Department stores have now become strategic locations; they would be the first to be occupied by the Easter bunnies if they ever planned an attack.

Walter Benjamin, ‘Berlin Toy Tour I’

Benjamin for Children

Between 1929 and 1932, during the last years of the Weimar Republic’s liberal media policy, Walter Benjamin broadcast talks for Berlin Radio’s Jugendstunde and Frankfurt-based Southwest German Radio’s Stunde der Jugend.1 There are good historical and editorial reasons why Benjamin’s Youth Hour programmes have remained understudied until now: in 1940 Benjamin left behind in Paris the typescripts of the radio broadcasts, which were later confiscated by the Gestapo. Mistakenly packed with the Parisier Tageszeitung, they were rescued by an act of sabotage in 1945, taken initially to the Soviet Union, and then to the GDR. They were first held in the Central Archive in Potsdam and, after 1972, in the literary archives of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin.2 The editors of the Gesammelte Schriften were denied access to these texts until 1983, and in 1985 Rolf Tiedemann edited for Suhrkamp an edition under the controversial title Aufklärung für Kinder [Enlightenment for Children].3 It was only in 2014 that Lecia Rosenthal edited the volume Radio Benjamin, presenting for the first time all of Benjamin’s existing typescripts to the English-speaking public and disputing the widely held idea that they, as most work done in exchange for money, were not much valued by Benjamin himself.

An explanation for the relative critical neglect of the Youth Hour programmes, however, can also be found in the less controversial part of the title of the Suhrkamp edition. Enlightenment might be a poor description of these radio talks’ ideological purpose and a better one of the object of their critique, as made clear in ‘Cagliostro’ (1931), which reads like Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of the Enlightenment in quiz form:

At the beginning I spoke of the Enlightenment, an age in which people were very critical of the traditions of the government, religion and the Church, and indeed, we can be thankful for the great strides made during this period in terms of
freedom and culture. It was precisely during this free and critical Age of Enlightenment that Cagliostro was able to turn his artistry to such advantage. How was this possible? Answer: precisely because people were so firmly convinced that the supernatural world did not exist, they never took the trouble to reflect upon it seriously and thus fell victims of Cagliostro, who led them to believe in the supernatural with a magician’s finesse. Had their convictions been weaker and their power of observation stronger, they wouldn’t have succumbed. This is another lesson from the story: in many cases, powers of observation and knowledge of human nature are even more valuable than a firm and correct point of view.4

Rather than the critique of the entrenched truth regimes of the Enlightenment, it is the apparently obvious point of destination of these talks (‘für Kinder’) that has proven resistant to interpretation.5 The generic broadcasts’ series titles *Jugendstunde* and *Studien der Jugend* kept the notion of ‘youth’ as its implied addressee quite open, but once the Benjamin becomes ‘for children’ – a description wisely avoided by Rosenthal in her comprehensive collection – these broadcasts advertise their simplicity and raise the issues of didacticism and pedagogy, two categories which have been at the heart of the disciplinary split between children’s and adult literature and culture.6 While the notion of childhood in relation to memory has been a fruitful object of research, the idea of a ‘Walter Benjamin for children’ seems instead to be amusing at best.7

Unlike *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* or the essays on colour, which have received critical attention in both the German and the English speaking academies, these texts have proven less amenable to analysis because, we could say in Althussian terms, they do not so much discuss childhood as a philosophical problem as perform the problematic of the child.8 The child encapsulates the problematic of human nature as ‘transparency itself’:

> If the essence of man is to be a universal attribute, it is essential that concrete subjects exist as absolute givens; this implies an empiricism of the subject. If these empirical individuals are to be men, it is essential that each carried in himself the whole human essence, if not in fact, at least in principle; this implies an idealism of the essence. This relation can be inverted into its ‘opposite’ – empiricism of the concept/idealism of the subject. But the inversion respects the basic structure of the problematic, which remains fixed.9

For Althusser, late Marx’s great ‘scientific discovery’ is the rejection of the ‘essence of man’ as a theoretical presupposition and its recognition as an ideology, replacing the ‘old couple individual/human essence’ with a ‘historico-dialectical materialism of *praxis*’. Althusser’s late Marx develops his ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ as a rejection of humanism’s theoretical status.
while ‘recognizing its practical function as an ideology’. Like him, Benjamin’s broadcasts make use of the child to designate a set of existing relations, but also to offer a means of knowing them. This is why they do not demystify the transparency of the child in the name of its Platonic rejection as a ‘beautiful lie’ or consumerist product. Instead, the broadcasts reject the humanist postulate that encapsulates the whole of human essence in the child as an ideal form of subjectivity. Rather than leading us back to an unquestioned empiricism of the child, they play with its practical function as an indispensable ideological structure able to form and transform. The pedagogical desire to equip interlocutors to respond to the demands of the conditions of their existence can take place only when the child is seen as an ideological formation rather than as unproblematically real.

Benjamin’s children are ‘particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognise the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them.’ If read from a philosophical humanist point of view, this statement may give us the feeling of a solidity that is nevertheless not supported by Benjamin’s dialectical materialist method. Like the fairy tale, which is ‘a waste product that emerges from the growth and decay of the saga,’ the radio broadcasts present themselves as ‘artifact[s] produced in play, materials of different kinds [brought together] in a new, intuitive relationship’, an imitation of children’s play, in which ‘their own small world of things [is produced] with the greater one’. Rather than the empirically based universal subject of a romantically ‘intuitive relationship with waste, the child works here as a waste product, and as such we can make it, after Freud, into ‘material for observations […] usually […] put aside by the other sciences as being too unimportant – the dregs [Abhub], one might say, of the world of phenomena’. The child, in these broadcasts, is thus an ideological structure that is both recognised as underpinning bourgeois humanism and yet not discarded as if it were ‘just waste’. Looking at the child as ‘Abhub’ – not a sediment, as per Strachey’s translation of Freud, but, more literally and provocatively, as scum – a superficially visible film of waste – I want to challenge, along the lines of what Freud outlines in his Introductory lecture on parapraxes, the assumption of the utter worthlessness (or its attending paradoxical worthiness) of the child. I will investigate instead how these radio broadcasts play – as if with ‘Abhub’ – with a subject seldom observed because only recognised on the surface.

Voices

The voice is like a guest; upon arrival, it is usually assessed just as quickly and as sharply.

‘Reflections on Radio’
Brían Hanrahan has argued that ‘something quintessentially Benjaminian happens in that uncanny encounter of radio and child: the hint of an unsettling remainder in the everyday, in the dislocation of sent message and received meaning, in the figure of the child who knows something his parents do not.’ But these recognizably productive critical remainders never shield us completely from the predictably ‘delightful moments’ which these ‘miniatures’ generate in the criticism. It is, indeed, delightful to bask in the erudition that Benjamin displays in these tender miniatures, or to retrieve a child-loving Benjamin, a Benjamin perennially nostalgic for his own childhood, or a Benjamin enamoured with the revolutionary potential of the child. After all, reading texts in which we hallucinate Benjamin’s own voice gently sending off young readers to read Alfred Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz, or marching them through a history of the railroad, exerts an undeniable degree of fascination for any lover of Benjamin at his most ephemeral. This, however, leaves open the Benjaminian question of ‘to what end’ [wozu]? In other words, what are the critical consequences of the ‘delightful’ quality of which Hanrahan speaks?

It is tempting to read these miniatures as part of the ‘uprising of the overlooked’ in Benjamin, a move that may well justify transforming the child from a marginal figure into an argument for its political centrality. A number of critics, including Susan Buck-Morss, Brian Dillon, Eli Friedlander, Nicola Gess, Davide Giuriato, Esther Leslie, Maeve Pearson and David L. Pike have responded to this challenge. My own choice of the radio plays as a subject of analysis and my earlier emphasis on ‘Abhub’, too, participate in the great enjoyment felt by the cultural historian delighting in the ‘small print’ that is not ‘required’ learning, in the ‘urge to play’ that ‘overcomes an adult’ – not a ‘regression to childhood’, but a liberating activity that we engage in when we find ourselves ‘threatened by the real world and can find no escape,’ able to remove ‘its sting by playing with its image in reduced form’.

Like review essays from this period, such as ‘Old Forgotten Children’s Books’ (1924) and ‘Old Toys’ (1928), the radio broadcasts draw attention to the relation between the child and the marginal:

You must be thinking: what a strange toy tour; we're almost finished and he's yet to mention either dolls or soldiers. And you would be right. But today he's dwelt on the more peculiar and unconventional, and so he will continue until the very end.

The simplicity of the language employed in the second ‘Berlin Toy Tour’ should not obscure how the marginal is, however, never static: the child listener is conjured up as both the norm against which Dr. Walter Benjamin’s method can be gauged (‘you must be thinking’) and as the interlocutor understanding the persistent necessity of his method (‘he’s dwelt on the more peculiar and unconventional’). So, although the child and the
marginal, the small and the unconventional certainly go together in Benjamin, these broadcasts for children enter child and adult into an interminable mutual interpellation in which each element constitutes the other: ‘It is the critical error of this institution,’ Benjamin writes of the radio in 1930 or 1931, ‘to perpetuate the fundamental separation between performer and audience, a separation which is undermined by its technological basis.’ Here, the ‘you’ is the ear of the other: right in front of our eyes, this curiously protean ‘you’ stands in for the young listener (in German, the ‘du’ pronoun produces a young audience) while at the same time occupying the point of view that turns the ‘I’ into a ‘he’. This estranges the speaking self and metamorphoses the voice into a presence whose existence extends beyond the confines of the broadcasts themselves, beyond those minutes on air that the performer compares to pharmaceutical ‘weights’. In these texts, then, children are not pre-existing psychological or developmental subjects of pedagogy: the broadcasts vehemently refuse to either perpetuate the fundamental separation between performer and audience or align themselves with one of those ‘follies’, children’s books ‘fashionable today, thanks to supposed insights into the child’s psyche’.

Hanrahan sees the radio as a peculiarly adult phenomenon, at the opposite end of the spectrum of cinema, a medium that Vicky Lebeau has argued instead to ‘lay claim to the child – both on and off screen’ from its inception. Joe Kelleher in turn has read the wonder and terror of the child as the hinge between ‘the discrepant technologies of cinematic narrative and mise-en-scène’ throughout the history of cinema. For Benjamin, however, cinema and radio are on the same side in their competitive relationship with theatre – both media ‘have room in their studios for ancient Chinese drama along with new forays into Surrealism’. Yet, it is Brecht’s, and his literary and musical colleagues’ pedagogical take on the theatre that makes it both the ‘art form’ of the child and ‘constitutes a bridge between theatre and radio in a wholly original way’ ‘by replacing culture (of knowledge) with training (of judgement)’. If radio wants to ‘remain free from the halo of a “gigantic educational enterprise”’, it needs to ‘draw on its arsenal of impossibilities’, making the most of being ‘the more exposed technology’. By exposing the way in which ‘you’ and ‘he’ mutually constitute each other on air, the broadcasts also resist a notion of audience based on ‘consumer mentality’ and ‘man’ as ‘the lord of creation’.

These radio broadcasts for children, dismissed in the correspondence as simple monetary transactions, reconfigure the classic opposition between education and distraction by exposing the machinery that produces complex – and rather unstable – notions of a ‘young’ audience and a performer in a ‘conversation’, which, under the guise of simplicity, is anything but: ‘Today, for a change, I’m simply going to tell you a story’, remarks the author of the essay on Leskov (1936).
Mobilizing the Public in the Direction of Knowledge

Epic theatre [...] replaces culture (of knowledge) with training (of judgement).

Theatre and Radio

And with this we are through with dogs for the day.

True Dog Stories

The Youth Hour programmes attune Benjamin’s pedagogical preoccupations with ‘observation’ to his attention towards ‘objects on the margins’. Many of the broadcasts engage with topics that announce themselves as child-oriented, such as the fantasy of revenge stories to be found in ‘Gypsy’, ‘Robber Bands in Old Germany’, and the 1932 radio play ‘Much Ado About Kasper’ [Radau um Kasperl].29 If ‘Radio is particularly bound to take advantage of established cultural goods, which it does best through adaptations that not only correspond to technology, but also comply with the demands of an audience that is a contemporary of its technology’, Kasper, which was singled out by Benjamin as ‘notable from a technical point of view’, is a virtuoso Guignol adaptation of the ‘Kaspertheater’ (Guignol is ‘Kasper’s name in French’).30 This is a form of puppet theatre dating back to the aftermath of the Thirty Years War and mentioned in the 1929 broadcast ‘Berlin Puppet Theater’ as the only puppet theatre that ‘has always remained for children’.

The nod to comedy is there for all to see, since in German ‘herumkaspern’ means ‘clowning around’, but here the adaptation turns that clowning into technological ‘Radau’ [racket, din, hubbub], which the medium of the radio itself performs. Kasper, speaker of the Berlin Schnauzete, which is also the topic of the 1929 broadcast ‘Berlin Dialect’, is a cross between a Kleist puppet, a Brechtian proletarian anti-hero and the figure revenging the sadistic fantasies of punishment played out onto Suppenkasper in the Struwwelpeter children’s book. The satirically named Herr Maulschmidt [snout-forger] tricks Kasper into an appearance on the radio by preposterously hailing him as ‘the age-old and famous friend of children’, but, punning on the German for radio [Rundfunk], he remains fearful of and resistant to ‘sparks [Funken] flying around [rund]’.32 We follow his antics around the market, the fair and the zoo, after he flees from the producer and the police following his inappropriate behaviour on air, where he insults his friend Seppl from Puztingen, imagined to be listening in.

In 1921, Max Jacob, the puppeteer founder of the Hohnsteiner Kaspertheater, introduced the figure of Seppel as Kasper’s friend, of Saxon origins, sporting the traditional Burschentracht; later, Seppel becomes Bavarian, in Lederhosen and typical ‘Seppelhut’ on his head.33 The text mirrors Kasper’s inappropriate behaviour, insofar as ‘Putz’ is a pun on the Yiddish for ‘fool’, still bearing sexual connotations and surviving in ‘putzing around’. Kasper is finally tricked into being recorded, since radio technicians have secretly
installed microphones in his bedroom; hearing his distorted voice, he claims: ‘I’ve just heard for the first time what radio is’. The play’s ending marks the puppet’s technological birth. Unlike other puppets, who ‘eat nothing and ask for no money’, Kasper is paid a thousand marks for his unwitting performance, thus entering the economy that he had made such a song and dance of avoiding.

In a move that goes back to the ‘Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre’ (1929) but echoes the principles of ‘Theatre and Radio’ (1932) in its emphasis on the primacy of the technological, performance in Kasper is an almost accidental ‘prank’ or ‘carnival’, while the medium is the place of work and study. If in proletarian children’s theatre space is ‘the dialectical site of education’, ‘Rundfunk’ works by sparking sounds: Kasper’s performance as prank and carnival is the ‘interruption’ of a ‘course of study’, thus becoming, in Brechtian fashion, ‘the great creative pause in the process of upbringing’.

Clowning around is not simply a form of pedagogy based on comic topics, however. As can be gauged by a swift survey of some of their titles – ‘Witch Trials’, ‘Kasper Hauser’, ‘The Bastille, the Old French State Prison’, ‘A Visit to the Brass Works’ and ‘The Bootleggers’ – these broadcasts play, in often witty and at times explicitly funny ways, with an array of historical, cultural, technological and literary topics. Whether of national, European or international origins, these topics are offered as familiar while also being simultaneously questioned or explained as such: ‘Are you familiar with Godin’s book of fairy tales? asks the speaker in ‘Berlin Toy Tour I’, adding ‘of all the children out there listening, perhaps not a single one of you’; ‘I’m not sure if you’ve heard about the alcohol debate. But you’ve seen a drunk person before’, we read in ‘The Bootleggers’; ‘Have you ever heard of the Minotaur? He was the hideous monster that dwelt in a labyrinth in Thebes’, opens ‘The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii’; and ‘True Dog Stories’ begins with the comically counterintuitive challenge: ‘You probably think you know dogs’.

Sometimes the process of estranging familiarity assumes an uncanny colouring, such as in the broadcast on E.T.A. Hoffman himself, whose aim is ‘to show that this prosaic, sober, enlightened and rational Berlin is full of things to charm a story-teller – not only in its medieval nooks, secluded streets, and sombre houses, but also in its working inhabitants of every social rank and from all corners of the city – which can be teased by dint of observation’.

At other times the back and forth movement between familiarity and estrangement dramatizes the problem of representing catastrophe, such as in ‘The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii’, ‘The Lisbon Earthquake’, ‘Theatre Fire in Canton’, ‘The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay’, and ‘The Mississippi Flood of 1927’.

In his ‘Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre’ Benjamin attributes importance not to the performance as an object but to the process of kidding
around in the theatre, so that offspring (proles) develops a class consciousness. Classifying these broadcasts as Lehrstücke, however, might blind us to how they also enact ‘the rules and rhythm of the entire world of play: the law of repetition. […] The obscure urge to repeat things is scarcely less powerful in play, scarcely less cunning in its workings, than the sexual impulse in love. It is no accident that Freud has imagined he could detect an impulse “beyond the pleasure principle” in it.40 Far from innocently clinging ‘to Rousseau-esque dreams’, these broadcasts work as ‘modifications’ of material presented as historically familiar but estranged as a series of repetitions – ‘fantasies of children and of texts’.41 Even when risking to re-enact what Jacqueline Rose has described as the cultural ‘demand which fixes the child and then holds it in place’,42 this form of Überleben cannot hold in its place either the child, the toy, or even the broadcast itself as a form of play: in these texts, ‘once mislaid, broken, and repaired, even the most princely of dolls becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children’s play commune’.43

For instance, the German ‘du’, rather than producing a ‘listener bloc in terms of social class, interests and milieu’44 conjures up the child ‘as ear’ and turns on its head traditionally ‘child-related’ notions; landscape and mountains become ‘our past existence – that was the prophecy of childhood. We are their future’.45 Past, present and future never work linearly in Benjamin, and in the broadcasts any preoccupation with educational ‘methodology’ is seen as ‘a symptom of the authentic bourgeois attitude’ to be fought by an etymologically proletarian education which ‘needs first and foremost a framework, an objective space within which education can be located. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, requires an idea toward which education leads’.46 The ‘more exposed technology’ of the radio, then, is aimed at rejecting a notion of childhood as a profit-oriented developmental trajectory and the child as an individualistic psychological model of interiority and constructing instead the child as a ‘collective’.47

This is the angle of vision that we need to adopt in order to explain those moments in Benjamin that make universalising gestures or repeat the most commonsensical idea of the child. Some of the broadcasts, indeed, invoke truths about the child, such as ‘Kids are naturally interested in everything’ or the highly gendered ‘The boys, as boys will, begin to scuffle’, which sit at odds with the ways in which the child has been seen to question consumption, history and desire.48 But if we think of the child not as an idea of individual agency and interiority but as the ideology of the (masculine) collective, we can start observing the peculiar, at times apparently wrong-headed performance of pedagogy at play in these talks.

When discussing the relation between politics and aesthetics in Theodor Hosemann during the Berlin Hour in 1930, the performer exposes the workings of the medium, commenting on the ‘crazy idea to talk about a painter on the radio’, adding that ‘even without describing any of his pictures, I can just tell you how he came to paint, draw and make illustrations,
and what people thought of his pictures, and how they were received. Drawing on radio’s limitations, the broadcast moves towards the material history of the work of art. The initial disavowal of familiarity, which resonates with a number of other broadcasts, qualifies the text’s opening as a continuation rather than a beginning:

Are you familiar with this name? You can no longer find him in any of your storybooks. But if one day you dig up an old book that belonged to your father or mother, you might discover this name on the title page, where it might say that he drew the pictures in the book.

The ‘I’ then reads with his audience ('Now we'll read') an excerpt from Hosemann’s letter in reply to a professor from Brandenburg interested in writing his biography. The text then reinterprets what has just been ‘read out’ from the letter into a complex ekphrastic description of humbleness, repetition and simplicity:

How often Hosemann would later depict such a humble, tranquil family, toiling day after day with busy hands to earn a paltry wage. Often there would be a sick mother or a feverish child lying in bed, because back then the publications for young people, which Hosemann illustrated, loved to appeal to children with rather maudlin stories, hoping to influence their behaviour for the better. But that was probably misguided. Kids are naturally interested in everything. If you show them the world only from the good and agreeable side, they’ll go out of their way to find out themselves about the other side. And even so, no one’s ever heard of kids learning naughty tricks from, say, Max and Moritz and trying to plug their teacher’s pipe with powder.

The ‘humble, tranquil family, toiling day after day with busy hands to earn a paltry wage’ presents itself as both a repetition and a modification of Hosemann’s letter (in which such activities are the background for the happiness experienced when painting). This assembling also supplements its original, in a move that pictorially represents in the types of ‘a sick mother or feverish child’ the ‘maudlin stories’ and pious pedagogy of times gone by (as made even clearer by the use of diminutives ‘Mütterchen’ and ‘Bettchen’ in the German). The text, however, does not simply perform the paradoxical coexistence of disciplining and its critique, which Lesnik-Oberstein sees as defining children’s literature criticism. Instead, ‘we’ inhabit a present from where the repeated actions of the past can be observed as unfolding future events, understood and – rather carefully – questioned. Since the sense of a historically mutable notion of the child cannot be ‘neutrally’ observed, we should not be too quick to dismiss such old-fashioned pedagogical ideas. Repetitiousness and carefulness characterise not only Hosemann as a subject, but also the broadcast itself. The writing reproduces the residual drudgery
and sentimentality that render this painter an illustration of the difficulties of transcending one’s social class. By doing so, the piece also avoids presenting Hosemann’s story as a bourgeois trajectory of individualistic emancipation.

The problem remains, however, of how to read in this context the starkly rigid universality of the sentence ‘Kids are naturally interested in everything.’ A lot, I would argue, hinges on that ‘natürlich’, which by suggesting organicist and essentialist obviousness creates instead an interruption in the narrative. From the communal ‘we’ of the incipit we now move to the German impersonal syntax [‘Wenn man ihnen […] zeigt’], in which children become both the grammatical object and the source of predictable upturns of pedagogical intentions. Such upturns, however, are ‘unnaturally’ scrambled by the comment on Max und Moritz: these ‘naturally interested’ children, who do not seem to learn in predictable ways from either good or bad examples, refuse to merely reverse the book’s pedagogical rigidity.

The link between Hosemann and the child is key to the text’s discussion of the relation between politics and aesthetics. Hosemann’s own simplicity and lack of refinement are presented as appealing to those ‘common people’ and ‘children’ who will bridge the gulf between proletariat and bourgeoisie in Berlin in 1848. When cast against a stable notion of the child’s natural curiosity, such correspondence between aesthetic and social simplicity maps out the humanist ideology at the basis of strategic and pragmatic political allegiances. That such naturalness is also shown to be utterly unpredictable, however, alerts us to the fact that humanism is here pragmatic rather than essential: it is an ideological formation that cannot be dismissed and yet must be recognised as such.

I do not see a contradiction between a Benjamin advocating the political potential of a simple art able to fascinate children and common people and a Benjamin harshly critical of essentialist humanism; as, for instance, when he discusses the ideology of bourgeois theatre in which man works as an unquestioned ‘lord’, as opposed to Epic Theatre, in which man is instead ‘the fifth wheel of technology’. This is because as soon as the texts pin down the child as a universally recognisable human essence, they also trouble its allegedly predictable behaviour.

This lack of predictability is further emphasised later in the text by the very fact that Hosemann’s bridging of opposing factions is not just due to his natural appeal to the people but also to his collaboration with Adolf Glassbrenner. Glassbrenner is presented as a champion of the Berlin dialect and inventor of popular figures such as Nante the Loafer and Buffay Bourgeois. His eloquent depiction of Nante’s court trial is read out before the speaker concludes:

So now I’ve just shown you the speaking Nante instead of the drawn version. No matter that at the end of today Hosemann
has crept a bit into Glassbrenner’s shadow. Because one day we’ll talk some more about Glassbrenner and then Hosemann will emerge again from behind him.\textsuperscript{55}

The conclusion repeats, once again, the ekphrastic gesture of the broadcast’s opening. It also draws attention to the inescapable relation between figure and ground (Hosemann/Glassbrenner), showing that the alliance of empiricism of the subject and idealism of the essence underpinning the revolution of 1848 was pragmatic and strategic, rather than simply ‘natural’.

Seeing the child

\textit{You can’t see a thing. – But if you can’t see anything, how do I see the fog? It seems to me, you can’t even see the fog on account of the fog. – Do I see the fog or don’t I! – If I can’t see it then I must be seeing something’ else. – And if I do see it, then I see it, and it can’t be foggy. ‘Much Ado About Kasper’}

One of the main preoccupations in these broadcasts revolves around the pitfalls and possibilities of \textit{seeing} the child on air. Jeffrey Mehlman has discussed the problem of counterfeit, but here I want to focus on the ‘wonderful’ story ‘The Bootleggers’ (1930) and the first ‘Berlin Toy Tour’ (1930) to explore race and consumerism as two ways to see the child as an ideology of transparency.

There’s a wonderful story of a train station near New Orleans. Little Negro children walk along the train that stops there, hiding under their clothing variously shaped containers with large labels that read “Iced Tea.” One passenger gives a nod and for the price of a suit buys the container, which he then cleverly conceals. Then another one, then ten, twenty, fifty. “Whatever you do, ladies and gentleman,” implore the Negro children, “drink the tea only once the train is under way.” Everyone winks knowingly... The whistles blows, the train drives off, and right away the passengers put the containers to their lips. And then their expression turns to disbelief, as what they are drinking is actually real tea.\textsuperscript{56}

Mac Orlan’s \textit{Alkoholschmuggler} is the acknowledged source of this ‘little tale’ in the present tense, in which doubly diminished ’kleine Negerlein’ implore (implicitly) white Americans.\textsuperscript{57} It would be redeeming to see the Black children’s named inferiority turned into a form of power – the children as triumphant agents of reversals, just like Nante. Reversals, after all, characterise the whole text: following the anticipation created by the ellipses the passengers are revealed to be drinking ‘actually real tea’. In Hegelian terms, what seemed to be a secretly shared knowledge is the actuality of the object.
itself: ‘almost any object, no matter how harmless – an umbrella, a camera, or boot tree – can make the custom police suspect that there may be whiskey inside. The police, and ultimately the Americans as well’.\(^5\) Under such an expensive regime of suspicion, the thing itself turns into its opposite, real tea is transmuted into whiskey right in front of our eyes: in this respect, this is literally a ‘wonderful’ story.

The Black children, assumed to come from the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ and to already be on the wrong side of the law, are the problematic site of wonder because they remain as harmless as the narrator knows them to be in their diminutiveness. On the other hand, they profit from the white Americans who are prepared not only to pay the price of a suit for a drink but also to assume that these Black children will be in a position to sell it to them. The Black children are nevertheless unable to transcend the dynamic of visibility and invisibility that enables the reversal to take place: their authenticity nails them into their racialised diminutiveness, which in turn marks them as suspects. This story denounces the gaze that ‘holds the child in place’, the gaze of the law that makes ‘adults act like naughty children’, ‘whose enforcement costs the state a tremendous amount of money, and whose violation costs many people their lives,’ without, however, engaging with the particular kind of visibilities and invisibilities produced by skin colour. This is American ‘violence and fanaticism’ critiqued through Europe’s eyes.

The act of ‘just looking’ is traversed by violence and desire, too, in the two Berlin Toy Tours, both exposing the price one pays to delight in the optical transparency of department stores.\(^6\) Broadcast on 15 March 1930, the first tour is structured around the paradoxical impossibility on the part of the ‘you’ to remember Godin’s book of fairy tales, which then leads to the performer’s choice of ‘Sister Tinchen’ as a story to retell from this elusive book. Following Tinchen’s repeatedly brave refusals to yield to temptation in order to save her brothers leads in turn to a Faustian tour of the toy gallery – both utterly serious in its implications and comically absurd in its self-reflective execution.

The toy tour is aurally produced as a visual hall of mirrors, which seems to emerge, like fairy tales from sagas do, from the growth and decay of Goethe’s Faust story, which the ‘you’ is forewarned to encounter ‘in a few years’ time. Tinchen, the only female child in the broadcasts, is a gendered figure of sacrifice transfigured into a desiring subject, soon to be supplemented by the desiring Faust. Working as the dislocated object of collective desire, she mirrors the desiring performer and the equally desiring ‘you’: ‘We could follow her everywhere if this weren’t the radio station’s Berlin Hour and I didn’t have to zip back to Berlin through secret underground tunnels while Tinchen stays in the magic kingdom. After all, even when she stands in front of a gingerbread house, Tinchen is coming to Berlin as well’.\(^6\)
This tour is, above everything else, an acoustic flânerie that plays with paradoxical combinations of the visual and the aural:

You must be thinking, this fellow will never make it to Berlin. But it’s like the race between the tortoise and the hare. As is well known, the tortoise is sitting in a ditch while the hare arrives, completely out of breath. The tortoise says: “I’m already here.” And sure enough, I’m already here in Berlin, just where you would all like to be.\footnote{61}

Berlin as the place of consumerist delights is where the ‘you’ would like to be but also where they already are, since ‘all of you, just as courageously, have passed by without lingering’.\footnote{62} While wishing to be in Berlin, the audience is already there: the performer, on the other hand, wishes to stay where the toys are, but tries to move along, bravely, like Tinchen (who, however, is left for once in the magic kingdom, suspended in time and never recruited back to complete her role as saviour).

Openly dislocated through sound technology, the tour of the magic land of the department stores is not severed from history and geography. Instead, department stores are ‘strategic locations’ at the heart of the modern metropolis, as in the wild sci-fi moment which I have adopted as my epigraph: the joke about the attack of the Easter bunnies is not only as ‘absurd’ as Tinchen’s story was said to be, but also, because of its estranging comedy, a way of placing any fairy land in a political perspective. The army of Easter bunnies knows something about the economy of exchange that seduces us all – no matter how much of a good girl we may try to be.

At first, the performer bravely shows his indifference to the sales assistant who puts up ‘the most indescribable little theatre piece’ for him, but stops ‘once she realised that under no circumstances would I buy what was on offer, which is how I felt in the animal gallery as well’.\footnote{63} Soon after, with nonchalant disregard for any accusation of inconsistency, we read: ‘But later on I just couldn’t resist and I bought something. It’s a very strange game, rather new, I think, but in any case I had never heard of it’.\footnote{64} This unusual, possibly new, strange object of desire is a game made of rubber stamps, each one with a piece of landscape on it, so that one can build the strangest ‘landscapes, neighborhoods, events and stories’.\footnote{65} In a further hall of mirrors effect, the assembled pieces bought during this unbelievable tour create more imaginary landscapes.

The infinite quality of this economy of desire is also signalled by the ungraspable quality of the toys that have ‘vanished’ in history, such as “The Lucky Fisherman’, the ‘special type of music box’, which the performer ‘never owned’ but ‘only saw it one day in a shop when I was little’, or the ‘flip books’ which could ‘easily transform a math lesson into a cinema show’.\footnote{66} The pace of this tour is one of breathless pursuit, projected outwards through its constant exhortation to pay attention to the detours before...
hearing more about more toys, and inwards, via the pun that ‘the devil only knows how they [little soldiers in the music box] fared in there before they neatly filed out again’, which picks up on the Faustian theme in a very minor key. It also constantly oscillates between describing a journey and reflecting on the technology that allows that journey to take place, a technology that breaks down, once again, the opposition between audience and performer:

I was thinking, grownups have all sorts of specialized shows on the radio, shows of great interest to them, although, or even because, they understand at least as much about the subject as the speaker. Why shouldn’t we make such special shows for children as well? For example about toys, although, or even because, kids understand at least as much about toys as the man who’s speaking to you here.67

Allegiances keep shifting in this passage which first makes ‘grownups’ appear as external to the exchange, and then make the same happen to children. The show characterises itself as ‘specialised’ while also paradoxically admitting not to have existed before the moment of utterance, which happens midway through the text, well after the broadcast defines itself as ‘the radio station’s Berlin Hour’. This shifting perspective is echoed by the concluding paragraph, which moves from the visual to the aural:

Cover your ears for a moment [Augenblick]. What I have to say now [Jetz] is not for children to hear. Next time I will tell you the conclusion of my tour. I’m worried sick. I’ll soon be swamped with mail, letters along the lines of: “What? Are you completely mad? You think that kids don’t already whine from morning to night? And now you’re putting ideas in their heads and telling them about thousands of toys that, up until now, thank God, they knew nothing about, and now they want all of them, and probably things that don’t even exist anymore?” How should I answer them? I could just take the easy way out and beg you not to repeat a word of our story, don’t let on a thing, and then we can continue next week just like today. But that would be mean. So it’s left to me to calmly say what I really think: the more someone understands something and the more he knows of a particular kind of beauty – whether it’s flowers, books, clothing, or toys – the more he can rejoice in everything that he knows and sees, and the less he’s fixated on possessing it, buying it himself, or receiving it as a gift. Those of you who listened to the end, although you shouldn’t have, must now explain this to your parents.68

The gesture of covering one’s ears for the duration of the blink of an eye implies an impossible suspension of the listening activity, predicated on the basis of the subsequent prohibition and appeasement, which are still

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supposed to be heard. This ‘now’ does not belong to the moment of utterance but anticipates instead what is to come, while also going back to what has just been said. The endearing concession promises a conclusion while enacting a further deferral, which echoes the many more we have already encountered. Moreover, if the didacticism of ‘it’s left to me to calmly say what I really think’ seems straightforward, the message is one in which transparency can work both ways. The display of toys seduces you into a consumerist oblivion made possible only through size and transparency: ‘The big difference is that the department stores simply have more space to put out their giant tables so that nothing remains hidden and anyone with eyes gets to look at everything that would otherwise be stowed away in closets and crates’.\textsuperscript{69} This transparency is disarming: the apparently stoic performer capitulates, succumbing to the alluring strange new toy whose function mirrors that of the tour itself. On the other hand, however, this ability to see is also the ability to see the seduction at work, a form of knowledge that emancipates from the wish to individually possess, liberating communal enjoyment instead. The ‘you’ is positioned as learning via a form of disobedience that does not lead to an end, like the Faust story, but, in this infinite process of deferral, participates in the raconteur’s detour on the political potential of the aesthetic.

Conclusion: The Child Explained to Dialectical Materialists

The \textit{Youth Hour} broadcasts, with their descriptions of means of production (‘A Visit to the Brass Works’) discussions of class politics (‘Berlin Dialect’) and urban architecture (‘The Rental Barracks’), and incitements to love objects rather than wish to possess them, explain dialectical materialism to children. Even when the ‘you’ is recommended a particular book, it is in terms of its history of publication, different editions, and illustrations. The perhaps less obvious argument that this essay has developed, however, is that these radio plays also explain the problem of the child to dialectical materialists by performing a pedagogy that does not see the child as the object of educational methods but as a collective ideology at play.

The child is the way into understanding what is at stake when we think theoretically about what is easily overlooked not because of its marginality but because of its transparency. Unlike any other figure of immediacy, the child’s visibility does not produce a revelation but only the recognition of the obvious, and its accompanying sense of either comfort and delight or, conversely, boredom. To look at this problem from another angle, these radio programmes enact the struggle with the child’s constant threat to bring theory to a standstill. They critique a preconceived notion of the spontaneity and naturalness of the child; they often dislocate romantic tropes of childhood and embrace the anti-humanist child that is seen as constituting the early-twentieth-century incarnation of this ideology; but they also make universal claims on behalf of children. But since this immobility can only be gauged
against the ground of the constantly shifting (and yet mostly masculine) ‘you’ who produces the ‘he’, the child is part of a series of ‘strange dislocations’ of the notion of human interiority.\textsuperscript{70}

The broadcasts, ephemerally marginal even within an oeuvre that openly shows its love for the neglected detail, help us understand the recurrent difficulty of Benjamin scholars to reach a satisfactory description of ‘the child in Benjamin’. Nicola Gess argues that

in Benjamin’s writing, the child plays a central role in an enchanting / disenchanting—that is, dialectic—treatment of history and of that which is strange—in this way serving as an inspiration for his late \textit{Passagenwerk}. There and elsewhere, the child functions for Benjamin as a utopian figure. This is, however, not in the sense inherited from Romanticism, of an embodiment of plenitude in harmony with nature, but rather in view of both the ‘barbaric’ and ‘primitive’ tendencies that children display. Their destructive and mimetic potential come together in the games children play, leading dialectically to a gain of sovereignty in which intimacy with history or the strange, analytical destruction and steady new creation mutually specify each other.\textsuperscript{71}

Gess’s reading shows the symptomatic tendency to bring dialectics to a standstill. If the child, unexceptionally, ‘functions as a utopian figure’ in Benjamin, it is ‘in view’ of certain characteristics that all ‘children’ display, in their plural and unquestionably material existence. In pulling towards their material presence and refusing to be Romantically idealised, Benjamin’s children, in Gess’s reading, end up working in a nominally dialectical way, which is, however, strangely stabilized. Even when they are identified as the agents of a seesaw movement between mimesis and destruction, enchantment and disenchantment, children in this perspective act as a form of resolution. In Gess, children become, unwittingly, the unquestioned sign of a humanism in which the ‘empiricism of the subject implies idealism of the essence’, to put it again in Althusserian terms. In Benjamin’s broadcasts instead, the child operates neither exclusively as an ‘empirical subject’ nor as an ‘idealism of the essence’: in a quietly revolutionary manner, the two are always shown to be mutually constitutive. This can be seen from a historical, but also from more radically theoretical point of view.

If the ‘despotic and dehumanized element in children’ which Benjamin reads as pertaining to the 1916 construction of childhood takes precedence over the cruel Biedermeier sentimentality preceding it, the broadcasts, as the reviews, demonstrate a keen awareness of the radical historical changes in the notion, even when traced in progressive terms. In a passage that seems to anticipate Philippe Ariès, Benjamin writes
It took a long time before people realised, let alone incorpo-
rated the idea into dolls, that children are not just men and
women on a reduced scale. It is well known that even chil-
dren’s clothing became emancipated from that of adults only at
a very late date. Not until the nineteenth century, in fact. It
sometimes looks as if our century wishes to take this develop-
ment one step further and, far from regarding children as little
men and women, has reservations about thinking of them as
human beings at all. People have now discovered the gro-
tesque, cruel, grim side of children’s life.  

Instead of adopting this child of 1916 as a new form of modernist
anti-humanism replacing an outmoded one, the broadcasts make us hear the
mutually constitutive ‘you’ and the ‘I’ as in a whispering gallery, thus offer-
ing the child, through technological aurality, as a problem of observation
rather than a place or a time of innate development, as if echoing Gramsci’s
preoccupation with the estranging quality of children’s spontaneity.  

It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice
each time to the concrete historical situation of its object. But
that is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing jus-
tice to the concrete historical situation of the interest taken in
the object. And this situation is always so constituted that the
interest is itself preformed in that object and, above all, feels
this object concretized in itself and upraised from its former
being into the higher concretion of now-being <Jetztsein> (wak-
ing being!).  

Never simply ‘just’ a historical object, the child bears the traces of the obser-
ver’s investment in making it into an object of interest. The child emerging
from the broadcasts, out of the encounter between self, ‘ear’ and technology,
is constantly ‘exposed’ as a preformed investment in the human and its cri-
tique. In this respect, the aural child works politically in Benjamin because it
is the point where the desiring voice makes things heard and known so as to
kritique an economy of possession and exchange. More radically, the Youth
Hour texts perform a modern investment in a child that gravitates towards
essentialist universality and yet is always on the verge of transgressing the
very category of the human. The ‘children are like this, naturally’, statement,
which still dominates most everyday discussions on the subject, does not close
the discussion via common sense in Benjamin, but shows how the workings
of common sense are far less reliable – and much more politically relevant –
than one may be inclined to assume.

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Notes

1 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, edited by Rosenthal. Leslie, http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1746-esther-leslie-walter-benjamin-on-the-radio. Accessed June 2013. Benjamin also wrote two radio plays: 'Radau um Kasperl', broadcast on Southwestern German Radio, Frankfurt, on 10 March 1932 and on Western German Radio, Cologne, on 9 September 1932. 'Das Kalze Hertz', another radio play for children written with Ernst Schoen and with music by Schoen was broadcast on Southwestern German Radio, Frankfurt, on May 16, 1932. Rosenthal, 219–220 and 248. According to Rosenthal, 'Radau' is the only broadcast for which a partial audio recording exists (in which Benjamin's voice cannot be heard, though). All the other texts were not recorded either during or after being broadcast.

2 Rosenthal, xvi.

3 Tiedemann, Aufklärung für Kinder.

4 'Cagliostro', 127–132, 132. See also 'Witch Trials', 85–90 and 'Old Forgotten Children's Books', 406-413, 407, in Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1 (1913–1926).

5 Mehlman, Walter Benjamin for Children, 1.

6 Lesnik-Oberstein, Children's Literature.

7 Burman, 'The Pedagogics', 55–88.

8 Benjamin, 'A Child's View of Colour', 50–52 and 'Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Coloured Illustrations for Children: Reflections on Lyser', 264–266, in Selected Writings, vol. 1; 'Der Regenbogen', Gesammelten Schriften, vol. VII. i, 19–26. On childhood, and especially childhood memories, in Benjamin, see Leslie, Walter Benjamin; 'Telescoping the Microscopic Object'; 'Future Murmurs'; Giuriato, Mikrographien; Pike, 'Buried Pleasure'; Friedlander, 'A Mood of Childhood'.

9 Althusser, 'Marxism and Humanism'.

10 'Old Forgotten Children's Books' (1924), in Selected Writings, vol. 1, 406–413, 408.

11 'Old Forgotten', 408. For a discussion of intuition in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, see 'On Perception', in Selected Writings, vol. 1, 93–96, 94.

12 Freud, 'Parapraxes', in Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis, vol. 1, 50–65, 52.

13 Hanrahan, 'Radio and Child'.

14 T.J. Clark, 'Reservations of the Marvelous', 3–9. Quoted in Benjamin's Arcades, 36.

15 Gess, 'Gaining Sovereignty'; Pearson, 'Arcadian Children'; Buck-Morss, 'Verehrte Unsichtbarkeit'

16 'Dr. Faust', Radio Benjamin, 119–126, 119 and 'Old Toys', 100.

17 'Berlin Toy Tour II', Radio Benjamin, 37–43, 48.

18 'A Visit to the Brass Works', Radio Benjamin, 70–75, 72.

19 'The Lisbon Earthquake', Radio Benjamin, 158–163, 158. Derrida, The Ear of the Other, 51.

20 'Old Forgotten Children's Books', 407.

21 Lebeau, Childhood and Cinema, 7.

22 Kelleher, 'Face to Face with Terror', 29–54, 37 and 41. See also Vallet, L'image de l'enfant au cinema; Keller, The Untutored Eye; Lury, The Child in Film; and Miller, 'The Burning Babe'.

23 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 367.

24 Ibid.

25 'Theatre and Radio: in the Mutual Supervision of Their Educational Roles', Radio Benjamin, 365–368, 366.

26 Ibid., 363.

27 Ibid., 366.

28 Ibid., 365 & 112.

29 Sobchack, ‘Gypsies, Children and Criminals’; Zipes, ‘Walter Benjamin, Children’s Literature and the Children’s Public Sphere’.

30 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 17–23, 21, 362, 220.

31 Jacob, Mein Kasper und ich.

32 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 203 & 204.

33 'Wanderings Through the Mark Brandenburg', 76–84, 76. Jacob was interested, like the young Benjamin, in the Wan dervögel movement, and was a strong supporter of folk art as a form of pedagogical intervention not aimed at moralising. His theatre eventually performed for the Nazi army.

34 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 219.

35 Ibid., 19.

36 'Programme for a Proletarian Children's Theatre'; for a discussion of pedagogy and the ongoing influence of Gustav Wykenen's concept of youth culture, see Lehman, 'An Interrupted Performance', 441–457.

37 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 202–205.

38 Ibid., 37, 152 &182.

39 Ibid., 29.
40 ‘Toys and Play’. Selected Writings, vol. 2, part 1, 117–121, 120.
41 Derrida, The Ear, 158–159. Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 101.
42 Rose, The Case of Peter Pan, 3–4. Lesnik-Oberstein, Children’s Literature; Literature, Culture, History, 1–26; ‘The Psychopathology of Everyday Children’s Literature Criticism’, 222–242; ‘Children’s Literature: New Approaches’, 1–25; ‘Voice, Agency and the Child’, 1–18.
43 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 101.
44 ‘Theatre and Radio’, 367.
45 ‘Experience’, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 3–6, 13.
46 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 202.
47 Ibid., 203.
48 Ibid., 64 & 38.
49 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 63.
50 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 63.
51 Ibid., 64.
52 Ibid.
53 Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, ‘Children’s Literature: Sexual Identity, Gender and Childhood,’ Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies, forthcoming.
54 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 367.
55 Ibid., 69.
56 Ibid., 143.
57 For a classic discussion, see Gates Jr., The Signifying Monkey.
58 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 143.
59 Bowlby, Just Looking; Moore, Invisible Architectures.
60 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 41.
61 Ibid., 40.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 42.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Insert before this: Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 41.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 42-43.
69 Ibid., 47.
70 Steedman, Strange Dislocations.
71 Gess, ‘Gaining Sovereignty’, 683.
72 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 101.
73 Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, vol. 1, §211.
74 Benjamin, Radio Benjamin, 391–392.

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