**Water Benjamin, Childhood and Pedagogy:**

**An interdisciplinary symposium**

Monday 6th July 2015

Room LG01, Professor Stuart Hall Building

Goldsmiths, University of London

Sponsored by the journal *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*

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The cultural critic and theorist, Walter Benjamin turned his attention several times to the nature, culture and habits of children along with the artifacts that are made or written for them. He also wrote an autobiography based entirely on his childhood in Berlin around the year of 1900 which was based on a draft known as the ‘Berlin Chronicle’. In the 1980s, a cache of radio scripts of broadcasts for children was found, which appeared in English for the first time in 2014.

This interdisciplinary symposium celebrates Walter Benjamin’s re-emergence as an important thinker and writer on childhood and education by situating his work within wider academic contexts, bringing together international scholars to explore various strands of his life and work.

The aims of the symposium are as follows:

* To consider whether Benjamin was presenting a consistent view of childhood;
* To examine what this view (or views) consisted of, how this relates to Benjamin’s views on memory and recall;
* To examine the pedagogic intentions and content of these broadcasts;
* To consider what light Benjamin’s work on and with children sheds on childhood in urban contexts and on the relationship of this to pedagogy;
* To consider how Benjamin’s work is related to views of childhood appearing or current at the same time, such as those of Melanie Klein, Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich, along with prevailing ideas about German children.

**Timetable**

10.00 Coffee

10.30 **Michael Rosen** Goldsmiths, University of London  
*Welcome and Introduction*

10.45 **Esther Leslie**, Birkbeck College, University of London  
*Colonial and Communist Pedagogy*

11.30 **Eric L. Tribunella** University of Southern Mississippi  
*Benjamin, Children’s Literature, and the Child’s Gaze*

12.15 **Gillian Lathey**, University of Roehampton   
*Enlightening City Childhoods: Walter Benjamin’s Berlin and Erich Kästner’s Dresden*

1.00 Lunch

2.00 **Sam Dolbear & Hannah Proctor.** Birkbeck College, University of London  
*Childish Adventures: Walter Benjamin's Journeys into Picture Books and Children's Encyclopaedias*

2.45 **Matthew Charles,** University of Westminster  
*Education as Transmissibility*

3.30  **Iris Pereira and Brenton Doecke** Universidade do Minho, Portugal  
*Beginning again*

4.15 Tea

4.30 Finish

**Abstracts**

**Esther Leslie**

Birkbeck College, University of London

*Colonial and Communist Pedagogy*

Benjamin’s first published piece of writing was a critique of Lily Braun’s Manifesto for School Children, in 1912. Throughout his life he returned to questions of pedagogy and the ways in which children come to know and learn. This paper explores the ground laid out between two types of pedagogy, colonial pedagogy (as Benjamin terms it) and communist pedagogy. It draws in some questions of what is at stake in Benjamin’s sometimes harsh reviews of books on children playground rhymes and toys, and explores the paradoxical significance of debris – the outmoded, exhausted - for the task of accomplishing what ‘the adult absolutely cannot: recognise the new once again’. What the child achieves – and what Benjamin aspires to, is the bringing of ‘materials of widely differing kinds ‘into a ‘new intuitive relationship.’ Benjamin’s works negatively – anti-pedagogical, anti-historicist, anti-linear and refusing distinction between ‘major’ (older) and minor (young) things, people, events etc. What might be learnt from this destructive process and can it leave a legacy beyond itself?

**Eric L. Tribunella**

University of Southern Mississippi

*Benjamin, Children’s Literature, and the Child’s Gaze*

Benjamin’s fragments and essays on the subject of children and their books turn repeatedly to the subject of the child’s gaze. In “A Child’s View of Color” (1915-1916), he says that the child possesses “the highest artistic development of the sense of sight; it is sight at its purest” (*SW* 50). Having not yet adopted the adult view of the world, children’s sensitivity to nuance and fluidity allows them “to create the interrelated totality of the world of the imagination” (*SW* 51). For Benjamin, children’s ability to see the world differently from adults allows them access to a unique form of imaginative play in their perception and manipulation of the world. In “Old Forgotten Children’s Books” (1924), he claims that “children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on” (*SW* 408). In finding and manipulating the materials of these work spaces, “they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely different kinds in a new, intuitive relationship” (*SW* 408). Benjamin’s child is the collage artist who can make the world anew, but the objects created or perceived are less material products for the world than occasions for the child’s expansion of an internal, imaginative space of play. “After all,” he writes, “the role of children’s books is not to induct their readers directly into the world of objects, animals, and people—in other words, into so-called life” (*SW* 410). In this way, he sees artists and children defying the pedagogues, who “brood pedantically over the production of objects” (*SW* 409, 408). Further, in “A Glimpse into the World of Children’s Books” (1927), he describes the “gazing child” as entering into the imaginative space of the book rather than taking the book as fixing or “meeting” the objects of the external world (*SW* 435).

Benjamin’s use of the child reflects a desire to imagine different possibilities in perceiving and engaging with the world, and in these early writings on children and their books we find a continuity or affinity both with Benjamin’s own textual collage style and with his interest in Baudelaire’s flâneur, for whom sight is also crucial. The child and the flâneur share a particular way of seeing unfettered by instrumentality and characterized by a sense of wonder, an aimlessness of path or purpose, and a keen interest in triviality and detritus. Similarly, writers of children’s literature make use of the child for similar ends—to imagine a way of remaking the world in and through the imaginative play of children who look or wander about in fantastical worlds of school, city, or dreams. To wander or to look is to be absorbed—by a book or by the spectacle of the city—and thereby to experience a childlike delight in what is seen.

E.F. Benson, for instance, has his fictional David Blaize literally transported through his pillow into a fantastical dreamland in *David Blaize and the Blue Door* (1918), a children’s work of literary nonsense and a prequel to Benson’s traditional school story featuring an older version of the same character. Like Benjamin’s child reader, David’s imaginative wanderings through a Carrollian wonderland are used by Benson to reimagine an adult world order. In particular, Benson’s earlier *David Blaize* (1916) and his own biography suggest a discomfort with adult models of desire and pleasure between boys or young men, and Benson’s boy characters imagine different possibilities through acts of looking and wandering. Benjamin’s interest in the imaginative work of the child’s gaze, of his wanderings through fantastical cityscapes, and of his manipulation of toys and objects provides a way of reading Benson and others who make use of the child to reconfigure or reassemble adult systems, objects, or expectations. For both Benjamin and Benson, the child stands poised to defy instruction, and in both of Benson’s children’s books, the child enacts a different model for experiencing and consummating desire.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.

**Gillian Lathey**

University of Roehampton

*Enlightening City Childhoods: Walter Benjamin’s Berlin and Erich Kästner’s Dresden*

Two German writers, born just seven years apart (in 1892 and1899), and two memoirs of childhoods set in cities that effectively no longer exist. Walter Benjamin, essayist, cultural critic and philosopher, compiled the numinous fragments known as *Eine Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (*Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland, 2006) while in exile from Germany in the early 1930s, driven – according to his preface – by a sense of the city’s doom, and filtering impressions of a privileged childhood through a politicised adult consciousness. Erich Kästner, urbane journalist, poet, satirist and author of the internationally successful children’s classic *Emil and the Detectives* (1929), offers in his *Als ich ein kleiner Junge war* (1957) [When I was a small boy] a hymn to the lost city of Dresden, the expression of an enduring mother fixation, and a vision of the child’s moral certainty and responsibility that also characterises his fictional children. Both sets of memoirs convey in engaging or poetic prose transcendent sensations of childhood, but are at odds in their stated purpose. Indeed, Max Pensky has argued that ‘what Kästner wants to preserve as a nourishing light, Benjamin wishes to exploit as an arsenal’ (Pensky, 1993: 250). A comparison of selected themes these texts share – anxiety at Christmas and perspectives on the social topography of the city – will throw light on commonalities in the representation of the thought processes of two hyper-aware children, as well as paradoxes inherent in adult reconfigurations of the past.

**Sam Dolbear & Hannah Proctor**

Birkbeck College, University of London

*Childish Adventures: Walter Benjamin's Journeys into Picture Books and Children's Encyclopaedias*

In 1931, Walter Benjamin published ‘Verdant Elements’ in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a review of a children’s primer by illustrator and writer Tom Seidmann-Freud (a niece of Sigmund Freud, who changed her name from Marta to Tom as a teenager).

Traditionally, according to Benjamin, the pedagogical function of the primer was to usher the child across a threshold into a serious adult world of cold abstractions and fixed meanings. The child learning from the primer ‘was under the influence of the black on white, of law and rights, the irrevocable, the being set for all eternity.’

Benjamin praises Seidmann-Freud’s primer for departing from this view of the child, instead creating a playful approach, which trusts the child to find its own path. The primer conceives of learning as a ‘great adventure’ placing the child in the position of a horse rider guiding its steed around a bright new landscape - a ‘world of tree leaves and fish, shops and butterflies rise up from the water.’ The primer encourages mischief and absurdity, and is not afraid of fantasy, leaving space for the child’s imagination to explore.

By raising the question of how to teach without reproducing the values of the existing social order, this short review stages tensions that animate many of Benjamin’s writings on childhood and pedagogy. Benjamin frames the relation between the individual child and the existing adult world as a confrontation between chaos and order, rationality and the fantastic, suggesting that the child might be able to unravel or challenge dominant structures.

Benjamin’s celebration of the child’s idiosyncratic qualities runs counter to pedagogical theories espoused by many of his communist contemporaries, both in Germany and in the Soviet Union (which he had visited five years previously). This collaborative paper will attempt to think through the political implications of Benjamin’s writing on childhood and pedagogy today. Does Benjamin’s work provide a genuinely revolutionary theory of childhood or does his emphasis on individual subjective experience align his work with contemporary liberal conceptions of the child?

**Matthew Charles**

University of Westminster

*Education as Transmissibility*

In an early definition of education, Walter Benjamin insists that you cannot teach by example, only through a mutual transformation of learner, educator and the learnt in a medium of transmission. The task of education is therefore *to make teachings transmissible* for each new generation, a conception that has much in common with that of the storyteller, who appropriately joins the ranks of teachers and sages in Benjamin’s writings. If Kafka’s stories provide one exemplary location in which a modern crisis of “transmissibility” manifests itself in the epoch of mass media, they simultaneously provide models for the pedagogic reconstruction of such media. How might the deformative power of technological media and some of the affects of its users (boredom, distraction, frustration, resistance) be thought of in terms of a destructive force or agencythat *provokes* such transmission? And to what extent does this, in a reversal of our usual pedagogic assumptions, involve a positive transformation not so much of the learner as the educator and their teachings?

**Iris Pereira** and **Brenton Doecke**

Universidade do Minho, Portugal

*Beginning Again*

‘… the most urgent task of the writer today: that of recognizing how poor he is and how poor he must be in order to begin again at the beginning.’

Walter Benjamin, The Author as Producer, 1934

Substitute ‘educator’ for ‘writer’, and you have the gist of what we are proposing to argue in this paper. We are appropriating Benjamin’s language from an address he gave to the Institute for the Study of Fascism, in Paris, in 1934. This was at the time of the Nazis’ rise to power, when writers like Benjamin had been driven into exile, and forced to contemplate the cultural resources they had at their disposal that would allow them to challenge the Nazi triumph over German language and culture. By the ‘poverty’ of the writer he means a capacity to ‘begin again’, in the sense that prior understandings of the traditions in which a writer works can no longer serve as a rationale for the work that a writer does, where everything is under attack, and the foundations of culture have been radically undermined.

Our argument is that at the current moment language educators should similarly begin with an acknowledgement of their ‘poverty’. Their work has come to be mediated by a complex machinery of measurement, all designed to render them accountable for improving the educational outcomes of students. This has involved an historical forgetfulness with regard to earlier moments in history when educators understood their work differently. We are thinking especially of the moment of ‘Growth’ pedagogy in the English speaking world, when educators such as James Britton, John Dixon, Douglas Barnes and Harold Rosen emphasized the need to be fully responsive to children’s needs rather than judging them according to predetermined standards of performance. The answer to our current situation, however, does not lie in going back, let alone nostalgia for a time when other values and beliefs shaped the work of language educators. The insights of those educators need to be reclaimed, but this should be done in the spirit in which Benjamin conceives of ‘beginning again’, reflexively engaging in one’s work and seeking to cultivate a responsiveness to students that might enable us to see and respond to them anew.

The paper will draw on work that we have done respectively with language educators in early childhood settings in Portugal and secondary schools in Australia. ‘Beginning again’ is not something that can simply happen, but educators need to develop within themselves (indeed ‘train’ themselves) to find ways of engaging with students that challenge how their relationships with them are currently mediated by standards-based reforms. Crucial in this respect is cultivating an ability to use stories – both to respond to the stories that students bring within them into class and to tell stories of one’s own that produce a better understanding of the complexities of one’s social and cultural setting as an educator. To do this, we shall revisit Benjamin’s essay ‘The Storyteller’, arguing its relevance to educators.