

My paper will examine the image of the child as a historical agent in Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* or *One-way Street*. This work, written between 1923-1926 and published in 1928, was seen by Benjamin as a prototype for his uncompleted materialist philosophy of history known variously as *Passagenarbeit*, *Passagen Werk*, or in English, *The Arcades Project*. *Einbahnstraße* is a montage of written fragments Benjamin called *Denkbilder* (or thought-images). Because of this fragmentary form, this work is often seen as a literary version of a Dadaist collage or photo-montage.

The image of the child appears in several sections of *Einbahnstraße*. For Benjamin, the child is the ideal reader, acting out allegorical readings. The child also has a unique relation to history because all history is equally remote to them. The child occupies a privileged position because of their ability to act upon the world, reworking and undoing the phantasmegoria of the commodity world. However, as Susan Buck-Morss states in her book *The Dialectics of Seeing*, "At no time did Benjamin suggest that the child's mythic understanding was itself truth."¹ These abilities of children must be taken into the adult world to have political effectiveness.

An important adult allegorical subject for Benjamin was the *flâneur*, the stroller of the mid-19th century Parisian street. The *flâneur* was an observer of modern life in the city who maintained an aloofness from urban activity. The *flâneur* bathes in the crowd, making the street an interior, all the while remaining incognito. In Benjamin's world, however, the *flâneur* was an inadequate revolutionary, being unable to interact with the objective, sensuous world around them. The child is the interactive agent.

... 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 recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.²

Children not only see but play with what adults are blind to: things without use value. The child recognizes in detritus the face that the world turns to them because it is stripped of its camouflage of usefulness. With this camouflage goes second nature; this

¹ Buck-Morss, Susan, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass, MIT, 1991), p. 277.

² "One-Way Street" in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Belknap/Harvard, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1996), p. 449.

material loses the façade of being the natural outcome of progress. Children are themselves allegories for a world free of instrumental thinking. Where the bourgeois subject surveys a forest and sees only lumber, the child can transform a clump of trees into a machine, an abandoned tractor into a vehicle to explore the depths of the ocean, or furniture into a mountain range. For Benjamin the child builds sensuous, concrete allegories from materials that are living the natural-historical dialectic. These allegories undermine the idea of history as a first principle and instead reveal it as nature-acted-upon. Nature becomes an interdependent term of history, rather than a victim of it, and vice-versa.

The relation between the adult and the child bears some resemblance to this relationship between nature and history.

The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery of not nature but the relation between nature and man. (*One-way Street*, p. 487)

This is Benjamin's utopian glimpse of this relationship. In practice, the adult tries to dominate and conquer the child's world. In one way, the child lives trauma: an infantile state of helplessness. The true trauma for the child is living in the instrumental world of the adult as a little adult, where all experience is mediated socially and instrumentally instead of by sensuous experience. All of childhood becomes a field in which traumas can later be harvested. Trauma to the adult is an unmediated, or sensuously mediated experience overseen by instrumentality, whereas sensuous experience is the goal for the child, the true world that is terrorized by instrumentality. Being forced into the role of the little adult in a traumatic state of infantile helplessness keeps the child from childhood, denying their allegorical relationship to the world.

The sensuous experience of allegory contains an element of the phantasmagorical in the world of the child. For Benjamin it occurs when the world of things reveal relations among themselves and stand up and speak. It is the fantastic appearance of the myth of progress in the commodity world, or the extraordinary historical relationships revealed in an epiphany of allegory. In Benjamin's world phantasmagoria lurks everywhere, waiting around every corner and in every shop window, ready to spring on the next passer-by, and it is one of the most elusive ideas in his repertoire. It does not reside on one side of any fence we might falsely hope partitions the true from the false, legitimate from illegitimate, nature from history, or second nature from the natural-historical dialectic. Phantasmagoria is as alive in the false consciousness of the commodity world as it is in the illuminating flash of the child's construction site.

Phantasmagoria must be entered into. It is the flash of non-mediated experience encountered by Benjamin's "Pilfering Child" in *One-way Street*:

And just as the lover embraces his girl before kissing her, the child's hand enjoys a tactile tryst with the comestibles before his mouth savors their sweetness. How flatteringly honey, heaps of currants, even rice yield to his hand! How passionate this meeting of two who have at last escaped the spoon! (*One-way Street*, p. 464)

Even here Benjamin is dialectical. The child's world is couched in allegories of the adult world, sexual tales that disrupt the utopia of childhood. The child is a revolutionary figure, but also one inadequate to experience the full range of life.

You are given a book from the school library.... For a week you were wholly given up to the soft drift of the text.... Its contents did not matter. For you were reading at the time when you still made up stories in bed. The child seeks his way along the half-hidden paths.... one hand is always on the page. To him, the hero's adventure can still be read in the swirling letters like figures and messages in drifting snowflakes. His breath is part of the air of the events narrated, and all the participants breath it. He mingles with the characters far more closely than grown-ups do.... and when he gets up, he is covered over and over by the snow of his reading. (*One-way Street*, p. 463)

Here the child is the ideal historian in that they enact the text, bringing their own lives into it. This is allegorical reading as Benjamin was aiming for, creating a unique experience of history. However, the child is a teacher that does not comprehend their subject. The child can demystify historical relationships, but they cannot understand history as a multi-dimensional force that has left destruction in its path. They are barred from the adult world. This has a great deal to do with adult sexual relationships. "And the truth refuses (like a child or a woman who does not love us), facing the lens of writing while we crouch under the black cloth, to keep still and look amiable." (*One-way Street*, p. 480) Only the adult, who has supposedly mastered reason, has endured the absolute refusal of reason one experiences when dismissed by a child or discarded by a lover.

This is due in part to the child's relationship to history. To a child history is two-dimensional. All history is equally remote to the child because they lack a historical past. Only an adult has the ability to see the angel of history, like Benjamin did, as an angel facing the past and being swept into the future by the destruction capitalism still calls progress. What Benjamin was calling for was an enactment of history.

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously,

as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.³

This grasping of the constellation of historical relationships is only possible through the child-like enactment of history by the adult who has an experience of history. Benjamin's call to read the world allegorically, and this must be practiced on his own writings as well, is a way of understanding the world as historical over and over again.

³ "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken, New York, 1968), p. 263.