

# Mimesis and playfulness in Walter Benjamin and Roger Caillois: playing and gaming in the process of child development <sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The article is concerned with the centeredness of childhood in Benjamin's thought, whose objective categories are the playfulness, the language and the mimesis, to deprehend from them formative possibilities for the early childhood education. For Benjamin, the mimetic mediation in the child formation occurs in the ontogenetic development (of the individual, in socialization and in the game), and in the phylogenetic development (of the species, of humanity, in the language and the culture). Approaching Caillois' games sociology, there is an assertive connection between mimesis and playfulness and between the image and imagination. Through comparative analysis, it is argued that the mimetic faculty related to playful socialization can be a device for the child's psychic constitution and a mechanism of disruption in relation to the adequacy of technical development.

**KEYWORDS:** Critical Theory of Society. Early Childhood Education. Mimesis. Playfulness.

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*Mimesis e lúdico em Walter Benjamin e Roger Caillois: o brincar e o jogar no processo de desenvolvimento da criança*

**RESUMO**

O artigo ocupa-se da centralidade da infância no pensamento benjaminiano, cujas categorias objetivas são o lúdico, a linguagem e a mimese, para apreender delas possibilidades formativas para a educação infantil. Para Benjamin, a mediação mimética na formação da criança ocorre no desenvolvimento ontogenético (do indivíduo, na socialização e no jogo), e no desenvolvimento filogenético (da espécie, da humanidade, na linguagem e na cultura). Na aproximação com a sociologia dos jogos de Caillois verifica-se a ligação direta entre mimese e lúdico e entre imagem e imaginação. Com análise comparada sustenta-se que a faculdade mimética relacionada à socialização lúdica pode ser um dispositivo para a constituição psíquica da criança e um mecanismo de ruptura em relação à adequação ao desenvolvimento da técnica.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Teoria Crítica da Sociedade. Educação Infantil. Mimesis. Ludicidade.

*Mimesis y enseñanza lúdica en Walter Benjamin y Roger Caillois: el juego en el proceso de desarrollo del niño*

**RESUMEN**

El artículo se ocupa de la centralidad de la infancia en el pensamiento de Benjamin, cuyas categorías objetivas son el juego, el lenguaje y la mimesis, para deducir de ellas posibilidades formativas para la educación infantil. Para Benjamin, la mediación mimética en la formación del niño se da en el desarrollo ontogenético (del individuo, en la socialización y en el juego), y en el desarrollo filogenético (de la especie, de la humanidad, en el lenguaje y la cultura). En la aproximación con la sociología del juego de Caillois, hay una conexión directa entre mimesis y juego y entre imagen e imaginación. Mediante un análisis comparativo, se argumenta que la facultad mimética relacionada con la socialización lúdica puede ser un dispositivo para la constitución psíquica del niño y un mecanismo de perturbación en relación con la adecuación del desarrollo técnico.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Teoría Crítica de la Sociedad. Educación Infantil. Mimesis. Enseñanza lúdica.

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*“Just as a child imitates us in his play, so we imitate in the art game the forces that have created and continue to create the world” (Paul Klee, 1920).*

## Introduction

There is a playful dimension to the writing and images of Walter Benjamin's thought. Like the groping child in his first sketches with crayons or watercolor brushes, the Benjaminian method seems to be playing<sup>5</sup> with the obtuse seriousness of traditional philosophies. His method as a "detour" (Umweg, in German), as a descent, subverts the Greek word *methodos*, which means "with a path" (GAGNEBIN, 2014, p. 70). The "method as detour", the starting "again and again" that breaks the "uninterrupted course" of the process, indirectly refers to the habits of the child. This is not to say that it is inferior to the great philosophical systems; the opposite is true.

Method is deviation. Presentation as deviation - this is the methodological feature of the treatise. Renouncing the uninterrupted course of intention is its first characteristic. Tirelessly, thought begins again and again, minutely returning to the thing itself. This incessant taking of breath is contemplation's most authentic form of existence (BENJAMIN, 2011, p. 16).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The word game used in this work also refers to children's games. In German [Spiel] there is no distinction between playing and games, just like in English [to play] and Russian [igra]. According to Vygotsky (2021) and other researchers into the world of play, the substantial difference between games and play refers to games with rules and freer play, without pre-established rules. Especially after Huizinga's *Homo ludens* (2012), play and games are listed in the category of playfulness.

<sup>6</sup> We have opted for Gagnebin's translation. In João Barrento's translation: "Representation is the quintessence of his method. Method is a non-direct path: this is the methodological character of the treatise. Its first characteristic is the renunciation of the

This methodological conception rejects the chronological linearity of traditional philosophies from Descartes to Kant<sup>7</sup> and the positivism of Comte and Ranke. It returns to the object, takes a breath, and is characterized by the apprehension of its target: the object. In Gagnebin (2014, p. 71) words, the "method allows the subject to take hold of the object", but not without taking risks. The method is "certainly dangerous, because you can never be sure that it really leads anywhere, but for the same reason it is extremely precious, because only renouncing the safety of the predictable allows thought to achieve freedom" (GAGNEBIN, 2009, p. 88). The Benjaminian method's predilection for the object also relates to the objects of sensitive experience<sup>8</sup> and, therefore, to images.

The decline of the formative experience in modernity has led to a progressive distancing of the knowing subject from the knowable object. Thinking dialectically about childhood means looking for the element that reconnects subject and object, teaching and learning, in other words, looking for the mediating element in the formative process. About dialectical mediation, Hegel writes in his Encyclopedia: "But when it comes to the immediate knowledge of God, of law, of ethics", these are "absolutely conditioned by the mediation that is called development, education, culture" (apud ADORNO, 2013, p. 162). Adorno supports the hypothesis of mimesis as an element of mediation between subject and object in the sense of approaching the extremes and in the extremes.

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uninterrupted path of intention. Thought continually returns to the beginning, returns in detail to the thing itself. This indefatigable movement of breathing is the specific mode of being of contemplation" (BENJAMIN, 2011, p. 21).

<sup>7</sup> However, in "On the Program of Philosophy to Come", Benjamin (2019) considers that Kant is the obligatory starting point for any philosophical reflection. He doesn't exclude Kant or even Descartes from discussions about method; he doesn't aim to suppress them, but to overcome them dialectically, in the sense of Aufheben, or supersumption. Missac (2020, p. 32) classifies Benjamin as an "anti-systematic thinker, but one who sometimes feels the need to anchor himself somewhere [...]".

<sup>8</sup> The word experience comes from the Latin *experiri*, or to prove. Experience is, in the first place, an encounter or a relationship with something that is experienced, that is tasted. Its root is *periri*, which is also found in *periculum*, danger. The Indo-European root is *per*, with which the idea of crossing is primarily related and, secondarily, the idea of proof. In German, experience is *Erfahrung*, which contains the *fahren* of traveling. And from the Old High German *fara* also comes *Gefahr*, danger, and *Gefahren*, to endanger. In both Germanic and Latin languages, the word experience inseparably contains the dimension of crossing and danger (LARROSA, 2004, p. 161).

The mimetic element<sup>9</sup> (das Mimetische) or "immaterial resemblance" has been a mediating category since the Platonic mimesis, or the participation between the intelligible world of ideas and the sensible reality of the objects of experience.

Genuine mimesis would then be an instrument of knowledge, as Gebauer and Wulf (2004) point out, with an important relationship in the processes of socialization and identification in childhood, according to Grigorowitschs (2011). However, despite demonstrating the mimetic potential for children's education, especially in relation to the universe of play, modern scholars have paid little attention to the issue of technique and technology. The technical reproduction of forms, images in cinema and sound on the radio have a direct impact on mimetic perception. Adorno's (2020) work on the culture industry and Benjamin's (1994; 2017) work on the technical reproducibility of art are sensitive in demonstrating the false mimesis in mass culture and, consequently, in revealing the cognitive regression in modernity.

In the second version of the essay "The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility", when analyzing the decline of traditional auratic art, especially after its peak in Goethe's aesthetics of beauty, Benjamin (2017a, p. 299) states that "[...] what accompanies the atrophy of appearance and the decline of aura in works of art is an enormous gain for the playing space". Or, according to Gagnebin's translation (2008, p. 123), "[...] what is brought about by the withering of experience, by the decline of the aura, is a formidable gain for the space of play (Spiel-Raum)". This vast space for play is inaugurated in modernity by cinema. But what is the meaning of this postulate? What relationship is there between the decadence of pre-capitalist aesthetic forms (magical, mythical, sacred) and play today? Benjamin doesn't clarify this question, but he does provide clues that support interpretative hypotheses, by relating the universe of play to mimesis:

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<sup>9</sup> The word mimesis has its etymological origins in mimos, from which are derived mimesthai and mimesis, mimema, mimetes and mimetikos. Mimesthai means "to imitate", "to represent" or "to portray". Mimes and mimetes designate the people who imitate and represent; mimes also refers to the context of dramatic actions. Mimema designates the result of mimetic action, and mimesis the action itself. Mimetikos refers to something capable of imitation or the imitable (GEBAUER; WULF, 2004, p. 22).

Its [the aura's] decline doubly suggests that we look at its origin<sup>10</sup>. This lies in mimesis as the original phenomenon of all artistic activity. The imitator does what he does only apparently. And, in fact, ancient imitation knows only one material in which it is formed: the imitator's own body. Dance and language, body language and lip language are the oldest manifestations of mimesis. - The imitator makes his thing apparent. You could also say: he represents the thing, he plays with it. Thus, we are faced with the polarity that prevails in mimesis. In mimesis lie, closely intertwined like the membranes of a seed, the two faces of art: appearance and play (BENJAMIN, 2017a, p. 299).

The allegorical use of "seed membranes" is not random. As cell biology recognizes, some prehistoric seeds can germinate again after thousands of years. Similarly, the mimetic impulse that originated in the human being resurfaces as a creative force in modernity in the form of play. If play is asleep in mimesis, it's a question of understanding the intertwined connection between the decline of the aura and the gain for play. Although Benjamin does not explain the horizon opened up by play for early childhood education, his formulations find resonance in other specialists in the universe of play, such as Huizinga (2012), Agamben (2005), Vigotski (2021) and, above all, Caillois (2017).

For Benjamin (1994, p. 253), "it is play, and nothing else, that is at the origin of all habits", because "the adult relieves his heart of fear and doubly enjoys his happiness when he recounts his experience. The child recreates this experience, always starting all over again, from the beginning". This "beginning again", the repetition that occurs in all children's play, is the starting point for

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<sup>10</sup> This is the origin [Ursprung] of what Benjamin calls the "second technique" - or something like interacting harmoniously with nature, which contrasts with the domination of nature characteristic of the "first technique" that goes back to prehistory, where humanity began "[...] for the first time, and with unconscious cunning, to distance itself from nature. In other words, the origin is in the game" (BENJAMIN, 2009a, p. 290). For Seligmann-Silva (2008), Ursprung - literally proto-jump - means jumping and making bridges between fragments of redemption, i.e. a remembrance of the original event that becomes a cultural tradition. Gagnebin (1999) reiterates that Ursprung designates the origin as a leap [Sprung] out of the traditional leveling and linear chronological succession; by its emergence, the origin breaks the timeline.

the analysis of Benjamin's "dialectic of childhood". According to Seligmann-Silva (2010), Benjamin's interpretation of children's play represents the child's mimetic faculty in its repetition, a characteristic feature of play. Repetition is also dealt with by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which it characterizes the experience of the traumatized, who tend to involuntarily repeat the "scene" of the trauma. The conservative trait of drives and obsessive rituals bear this mark of repetition:

We know that for the child it [repetition] is the soul of play; that nothing makes him happier than 'one more time'. The obscure compulsion to repeat is no less powerful, no less sly than the sexual impulse of love. And it's no coincidence that Freud thought he had discovered a 'beyond the pleasure principle' in this compulsion. And, in fact, every deepest experience insatiably desires, to the end of all things, repetition and return, the re-establishment of a primordial situation from which it took its initial impulse (BENJAMIN, 2009a, p. 101, emphasis added, author's quotation marks).

The 'primordial situation', the origin [Ursprung] or the proto-phenomenon of humanity's childhood is still present in the culture of the child. In phylogenetic development, the human being preserves archaic characteristics, often in the unconscious, which combine with ontogenesis. The mimetic faculty or the doctrine of similarities allows us to reflect on the playful dimension of learning and socialization in childhood. The dialogue between Benjamin and Caillois brings the discussion together in an objective way.

## **2. *Mimesis* e lúdico em Benjamin e em Caillois**

By returning to Benjamin's reflections on the child, experience and play, Agamben demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between

play, childhood and history. At the basis of Western thought - Greek and Jewish - play is related to the concepts of temporality and culture. Thus, for Heraclitus, the notion of Aion or originary time, "the temporalizing essence of the living" that differs from Chronos, is defined as a "child playing with dice", representing the temporal essence of the living as a game, whose open dimension in this game is described as a "child's realm" (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 88-89). In another work, Agamben (2013, p. 9) quotes a Talmudic legend that says: "In the last three hours of the day, God sits down and plays with Leviathan, as it is written: 'You made Leviathan to play with him'".

The universe of play that Agamben analyzes in Collodi's Pinocchio takes place during the vacations, when rhythm, alternation and repetition are like vacations or weekends. In this way, the play is something like a stoppage or interruption in the calendar. If the rites had the function of fixing and structuring the calendar, the game, on the other hand, alters and destroys it. The spheres of play and the sacred are closely linked. The origin of many games is related to ancient sacred ceremonies, such as dances, fights and divinatory practices. Following Benveniste's studies, Agamben (2005, p. 84) defines play as the "sacred inside out", in the sense that, although it has its origins in the sacred, play maintains an inverse connection with it. In the land of toys, children perform rites and words and manipulate objects that were once sacred, but with the difference that the original meaning and scope of the myth does not exist. In other words, one could say that there is a desacralization of mythical time with play, as the eternal return alternates with the time of a "flash" in play. "By playing, man detaches himself from sacred time and 'forgets' it in human time" (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 85).

In short, despite originating in rite, play maintains a certain opposition with it, which Agamben (2005, p. 89) defines using a maxim from Lévi-Strauss: "while rite transforms events into structures, play transforms structures into events". A notorious example of this relationship between



play and ritual can be found in the classic of children's (and adult) literature, *The Little Prince*:

What is a ritual?- asked the little prince. - It's something that's forgotten too," said the fox. - It's what makes a day different from other days; an hour from other hours. My hunters, for example, love a ritual. They dance on Thursday with the village girls. Thursday is a wonderful day! I go for a walk to the vineyard. If hunters danced on any day, all the days would be the same and I'd never have a vacation! (SAINT-EXUPÉRY, 2016, p. 88).

In a similar vein, according to Huizinga (2012, p. 25), even though the rites are bloody, the tests to which the initiate is subjected are cruel, and the masks are frightening, this does not prevent the atmosphere of the game from being festive, "implying the interruption of everyday life". It is not too much to repeat that Benjamin's concept of origin [Ursprung] reiterates the interruption of history. Huizinga's (2012) central thesis takes up the centrality of play for history in the constitution of human culture, from language to law, poetry, philosophy and art. Contrary to Huizinga, Caillois (2017, p. 107) states that "the spirit of play is essential to culture, but games and toys, throughout history, are really residues of that culture". Games generate habits and this leads to an interdependence between play and culture. At the intersection between play and culture lies mimetic mediation. In this sense, thinking about the social vocation or even the sociology of games requires understanding their origins. According to Caillois<sup>11</sup> (2017), the magical space of games goes back to toys, which in turn go back to primitive societies, which he calls the "society of chaos". Drawing on sources from ethnology and

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<sup>11</sup> In 1937, together with George Bataille and Michel Leiris, Roger Caillois (1913-1978), a sociologist and literary critic, formed the Collège de Sociologie, which Benjamin attended as a listener. Caillois was scouted as a potential French collaborator with the Institute for Social Research. In Adorno's correspondence to Benjamin (2012, p. 295), this is made clear: "Furthermore, I would like to ask you to keep an eye out for possible highly qualified French collaborators. [...] I mentioned Caillois and Bataille".

anthropology, the author states that primitive weapons become toys when they fall into disuse: the bow, shield, blowgun and sling are just a few examples, while nursery rhymes and nursery rhymes are ancient forms of enchantment that have fallen into disuse<sup>12</sup>.

Toys would then be displaced forms of what was sacred in pre-animist and animist societies. For example, the pau de sebo is linked to the myths of the conquest of heaven; the kite, before becoming a toy, represented the outer soul of its owner who remained on earth, the magical link between the subject and the object occurs through the kite's line; the game of hopscotch probably represents the labyrinth where the initiate got lost and, later, the architecture of the temple where the stone symbolizes the displacement of the soul to the vault or heaven. "Today's game often remains little detached from its sacred origin" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 110). The sacred origin of games is also highlighted by Huizinga:

The racetrack, the tennis court, the chessboard or the yellow-ball field are not formally distinguishable from the temple or the magic circle. The extreme similarity between sacrificial rituals all over the world shows that these customs must have their roots in some fundamental and essential characteristic of the human spirit (HUIZINGA, 2012, p. 23-24).

The same way that toys cause an inversion of the sacred, they also subvert what is economic. As Benjamin (2009b) writes, the remains of building materials, the residual and the disposable are transformed into toys by children in a kind of miniature of the economic sphere. Another example of this subversion of play is its analogy with DIY. Like DIY, toys also use fragments, parts and scraps that constitute an "assembly" and transform certain meanings into signifiers and vice versa. This leads to a

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<sup>12</sup> There is an obscure relationship between play and mourning. J. J. Bachofen (apud BENJAMIN, 2012, p. 124), a profound connoisseur of primitive societies, states that "all games have a mortuary character" and Ariès (2017, p. 99) writes that toys "most often had a religious meaning: domestic cult, funerary cult". Benjamin (1994, p. 250) analyzes the newborn's rattle not only as a toy to stimulate hearing, the first sense to be excited, but as an instrument "to ward off evil spirits".

historical definition of the toy: "The toy is that which belonged - once, now no longer - to the sphere of the sacred or to the practical-economic sphere" (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 86).

Even so, every game is a system of rules that defines what is and isn't a game, in other words, what is permitted and what is forbidden. The game suggests an idea of breadth and ease of movement, a freedom that is useful but not excessive. This freedom must remain within the rigor of the game itself. According to Caillois (2017, p. 36), play is characterized as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement. Even games of chance do not have the purpose of creating works or wealth, and in this they differ from work and art, because play "is the occasion for pure spending". Gambling is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of existence.

Games of competition result in sports; games of imitation and illusion foreshadow acts of spectacle. Games of chance and combinations were at the origin of many developments in mathematics - from the calculation of probabilities to topology. [...] Their contribution at the level of the individual is no less. Psychologists recognize their important role in the history of self-assertion in children and in the formation of their character. Games of strength, dexterity and calculation are exercises and training. They make the body more vigorous, more flexible and more resistant, the sight sharper, the touch more subtle, the mind more methodical or more ingenious. Each game reinforces, exacerbates some physical or intellectual power (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 24).

Contrary to what is often said, play is not learning or training for work. The boy who plays at being a horse or a locomotive is in no way preparing to become a knight or a mechanic; nor is the girl who, in imaginary dishes, makes fictitious food enhanced by illusory condiments,

preparing to be a cook. "Play does not prepare you for a specific profession; it is introduced into the whole of life by increasing your ability to overcome obstacles or face difficulties" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 25). In these terms, Caillois (2017, p. 42) defines play as an activity:

- 1) *free*: to which the player cannot be forced, as the game would immediately lose its nature as an attractive and joyful diversion;
- 2) *separate*: circumscribed within previously defined space and time limits;
- 3) *uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined nor the result obtained in advance [...];
- 4) *unproductive*: because it creates neither goods, nor wealth, nor any kind of new element [...];
- 5) *regulated*: subject to conventions that suspend ordinary laws and momentarily establish new legislation, the only one that counts;
- 6) *fictitious*: accompanied by a specific awareness of a different reality or one that is frankly unreal in relation to everyday life.

In view of this definition of play, Caillois proposes its classification under four main headings in which competition (Agôn), chance (Alea), simulacrum (Mimicry) and vertigo (Ilinx) predominate. The group of games systematized around Agôn focuses on skill, on the triumph of the winner, since Agôn presents itself as the pure form of personal merit and serves to manifest it. On the other hand, in the Alea group - the Latin word for dice game - victory or defeat doesn't depend on the player, it's about beating fate rather than your opponent. These are dice games, roulette, heads or tails, the lottery, in which chance or fate are the protagonists. "The agôn is a claim to personal responsibility; the alea, a renunciation of the will, an abandonment to fate. [...] The game, agôn or alea, is therefore an attempt to replace the normal confusion of everyday existence with perfect situations" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 55-56).

In this sense, according to Caillois (2017, p. 57), play is a way of evading the world by making it other, but it is also possible to evade it by making oneself other, which corresponds to mimicry. In the fictional aspect of play, it can consist not only of displaying an activity or experiencing a destiny in an imaginary environment, but also of becoming an illusory character. This is a universe in which the subject can pretend to believe, make himself believe or make others believe that he is someone other than himself. According to Caillois (2007), the term mimicry emphasizes the fundamental and elementary, almost organic nature of the impulse that gives rise to this form of play. Its natural phenomenon is found among insects, which are capable of camouflaging nature, like the praying mantis resembling tree branches or butterflies acquiring shades of color almost identical to their natural environment. "The mimicry of insects suddenly provides an extraordinary replica of man's pleasure in disguising himself, dressing up, wearing a mask, playing a character" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 58, emphasis added).

In children, this manifests itself in the form of imitation of adults, mimicry and disguise. But, according to Caillois, mimicry behaviors spill over from childhood into adulthood, acting to mask or disguise the player's behavior. Typical forms of this group of games are theatrical representations and dramatic interpretation. Mimicry is not directly related to *alea*, as it imposes immobility and the anxiety of waiting on the player, but it is related to *agôn*, in the sense of sports games and shows, in which the audience imitates athletes and stars. For Caillois (2017, p. 60), this is due to the pleasure<sup>13</sup> provided by the game of being another or impersonating another. "Even the simple identification with the champion already constitutes a mimicry analogous to that which makes the reader

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<sup>13</sup> According to Agamben (2005, p. 127), pleasure is an immediate experience available to all, related to the temporality of play. In Aristotle, pleasure (*eidos*) does not develop in a homogeneous space of time, but is "in every instant something whole and complete". By its incommensurability, pleasure is subtracted from the commensurable duration of time.

recognize himself in the hero of the novel and the spectator in the heroes of the films" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 60).

If mimicry is characterized by the "masking" of reality, *ilinx* acts more radically as a vertigo of reality. *Ilinx* in Greek means "whirlpool of water" and, by extension, vertigo [illingos]. "This vertigo marries easily with the normally repressed taste for disorder and destruction. It translates crude and brutal forms of personality affirmation" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 64). Children's games of swinging or spinning are forms of escape and escapism, in which the body struggles to regain its balance and the perception of its sharpness. Slide rides and merry-go-rounds are elementary forms of vertigo for children, but elevated to relentless levels with modern amusement parks, which Caillois calls "vertigo machines". He doesn't mention the rollercoaster, but it can certainly be included as a way of inflicting vertigo panic on the consciousness.

Once the classification into four essential characteristics of play had been established, Caillois sought a sociological typology for the playful impulse. For him, what lies at the root of play is an important freedom, the need for rest, distraction and fantasy. This primary power of improvisation and joy he inserts under the name of *paidia* - the childlike essence that also resurfaces in adult life - and *ludus* or "controlled play". *Ludus* and *paidia* are not categories of play, but ways of playing; they "integrate into common existence with their immutable contrast: the one that opposes the clatter to a symphony, the scribble to the competent application of the laws of perspective" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 101). According to Caillois (2017), the hobby is a particular form of *ludus* in industrial civilization, as a way of compensating for the mutilation of the personality caused by repetitive, automatic work.

For Caillois (2017, p. 85), there is a "social vocation in games", a thesis followed by subsequent game researchers such as Grigorowitz (2011) and Kishimoto (2020). In this sense, the different categories of game - *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* - presuppose companionship and not solitude, with

the caveat that this is most often a circle restricted to a particular form of game. Generally, the game appears as an occupation of small groups of initiates or aficionados, who for a few moments indulge in their favorite amusement. The variety of spectators favours mimicry and agôn, in which the socialized form is essentially sport; for alea there are casinos, racecourses, lotteries; for mimicry, the performing arts, from opera to puppets and puppet theater; for ilinx, amusement parks, festivals and popular celebrations such as carnival and masked dances.

While the origins of civilization were dominated by the mask and vertigo, i.e. mimicry and ilinx, in antiquity there was a shift towards agonistic games, without the simulacrum, which leads to the spectacle, disappearing. Ancient Greece represents the agonic ideal, competition, merit, but this subsists alongside mimicry, which Caillois (2017, p. 132) defines as the "only truly creative category of games". However, the passage to civilization proper implies the progressive elimination of the combination of ilinx and mimicry, for social relations governed by the pair agôn and alea, competition and luck. "Whenever a high culture manages to emerge from the original chaos, there is a noticeable regression of the powers of vertigo and simulacrum" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 159). In other words, in the words of Caillois (2017, p. 167), "the sorcerer who presided over the initiation becomes a pedagogue".

For Caillois (2017), the realm of mimicry and ilinx, as recognized cultural trends, is doomed from the moment the human spirit arrives at the conception of the cosmos, that is, the ordered and stable universe, without miracle or metamorphosis. Cosmogonic or creation myths characterize such societies, no longer founded on magic, but on myth. It is a step forward in the mastery of nature, albeit feared, in which mathematics occupies a prominent place, especially after Pythagoras. The Greece of the classical period is a good example of the will to triumph that characterizes the agôn. A warrior and intellectual aristocracy occupied the administrative posts, but no king or general went to war without consulting fortune with the oracles, just as in democracy magistrates were chosen by lot, which indicates the



persistence of the alea. "Recourse to luck helps to withstand the injustice of competition that is rigged or too rough. At the same time, it gives hope to the disinherited [...]. It is up to the alea to propose this permanent miracle" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 182-183).

In modern society, mimicry is once again of considerable importance in the association between luck and merit. In contemporary times, Caillois warns of the problem of corruption in games,<sup>14</sup> where the typical form is cheating the rules. In mimicry, this corruption manifests itself when the simulacrum is no longer considered as such, when the one in disguise believes in the reality of the role, the disguise and the mask.

He does not interpret this other that he is representing anymore, because he is convinced that he is another, he conducts himself accordingly and forgets who he is. The loss of their deep identity is the punishment of those who don't know how to stop the pleasure they get from assuming a strange personality in the game. This is called alienation (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 95, emphasis added).

Advertising multiplies identification with the other, with the hero and the movie star. This process is called delegation by Caillois (2017, p. 190-191), a diluted form of mimicry, through which the masses identify with and become intoxicated by the triumph of the winner. They try to be the winner through an intermediary, by delegation, hence modern society's characteristic cult of the champion and the star. The dream of living the life of celebrities is limited and restricted, so viewers only triumph by "proxy", through the protagonist of the movie or the hero of the novel. This superficial and vague identification, although tenacious and universal, can

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<sup>14</sup> Caillois is very attentive to the forms of gambling in Brazil, especially carnival and jogo do bicho. "In Brazil, where gambling is king, savings are lower. It's the country of speculation and luck. In the former USSR, gambling was banned and persecuted, while savings were strongly encouraged to allow the domestic market to expand" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 245). One of the harmful effects of gambling is the vacuum of small capital that stops circulating or being saved and ends up in the cycle of an eternal return that is rarely profitable for gamblers. When it's not clandestinely appropriated by speculators and organizers, it's taxed by the state, and the return to society is minimal. "In Brazil, where gambling is king" seems to be a pejorative and derogatory expression that denotes our state of drunkenness.



be described as "false mimesis", although Caillois doesn't use this expression. But, according to him, the vast majority of the population only has this illusion to fall back on, to distract themselves from a monotonous and tedious existence.

The need to identify with the winner is reinforced by the fascination caused by the press, radio and television, in short, by the culture industry. Caillois (2017, p. 194) refers to a "continuous osmosis" between temporary divinities and the multitude of their admirers, who imitate them and copy their hairstyles, clothing, manners and even their food tastes. Identification leads the individual to develop a second nature, in which vertigo and simulacra tend to alienate the personality; or, in Frankfurtian terms, to weaken the Self:

A latent and benign mimicry provides a harmless compensation for a resigned crowd, with no hope or firm intention of accessing the universe of luxury and glory that enchants them. Mimicry is diffuse and corrupted. Deprived of the mask, it no longer results in possession and hypnosis, but in the most useless of fantasies, the one that originates in the enchantment of the dark room or the sunny stadium, when all eyes are fixed on the gestures of a radiant hero. [...] The infinitely exposed mimicry serves as a support or counterweight to the new norms that govern society (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 198).

In this sense, mimicry and the ilinx, as permanent temptations for human beings, can unleash threatening instincts, repressed and explosive wild energies. According to Caillois, the drive<sup>15</sup> for simulacra and vertigo for the primitive mask is replaced by the fetish of uniforms in the modern era. The confusion between primitive chaos and the order symbolized by

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<sup>15</sup> "Play and art are born from an excess of vital energy, which man or child does not need to satisfy their immediate needs and which they use for free and pleasant imitation of real behaviors" (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 251).

uniforms, especially military uniforms, which the Nazis were able to develop with the refinement of designer Hugo Boss, can be deduced from this.

Nevertheless, this is a degraded form of the original and sacred mimicry, since mimicry is closer to *paidia* than to *ludus*, that is, it relates more to the universe of children than to the infantilization of the adult world caused by the game of winners. According to Caillois (2017, p. 206), mimetic play, in its first and true sense, "remains completely on the side of anarchic improvisation, confusion and gesticulation, the pure expenditure of energy". The pleasure and excitement provided by play remain a form of original drive; they manifest themselves in the form of shocks, sudden falls, disorientation. The circus, carnival and popular festivals are still privileged places for the manifestation of play, where there are no protagonists and spectators, but rather the interaction of the public as part of the spectacle<sup>16</sup>. For Caillois (2017, p. 219), there is a particular aspect of mimicry whose social function cannot be disputed: satire<sup>17</sup>. Caricatures, buffoons and clowns have always been representations of mockery and ridicule towards monarchs and victors.

In addition to these factors that are incompatible with the ideology of social order, with the rules of the official game, play makes a mockery of work and acquires importance in determining, in part, the lifestyle of a society (CAILLOIS, 2017). The idea of freedom and gratuitousness of play was highlighted before Caillois by Karl Gross, in works on *Spiele* known and commented on by Benjamin (1994, 2009b). Another highlight in every game is the power to freely interrupt the activity at any time, since the fundamental element manifested is pleasure and not obligation. In this original aspect of play, which is free and creative, lies its educational and emancipating potential.

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin's (1993) work on popular culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance is a classic example of the social inversion - albeit momentary - of man and woman, poor and rich, master and slave at carnival and festivals.

<sup>17</sup> Menippean satire is an important dialogical textual form, a genre that preserves the playfulness of language in its carnivalesque origins, according to Bakhtin's thesis (1993). Satire can be found in Dostoevsky's dialogues and in Benjamin's radio plays, as a mimetic resource for opposing the hierarchical order of fascist Germany.

In general, play appears as education - without a predetermined objective - of the body, character or intelligence. In this respect, the further the game distances itself from reality, the more important its educational value becomes. Because [the game] doesn't teach recipes, it develops skills (CAILLOIS, 2017, p. 257).

This historical and sociological digression on the universe of play is justified by the initial question, that is, how could the decline of the aura develop an extraordinary gain for play? Moreover, what does Benjamin mean when he says that play lies dormant in mimesis? For Benjamin (2009b, p. 142), "where children play there is a buried secret", which implies unveiling a hidden problem. In pedagogical terms in the field of early childhood education, educational psychology<sup>18</sup> (Freud, Vygotsky<sup>19</sup> and Piaget) provides elements for a synthesis between play and imitation. To do this, we need to bear in mind what has been presented so far, namely that play interrupts ordinary life, both in the material and economic spheres (its incompatibility with work) and in cultural terms (its inversion of sacred practices and linear historical temporality). Without pretending to anticipate conclusions, it can be said from the outset that the enormous gain for play means a leap towards freedom. "There is no doubt that play always means liberation" (BENJAMIN, 2009b, p. 85).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, play, as a psychic activity, is similar to dreaming, as it gives vent to the tensions arising from the impossibility of fulfilling desire, becoming a channel for satisfying these

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<sup>18</sup> In the article "Problems of the sociology of language" (BENJAMIN, 2018), Piaget and Vygotsky are worked on together. Respecting the methodological vicissitudes of each psychological strand - a certain biological evolutionism and the primacy of the social, respectively - both converge to understand specific points; in Benjamin's case, the development and evolution of human language, in ours, the game and its correlation with mimesis. These are specific relationships, in general Freud stands out above the others, in Benjamin and the Frankfurtians.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin was familiar with the post-revolutionary history of the USSR and its educators' predilection for the social. In the text entitled "Moscow", he recalls his impressions of a trip to Russia: "In the midst of all the images of a childish misery not yet overcome, anyone who pays attention will notice that the pride of the emancipated proletariat meets the emancipated attitude of the children. [...] The New Russians say that the social environment is the only educator one can count on" (BENJAMIN, 2017a, p. 25-31). The primacy of the social is explained by the appropriation of culture by workers and children, something unthinkable under Tsarist absolutism. Therein lies, however, a divergence regarding play. For Vygotsky (2021, p. 2019), "In play, the child is free. But this freedom is illusory". For Benjamin, freedom is complete, to the point of resignifying the social structure.

desires. However, unlike dreams, play moves freely between the internal world and the real world, which guarantees a temporary escape from reality. Freud (2017) highlights *Spiele's* relationship with dreaming and fantasizing; Vygotsky<sup>20</sup> (2021) underlines the issue of play with desire and imagination; Piaget<sup>21</sup> describes the basic structures that characterize children's games - the exercise, the symbol and the rule - and highlights the development of these structures in the development of the child's thinking (HORN; BARAZZUTTI, 2018).

In the universe of play, the child's imaginative faculty develops, which then leads to the habitus. "It is play, and nothing else, that is at the origin of all habits", because "the adult relieves his heart of fear and doubly enjoys his happiness when he recounts his experience. The child recreates this experience, always starting all over again, from the beginning" (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 253). Destroying and rebuilding is at the heart of play, and always starting all over again, because children are irresistibly attracted to the debris that comes from building, working in the garden and carpentry, tailoring or wherever. "Once lost, broken and repaired, even the most princely doll becomes an efficient proletarian comrade in the children's play commune" (BENJAMIN, 2009b, p. 87). According to Benjamin's postulate (2009b, p. 96), "the era of dolls with realistic features has come to an end, a time when adults pretexted supposed childish needs in order to satisfy their own puerile needs". Surrounded by a world of giants, children playfully create their own little world.

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<sup>20</sup> In the article "Play and its role in the child's psychological development", Vygotsky (2021) analyzes the subject-object relationship in childhood. According to Vygotsky (2021, p. 224), "in early childhood, there is an intimate union of the word with the object, of the meaning with what the child sees. During this time, the divergence between the semantic field and the visual field becomes impossible". In other words, "in pre-school play, we have, for the first time, the divergence between the semantic and optical fields" (VIGOTSKI, 2021, p. 225). In play, the idea separates from the object and the action is triggered by the idea and no longer by the object. It is worth highlighting Vygotsky's (2001, p. 59) canonical statement on development and imitation: "We become ourselves through others".

<sup>21</sup> In *The Formation of the Symbol in the Child*, Piaget analyzes imitation as a way of explaining the mechanisms responsible for the formation of symbolic representation, for which play is of fundamental importance. For Piaget, the sensorimotor function is characterized by the tendency to incorporate (assimilation) objects into the subject's schemas, at the same time as the subject accommodates their schemas to the objects (accommodation). In this sense, children learn by imitation from early childhood, when reflexes predominate. Although absent from imitation, reflexes enable subsequent phases, such as "sporadic imitation", "systematic imitation", "immediate imitation" and "deferred or delayed imitation", until the development of "reflected imitation", between the ages of seven and eight, in which there is greater social interaction and the expansion of the child's expressive possibilities (HORN; BARAZZUTTI, 2018, p. 49).

Freud also highlights the intrinsic relationship between fantasy, imagination and childhood play. In addition to repetition, another principle of play is a particular "instinct of imitation". Unlike the imitation of adults, which is directed at the person of the spectator, as in tragedy, for example, in which painful impressions are perceived as high fruition, the child moves from the passivity of experience to the activity of play. In *The Poet and Fantasy*, Freud (2017) brings poetic activity closer to other modes of fantasy, such as children's fantasy and the oneiric<sup>22</sup> world:

Shouldn't we be looking for the first traces of poetic activity in children? Children's most enjoyable and intense activity is playing. Perhaps we should say: every child who plays behaves like a poet, to the extent that they create their own world, or rather, transpose the things of their world into a new order that pleases them. [...] The opposite of play is not seriousness, but reality (FREUD, 2017, p. 267).

For Freud, children's play stems from desires, in fact from a specific desire, the one that helps educate the child: that of becoming big and adult. "Desire uses an opportunity in the present to project, according to a model from the past, an image of the future" (FREUD, 2017, p. 272, emphasis added). This Freudian formulation comes close, almost literally, to Benjamin's concept of "dialectical image", which are images of desire, dream images:

It's not that the past sheds its light on the present or that the present sheds its light on the past; rather, the image is what happened meets the now in a flash, forming a constellation. In other words: the image is dialectics in

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<sup>22</sup> Childhood memories in the poet's life ultimately derive from the assumption that literary creation, like daydreaming, is a continuation and replacement, at once, of childhood play (FREUD, 2017, p. 275).

immobility. For while the relationship between the present and the past is purely temporal and continuous, the relationship between what has happened and now is dialectical - it is not a progression, but an image, which leaps (BENJAMIN, 2009a, 504).

An image that jumps out' of the continuous succession of history, just as the game interrupts the flow of becoming. "The fact that we were children at this time is part of its objective image. It had to be that way in order to give birth to this generation. In other words, in the oneiric context we are looking for a teleological moment. This moment is waiting" (BENJAMIN, 2009a, 435). This obscure passage about the dialectical image becomes clearer if we think about "unconscious images" which, according to Gebauer and Wulf (2004, p. 86), are those images with "a special power over people", due to the fact that they are linked to primary life experiences, such as lack, food and security. According to the authors, these images have the power to structure yearning and desire throughout life.

For Lacan's psychoanalysis, the "mirror image" phase plays an extraordinary role in the constitution of the individual<sup>23</sup>. This image is the source of energy for their mental process; it structures the child's search. The child then tries to mimetically reach the image reflected in the mirror and linked to a lost situation. The child imitates the other because they don't yet know the difference between themselves and the other. They don't yet have self-perception or a sense of self; they allow

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<sup>23</sup> What Lacan calls the "mirror stage", in which this phase of child development can be understood as follows: "Before accessing conceptual thought, the baby is guided by mimetic operations. In order to guide his desire, the baby mimics another in the position of an ideal type. These operations are not only linked to the orientation of desire, but have a fundamental value in the constitution of the self as a functional center and instance of self-reference: the baby introjects the image of another baby in order to constitute its own still unformed self, using the other as one uses a mirror. The introjection of this image is the last stage in the baby's process of breaking away from symbiotic indifferenciation with the mother and with partial objects. By breaking with these partial objects (breasts, faeces, gaze, voice) arranged in a zone of interaction with the mother, the baby can finally have an image of its own body responsible for organizing a body schema. [...] This is summed up by Lacan with the canonical statement: 'The desire of man is the desire of the other'" (SAFATLE, 2005, p. 41).

themselves to be absorbed entirely by the other and by objects. "The adult will show her how to reach herself. The way is the mimesis of the adult's desire, through which the desire itself will be developed" (GEBAUER; WULF, 2004, p. 68).

In this sense, mimesis and desire are closely linked, to the point where one can speak of "mimetic desire". According to Gebauer and Wulf (2004, p. 91), "the pedagogical mimesis process consists of the beholder's resemblance to the image through a visual re-creation, the absorption of the image into themselves and, through this, the expansion of their world within the imagery". For this reason, the authors state that mimesis recreates the imagination, since images, desires and imagination are interconnected in the child's development process.

### **Final remarks**

The pedagogical praxis for playful teaching remains to be seen. Horn and Barazzutti (2018) highlight the importance of the teacher's intentionality in organizing the game as a way of teaching and learning, inserting it into a project. They also highlight the spontaneous nature of the game, as freedom and spontaneity contribute to characterizing it. By avoiding direct intervention in the play activity, the teacher understands that the meaning of play is learning with pleasure. It is not an exercise for the children, but an activity for the children. To make playful education possible, Freud (2017) suggests that teachers reconcile with the child within themselves. For Benjamin (2009b, p. 94), children's toys do not bear witness to an autonomous and segregated life, "but are a mute dialog of signs between the child and the people". It is up to the teacher to be trained and prepared to read these signs, which are all the more fleeting the greater the technical development in mass society.



Mimetic mediation in teaching and learning processes presupposes dialog and interaction between teacher and student. Benjamin points out that in some cases, such as children's theater and play, when adults interfere, nonsense breaks out. These are practices specifically by children and for them, in which development occurs all the better the less the teacher intervenes. However, he does not deny the intentionality of the training process or the curriculum content; on the contrary, he highlights the correspondence between the images and illustrations in children's books and primers and the necessary pedagogical mediation, justified by the mimetic mediation between the game and the individual.

In the gathering of Benjamin's playful fragments, the dialog with Caillois is fundamental. His sociology of games makes it possible to sustain a direct connection between mimesis and the universe of play, as a mediation between culture and society. Something that Benjamin only sketched in the brief essays on "The doctrine of similarities", "The mimetic faculty" and "The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility". In the same sense, the impulse to freedom, the need for rest, distraction and fantasy that characterize Caillois' ludus and paidia, find their aesthetic and cognitive complement in Benjamin. As Adorno wrote (1986, p. 189), Benjamin "seized the essential where the wall of mere facticity inexorably bars everything that is deceptively essential".

In children's play, the relationship between play and mimesis [mimicry], between the child and the object, preserves the original link between childhood and the proto-phenomenon [Ur-phenomenon], brought to life in handmade toys, puppets and puppet theater, differentiating them from the performing arts and identification with celebrities, stars and "leaders". Didi-Huberman (2010, p. 180) considers that children's play, if conceived allegorically, can offer a figure of the dialectical image in the production of the "newness" that is experienced in the very emptiness of the discovery of words. When the child



constructs his or her novelty in the form of overcoming the same, he or she creates an artistic form.

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