



Grey Room, Inc.

Childhood and Critical Thought

Author(s): Paolo Virno and Alessia Ricciardi

Source: *Grey Room*, No. 21 (Fall, 2005), pp. 6-12

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442697>

Accessed: 29/12/2013 05:02

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The MIT Press and Grey Room, Inc. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Grey Room.

<http://www.jstor.org>

"Ice gave way beneath her
with a curious tinkling crash . . ."
John Rae, *New Adventures
of "Alice"* (Chicago: P.F. Volland
Co., 1917).



Childhood and Critical Thought

PAOLO VIRNO

TRANSLATED BY ALESSIA RICCIARDI

It is not possible to conceive a form of critical thought that is not also, in its every fold, a meditation on childhood.

From Rousseau to the antiauthoritarian communes of 1968, the attention of reformers and revolutionaries to the newborn human being has resulted, however, in pedagogy—in the attempt, that is, to make the infant's training conform to the ideal of a more just society. In this way, the authentic stakes have been misperceived: to draw criteria and concepts from the very experiences of childhood that can shed an ulterior light on social relationships and the relations of production and, moreover, inform their criticism. Reversing the pedagogical perspective, it is from childhood that we ought to expect instruction.

The society of generalized communication in which even labor manifests an essentially linguistic character must be questioned, proceeding from the experience of the subject who, not yet speaking, is in the process of acquiring language. The current form of technology, which is to say the artificial intelligence that yearns for the objectification of cognitive processes and of self-reflection, can be understood better if compared to the child learning about the world. The meaningless and parasitic nature of wage labor becomes particularly evident in light of the game practiced in the preschool period in which the absence of a goal and an experimental inclination coexist. Finally, the metropolitan forms of life, which are deprived of tradition and poor in experience, exhibit *puerile* traits that, while powerfully calling it into evidence as an explanatory key, restore childhood only as a faded and parodic image.

Neither a tiresome metaphor introduced in order to speak of another matter, nor even an appeal to a state of uncontaminated “authenticity,” the reflection on childhood relates to a mode of being that is always current and to a form of experience connected to the most diverse contexts. The *literal* childhood with which we never cease to deal is also, as such, a critical and cognitive category.

|||||

During the 1980s a weak utopian force survived only as a result of the care devoted to childhood by those who, regarding everything else, professed “realism” and exercised resignation. There we found, often resisting explicit formulation, a lasting instance of radical transformation, albeit an instance that has been expunged with great force from the circuits of social production and derided in political enclaves.

Although dispersed in so many private or professional rivulets, the vis-à-vis with childhood has maintained such intensity as to pass over the particular context in which, time after time, it has arisen. It could have to do with the active interest for the self-management of day-care centers or for alternative puericulture, for questions related to mothers’ and fathers’ work schedules, or for an exemplary cinematic or literary tale, for Marco Lombardo Radice’s psychiatric work—in each of these cases and in still others, we have distinctly heard questions about the possibility of a successful life, about freedom, about happiness. The approach of the women’s movement, by contrast, to the question of childhood has been by no means uneven or interstitial: ever since the publication of Elena Belotti’s *Dalla parte delle bambine*,¹ we can say that, from one end to the other, this question has given nerve to an entire political project.

Although not always free from ambiguity (the affected diminution of the self to avoid the blows of history, the illusory reconciliation with a nature restricted to the crib), reflections on childhood in the 1980s nevertheless accumulated critical energies which, as happens with a battery of voltaic cells now grown saturated, wait to be discharged in all directions—critical energies that developed out of the recognition of their own precariousness and vulnerability, out of the recognition of that exposure to the world, which finds sensible proof in the unsaturated fontanelles on the newborn’s head. These are energies that spring exactly from the sense of limit rather than trying to escape it. Hence, they are energies immunized against “disenchantment.”



It has been noted that Walter Benjamin never removed his gaze from childhood. It also has been noted that he established with admirable timeliness the salient characteristics of the technical reproducibility of the work of art. What remains in the shadows is the very close link relating these two facts. Benjamin understood very quickly the new conditions of cultural production (photography, radio, cinema, genre novel) because he did not preclude himself from access to the experience of the child, from which he drew lessons about the fundamental tendencies of his time.

Only a person who has spent a long time dwelling on children's games characterized by the inexhaustible iteration of the same gestures and the same verbal formulas could understand the exact significance of seriality on a grand scale, which by now marks not only the culture industry but all the abyss of immediate experience. Reviewing a book on toys, Benjamin writes words that in certain respects could refer to the inhabitants of contemporary metropolises:

We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to "Do it again!" . . . "All things would be resolved in a trice / If we could only do them twice." Children act on this proverb of Goethe's. Except that the child is not satisfied with twice, but wants the same thing again and again, a hundred or even a thousand times. This is not only the way to master frightening fundamental experiences—by deadening one's own response, by arbitrarily conjuring up experiences, or through parody; it also means enjoying one's victories and triumphs over and over again, with total intensity. . . . A child creates the entire event anew and starts again right from the beginning.²

The fascination of the "one more time" typical of childhood extends to the technically reproducible experience. Already this consideration makes it impossible for Benjamin to indulge a nostalgic regret: because a profound need of the human species seems to find fulfillment in reproducibility, it is useless to sulk. The true question is the following: How is it that the society of advanced capitalism adopts a mode of childhood? What do the two have in common? The absence of the routine habits that might channel praxis as in a riverbed, protecting it from chance: this is the answer. Without either traditions or compasses, one is both the child as well as the resident of the metropolis. Deprived of the protection of customs, both have to make use of repetition to smooth the shocks of the unforeseeable and orient themselves as well as they can.

The ludic iteration of an early age shows that there are still no habits, which predisposes one to their acquisition, becomes their matrix. However, in the present epoch this preliminary stage becomes permanent to a certain degree. The experience remains repetitive, does not achieve a habitual nature. The matrix disappears under the heap of its realizations but persists as such, always visible in the foreground. At this point, however, the analogy between childhood and technical reproduction reverses itself in an irremediable dispute.

The child demanding to listen to the same fairy tale or to play the same game each time perceives as unique what is the same. Every replication has the value of a prototype, of a milestone. To the instance of "yet another time"

is always associated the “once and for all”: one looks for a perfect completeness in every single iteration. On the other hand, holding the equality of genre good even for what is unique, technical reproduction promotes the “yet another time” over and above the “once and for all.” To the repetition of the game stands opposed the repetition compulsion of commodities and wage labor. Whereas childhood faces the absence of habits through a particular form of “eternal return,” the culture industry presents the nude iteration as a *surrogate* of habits, apes what is lacking, builds a surreptitious and yet binding “tradition.”

The society of mature capitalism is simply puerile. What is necessary is to mobilize against it the forces of childhood from which it draws, but which it shamelessly degrades to the status of a nightmarish kindergarten.



The opposition between the always-current experience of childhood and its caricature, which we call “puerile,” manifests itself at every turn. It applies with particular clarity to so-called free time, whose increase characterizes Western societies. When the work ethic that contributed so much to define the “adult” withers, the employment of excess time either conforms to a heedless and “puerile” model (which ultimately coincides with the adult worker’s point of view of the child), or it becomes reconnected to the seriousness of childhood. An eventual criticism of free time must adhere to this alternative. There is no place for the pedantry and self-inflation of the person who, in the name of labor, makes a show of “maturity.”

Even and especially in a state of emergency, horror has something “puerile” about it. And it requires an “infantile” antidote. Let me give you an example. The prison cell is a customary human environment: a room supplied with the essential, which is not dissimilar enough from ordinary rooms to make us think of a spaceship or a cave. An ordinary environment but submitted to a slight, parodic alteration: this is the puerile version in fact of ordinary, “same old” things and gestures. The bed nailed to the floor makes you think of an ancient peasant crib. The bucket, when available, reminds us of the chamber pot, although in an oppressive and malignant way. Stools are reduced in scale and made of plastic. The too-high window provokes a sense of uneasiness that children know all too well. The furniture is Lilliputian, based on matchboxes glued to the walls, recycled cardboard-boxes, occasional small wood sticks. A cell has something of a dollhouse, albeit sinister and put together with accidental materials. And yet it is mawkish.

The experienced prisoner, who has learned the job, knows that it is not

useful to oppose a hallucinatory, adult autonomy to the puerility of prison, because it is important to keep alive the infantile feeling of displacement and precariousness by refusing to adapt to the environment. May the prison cell be as bare as possible and always uncustomary.



In a very important book of a few years ago, *Infanzia e storia*,³ Giorgio Agamben remarked that if we were born with the gift of an already perfectly formed language, this would perform the same function fulfilled in animals by the sense of smell and olfaction. In other words, it would be the organ of orientation in an environment that envelops us like an amniotic liquid without leaving us any possibility of maintaining a distance from it or transforming it. On the other hand, to have a *childhood*, which is to say to accomplish the experience of learning a language, implies a permanent fracture between the human being and any given environment. To say it better: thanks to the progressive passage from the mute sensible life to articulate discourse, we do not have an environment but a world. We have a world to which we belong, understanding that there is attrition or imperfect interpenetration. This is a historical world, one to modify. It is childhood that, literally out of place, raises the possibility of history (*vide* Agamben).

Now, if we want to define the society of the spectacle with a succinct formula, we should say it is a society that has reduced even language to *immediate* environment, making of generalized communication something similar to the forest for the bear or the river for the crocodile. The objectivized codes and materialized grammars that comprise the seminatural context of metropolitan experience are enveloping us without residues, like an amniotic fluid. Moreover, the fact that language presents itself as the instrument and the raw material of work processes strengthens beyond measure the appearance of a nontransformable “environment.” From this, the asphyxiating impression arises of a block or a freezing of history—an impression that post-modern thought never tires of confirming and dressing up.

To oppose the society of spectacle means to reactivate childhood. Which is to say, to dissolve the viscous appearance of a “linguistic environment,” rediscovering in language what dislocates and makes the “world.” Or, if you please, renovating the infantile feeling of language as something one accesses, of language as a faculty.

The “egocentric language” of the preschool-age child (on which Piaget and Vygotsky have dwelled, interpreting it in different ways) does not have any denotative or connotative function. It is a language that the child speaks for

him/herself, for his/her own satisfaction, experimenting in this way with nothing but the pure event of the world. In those interminable litanies, what counts is only the access to communication, the savoring of the transition from its absence to its eruption. This experience renews itself every time language reverts to being “egocentric,” which is to say when any correspondence between the word and the thing is missing (“correspondence” being all too similar to the olfaction of a wolf becoming aware of a threat or of prey).

Thus, childhood becomes perceptible in the metaphors and metonymies that deviate from direct discourse (and from the forms of life related to it). One can still recognize the grimaces of a child who passes from prehensile gestures to verbal indication in the rhetorical figures that delineate an authentic physiognomy of concepts. Moreover, childhood lives on in the hypothetical language in which possibilities other than the present state of things come to the surface: every specific (determinate) virtuality arises from having experienced the very same language as virtual.



The sociologists say we stand before an endless adolescence, the industrialized world become populated by eternal students. Often such definitions are accompanied by a manifest contempt for the new species. However, they limit themselves to registering the crisis of the labor-based society. Consequently, it is necessary to accept the terms as an honorary title. But radicalized: *eternal children*.

Notes

1. Elena Belotti, *Dalla parte delle bambine: L'influenza dei condizionamenti sociali nella formazione del ruolo femminile nei primi anni di vita* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975). Published in English as *Little Girls: Social Conditioning and Its Effects on the Stereotypical Role of Women during Infancy*, trans. Lisa Appignanesi et al. (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1975).

2. Walter Benjamin, “Toys and Play,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 120.

3. Giorgio Agamben, *Infanzia e storia. distruzione dell'esperienza e origine della storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978). Published in English as *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993).