made to escape from the influence of psychology and aestheticism. Folk art
and the worldview of the child demanded to be seen as collectivist ways of
thinking.

On the whole, the work under review corresponds to this latest state
of research, if indeed it is possible to tie a standard work of a documentary
kind to a theoretical stance. For in reality the stage reached here must form
a transition to a more precise definition of our knowledge of the subject.
The fact is that the perceptual world of the child is influenced at every point
by traces of the older generation, and has to take issue with them. The same
applies to the child’s play activities. It is impossible to construct them as
dwelling in a fantasy realm, a fairy-tale land of pure childhood or pure art.
Even where they are not simply imitations of the tools of adults, toys are a
site of conflict, less of the child with the adult than of the adult with the
child. For who gives the child his toys if not adults? And even if he retains
a certain power to accept or reject them, a not insignificant proportion of
the oldest toys (balls, hoops, tops, kites) are in a certain sense imposed on
him as cult implements that became toys only afterward, partly through the
child’s powers of imagination.

It is therefore a great mistake to believe that it is simply children’s needs
determine what is to be a toy. It is nonsense to argue, as does an
otherwise meritorious recent work, that the necessity of, say, a baby’s rattle
can be inferred from the fact that “As a rule it is the ear that is the first
organ to clamor for occupation”—particularly since the rattle has always
been an instrument with which to ward off evil spirits, and this is why it
has to be put in the hand of a newborn baby. And even the author of the
present work is surely in error when he writes, “The child wants from her
doll only what she sees and knows in adults. This is why, until well into
the nineteenth century, the doll was popular only when dressed in grown-up
clothing; the baby in swaddling clothes that dominates the toy market
nowadays was completely absent.” No, this is not to be laid at the door of
children; for the child at play, a doll is sometimes big and sometimes little,
and as an inferior being it is more often the latter. We may say instead that
until well into the nineteenth century the idea of an infant as a creature
shaped by a spirit of its own was completely unknown; on the other hand,
the adult was the ideal in whose image the educator aspired to mold the
child. This rationalism, with its conviction that the child is just a little adult,
makes us smile today, but it had the merit of declaring seriousness to be the
child’s proper sphere. In contrast to this, the inferior sense of “humor"
manifests itself in toys, alongside the use of larger-scale objects, an
expression of the uncertainty that the bourgeois cannot free himself of in
his dealings with children. The merriment that springs from a sense of guilt
sits admirably with the silly distortions of size. Anyone who wishes to look

the hideous features of commodity capital in the face need only recollect
toyshops as they typically were up to five years ago (and as they still often
are in small towns today). The basic atmosphere was one of hellish exuber-
ance. On the lids of the parlor games and the faces of the character dolls,
you found grinning masks; they gaped at you alluringly from the black
mouth of the cannon, and giggled in the ingenious “catastrophe coach” that
fell to pieces as expected, when the train crashed.

But scarcely had this militant viciousness made its exit than the class
character of this toy reappeared elsewhere. “Simplicity” became the fash-
ionable slogan of the industry. In reality, however, in the case of toys
simplicity is to be found not in their shapes but in the transparent nature
of the manufacturing process. Hence, it cannot be judged according to an
abstract canon but differs in different places, and is less a matter of formal
criteria, because a number of methods of processing—carving, in particu-
lar—can give free rein to their imagination without becoming in the least
incomprehensible. In the same way, the genuine and self-evident simplicity
of toys was a matter of technology, not formalist considerations. For a
characteristic feature of all folk art—the way in which primitive technology
combined with cruder materials imitates sophisticated technology combined
with expensive materials—can be seen with particular clarity in the world
of toys. Porcelain from the great czarist factories in Russian villages
provided the model for dolls and genre scenes carved in wood. More recent
research into folk art has long since abandoned the belief that “primitive”
ievitably means “older.” Frequently, so-called folk art is nothing more than
the cultural goods of a ruling class that have trickled down and been given
a new lease on life within the framework of a broad collective.

Not the least of this book’s achievements is that Gruber decisively shows
how the economic and particularly the technological culture of the collective
have influenced toys. But if to this day toys have been far too commonly
regarded as objects created for children, if not as the creations of children
themselves, then with play it is the other way around: play has been thought
about altogether too exclusively from the point of view of adults, and has
been regarded too much as the imitation of adults. And it cannot be denied
that we needed this encyclopedia of toys to revive discussion of the theory
of play, which has not been treated in this context since Karl Groos pub-
lished his important work Spiele der Menschen [People at Play] in 1899.1
Any novel theory would have to take account of the “Gestalt theory of play
gestures”—gestures of which Willy Haas recently listed (May 18, 1928) the
two most important.2 First, cat and mouse (any game of catch); second,
the mother animal that defends her nest and her young (for example, a
goalkeeper or tennis player); third, the struggle between two animals for
prey, a bone, or an object of love (a football, polo ball, and so on). Going

shelf hell
Walter Benjamin
SELECTED WRITINGS
VOLUME 2, PART 1
1927-1930

Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith
Translated by Rodney Livingstone
3. The German word Speller means both "to play" and "game." Hence: "German toys, from the 17th century, are considered the most interesting." (F. Frank, 1998-1999).

2. Why is there so little research on minimalist fashion and culture? It's an interesting question, but there are a few reasons why this might be the case.

1. A recent (2001-1999) German philosopher wrote a number of provocative books, including "We need more childish..." and "Beyond the box of toys: how many people would not look for it in in old box of toys..."

Notes

Read by Rodney Linstead

Toy and Play 121

"Toys and Play..." published in the trimester with June 1999; Commissarios, 1999-1999}

Noisy, cluttered, habit-forming toys are to be avoided, in the