

The Pedagogic Role of Children's Literature Walter Benjamin's Theory in Modern Education

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Abstract

This article focuses on the theory of German philosopher and literature critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) on the role of children's literature and the degree by which his aesthetical theory, as expressed in the early 20th century, may be applied in modern education. Particularly in preschool ages, children's literature plays a defining role in children's development, stimulating learning memory and providing the foundations for the child's perception of the world around him/her. Children's literature and illustrations of children's books, introduce children in learning and writing. In his theory, Benjamin describes how literature, and in particular the magic perceived by children's mentality in fairytale, can and should be an integral part of education that does not apply standardized pedagogic norms or psychological interpretations, but promotes the way in which the child observes the world, imagination and intuitive perception.

Keywords

literature, picture, memory, aesthetics, language, writing

1. Introduction

Walter Benjamin has written about the integration of literature in education, advocating a non-standardized teaching of literature texts. Benjamin focuses on the value of literature itself and its aesthetic influence. It is the well-known *aura* of literature, a term used by the philosopher to define the effects of a literature work as text and image. According to Benjamin, the particularity of the aura found in children's language is abolished in common pedagogic methods, which aim to decipher the meaning of a literature text, to collect information or even to perceive literature reality. The way in which literature is taught, destroys the magic found by children in it. Benjamin insists that literature in education is a pre-gnoseological reading that does not follow any common direction, meaning, the goal is not to expand children's experiences or memory through literature, but to educate and enrich the child as a being (Birkmeyer, 2008, pp. 1-2). According to the philosopher, reading children's literature

is not a substitute of knowledge, but a symbol of dedication and immersion in books. Children's reading is not associated to their education or their knowledge as much so, but rather to their development and dynamics (Benjamin, 1989, p. 257). Reading literature allows the child to be unconsciously enriched as a being, during the process of reading itself. What a child can find in a literature book and remains unseen for adults, is important by itself more than the teaching method, which interprets books as symbolic portrayals of reality. In other words: Children's books' aesthetics and the imagination built in children as a free space, not a guided interpretation, help develop the child's personality.

2. Method

2.1 *The Importance of Illustration in Children's Literature*

Benjamin pays particular attention to the importance of *color* in children's books. Illustrated books allow children to be immersed in imagination and dreams. For adults, illustrations may be a childish imitation of reality, but for children, color is a source for the collection and creation of visual, unprecedented treasures. This secret world of images, accessed through reading literature, should also be supported through education. Thanks to illustrations, children's literature becomes a "shelter of narration" (Ewers, 2000, p. 205) and thus, language, as well as a shelter of memories. The imaginary world of colors is reminiscent to Benjamin of Plato's memory and the perception of a children's book is parallel to that of paradise (Benjamin, 1985, p. 124). Color is the mediator between clear imagination and creation (Benjamin, 1985, p. 110).

For children, color is the means of all changes noticed in his/her surroundings. The constant changing of shapes is also a characteristic of imagination, in close accordance with color and its importance in children's development. Benjamin stresses children's observation, seeing objects within their color and not isolating them, but witnessing them in a perception that coincides with the world of imagination (Benjamin, 1985, p. 110). Children perceive color as a limit, while for adults, it is a coverage of what is essential. It is worth noting that children's toys also reproduce an array of limitless color hues, suggesting an aesthetic world, providing unique basic access to the class of aesthetics.

Children are not interested on what lies underneath the surface of objects, but on the coloring of the surface itself. Through colors, they create an analogy with the world, color and text. The chain of colors has a synesthetic effect, a synesthetic imaginary experience (Lemke, 2008, p. 89). With colors, the child is transformed and through this transformation, perceives the world differently and is linked to it.

In other words: Imagination can witness and perceive the world creatively only through color, never relying on the form, since form is a hypothesis of the law and rule. The rule, form itself, entails passive apperception and lack of creativity. A child can clearly observe the world, because he/she does not focus on the space and object, but rather on color (Benjamin, 1985, p. 111). This clear observation and disposition before color should not be linked to psychological causes, since it's the child's cohesive imagination act. Since color is not related to form, surface, or focusing on space, but only related to

imagination, it differentiates itself from form and is liberated from it. Thus, the child exceeds form through hues, which do not shape the form but entertain it. They do not decompose it, but scatter it in endless transitions and moves that cannot be shown through a single form. In this children's clear observation, objects are not separated in frames or forms, but are a whole. The world consists of colors for children and this is the way they mentally perceive it. They perceive it harmonically and innocently, like a rainbow. Children are unashamed, because they do not have thought, but only observation (Benjamin, 1985, pp. 111-112). Viewing is perfectly attached to experience. In particular, Bröcker analyzes children's experience, stating that they do not transfer the sort of knowledge that children may grasp in the form of data, cause-and-effect relations, etc., but a condition that immobilizes time and thinking (1993, pp. 248-249). The way in which children acquire experiences by viewing, is related to the objects themselves, not concepts. It is not conceptual, but material, actual.

2.1.1 The Role of Fairytale in Children's Psychology

Benjamin's theory is a romantic and somehow anti-pedagogic prospect. It is based on the way children express themselves, through their games and magic references to colors, letters and images. Pictures in particular cause a sense of magic to children. For children, "there is nothing more beautiful than tracing underground routes in this fleeting observation of the labyrinth of reading, as long stories are interrupted in various aspects, to emerge again in light, charmed in this process" (Benjamin, 1972, p. 278).

Benjamin's anti-pedagogic theory protects this *magic*, these heavenly moments of children's world, from the strict pedagogic rules that perceive children's books as tools, destroying what children's literature is, that is, the aura of memories that will accompany children as they grow up. Imagination, or intuitive perception, is not simply a pedagogic category leading to creativity with suggestions and strict rules that destroy literature's aesthetic quality and challenges. Literature must be attached to the hidden, imaginary world of children, as it is liberated in combination with children's books. Children read just as they think and they invent their own stories. They invade a book's world:

When children invent stories, they are directors not censored by logic. One can easily test this. When you give children four or five specific words and ask them to connect them in a brief sentence, the most amazing prose will emerge. Not as a prospect, but as a signpost in children's books. Words acquire a certain substance, involved in battles, love scenes, fights. This is the way in which children write and read their texts (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 47-48).

Applying this approach, Benjamin contradicts theories supporting the existence of phobia and inferiority complexes in children, which are supposed to be generated when a child reads a fairytale. To Benjamin, fairytales do not just provide proximity to oral communication and the surroundings, but constitute the primary cultural guide for people and particularly for children. Fairytales provide an association between cognitive experiences and the narrative act and the raw materials for the narrator's experience and experiences deriving from tradition. Throughout the history of mankind, reading a fairytale has been a defense mechanism against fear and fatalism caused by myths (Birkmeyer, 2005).

Fairytales help children escape their phobias, conspiratorially develop a dialectic of bravery between deceptiveness and carelessness, leading to the feeling of happiness and completeness. It's worth reading the following abstract:

Fairytales, which remain to our days children's first consultant, since it has been the primary consultant of humanity, continues hiddenly existing in narration. When a good piece of advice was expensive, it was included in fairytales and when poverty was strengthened, its assistance was enhanced as well. This poverty was the poverty of myth. Fairytales provide us with knowledge about events that used to be held by humanity, to shake off the nightmare held in myth. It uses a fool character, to show us how humanity pretended to be a fool before myth. It uses the character of the younger brother, to show how humanity's skills developed after leaving the mythical primitive age. It uses the character of the individual who went far, to allow us to become acquainted with fear and teach us that the things we used to be afraid of, were not dark. It uses the character of the clever individual, to show us that the questions posed in myth are naïve, questions like the ones posed by the Sphinx. It uses the characters of animals, helping the fairytales' child, to show us that nature does not carry an obligation only towards myth, but it also knows how to focus on man. The magic inherent in fairytales, liberates, brings nature in the game, not in a mythical manner, but by suggesting its conspiracy with the liberated human. This conspiracy can only be felt sporadically by a mature man, that is, only in happiness. It meets with children in fairytales and provides happiness (Benjamin, 1980, p. 458).

Fairytales as a cultural and symbolic means of cooperation with children, helps children become emancipated, grants them authority, the authority of the stronger one, allowing them to invent, to narrate, to produce desires and use them to communicate in the imaginary world of narration. The fairytales' magic allows children to enter the history of culture and be protected from teaching meticulousness. Children's literature is not a subjective expression of nostalgia for an ideal historical past, but a social form of expression for children. We need to stress that what is definitive is not just the children's book itself or its theoretical approach, but the concept of aura during the reading process, allowing children to think independently. The enchanting experience of reading provides children with self-protection. Reading children's literature supports the development of the child's personality. For Benjamin, the value of children's literature is not found in its content or quality, but to the very child-reader. Benjamin wishes for the meaning of literature to be rescued and protected from the directions of reading for the sake of the lesson taught.

In particular, the literature image is the topographical location where perception and abstract thinking of concepts converge. Meiffert describes literature image as a space causing various degrees of intensity in children's imagination and experiences of mental identity (1986, p. 41). In other words: It is a dialectic image, generating an experience for children: the experience of waiting. Time is expanded and through fairytales, children wait for the fulfillment of an event, once the fairytales are over (Jornitz, 2002, p. 127). Through the fairytales fantasy, children can observe the world around them and through pictures, they learn how to express reality in words and structure their perception (Jornitz, 2002, p. 184).

Children acknowledge reality in fairytales and certain conditions they are familiar with. They draw images that help them rediscover reality and provide them with a foundation to be able to express themselves through words.

2.1.2 Children's Entry into Writing

For Benjamin, children's books constitute an entry point for language and writing. Illustrated books in particular, introduce children to the visual aspects of writing, the figurativeness and transformation of images into letters. These books place children in a particular historical period of writing, in which man became familiar with the process, witnessing it not as a tool, an object or a means of communication, but rather as a place allowing him to discover words. Using images, children's imagination is immersed into writing. The images' descriptions generate words for children and teach them the language of writing. Alphabet letters in their form and written accuracy, are the primary form of language. Learning how to write is a unique experience, in which children cross the threshold to the world of writing.

Children discover color and writing simultaneously. Benjamin uses the term *hieroglyphics* to describe the child's writing skill acquisition. Hieroglyphics were always considered to be the first form of writing, linked to physical-philosophical secrets. Hieroglyphics had a particular proximity to the origination of knowledge and its depiction in writing (Bauer, 2008, p. 90). The combination of color, image and drawing, creating a uniform visual concretion and abstract thinking. An aggregate of color, graphics and semantics. Children's reading can be linked to hieroglyphics and perception. Children can read what appears on the surface and bestow it with meaning through color. Drawing allows children to write through images and learn the writing process (Benjamin, 1985, p. 113). Children use metaphors and produce hieroglyphics through writing. These early children's scribbles-drawings, which are so meticulously created when children invade color and assimilate it, are the first stage from which they will transition to script and the writing skill.

Benjamin differentiates between script and writing. Script is a historical and cultural system of graphical characters. Writing is based on this historical-cultural foundation and regards the child's personal relationship with this system (Giuriato, 2006, pp. 47-48). In other words, it's a personal and unique physical and aesthetical act of script implementation. Writing is the ability to access script. When a child writes, he/she represents script in some manner, leaves a mark on the script system. For this reason, Benjamin considers writing a very special act, not simply because it allows children to express themselves as creative subjects, but because through writing, a whole array of different skills for the child's personal fulfillment opens up, depicted in the visualization of written text, unfolding different forms and aspects of self-reference. The child who writes makes himself/herself the object of writing. In other words, it is a direct self-reflection of the subject, during the script process. This self-reference does not mean that the child understands and acknowledges himself/herself as an entity, but it's rather a *pre-subjective* condition, in which the child is found above the text. We could describe children's writing as autobiographical in a wider sense (Giuriato, 2006, p. 62), as a miniature of the child's psychology. Writing, whether it consists of copying or taking notes, is not just a representative

process nor does it provide children with just a form of material. It primarily has a productive aspect, at the unique moment when creative thinking and the hand's motion converge, providing writing with dynamics found in games, converting it from a static to a flowing product, a transition into the world of writing.

2.1.3 The Function of Memory

We shall now move on to Benjamin's theory on memory, which is allegorical and characterized by the relationship between remembrance and oblivion. Children's memory is based on the relationships of *similarities* on semantics, graphical and visual aspects, not limited in language but used for children to perceive the world as a whole. Children move from image to language and from language to image, which means that the world of objects and the world of language are on a common semantics framework (Lemke, 2008, p. 74). Children are in a constant state of transition and movement, due to their ability to perceive and construct similarities and analogies between things and alphabet letters. This ability is what allows further access to language.

Benjamin does not only interpret learning through a gnoseological viewpoint, but also focuses on the imitating approach of words. Children's first learning, words, represent a coercion, the coercion to be included in society. Children react to this coercion with imagination (Jornitz, 2002, p. 238). Each word that a child needs to understand, activates his/her imagination and at the same time, his/her imitating skills.

Learning memory is thus a dynamic process of sliding from one signification to the next, without a fixed establishment of meanings. It is a constant change of significances, which is not merely implemented through language, but also through image. For Benjamin, the world of children is an area of experience, where anything can become a means. Each object can become a symbol, each symbol can unfold its material aspects. At the center, we find the moment of transformation, which develops a game in the active process of writing and reading. It is a procedure of transitioning from adults' language to children's language as a game, in which mental, cognitive similarities are formed and all memory tools are applied. These similarities are based on the imitation ability and consist the primary form of reading. Thanks to the imitating ability, children can create lingual and thus learning similarities between the macrocosm and microcosm. They can identify similarities, become similar themselves and behave in a similar way. This is the concept of imitation, according to Benjamin (Benjamin, 1989, p. 417).

Children's ability to create imitating correlations is the key to understanding how children learn. During the learning process, the child turns to focusing on cognitive similarities with regarding writing and language images. During learning, the child transitions from natural symbols to lingual symbols. It is a correspondence of symbols, between the world of children and the world of adults. It is a visual, metaphor process where according to Sigrid Weigel, "a transition of language is performed, from things to words" (1997, p. 57).

Similarities formed by child are momentary, transient and lost in the chain of significances. This is

where the factor of oblivion comes at play. Similarity appears momentarily, so that the magical aspect cannot be stabilized in reading and become assimilated by children. It lasts only for a moment, that suddenly unfolds and opens up a world of experiences, that cannot be acquired with duration. This is the aspect of learning based on similarities. These are not figures balancing between magical and semantics reading, but a learning model based on the correspondence of words and things and a dynamic, with elements leading to each other. What interests Benjamin in children's learning is neither the similarity between words and significance, nor finding hidden similarities between symbols and objects or between symbols' form and content. He is more interested in the creation of significances and symbols produced by the child himself/herself and reproduced anew and differently with each act of reading and writing, without completion and consolidation—a work in progress.

3. Result

According to Benjamin, memory plays a double role. It's *remembrance and oblivion* at the same time, occurring in the coherent visual world of children (Lindner, 1989). The allegory of remembrance lies to the fact that man tries to approach what he needs to remember via memory, but as soon as this appears, it escapes into oblivion. The process of memory is an unknown world. Birkmeyer parallels Benjamin's theory to neuroscience and cognitive psychology and believes that Benjamin focuses on what we call episodic memory, which can only store content one can communicate, with social morphological aspect. Episodic memory as such, may be combined with perceptual memory. This kind of memory is a transition from unconscious to conscious forms of memory and may turn identification to a deliberate process. The identified object does not need to be identical to what our perception received at a certain time. A few characteristic traits are enough, to provide the right ranking (Welzer, 2005, p. 26).

According to neurobiology, memory acts as a storage of associations. Through the process of perception and processing, it produces and reproduces neuron connections, displaying memory contents. We can find a similar pattern in Benjamin's theory, according to Birkmeyer, since Benjamin's thoughts-images function as aesthetical storages of associations. Just as memory is communicative, due to the neurons' structure and operation, according to Benjamin, thinking is the area in which the person remembering performs connections between his/her present, the temporal limits of memory and the fantasy of the past. Memories are not a sequence of clear or genuine episodes, but the depiction of the interrelation of stories from the past with the social act of remembering, in the imaginative area of memory. When these memories are the combination of the actual event and its remembrance, on the field of memory, then the past's revival differs. Episodes of memory process cannot be stable. Benjamin thinks that this instability is the basis of associative imagination.

If we want to apply this theoretical framework in preschool and school classrooms, we can interpret the class as a social structure, where children's imagination, in combination with the knowledge taught, find communicative ground through the physical and mental act of teaching material's visual representation. The pedagogue should follow a certain plan during teaching, but he/she should also

treat students as explorers. In other words: Children's memory is not a conscious tool to investigate knowledge with, but it is to be investigated and explored, very similarly to an archaeological site. The process of memory is described by Benjamin using the descriptive image of digging in Berliner Chronic:

Anyone seeking to approach his buried past, should behave like a man digging. This defines the tone, the preservation factual memories. We should not hesitate to return to the very same incident. We should sow it, as we do with the ground, dig it, as we dig the ground. Incidents are merely stored layers of information that when we supposedly explore them, they provide us with actual words hidden in memories: images, liberated from previous associations and existing as something valuable in the logical space of our subsequent perception. And we definitely need to pursue this digging with a plan. What is also required however, is a careful, gradual scoop in the dark earth, although that too can deceive its own self, since it only retains the inventory of findings, not the dark happiness of the location and time of the finding itself. Searching in vain is as good as searching with success, and that is the reason why a memory should not be narrated or announced, but in a strict manner, epically and rhapsodically, one should continue digging in more and more locations and investigating in deeper and deeper layers (1985, pp. 486-487).

The educationalist should focus on the knowledge memory can retain, the knowledge that may lead to critical and creative thinking for children. Memory (personal, in the thinking of each child and collective, on the communicative framework of a classroom) becomes a record, safeguarding knowledge which can become the stage of a constructive act of what the child remembers.

4. Discussion

For remembrance it is fundamental that memory and its content are not at our disposal and when we apply personal investigation to recall what we have forgotten, we only find some remnants. Remembering is not a restoration process, but a process of inventory and documentation (Giuriato, 2006, pp. 81-82).

Children's memory is supported by writing, copying and paraphrasing. Children's writing is paraphrasing. Paraphrase is the writing child's way of thinking and remembering. Children's memory is directly linked to the present as a determinative term, since the knowledge we have been taught cannot be acquired again directly, it is not represented in our memory chronologically as a straight line, but access is provided to it only through the help of a means. This means is language. Language is on the one hand, an instrument used to announce something or transfer content, and on the other hand a means, the direct means a person uses to express himself/herself with. In other words: writing does not help us recall our knowledge, but provides room to the skills and prerequisites of remembrance, a dynamic character for the storage and memorization of knowledge. Regarding to the process of memory, it is a correlation of supporting data (memory) and deconstruction (oblivion), non-arbitrary and arbitrary data. Memory is not a tool to acknowledge knowledge content, but rather, the means. It is the means of what

we have experienced, what we have read and been taught. Memory in writing works similarly to an *archaeologist* who needs to dig the ground to find ancient ruins, repeatedly and to no end.

Benjamin sees the importance and value of this non-nostalgic memory as an originating event, which should be rescued and protected through language. Benjamin talks of a pedagogic manner differing from the psychological approach, where one tries to catch a child's attention by introducing him/her to the adult world. What he suggests is not a pedagogics witnessing a child's psychology as similar to an adult's, but one that does not try to analyze the child, but to microscopically build something on the child, based on his/her lack of experience. An important factor in this pedagogic method knows that the child is not in an area outside language, but at the *borderline*, or, in other words, has a different relationship to language, but co-existent with that of adults. Man is considered a talking creature, not because he possesses language naturally, but because he can be taught how to speak.

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