Misunderstanding Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's "Traumkitsch" (1925), Max Ernst's Protosurrealist Collages, and Old-fashioned Children's Book Illustrations

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Abstract: This essay establishes the centrality of Max Ernst's untitled protosurrealist frontispiece collage for Paul Éluard's *Répétitions* in Walter Benjamin's thinking on surrealism, kitsch, and the outmoded. Benjamin wrote about Ernst's frontispiece collage in his 1925 sketch, "Traumkitsch" (pub. 1927). I argue that Benjamin's "dream kitsch" is a form of counter-kitsch meant to unravel capitalist bourgeois social control and conditioning, as influenced by André Breton's discussion of unrestricted language and the process of relearning in the *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924. The fact that a reproduction of Ernst's collage was also included in the third and final installment of Benjamin's 1929 essay in *Die literarische Welt,* "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," demonstrates that Ernst's frontispiece encapsulated his special interest for old-fashioned children's book illustrations. As I show, Benjamin's fixation on Ernst's image results in an early formulation of redemptive modes of relationality in modern life inspired by childhood experience.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; surrealism; Max Ernst; Louis Aragon; André Breton; Paul Éluard; the outmoded; *Traumkitsch*; dream kitsch; children's illustrations; collage

Max Ernst's name arises only a handful of times in Walter Benjamin's writings. Yet Benjamin's conception of a specifically surrealist enactment of the outmoded [*das Veraltete*] was sparked due to his initial confrontation in 1925 with Ernst's reworkings of old-fashioned illustrations, well before he looked to surrealist books such as Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* [*Paris Peasant*] (1926) and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928). Perhaps this is not surprising since Ernst's collages of outmoded material from the second half of the nineteenth century are among the earliest expressions of a developing surrealist attraction to outmoded culture, predating the exploration of nineteenth-century sites in Paris, such as covered shopping arcades in Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, by nearly three years. Not long after the publication of Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, Benjamin already recognized in Ernst's collages a preoccupation with superannuated material culture that only later would fully emerge as one of surrealism's defining characteristics.

Benjamin admired Ernst throughout the 1920s and 1930s, comparing him to Picasso and Paul Klee.[1] Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico were the

[1] I thank Raymond Spiteri for his comments on this essay. See "Review of Kracauer's *Die Angestellten*" (1930) and "The Present Social Situation of the French Writer" (1934) in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, ed. Michael William Jennings, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 356, 744. Despite Adorno's invitation to introduce Benjamin to Ernst in 1935, a meeting never occurred. See the letters of May 20, 1935, and May 31, 1935, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin,

only visual artists mentioned in Benjamin's 1929 surrealism essay, where the shortcomings of their surrealist artworks are compared to the grandeur of the city of Paris itself.[2] However, Benjamin's most specific commentary on Ernst appeared in conjunction with his initial appraisal of surrealism at the end of 1925, while he was collaborating with Franz Hessel on a German translation of some of Marcel Proust's multipart, *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913-1927). In July of that year, the very month that his application for tenure at the University of Frankfurt was denied, Benjamin wrote letters to Rainer Maria Rilke and Gershom Scholem mentioning his study of surrealism and his admiration for their conquest of the dream realm.[3] That summer or fall, Benjamin drafted the short essay "Traumkitsch," which signaled a severance between his past research at the university and his post-academia life as a translator

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The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 85, 91. Also see Ludger Derenthal, "Max Ernst and Politics" in Werner Spies and Sabine Rewald, eds., *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 25.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929) in vol. 2 of Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 211. For an analysis of the role of surrealism in Benjamin's later writings see Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's On the Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London; Verso, 2005).

[3] Letter to Rilke, July 3, 1925. Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 274. Letter to Scholem, July 21, 1925. Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 277.

of literature and commentator on contemporary culture.[4] The dream kitsch essay characterizes surrealism as surpassing romanticism and tapping into contemporary generational consciousness, perhaps an unsurprising perspective given his recent departure from academia and his embrace of popular criticism.

"Traumkitsch" was published in 1927, around the time that Benjamin reviewed a book by surrealist Philippe Soupault and began translating Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* into German. By then, Benjamin's colleagues were already beginning to respond to his provocative thoughts on surrealism in essays such as Ernst Bloch's "On Images of Nature Since the End of the 19th Century" (1927), which discusses Ernst's 1920s surrealist collages as a two-dimensional form of ruin. Nevertheless, nearly two years earlier, Benjamin's "Dream Kitsch" essay had already begun to conceptualize the relationship of the image to time and materiality in its consideration of Paul Éluard's protosurrealist volume of poems, *Répétitions* (1922), which included collage

[4] Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism" in vol. 2 of, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 3–5. A portion of "Traumkitsch" with references to surrealism and Ernst removed appeared in the *Arcades* study. See [I13], Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 212. Burkhardt Lindner, "Versuch über Traumkitsch: Die blaue Blume im Land der Technik," *Walter Benjamin und die romantische Moderne*, eds. Heinz Brüggemann und Günter Oesterle (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 229–246. John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 213–220.

illustrations by Ernst that fascinated Benjamin in their evocation of childhood.

In "Traumkitsch," Benjamin associates *Répétitions* with surrealism despite its early publication date in 1922, perceptively placing it in context with his discussion of Breton's initiatory surrealist *Manifesto* and Aragon's *Une vague des rêves*, both dating to 1924 (Fig. 1).[5] In particular, Benjamin's meditation on Ernst's collage is reminiscent of the connection that Breton makes toward the beginning of the 1924 *Manifesto* between childhood, the surrealist approach to language, and the removal of restrictions.[6]

For Breton, surrealists seek a liberated form of language without reservations [ce langage sans réserve], which in an almost animate fashion can instruct them in a process of continual relearning [réapprendre].[7]

[5] William A. Camfield, Werner Spies, and Walter Hopps, *Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1993), 108–111.

[6] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 3–4, 32–35.

[7] Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," 33–34.

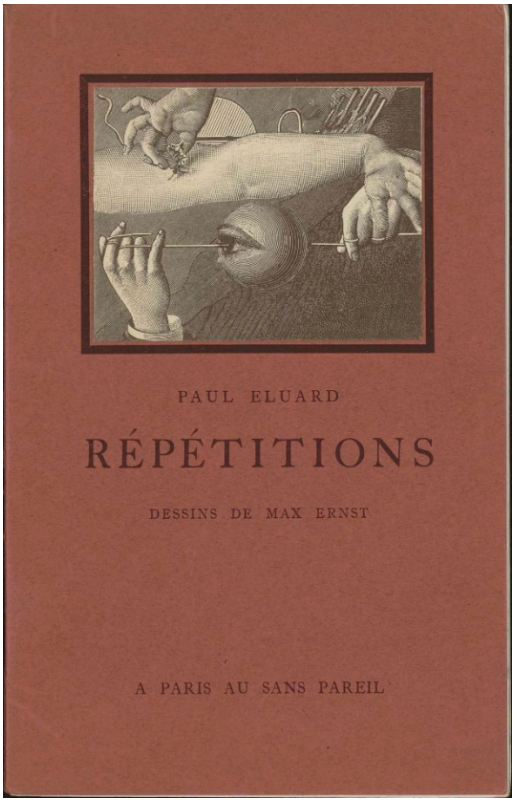

Fig. 1 Max Ernst. Untitled cover image for Paul Éluard's *Répétitions* (1922). 1921. Collage: cut engravings on paper. © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Moreover, though Benjamin derived much of his focus on dreams from Aragon and Breton's tracts, his thoughts on the obsolescence of modernity arguably owe their vividness and nuance to Ernst's eleven images in *Répétitions*. Such a claim is supported by the key role of Benjamin's formal analysis of one of Ernst's works from *Répétitions* in the "Traumkitsch" essay: its miniature-scale frontispiece depicting four schoolboys and a teacher in a hallucinatory classroom (Fig. 2). Scrutinizing this scene, which conjured reminiscences of his childhood, Benjamin arrived at his first conclusions about surrealism's attraction to the outmoded, and what this predilection meant for European culture in the interwar period. He writes:

> Max Ernst has drawn four small boys. They turn their backs to the reader, to their teacher and his desk as well, and look out over a balustrade where a balloon hangs in the air. A giant pencil rests on its point in the windowsill. The repetition of childhood experience gives us pause: when we were little, there was as yet no agonized protest against the world of our parents. As children in the midst of that world, we showed ourselves superior. When we reach for the banal, we take hold of the good along with

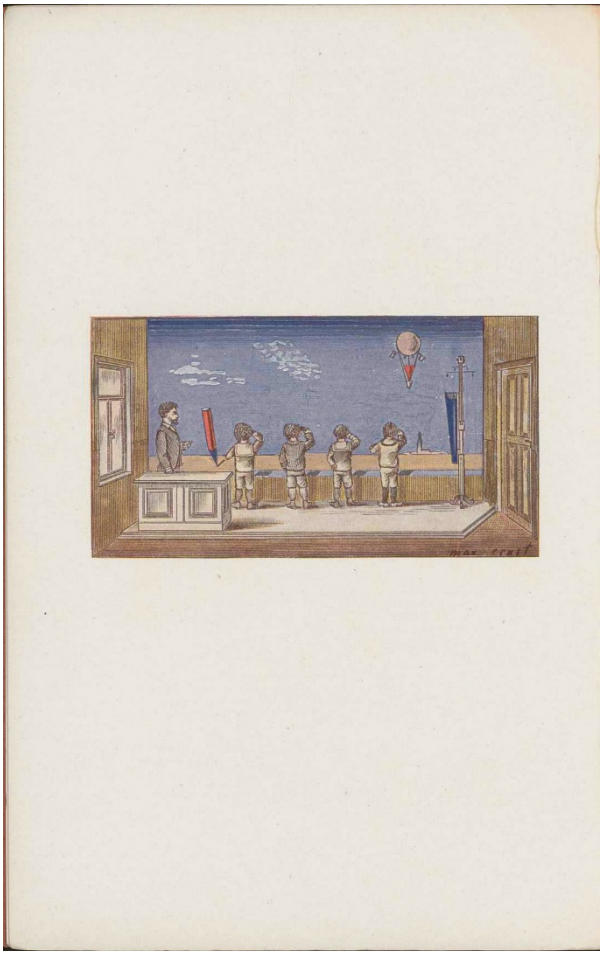

Fig. 2 Max Ernst, Untitled, 1921, collage and gouache, 6.2 x 11.2 cm. Frontispiece illustration for Paul Éluard's *Répétitions*, 1922. © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

it—the good that is there (open your eyes) right before you.[8]

As brief as it is dense with ideas and associations, Benjamin's *ekphrasis* of Ernst's frontispiece for *Répétitions* focuses on the "superior" ability of children to transmute the world around them into something "good."[9] Opposed to this is the two-sided nature of parental authority and "love," which is "sentimental" and "heartfelt" but also restrictive and instrumentalized—a controlling form of affection that has a visual correlate in "kitsch."[10] Benjamin's kitsch is like a "crimped picture puzzle" filled with "ornament," a highly constructed form of pedagogical picture that mimics the authoritative nature of parental communication with children.[11] Children, in turn, resolve the conflict between the love and control that their parents exude through a creative process of "dialogic misunderstanding" in conversation with them.[12] They transform their parents' tacky visual puzzle into a dreamlike vista of their own making.

Benjamin's description of Ernst's frontispiece for *Répétitions* is meant to serve to some degree in an illustrative capacity for his emergent ideas there; it functions as a "figure of thought" or *Denkbild* in the capacity articulated by Sigrid Weigel.[13] Weigel

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[8] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.
[9] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.
[10] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.
[11] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.
[12] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.
[13] Sigrid Weigel, "Thought-images: A Re-reading of the 'Angel of History,'" in *Body-and Image-space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1996), 49–60.

defines *Denkbild* as "images in relation to which his thoughts and theoretical reflections unfold, and also as images whose representations are translated into figures of thought…"[14] In this sense, the "Dream Kitsch" essay prefigures some of Benjamin's later writings in which specific images play a foundational role in the elaboration of his criticism. As a trial foray into the technique of "literary montage" that Benjamin most noticeably launched in the *Arcades* study during the 1930s, "Traumkitsch" inclines toward what might be called a pictographic mode of theory. Brigid Doherty has pointed to the obscure concept of Benjamin's "literary montage"—augmenting its generally accepted definition as a splicing of texts and citations by emphasizing the centrality of certain images and image-texts in Benjamin's thought processes.[15] Such a technique of literary montage was founded in part upon Benjamin's study of imagistic allegories in his ill-fated habilitation thesis on the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*, written between 1924 and 1925. "Traumkitsch" offers a rare example in which Benjamin relies upon a specific twentieth-century artwork to spell out his thoughts in such a deliberate way.

Ernst's untitled frontispiece was not included in the original publication of "Traumkitsch" in *Die neue Rundschau* in 1927, but one did appear in

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[14] Weigel, "Thought-images," 51.

[15] Brigid Doherty, "Max Ernst, " *Artforum* 44: 1 (Sept. 2005): 295–300. Brigid Doherty, "The 'Colportage Phenomenon of Space' and the Place of Montage in *The Arcades Project*, " *The Germanic Review* 81:1 (Winter 2006): 37–64.

miniature proportions in the third and final installment of Benjamin's 1929 surrealism essay in *Die literarische Welt*, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," even though the image was not mentioned specifically in the discussion there (Fig. 3).[16] Although the reappearance of this image in Benjamin's most important—and most critical— essay on surrealism has been overlooked in the literature on this subject, his pointed inclusion of Ernst's frontispiece in an essay written four years after "Traumkitsch" confirms the sustained importance of this particular work of Ernst's for Benjamin's conception of surrealism and the surrealist outmoded. The frontispiece for *Répétitions* encapsulated something of the essence of surrealism for Benjamin, even though the concept of dream kitsch itself later dissolved as an explicit entity in his writings. Like Klee's watercolor *Angelus Novus* of 1920, which Benjamin owned and honored with a descriptive passage in the late, unpublished essay, "On the Concept of History" (1940), the frontispiece for

[16] See the notes for "Traumkitsch" and "Der Sürrealismus" in tome 2, vol. 3 of Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-1989), 1041, 1425. Two illustrations are listed by the editors for "Der Sürrealismus," and none for "Traumkitsch." The final portion of "Der Sürrealismus," in which Ernst's collage appeared, was published in *Die literarische Welt* on February 15, 1929, vol. 5, no. 7, 55–56. The collage was printed with the caption "Sürrealistische Zeichnung [Drawing] von Max Ernst." The first installment of this essay, published in *Die literarische Welt* on February 1, 1929, also included a small reproduction of a drawing by Pablo Picasso depicting Guillaume Apollinaire as the pope.

Der Sürrealismus

Von Walter Benjamin

(Schluß)

Damals, kurz nach dem Kriege, als die Sürrealisten, die die Feier eines von ihnen verehrten Dichters durch die Anwesenheit nationa'istischer Elemente kompromittiert fanden, in den Ruf „Es lebe Deutsch'and" ausbrachen, blieben sie in den Grenzen des Skandals, gegen den die Bourgeoisie bekanntlich ebenso dickfellig wie empfindlich gegen jede Aktion ist. Merkwürdig die Übereinstimmung, in der unter dem Einfluß solcher politischen Witterungen Apollinaire und Aragon die Zukunft des Dichters gesehen haben. Die Kapitel „Verfolgung" und „Mord" des „Poète assassiné" bei Apollinaire enthalten die berühmte Schilderung eines Dichter-Pogroms. Die Verlagshäuser werden gestürmt, die Gedichtbücher ins Feuer geworfen, die Dichter erschlagen. Und die gleichen Szenen spielen zu gleicher Zeit auf der ganzen Erde sich ab. Bei Aragon ruft in der Vorahnung solcher Greuel die „Imagination" ihre Mannschaft zu einem letzten Kreuzzuge auf.

Man muß, um solche Prophetien zu verstehen und die Linie, die vom Sürrealismus erreicht wurde, strategisch zu

Sürrealistische Zeichnung von Max Ernst

ermessen, sich danach umsehen, welche Denkart in der sogenannten wohlgesinnten linksbürgerlichen Intelligenz verbrei-

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Kinderschändung steht, viell
paar Jahrzehnte zurückgreife
in den Jahren 1865 bis 1875
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sen, an ihren Höllenmaschine
Und das Erstaunliche ist:
unabhängig voneinander der
nau auf die gleiche Stunde
vierzig Jahre später explodiert

Fig. 3 Walter Benjamin. Page from "Der Sürrealismus," *Die literarische Welt* (Feb. 15, 1929), with a reproduction of Max Ernst's frontispiece for *Répétitions*.

Répétitions occupies a singular place in Benjamin's theories— it both heralds and formulates his reception of surrealism.[17]

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At the heart of Benjamin's reception is the concept of surrealism as a remedy for the problem of imposed kitsch and its psychic-somatic implications for children and adults. The "kitsch" that forms the preliminary basis for the critical experience of "Traumkitsch" is on the most basic level a ubiquitous form of modern materiality that is "banal," "familiar," "timeworn," and "cheap."[18] In contrast, Benjamin's "Dream Kitsch" theorized an experimental form of post-consumption, a belated

[17] See vol. 4 of, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 399. Werner Spies, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, trans. John William Gabriel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 77, 212. Christiane Hertel, "Irony, Dream and Kitsch: Max Klinger's Paraphrase of the Finding of a Glove and German Modernism, " *Art Bulletin* 74 (March 1992), 106, 110. Brigid Doherty, "Painting and Graphics" in Walter Benjamin et al., *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 195–217.

[18] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 3–4. Much of David Hopkins's "Dark Toys" is relevant for this discussion. See in particular: David Hopkins, *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 7–8, 23–25, 50–53, 71–73, 92, 150–51, 206–207. Also see Lorna Martens, "Collecting the Past, Prefiguring the Future: Benjamin Remembering his Childhood," in *The Promise of Memory: Childhood Recollection and its Objects in Literary Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2011), 137–182.

and aberrant form of deinstrumentalized consumption occurring after a commodity's novelty value had long since faded. Post-consumption simultaneously served as a means of psychic rehabilitation from bourgeois social conditioning and a path toward renewed subject-object relations liberated from the seductions of the desirable commodity. Post-consumption evoked the paradoxical utility that Benjamin saw in superannuated commodities or visual culture that had recently, in the last 30 to 80 years or so, outrun their newness and intended function in the hectic pace of capitalism's market turnover. To ignite the critical potential of "dream kitsch," Benjamin postulated that commercial entities dating from a few generations prior could be later re-consumed by subsequent generations to reawaken long-dormant memories of unconditioned childhood primacy, immediacy, and linguistic freedom, whether these memories were personal or collective— based in the childhood experiences of the self or of previous generations. In this sense, childhood and dreams were first and foremost historical phenomena that paradoxically retained some access to states of a-historical primary consciousness for Benjamin.

This liberatory post-consumption of *Traumkitsch* ironically depended upon a claustrophobic descent into the ever-proliferating storehouse of outmoded junk and sentimental kitsch before what he called a critical "formula of [the] dialogic misunderstanding" of capitalist kitsch could be extracted.[19] Quoting from Breton's 1924

[19] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.

Manifesto, Benjamin sought to deploy words and images as a "springboard" for retrieving lost childhood access to the imagination, integrating "reality."[20] The staged close encounter with proliferating old commodities, endless kitsch, and the increasingly timeworn world of parents, grandparents, and aging generations was both a dialogue and a dialectic that opened onto liberation precisely because it was a familiar world of cozy affect imbued with lessons learned in childhood. Dream kitsch depended upon this affect of remembered or nostalgic sentimentality to lure the resistant psyche back into the past. It wasn't just familiar because it was everywhere, it was also as close as it could be to ultimate nearness: it was already internalized by the bourgeois subject after a lifetime of exposure. Especially effective toward this end for Benjamin were dated illustrations, didactic material, puzzles, and games from nineteenth-century children's print culture. Even more powerful were surrealist collages and artworks by artists like Max Ernst that appropriated and transformed such outmoded visual culture into oneiric concatenations of varied memory impulses.

The trappings of social conditioning from childhood were akin to restricting tethers disguised by kitschy sentimentality that, once donned anew, might lead to memories of primary, naïve, wordless, and unconditioned object relations for the child. This tension between the mediation of learned social control and the immediacy of primary apprehension in children is the nether-sphere of Benjamin's

[20] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.

"dream kitsch," which is a type of counter-kitsch that psychically accesses authenticity precisely through the misunderstanding of the saccharine banality of ubiquitous kitsch. Rather than turning away from the endless detritus of industrial capitalism and bourgeois life or coolly contemplating it from a distance, Benjamin's "furnished man" in the "Dream Kitsch" essay clambers into the morass of cast-off commodities to activate an uninhibited, childlike consciousness. For Benjamin, surrealism was the test case for this experimental critical practice of dream kitsch. Dream kitsch demanded a psychic submission to the personal past as well as a projection into simultaneously personal and collective childhood experiences before liberatory processes could commence.

By singling out Ernst's frontispiece for *Répétitions* from the rest of the images in the book, and indeed, other proto-surrealist and surrealist images to which Benjamin— as a consummate Francophile and authority on surrealism by 1925—may have had access at this time, he sets a decisive tone for the types of "things" that easily lend themselves to this new form of strangely conscious objecthood. Not merely banal, familiar, dusty, and devalued—nor merely kitschy—dream kitsch involves a particular orientation toward the temporally-conflicted materiality of everyday modern life as well as a pointed manipulation of it. As an embryonic expression of the outmoded, dream kitsch also spoke to the critical potential of the social imaginary of childhood for Benjamin's generation. In such a way, this peculiar form of

kitsch, which should be viewed differently from the modern-day inflection of this word—with its emphasis upon bad taste, mass-reproduction, and pop aesthetics—this uniquely Benjaminian "dream kitsch" exercised a powerful catalyzing force upon both the sentiments and the psyche.[21]

Benjamin conjectured that children were so profoundly absorbed in the material world around them that their individuality remained indistinct and unformed. This childhood predilection for mimesis and synergy with the object world was for Benjamin a euphoric overcoming of quotidian ennui and the sameness of kitsch. Yet for Benjamin, Ernst's frontispiece simultaneously triggers traumatic memories of the inevitable disempowerment that comes with childhood. In Benjamin's words, the "heartfelt sympathy," "love," and "sentimentality of our parents" is kitschy in the sense that it is cliché and standardized in its attempt to disguise adult efforts at the control of children.[22]

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[21] Winfried Menninghaus, "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad taste,'" in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, eds., Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Victoria, Australia: re.press, 2009), 39–57. My reading of Benjamin's *Traumkitsch* is close to that of Martin Jay who, in a 2003 interview with D. J. Goodman, calls "Dream Kitsch" a reading of kitsch "against the grain" in search of "the potential for an alternative understanding." Here, dream kitsch is not kitsch as such. Also see D. J. Goodman, "Dream Kitsch and the Debris of History: An Interview with Martin Jay," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3: 1 (2001): 114. Also see Natalya Lusty and Helen Growth, *Dreams and Modernity: A Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2, 137–140.

[22] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.

These themes originated in Benjamin's close engagement with the German Youth Movement and the ideas of Gustav Wyneken before World War I, as seen in his early essays critiquing the concept of progress.[23] Before his break with Wyneken's epistemologies, Benjamin participated in a collective critique of traditional pedagogical systems, and his assessment of surrealism in "Traumkitsch" bears faint marks of this former undertaking.[24] Likewise, in early essays such as "The Metaphysics of Youth," written in 1913-1914, and "A Child's View of Color," a year later, Benjamin unveiled a budding interest in subjects such as dreams, children's artwork, and juvenile psychology and perception.[25] By the mid-1920s, psychoanalysis had also become a palpable influence for Benjamin; hence the close correlation of childhood memories with psychic projection and the uncanny return of the past in "Traumkitsch." However, such Freudian themes receded a few years later in the 1929 surrealism essay, in which the influence of Marxism prompted a materialist revision of dream kitsch with the explosively oppressive outmoded.

Given these interests, it follows that "repetition," with its simultaneous connotations of pedagogical techniques and psychoanalytic theory, is the keyword in Benjamin's analysis of Ernst's frontispiece collage. Such repetition operates on

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[23] Michael Calderbank, "Surreal Dreamscapes: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades," *Papers of Surrealism* 1 (Winter 2003): 1–13.

[24] Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 22–38.

[25] See vol. 1 of, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 6–17, 50–51.

several semantic levels in the image. The collage itself demonstrably depends upon an internal logic of tautology, both iconographically and in its very material ground. The four schoolboys, serial versions of one another, are lined up at a blackboard that has transformed into a vista during their monotonous assignment. The raised hands of the children, poised in the replicated moment of group transcription, likewise serve to shield their eyes from the mirage-like sun that shines over this imagined horizon— an expanse permeated with wispy clouds hinting at the occluded trace of their writing. The governing instructor oversees this rote exercise from his desk: his focus is the perfection of motor skills and the memorization of information through practice and rehearsal. The boredom of this standard classroom exercise, bent on perfection through repetition, has unexpectedly conjured a manifest daydream in which pencils inflate and hot air balloons lightly touch the ceiling. This collective hallucination overrides the confinement of the schoolhouse, and the flat surface of black slate opens onto depth perception. The rationalized standardization of childhood conditioning in the classroom is transformed into a space of liberation for the child via the didactic tools of juvenile storytelling and illustration. The writing surface depicted in the graphic image becomes a play-space (what Benjamin would come to call *Spiel-Raum* [space for play] starting in 1935), just as the illustration of the classroom itself morphs from

advertisement into hallucination through the action of the artist's overpainting technique.[26]

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For Benjamin, Ernst's frontispiece itself is intensely mnemonic and therefore repetitious in its conspicuous appeal to anachronistic periodicity; it re-presents the past of a shared generation. Indeed, Ernst and Benjamin had many memories in common, for although they were raised on opposite sides of Germany, Ernst was less than a year older than Benjamin. It is essential then, in the context of "Traumkitsch," to note that the frontispiece for *Répétitions*, like the other ten images in Éluard's book, is constructed with material remnants of this mutual generational past. Although Benjamin mistakenly believes that these images are drawings (following the misleading indication of "dessins" on the title page of *Répétitions* itself), he fully comprehends what he believes is their explicit *citation* of dated matter and grapples with the implications of this fact in his essay.

Ernst's artworks for *Répétitions* combine readymade material with artistic intervention, thereby creating an unusual hybrid form in which the "found" and the "created" coexist. Ernst constructed the ground of the frontispiece from a wood-engraved advertisement originally published

[26] Ralph Ubl, "Walter Benjamin and Max Ernst," in *Prehistoric Future: Max Ernst and the Return of Painting between the Wars*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 192–202.

in a teaching aids catalogue used in primary through tertiary education. Titled in some accounts of Ernst's work as *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* (and alternately as the *Kölner Lehrmittel-Katalog*), this text was published serially in Leipzig approximately between 1892 and 1914— precisely during the period of Ernst and Benjamin's childhood, although this text was also based upon more venerable didactic examples dating from the early to mid-nineteenth century (Ernst used the most recent edition from 1914).[27] Across its pages, some of which are rendered in color plates and others in black and white, myriad illustrations of plant and animal life, domestic and scientific things, are displayed side by side as printer's source material for school primers and assignments (Fig. 4).

Rules of scale and classification are set aside in the space of *Bibliotheca Paedagogica*, so that the inventory of worldly things can be compactly rendered for the printer's advantage. Likewise,

[27] Dirk Teuber, "Bibliotheca Paedagogica: eine Neuerwerbung im Kunstmuseum Bonn: Zur Quellenfunktion des Kölner Lehrmittelkataloges für Max Ernst, " in *Max Ernst, Illustrierte Bücher und druckgraphische Werke, Die Sammlung Hans Bolliger, eine Neuerwerbung [26.1 bis 2.4 1989, Kunstmuseum Bonn]* (Bonn: Kunstmuseum Bonn, 1989), 35–49.

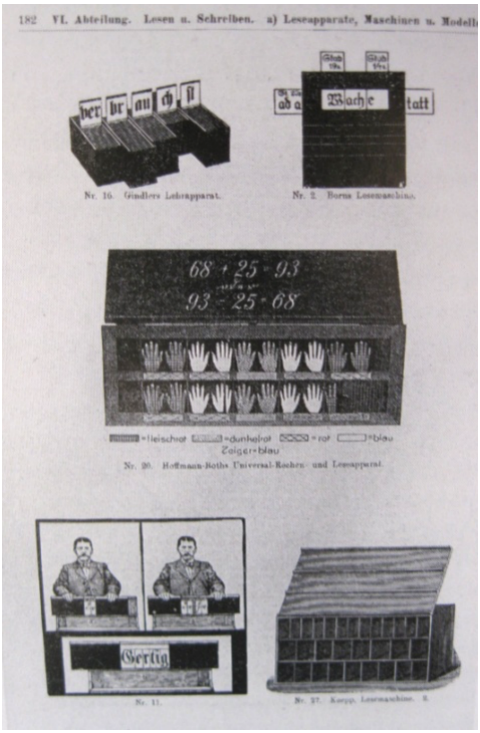

Fig. 4 Page from *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* showing different apparatuses for reading and counting, 21st ed. (Cologne: Ständige Lehrmittel-Ausstellung, 1914), 182. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/jpxgest6/items?canvas=1279&query=M.+K%C3%B6nigs

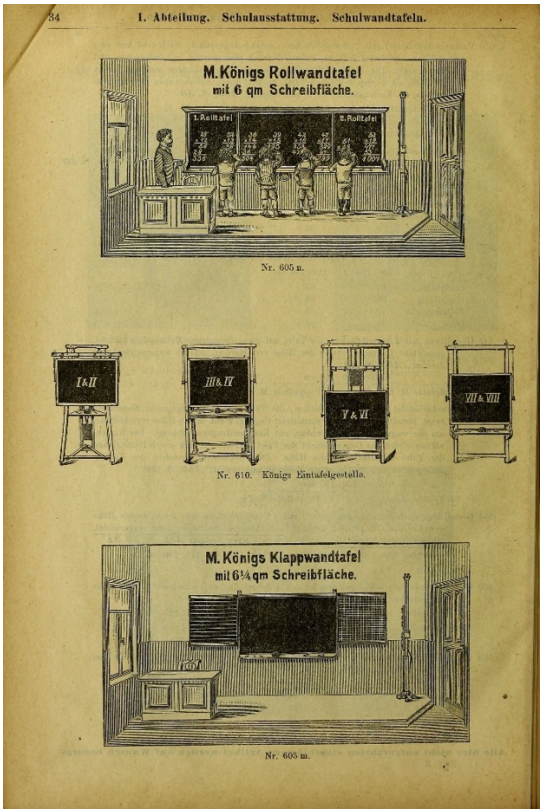

Fig. 5 Page from *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* with an advertisement for a retractable blackboard, 21st ed. (Cologne: Ständige Lehrmittel-Ausstellung, 1914), 34.
https://wellcomecollection.org/works/jpxgest6/items?canvas=1279&query=M.+K%C3%B6nigs

given the original serial format of the publication, there are advertisements, such as the one that Ernst chose for the frontispiece of *Répétitions:* a four-and-a-half-inch advertisement for "M. König's Retractable Wall Blackboard," which depicts a quatrain of boys busy at their multiplication tables—with their attentive but stern teacher standing close by (Fig. 5 above).

Ernst discovered this catalogue of didactic examples in 1919 while browsing in a bookstore in Cologne. Struck profoundly by its contents—as the artist's own self-proclaimed lore tells in the autobiographical essay *Beyond Painting* [*Au delà de la peinture*] (1936)—he hatched the idea of making collages out of its illustrations.[28] Ernst presented this encounter with *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* as the "origin" of his engagement with collage and other diverse practices that utilized found source materials made with outmoded reproduction technologies such as wood and steel engraving. In his foundational study of Ernst's collages, Werner Spies details how the popular usage of wood and steel engraving was rendered distinctly obsolete by 1919, apart from the odd dime store catalog that kept its expenses down by preserving the old ways.[29] Replaced by less costly photographic processes such as the autotype, the presence of a handmade engraving in the realm of popular print media was a sure sign of bygone times by the 1920s.

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[28] Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting, and Other Writings* (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1948), 14.
[29] Spies, *Max Ernst Collages*, 93–94, *et passim*.

In 1922 when *Répétitions* was published, however, Ernst had recently begun to rely largely upon other nineteenth and early twentieth-century sources for his diversely manufactured collages, such as the popular scientific journal *La Nature*. This publication was printed weekly in France beginning in 1873, and in Germany as a two-volume magazine, titled *Kolumbus-Eier* [*Columbus's Eggs*], for the first time circa 1890.[30] Most of the collages in *Répétitions* are based entirely upon *La Nature*, except for the frontispiece and a couple of others which draw upon material from *Bibliotheca Paedagogica.* This majority renders the book's frontispiece something of an intermediary work in the development of Ernst's collage practices and sources. In addition to its distinct source material, the frontispiece also differs from the other images in *Répétitions* in its artistic handling by Ernst. Unlike the other images in the book, the frontispiece is not a collage of cut-up illustrations, but rather what Ernst called an *overpainting* [*Übermalung*]— a found image that is partially covered over with gouache and other materials. In the frontispiece for *Répétitions*, the upper portion of the advertisement for "M. König's Retractable Wall Blackboard" has been altered with a layer of sky-blue gouache, various touches of other colors, and the occasional line drawing in ink.[31] As is the case with overpainting in general in Ernst's work, what is painted *out* plays as important a role

[30] Camfield, Spies, and Hopps, *Max Ernst*, 107.
[31] Jürgen Pech, *Max Ernst, Paul Éluard, 1921-1924. Ausstellung im Max-Ernst-Kabinett* (Brühl: Max Ernst Kabinett, 1982), 269, 271.

as what is painted *in*, as well as the fine lines, so to speak, where these two areas overlap— such as the printed *pentimento* of the original advertisement's slogan, "Schreibfläche" ["Writing Surface"] that seeps through the gouache in one corner, or the floating number "4" from the children's arithmetic that surfaces above a layer of paint elsewhere. However, as important as these last details may be to a contemporary understanding of Ernst's overpainting, it should be remembered that Benjamin himself was not privileged with such knowledge, limited as he was by his viewing of this image as a reproduction in Éluard's text, in which such visual subtleties were obfuscated.

In addition to these differences from the rest of the images in *Répétitions*, the frontispiece is also singular among the collages for Éluard's book in that it is the only image rendered in color. While the original advertisement for *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* was a simple black and white wood-engraving, Ernst painted over this material in brilliant hues, thereby creating an image that is, quite strangely, only half-colored. When *Répétitions* was published, Ernst had separate plates made by a professional engraver for color halftone printing so that the hues of his gouache retouching would be preserved in reproduction. The frontispiece is one of the few early works by Ernst using found source material that he reprinted in the more expensive color process.[32]

[32] Spies, *Max Ernst Collage*, 93. Also see the collages for the companion volume to *Répétitions*, *Les Malheurs des immortels* (1922).

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Ernst's images for *Répétitions* functioned like a mnemonic image-bank for Benjamin in the "Dream Kitsch" essay. They opened onto a vast world of remembered and partially remembered images from both a personal and a collective past, in particular, the general past of modern "childhood" as such. Benjamin became interested in issues of child psychology and perception as early as 1913, and as a collector and scholar of children's literature five years later, these youthful concerns came to the fore again, paving the way for the highly refined dialogue that appears in "Traumkitsch." In particular, a handful of essays written between 1918 and 1926 discuss children's literature in a way that prefigures Benjamin's reception of Ernst in the "Traumkitsch" essay. Therefore, "Dream Kitsch" demonstrates that what later became the surrealist outmoded is not just about obsolescent capitalist materiality. It also speaks to the way in which, starting already in childhood, commodities attach to us and become part of our lives as remnants of personal psychic history and the process of social conditioning.

Upon the birth of his son, Stefan, in 1918, Benjamin began to collect children's books of all kinds, particularly examples from the nineteenth century, although earlier works were also represented. To form the core of his collection, he gleaned from his mother's library in Berlin where his childhood books were preserved. His enthusiasm for this subject continued unabated, and by 1924, a

year before "Traumkitsch" was written, he planned to open a secondhand bookshop specializing in rare editions, including children's texts. This enterprise never materialized, but by 1930 Benjamin had gathered over two hundred examples of old German, Dutch, and French children's books for his collection.[33] In addition, this hobby soon led to related interests in antique toys and children's theater and radio programming— all well-represented themes in his writings of the 1920s.[34]

Not long after Benjamin took up collecting juvenile literature in 1918, he wrote the unpublished sketch, "Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children's Books." In this essay, lavish illustrations of children's books of the early nineteenth century are conceived as vehicles of a paradisiacal, intuitive form of knowledge and memory.[35] Likewise, in 1924, a year before "Traumkitsch" was penned, Benjamin published a review of the collector Karl Hobrecker's study, *Old Forgotten Children's Books* [*Alte vergessene Kinderbücher*] (1924) in the *Illustrierte Zeitung*.[36] There, Benjamin sets the stage for his first reception

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[33] Klaus Doderer, "Walter Benjamin and Children's Literature," in *"With the Sharpened Axe of Reason": Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, ed., Gerhard Fischer (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 170.

[34] See vol. 2 of, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 98–102, 113–121. On Benjamin's interest in children's theater, see "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" (1929) in vol. 2, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 201–206. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on his Radio Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[35] Vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 264–266.

[36] Vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 406–413.

of surrealism and Ernst by distinguishing between older children's books of the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, and children's books from the more recent past— that of the "last quarter of the nineteenth century on."[37] Although Benjamin believed these later texts were still valuable cultural documents, he also thought their language and images were unfortunately often degraded to the level of "kitsch" for several reasons, many of which were aesthetic.[38] The main fault of late nineteenth-century children's literature was that it had become self-consciously "childlike," and therefore falsified in its forced "jolliness."[39] For Benjamin, the shifts in children's texts and illustrations from the era of his childhood directly reflect the broader societal change in attitudes toward children during this period— a cultural transformation that he views negatively as tending toward an under-appreciation of the sophistication of the juvenile mind.

Even though Éluard's *Répétitions* was published in a traditional binding format, and all but one of its images printed in stark black and white, this volume's unusual concatenation of poetic images and iconic language conjured for Benjamin both the old-fashioned technical supports of the popular print culture of the previous century, and more specifically, children's literature from the same timeframe. "The surrealists," Benjamin says, "have copied [*nachgezeichnet*] the picture book." They have fashioned "fantasy images" which relate in a

[37] Vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 412.
[38] Vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 412.
[39] Vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected* Writings, 407, 412.

pictographic manner to the abstruse "maxims" ["*Sinnsprüche*"] of their poetry.[40] Benjamin's choice of the frontispiece for *Répétitions*, as the sole color image in the book, supported his comparison with the fanciful imagery of outmoded children's literature. For Benjamin, children's illustrations in color empathically drew a child into the image, whereas black and white illustrations pushed the child back out into the world.[41] According to him, while both of these actions have their advantages for children, this color theory looked quite different in the context of surrealism. Benjamin was most interested in highlighting the surrealist reactivation of the juvenile ability to psychically project into even the most commodified things or images to achieve a self-induced dream state— and so it was understandably toward the whimsical colored portion of the frontispiece for *Répétitions* that he was drawn.

Benjamin's references to children's literature of the nineteenth century are explicit in his discussion of *Répétitions*.[42] He compares Éluard's book to a children's fantasy *Leporello* or 'panorama'

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[40] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 3.

[41] See "Old Forgotten Children's Books," in vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 411.

[42] In the years following "Traumkitsch," Benjamin continued to associate surrealism with children's literature. Recall that one of the nine muses of surrealism according to Benjamin in his "Arcades" study is Kate Greenway (1846-1901), an English children's book author and illustrator. Benjamin also associated surrealism with J. J. Grandville's lithographic caricatures, which in themselves often resemble children's illustrations. See, Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 83 *et passim*.

book, a print medium in which the text folds out horizontally.[43] In his commentary in "Traumkitsch," Benjamin refers to an unidentified children's Leporello called *The Dream*.[44] Benjamin also associates Ernst's frontispiece with various print-based games that originated in the developing market for children's entertainment and education during the nineteenth century. Optical illusions, visual puzzles, trick pictures, rebuses, pictographs, and other paper-bound ludic schema haunt Benjamin's surrealism.

In a third essay on children's literature, "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books" ["Aussicht im Kinderbuch"], published in *Die literarische Welt* in 1926, Benjamin extends this concept of a subverted kitsch that he had demonstrated in "Traumkitsch" a year earlier.[45] Relying on his earlier theorizations of visual perception and memory in relation to word, image, and color written before the war, Benjamin presents a complex phenomenological view of the peculiar childhood rapport with texts and illustrations. He envisions a process by which the child literally "enters" into a given image psychically and physically through their particular fascination with colored illustrations. The child then intimately

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[43] Peter Haining, *Moveable Books: An Illustrated History* (London: New English Library, 1979), 24–25.

[44] Klaus Doderer, *Walter Benjamin und die Kinderliteratur: Aspekte der Kinderkultur in den zwanziger Jahren: mit dem Katalog der Kinderbuchsammlung* (Weinheim: Juventa, 1988), 247–282. Also see, Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 5, n.3.

[45] This essay was published in *Die literarische Welt* in 1926. Vol. 1 of, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 435–443.

"possesses" the image through repetitive, intensive viewing—an optical memorization akin to psychic tracing or imprinting—and also through more tactile activities like cutting the image out, writing over it, or coloring in between the lines.[46]

It is striking that such graphic surface alterations were the very kinds of appropriative activities that Ernst had undertaken in his overpainting of the blackboard advertisement in *Bibliotheca Paedagogica*. In this capacity, Benjamin's theory of childhood absorption in texts and illustrations in "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books" may well have incorporated the lessons learned in "Traumkitsch." Like the playfully destructive measures of a child who "claims" a favorite illustration by appropriating it for their own purposes, Ernst's frontispiece is a ludic revision of the advertisement for classroom equipment, driven far more by what could be called constructive, empathetic projection than the parodic sarcasm that characterized much of the aesthetic activity of the European avant-garde.[47] Benjamin's essay is illustrated by images culled from various tomes in his growing collection. Some of these illustrations bear a striking resemblance to Ernst's collages and overpaintings from this period, given the fanciful-yet-detailed qualities they share with Ernst's favored source, *Bibliotheca Paedagogica* (Fig. 6).

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[46] Vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 435–36.

[47] See Cecilia Novero's relevant discussion of "incorporation" as an "appropriative act" in Benjamin's writings. Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 96.

Fig. 6 Walter Benjamin, "Aussicht ins Kinderbuch" [A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books], *Die literarische Welt* (Dec. 1926): 3. Photograph courtesy of the Universitätsbibliothek der Freien Universität, Berlin. Fair use.

For instance, one page of Benjamin's essay in *Die literarische Welt* included a black and white reproduciton of the cover for *Der rote Wunderschirm: Eine neue Erzählung für Kinder* [*The Magical Red Umbrella*] (1881), an image which recalls Ernst's frontispiece for *Répétitions* in its suspended atmosphere and sanguine landscape (Fig. 7).[48] In these older examples of children's illustrated literature, which predate the standardization of a catalog like *Bibliotheca Paedagogica*, kitsch attitudes of false sentimentality or picturesque innocence had only just begun to interrupt the imaginative play of childhood dreaming, Benjamin averred. Ernst's images for *Répétitions*, in their critical employment of childlike means in a symbolic overwriting of dominant discourses, thus not only invoke the literature of Benjamin's own childhood at the turn of the century. They also evoke an even older tradition of children's tales that still bear the influence of pre-industrial culture.

[48] Also see "Child Reading," in *One-Way Street* (written 1923-1926, pub. 1928): vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 463; "Boy's Books" in "Berlin Childhood around 1900" (written 1932-1934, revised 1938) in vol. 3, 356–357.

Fig. 7 Cover, *Der rote Wunderschirm: Eine neue Erzählung für Kinder* [*The Magical Red Umbrella*] (Neu-Ruppin Printers and Verlag von Gustav Kühn, 1881 [1890]). Featured in a black and white reproduction in, Walter Benjamin, "Aussicht ins Kinderbuch" [A Glimpse into the World of

Children's Books], *Die literarische Welt* (Dec. 1926): 4. Image courtesy of The German Digital Library. Fair use.

A few months after he published his 1929 surrealism essay, a short article called "What Our Grandparents Racked their Brains Over," appeared in *Das illustrierte Blatt*. This essay featured images of nineteenth-century picture puzzles reminiscent of Ernst's collages for *Répétitions* in their disharmonious juxtapositions of subject matter (Fig. 8).[49] Musing upon the "childhood experience" he perceives in Ernst's frontispiece, Benjamin writes, "The long-windedness of their speeches, bitter as gall, has the effect of reducing us to a crimped picture puzzle [*Rätselbild*]; the ornament of conversation is full of the most abysmal entanglements."[50] For Benjamin, the development of tendencies towards dominance in adults relates directly to the various kinds of games, illustrations, and texts that children are given as educational toys. Much like a rebus or picture puzzle, Ernst's overpainted frontispiece for *Répétitions*, with its partially buried subtext of pedagogical repetition and didactic enforcement, functions for Benjamin as a complex metaphor of the strange rapport between children's games and adult hegemony. It seems that

[49] "Worüber sich unsere Großeltern den Kopf zerbrachen," *Das illustrierte Blatt*, no. 28 (July 1929) 95. This essay has been translated in Ursula Marx et al. eds., *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2007), 295.
[50] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.

Benjamin saw surrealism as a way of "solving" these old nineteenth-century rebuses of control as well as the "riddle" of outmoded materiality in general— by first conjuring them up from the past and then systematically dismantling, "misunderstanding," and "deciphering" them.

In "Traumkitsch," Benjamin says of surrealism: "This all in order to blaze a way into the heart of things abolished or superseded [abgeschafften], to decipher the contours of the banal as rebus, to start a concealed William Tell from out of the wooded entrails, or to be able to answer the question, 'Where is the bride?'" Surrealism blazes a way into the core of the outmoded and fuses with the most intimate of present desires and reveries— making for a joint process of identification and reclamation.

Ernst's frontispiece for *Répétitions* reclaims the rebus on behalf of the child's imagination by substituting open-ended fantasy for mathematical solutions and inchoate imaginings for the "whole" picture. Fittingly, such a process of substitution and revision in Ernst's frontispiece resembles some of Benjamin's descriptions of child behaviors toward illustrations and puzzles— as when, in the spirit of play, they undermine the pedagogical intent or moral lessons of their books through an infantile vandalism.

Fig. 8 Walter Benjamin. Page from "Worüber sich unsere Großeltern den Kopf zerbrachen" ["What Our Grandparents Racked their Brains Over"], *Das Illustrierte Blatt*, no. 28 (July 1929): 95 (GS IV. 2, 622–24). Walter Benjamin Archive, Institute of the Hamburg Foundation, Academy of Arts, Berlin.

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These four essays Benjamin devoted to children's literature—"Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children's Books" (1918), "Old Forgotten Children's Books" (1924), "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books" (1926), and "What Our Grandparents Racked their Brains Over" (1929)—provide a broader contextual view from which to analyze Benjamin's reception of Ernst and surrealism. They also speak to the highly specific nature of Benjamin's early understanding of the surrealist concern with themes of the outmoded—a focus which shifts significantly in the 1929 surrealism essay but remains central to Benjamin's reception of this movement. The proximity of Benjamin's writings on children's literature and illustrations to "Traumkitsch" reveals not only the way in which he associates *Répétitions*, and particularly its frontispiece by Max Ernst, in an overarching manner with the past tense of his own generation's childhood and social conditioning. These essays also attest to Benjamin's view of surrealism, via Ernst's images in particular, as a canny reworking, rewriting, or redrawing—a deliberate misunderstanding—of the textual and visual culture from his own generation's childhood.

In this critical scenario, Ernst and the surrealists are configured as avatars of a new trend of interest in certain incarnations of the outmoded popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—with World War I serving, as it still does today, as a historical dividing line between

the available "present" and the pre-Modern "past."[51] Like the surrealists, many of whom were collectors of old texts and aficionados of the history of French literary culture, Benjamin was keenly aware of the technological and cultural shifts that had taken place in both print culture and book culture at large in Europe over the course of the nineteenth century. Recently outmoded forms of print reproduction for that period—that is, outmoded for use in mass publications—such as steel and wood-engraving, chromolithography, etc., occupied a unique category in post-war quotidian life in that they were simultaneously ubiquitous *and* conspicuously anachronistic.

As an early expression of the more broadly defined phenomenon of the outmoded, Benjamin's concept of dream kitsch, as a twentieth-century appraisal of outmoded visual and material culture of the nineteenth century, adeptly evokes the paradoxical thrust embedded at the core of this concept. As examples of technological media processes and cultural trends less than a century old, juvenile textual and visual culture was in essence modern in many senses of the word. Nevertheless, by the post-war period, these early forms of children's books and print games had already been

[51] The concern with outmoded print culture permeates the *Arcades* study. In particular, see the earliest notes for the project, penned in 1927 with Hessel. Posters, old signs, underground newspapers, visitor's cards, typographies, *images d'Epinal*, dusty bookshops, elaborate wallpapers, and outmoded book subjects are featured as an important part of Benjamin and Hessel's research. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 919–925.

rendered obsolete as a result of several factors. Like *colportage*, the proletarian literature of the nineteenth century that Benjamin related to his later concept of the surrealist outmoded, the juvenile print culture of the past century was rooted at once in industrial technology and the formerly oral fairytales of primitive folk culture.[52] The melodramatic plots and awkwardly rendered illustrations of dime-novel colportage thus have their counterpart in the imaginative *Bilderbücher* of juvenile literature, as another form of popular culture of the nineteenth century that merged image and word through what were for the time progressive printing techniques. Ernst and Éluard's collaborative volume *Répétitions* therefore represents the first step in Benjamin's comparison of surrealism with his idiosyncratic impulses as a bibliophile.

What does this connection reveal about the phenomenon of dream kitsch as a prefiguration of the later concept of the surrealist outmoded? In many senses, it is arguable that the key to this connection hinges on Benjamin's critique of kitsch in this essay. Although kitsch, as it is theorized in later essays of the 1920s and 1930s, had many revolutionary sides for Benjamin, such as its ability to unravel the aloof superiority embodied in the idea of "fine art" and its proximity to working-class popular culture—here kitsch (and importantly, not the compound "dream kitsch") appears to be

[52] Benjamin compares Breton's *Nadja* (1928) to old chambermaids' books, one branch of the popular form of literature he calls *colportage* in his 1929 essay on surrealism. Also see vol. 2 of, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 211.

conceived of as a potentially detrimental category, linked on a basic level to the bad taste that accompanied kitsch's coinage in mid-nineteenth-century Germany.[53] Kitsch is articulated as the side of outmoded materiality that "turns" toward bourgeois rigidity, compulsiveness, and concealed authoritarianism. As obsolescence becomes a dominating factor in modernity's commodity culture, omnipresent outmoded materiality threatens to overtake the psychic life of humankind entirely, thus resulting in the psychic congestion of the "furnished man." This force-fed diet of commodities is naturalized by capitalist society despite its grotesqueness.

While sentimental and familiar kitsch could be seen as a far cry from a revolutionary tool—and Benjamin was certainly aware of this contradiction— what he locates as positive or useful within this category has everything to do with the way it is perceived, cognized, digested, rerouted, and relearned by its receivers. Kitsch must be misunderstood and misdirected to be creatively post-consumed. Hence, the correlation between children and the surrealists for Benjamin: just as

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[53] For other discussions of kitsch in Benjamin's writings, consult "Old Forgotten Children's books" (1924) in vol. 1, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 412. Also see "Some Remarks on Folk Art" (1929) in vol. 2, 278–280. Peter Krapp, "Future Interior," in *Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 31–52. Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998). For the etymology of kitsch, see Menninghaus, "'On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch," 39–42.

children distill the "good" from within the kitschy banality of their school lessons, picture puzzles, and parental guidance through various anti-pedagogical operations of play such as dream, fantasy, and creative intervention like coloring and cutting—the surrealists attempt in a similar fashion to glean some form of authenticity from the outmoded remnants of the past through ludic forms of appropriation and creative destruction. Thus for Benjamin, the surrealists can be said to approach omnipresent kitsch with a utopian point of view, extracting and mining its revolutionary potential—its "good," its "love"—through various critical operations, in order to "take on the energies of the outlived world of things."[54] Ernst's frontispiece, depicting four school boys turning their backs to their teacher and gazing out onto a window of possibility epitomized this alternate perception of the world. This is a more immediate and also perhaps more "automatic" form of perception and cognition, resulting from the way children "snatch" up objects rather than "clasp" them, allowing for a frank and direct—but also more spontaneous, inconclusive, and deinstrumentalized mode of object relations.

As for the surrealists, Benjamin envisions their revival of these faded children's pictures as an attempt to retrieve, in a utopian sense, this youthful ability to find wonder within the trappings of the mundane and the outmoded. In many ways, this revival depends on a recentering of play and dream as chief features of adult experience. Dream kitsch, as a potentially critical form of cultural memory, is

[54] Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 4.

therefore specifically tied to a post-consumption co-optation of outmoded print culture and kitsch for critical and deliberately misunderstood cultural purposes.

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