

The Children's Culture Industry and Globalization: Shifts in the Commodity Character of Toys¹

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Gary Cross begins *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* with an observation that sounds like a lament: "Toys that seem to prepare children for adult life have become harder to find" (1997, p.4). Doll houses, building blocks and train sets have been squeezed off the toy store shelf, he notes, to make room for playthings that appeal more directly to children's self-defined needs and desires – fantasy and novelty toys in particular. As a result, popular toys today no longer convey messages from adults to children about the future, adult experiences and/or emotions but invite children into "forms of play . . . entirely abstracted from the real worlds" (2003, p.144) of family, households and work.

Cross, in one fell swoop, alludes to one of the most perceptive insights of the children's culture literature while rehearsing one of its most enduring flaws. In focusing on the messages toys transmit between parent and child, he appropriately (though I suspect inadvertently) situates the apparently frivolous tools and practices of play within the broader process of social reproduction, the totality of creative human activity involved in sustaining life. At the same time, his opening comments betray a sense of loss that pervades his analysis, leading him to attribute changes in the modern toy industry to, among other things, parental failing characterized alternately by a loss of confidence in preparing children for the future and a tendency to cater too much to their children's quest for autonomy. In abdicating these childrearing responsibilities, parents reinforce the radical separation of childhood and adulthood that Cross bemoans. Yet, while it is tempting to invoke the past as the gold standard of childhood (and parenting practices) – and Cross is by no means alone in so doing – it is deeply problematic, encouraging the displacement of critical social theory by nostalgia, and of ideas for social change by moral suasion (admonitions, in this case, to better parenting).

Disentangling the threads of this position offers a way in to analyzing the impact of globalization on toys and play. In what follows I examine Cross' notion of parental messaging by situating it within a more comprehensive conceptualization of social reproduction, and foregrounding the impact trends in the global political economy have had on social reproductive practices and institutions. I ask what if, instead of parents *abandoning* the practice of sending messages through the toys they give their children, the message has simply *shifted* (partially in response to broader changes in social relations). From this

¹ This is an annotated, early draft. A full copy of the paper can be obtained by emailing the author sferguson@wlu.ca Please note that this paper is not for citation without authorization by the author

perspective, the significance of globalization vis a vis the toy industry and play lies not so much in the physical attributes of the toys now being produced (the fact that fantasy and novelty toys dominate the market), but in their hyper-commodified form. That is, the toys produced by global giants such as Mattel, Hasbro and Disney are examples of what Beryl Langer has termed “commoditoys” – toys that stimulate rather than satisfy longing by urging children to consume an endless array of add-ons, accessories and/or theme-related media products.

What then stands out is not how fantastical the products are, but the toy industry’s ever-intensifying participation in and cultivation of a veritable fashion cycle – one that far from being foreign to adult experience, has come to define it (and the process of social reproduction more generally) ever more closely. As a result, children, like adults, are drawn into an endlessly expansive fashion cycle in which, following Walter Benjamin, the quest for novelty (not play) becomes an end in itself. And if, at the same time, as Benjamin suggests, the only truly novel experience is death, it is not surprising that “clash toys,” violent video games and fashion dolls (all of which can be interpreted as brushing up against mortality in some way) dominate the toy market. The heightened cultural anxiety around such toys may signal, as Jyostna Kapur has argued in analyzing the “family movie,” not the growing separation of childhood from adulthood that Cross suggests, but precisely the opposite, the erasure of such boundaries.

To push the Benjaminian framework even further, I consider the possibility that commoditoys implicate children in a collective trance, inspiring or strengthening a subconscious belief in the mythic powers of capitalism. But play (in particular, the cognitive mode implied by play), as Benjamin saw it, has a special place in breaking free from that myth. For this reason, it is at least worth questioning the extent to which the transformation of the children’s culture industry in the era of global capitalism is capable of fully colonizing children’s hearts and minds.

THE RISE OF FANTASY TOYS

As toy production over the course of the 20th century became increasingly industrialized and internationalized, Cross suggests, toys began to bypass parental imaginations and appeal directly to children instead. That is, the market for fantasy toys took off, outstripping more traditional toys and games rooted in adult’s experiences of the past and present. “These toys were liberating – freeing children from the constraints of memorializing the past and allowing the unimpeded flow of the imagination about the future. The boy could choose his own forms of fantasy, not merely accept his parents’ nostalgic vision of play” (1997, pp.115-116). For girls, he notes, the appeal to fantasy and autonomy was “more subdued” (1997, p.118), as Shirley Temple and Little Orphan Annie dolls represented a world that, although foreign, comprised less of a radical departure from adult culture.

But it was the 1959 launch of Barbie that sparked the beginning of the end of adult mediation in the toy industry. Unlike baby dolls and earlier fashion dolls, he argues, Barbie directly responded to girls’ play values, incorporating fantasies beyond their mothers’ moral and aesthetic comfort zones. Representing a rejection of domesticity, the 11-and-a-half-inch,

shapely fashion doll taps an “eight-year-old’s fantasy of being grown up – having breasts and party dresses” (Cross, 2003, p.135). What’s more, the product line included Barbies with jobs foreign to mothers’ worlds. This alienation of adults from Mattel’s hottest toy was evident in early market testing, which indicated mothers disapproved of Barbie’s look and concept. And in 1976, when Hasbro introduced Super Joe, an 8-inch “clash toy,” children’s fantasies came to dominate the boy market as well. “The new Super Joe had nothing to do with the memory of fathers or with their expectations of their sons’ futures. They represented a child’s world of fantasy, free of family and fathers” (2003, p.138).

Barbie and G.I. Joe anticipated a more complete and seemingly irreversible break with tradition: the dominance of the so-called commercial toy tied into and cross-marketed with major media events. By the 1980s Star Wars, He-Man, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures were swamping little boys’ toy boxes, while girls’ toy boxes overflowed with Strawberry Shortcake, Care Bears and some female action figures. And as the popularity of Pokemon, Harry Potter and Dora the Explorer attests, fantasy toys continue to rule the playroom in the new millennium.

The cultural – as opposed to economic – roots of the fantasy toy industry can be found, Cross argues, in an evolving parenting culture. The respect for childhood that parents began to exhibit in the earliest years of last century has deepened, with modern parents even more likely than their predecessors to view and cater to children as autonomous beings. As a result, he claims, parents have abdicated their roles as mediators in the toy market. In the final chapters of *Kid’s Stuff*, Cross suggests this is related to the culture of consumption adults are themselves steeped in. But this point is tangential to his thesis of parental abdication in the book and he drops it completely in a later 2003 article, “Toys and the Shaping of Children’s Culture in the 20th Century.” Instead, he stresses that the social upheavals of the 1960s, and societal change wrought by feminism led to confusion about what messages parents should send their children. Parents, he writes, were no longer certain “about appropriate sex roles in adult life or the proper uses of war and violence in play . . . [They] lost confidence that they knew what their child’s path to maturity should be” (1997, p.187). Children, Cross concludes, are left without “grounding in a vision of past or future” (2003, p. 147) – woefully ill-prepared to negotiate real relationships in an ever-changing social world.

PARENTAL MESSAGING: FORM AND CONTENT

Cross’ lament barely conceals an admonition to parents to take more care in bringing up their children generally, and in choosing “appropriate” toys in particular. But the idea that parents were more concerned about their children’s future in the past than they are now, and wiser, more thoughtful caregivers is dubious. It ignores (indeed, contradicts Cross’ own comments about) the phenomenon of the so-called helicopter parent who hovers over their child, intervening more frequently and forcefully in schools, and structuring their child’s leisure time more rigidly than did earlier generations. It also suggests that children are sullied by, if not the market per se, the current mass market of globally produced commodities – a proposition that, as Ellen Seiter points out in *Sold Separately*, betrays a class elitism.

Still, the question Cross poses is a good one. Why are toys that have seemingly so little to do with the childhoods of parents, or parental messaging about a child's future, so popular? In his response, Cross wisely avoids a structuralist account in which shifts in toys and play patterns are seen purely in terms of the political economic logic underlying the toy industry. While his observations about parenting culture are intended to provide a framework that makes room for subjectivity, his notion of parental messaging is steeped in a nostalgic moralism which, in turn, leads him to posit too radical a separation between modern adult and child culture. In what follows, I reframe the notion of parental messaging in a way that circumvents these problems, suggesting an alternative approach to understanding the cultural impetus and implications of changes in the toy industry and market in the era of globalization.

The messages passed along in toys can be both more subtle and complex than Cross suggests.² A certain skill set implied by a given toy's physical features is not the only value transmitted. These same, "traditional" toys transmit hegemonic notions of mid-twentieth-century North America – the separation of private and public spheres, Protestant work ethic, scientific rationalism and productivity for example. Such values, embodied by certain toys that were largely manufactured by factory workers in domestically owned enterprises (albeit not necessarily located within national boundaries), helped secure the reproduction of specific (national capitalist) socio-economic, political and cultural relations.³ And while parents might not have always, or even necessarily often, associated the toys they bought with these values consciously, it is safe to assume that those values would be subconsciously present in most adults' acts of gift giving. Indeed, parents who gave their sons dolls and their daughters tool sets were arguably using toys to raise at least one principle – the gendered separation of private and public spheres – to a conscious level in order to challenge it.

Mothers then may well have been uneasy with Barbie's perceived threat to domesticity.⁴ But Barbie stands for much more than unfamiliarity with diapers and dishrags. She is, as Cross and others have noted, a *sine qua non* of commodity culture: if not the earliest, certainly the most famous example of Langer's "commoditoy." In defining play values through accessorizing and keeping up with the latest fashions, Barbie represents the notion that happiness is just a fur coat or gold-lame bathing suit away – a value that was gaining ground

² As anthropologic observations about the symbolic role of gifts and gift giving suggest, the practice is laden with layers of symbolic meaning and power (Levi-Strauss, Mauss). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze parental giving from within such a framework, considering some of those other layers can help elucidate the relationship of toys and play to processes of subject formation and, thus to the process of social reproduction generally.

³ The toy market – which had shifted from one supplied largely by imports and independent, artisan or small-shop manufacturers to one supplied by a largely domestic, factory-based production process – was highly protectionist in outlook until the 1970s

⁴ The survey Cross cites, however, requires a more nuanced interpretation against the background of feminism's liberating impulse vis a vis traditional sex roles – Betty Friedan, after all, was a housewife with a young daughter. Alternatively, parental disapproval may have had more to do with Barbie's shapely figure, and the sexualized doll play this invited. That is, contra Cross, parents may not have been enacting some *new* confusion over the future roles of daughters and sons. Rather, they were, possibly, displaying a long-standing anxiety over sex and children.

as adults participated in a post-war economy, whose strength was premised on a booming market in consumer goods.

This intensified consumerism had implications for processes of social reproduction as well. As mothers entered the labour market in growing numbers in the 1960s, the practice of mothering (and reproducing the family more generally) was increasingly mediated through the market. As baking mixes, canned soup and store-bought clothing replaced homemade products, the domestic sphere began a two-generation-long shift away from “productive” activities (strictly speaking) and toward organizing consumptive activities. (Ironically, this shift was characterized, as feminist historians have pointed out, by an *increase* in domestic labour as rising standards of cleanliness – promulgated by marketers for household cleansers and vacuum cleaners – meant women spent more time engaged in what we might call “para-reproductive” domestic labour.) Meanwhile, an apparent surge of fashion consciousness (perhaps because women were going to work, and taking on more service sector jobs in education and banking where personal grooming mattered in a way it doesn’t on a factory floor) fueled dramatic jumps in markets for clothing, fashion accessories and cosmetics – the very stuff of Barbie play. From TV dinners and dishwashers on the one hand, to Coco Chanel and silk scarves on the other, commodities became receptacles of people’s (social reproductive) needs and desires. They not only appeared to offer an escape from the hardship, boredom and sheer mundane character of a working person’s life, certain purchases (a house, car and annual trip to Florida, for instance) represented success, status and respect as well.

Today, the boundaries between consumption and social reproduction are even more blurred as the market relentlessly pushes outward, colonizing people’s everyday spaces. The commodification of the domestic sphere has expanded exponentially as more and more families with young children rely on the incomes of two parents. Indeed, parenting – or at least childrearing by nannies and childcare centres – and housecleaning, once available only to the very wealthy, are services that most middle-income and many lower-income families also access regularly through the market. Other practices of social reproduction that take place largely in the public sphere – education and healthcare – are similarly marketized and monetized. At the same time, our leisure time has also been colonized. Not only do we watch more paid, subscriber-based television, video-games and downloaded Internet games are a top form of home-based entertainment. Beyond the home, as George Ritzer has documented, we spend increasing amounts of time in shopping malls and other escapist “cathedrals of consumption” such as Disney World, fast food chains, casinos and superstores. They are “cathedrals,” Ritzer explains, insofar as they are shrouded in a mysticism we typically associate with religion. They strive to create a sense of enchantment, a world where anything seems possible – even while, as he deftly points out, they do so by relying on the decidedly *disenchanting* marketing equations of calculability, predictability and consumer control (2005, pp.71-91).

Walter Benjamin explores this enchantment with the world of commodities in terms of the mythic quality of capitalist industrialization. Writing of Paris and its 19th century shopping arcades, Benjamin suggests that the promise of industrialization – abundance, progress, a better future – is embodied in the commodities on display. Significantly, fashion – the incessant creation of the apparently novel – plays a central role in awakening those desires. It

is the fleeting quality of consumer goods, their “transitoriness,” as Susan Buck-Morss points out, that “is the very basis of their power” (1993, p.259). The hope that “something new” will translate into “something better” is powerful – inspiring us in a collective trance in which we continue to believe, despite recurring disappointments, that salvation is at hand. In the wake of the Paris Commune’s defeat, Benjamin suggests Parisians displaced their wish for liberation *from* commodities onto a wish for liberation *through* commodities (McNally: 2002, pp.201).

While I return to the notion of seeking freedom through commodities below, I want here to simply point out that the appeal of commodities in general, and of fashionable commodities in particular, is not incidental to the adult experience of capitalism. And as global capital, with its invasive marketing techniques and enchanting cathedrals of consumption, expands, so presumably do the cultural effects of commodification intensify.

Far from something foreign, then, the market seduction Barbie and other commodities represent penetrates deeply into the adult psyche – more deeply, arguably, than it does that of the child who is just being inaugurated into the market.⁵ Most parents who showered their daughters with Barbies (and her ever-multiplying line of accessories) likely also believed in, and desperately wanted redemption (to use Benjamin’s term) through the market – despite or perhaps even *because* of their unease with the displacement of domestic values Barbie represents. In this sense, Barbie symbolizes less of a break with adult culture, than its affirmation. Put another way, rather than signify the beginning of a rupture between parent and child culture, Barbie may represent the early stages of induction of children into an increasingly commodified adult culture – and *this*, ironically, may be the more authentic source of (subconscious) parental unease about her, and other such toys.⁶

Interrogating the doll’s commodity form (and not just its content) points to alternative, more deeply embedded meanings. Rather than abandoning parental messaging, then, we should consider whether or not adults have *changed* the content of those messages, and why. They accepted the challenge Barbie posed to traditional domestic values, at least in part because they embraced – even if only subconsciously – other values she embodies, those consistent with their own deepening attachment to commodity culture.⁷ If mid-century parents saw girls’ futures in terms of domestic *production*, parents at century’s end were more likely to see it in terms of domestic (and leisured) *consumption*. (We should be careful, however, not to overstate the case, for the mini-worlds of adults have not completely disappeared from the toy

⁵ and who remains close to a certain cognitive mode that is capable of resisting that logic ///after all, the market is (re)created and is sustained largely by adults

⁶ See Kapur on parental ambivalence about the changes to childhood. While Cross addresses the culture of consumption in his 1997 book, he fails to see how it affects his argument about the alienation of parents from children’s culture.

⁷ It is also important not to overstate the extent to which Barbie represents a rejection of nurturing and domesticity. Children’s play with Barbies incorporated nurturing themes. Precisely because she is a fashion doll, she was the object of many a little girl’s sewing lessons. In my own case, an elderly woman crocheted Barbie clothes for my sisters and my doll – clothes that, by their very touch and feel, recalled women’s traditional work.

shelf, and they remain highly gendered along the division between domestic – girl – activities and extra-domestic – boy – activities.)

Focusing on form over content also offers a new lens on the hyper-militarized and gruesome nature of some (especially “boy”) toys. The intergalactic missiles, blasters and light sabers sported by modern action figures can be seen as both a celebration and warning of the powers of technology. And while such fetishism is continuous with earlier toys (eg., electric train sets and erector sets), it appears also to have intensified in recent years. This is evident first in the exaggerated scale of destructive powers attributed to the weaponry. It’s also evident in the relative size of that machinery: as with Barbie’s 7-foot-two-inch height and 18- to 21-inch waist, there’s something disproportionate about the modern clash toy weaponry, especially when compared to Buck Rogers’ handheld ray gun and rocket pistol.

But such toys are not so foreign to adult culture, which similarly reveres (both celebrates and fears) technology. Advances in technology can alleviate the drudgery of work or provide hours of (commodified) pleasure through video games, ipods, and fast cars. That adults generally access these things through the market reinforces the notion that the market is the source of power/pleasure. At the same time, technological advances are seen to legitimate some of the more brutal consequences of the neo-liberal regime – deskilling, throwing people out of work, threatening to weaken and expose us to the harsh realities of the capitalist market. Indeed the intensified technology fetish of fantasy clash toys could be understood as part of a cultural compensation for the emasculation of the modern man. (Certainly the preoccupation with size intimates as much.) Adults – some of them heads of state responsible for massive military budgets – are deeply invested in propagating the same message marketers at Hasbro and elsewhere finesse: that the newer and more destructive weapons one buys, the greater the power one wields.⁸ But no matter what meaning we attribute to the fetish, such toys also draw children into adult culture, especially insofar as they send a message most adults take for granted: power resides in things (rather than in the humans who create them).

DEATH, TOYS AND CAPITALISM

Returning to Benjamin, an intriguing connection between the destructiveness of these toys and their status as commoditoys emerges. As Langer argues, commoditoys are distinguished by their goal of stimulating rather than satisfying desires. This is true today not only of the fantasy toys Cross focuses on, but more traditional toys as well (Ferguson, 2004). Toys like Thomas the Tank engine rails and characters, or infant dolls each with their own line of accessories are, in form, no different than modern action figures with their ever-multiplying line of villains and weaponry for instance. They are essentially *collectibles* in which the value lies in owning the latest, most “fashionable” addition, rather than in its play value (or, to use

⁸That the logic of this argument as applied to military hardware is flawed should be obvious when one recalls Vietnam, or the current war in Iraq. In both these cases, local insurgent forces with vastly inferior weaponry sustained lengthy and variously successful armed combat against the military muscle of the United States and (in the case of Iraq) British army.

Marx's term, use value). To the industry, the play (use) value of a toy is tangential to its desirability as something new. That is, as in the fashion industry it mimics, the toy industry is driven by the quest for novelty, not play – as are, increasingly, its consumers.⁹

But novelty and fashion, as David McNally's reading of Benjamin stresses, tends to eroticize death and the deceased. Fashion, McNally explains, holds a dual relationship to the past. On the one hand, it repudiates the recent past. "Capitalism is constantly laying things to rest, pronouncing them dead, long before they expire naturally, so as to replace them with the new." Recalling the world of the baroque, he writes, "capitalism is a space of death and decay" (2002, p.203). On the other hand, fashion is never truly new, but a reworking or distillation of an earlier past, on which, as McNally explains, is distant enough to evoke warm memories, often associated with childhood. These images, "mingle, Benjamin suggests, with elements of the primeval past." and produce "lingering traces of utopia all around us" which, in turn, summon up libidinal energies (McNally, 2002, p.203). That is, as in baroque theatre, the landscape is littered with the deceased, but the erotic attachment we feel for the relics invests that detritus with a certain power. This is the fetishism of commodity culture that, wandering the landscape of the baroque, children, like adults, experience ever more profoundly in the modern era of the globalized toy industry.

And if, as Benjamin suggests, the only truly novel experience is death itself, commodity culture relentlessly "moves ever closer to death" (McNally: 2002: p.203). It is not surprising, therefore, that those toys which can be interpreted as brushing up against mortality are such strong sellers on the market today. The destructiveness and gruesomeness of fantasy "clash toys" Cross describes are but one good example of this. Ultra violent video games such as Grand Theft Auto and The Warrior are another. "Death permeates this medium," writes Globe and Mail gaming reviewer Scott Colbourne, "providing not just the subject matter but the structure of most games . . . You begin, you die, you get another life, you get a little further, then you die again" (2005, p.R29).

Fashion dolls are yet another twist on this theme. The fashion industry, according to Benjamin, revolves around "cultivating a female empathy with the commodity." Women are invited and "expected to merge with commodities, to transform their body parts into racks for the display of merchandise, to become like mannequins" (McNally, 2002, p. 209). Such a unity – best encapsulated by the prostitute who has become in essence a commodity – "couples the living body to the inorganic world," writes Benjamin. "Against the living it asserts the rights of the corpse" (McNally, 2002, p.211). Insofar as fashion dolls celebrate this objectification of the female body, they can be understood as contributing to the eroticization of death.

⁹While the potential exchange value embodied in any industrialized toy has always driven its design, toys have long been marketed in and through the play value they represent. The point here is that in a hyper-commodified culture, such a pretense is no longer always necessary. The heightened competition of the industry organized as a global economic force has put such a premium on low-cost, low-risk production qualities, that marketing becomes increasingly important. A similar move can be seen in other media industries where cookie-cutter movies, TV shows, newspapers aim to deepen desire through their very pretense to novelty over substance.

Thus, as children are implicated at ever younger ages into the fashion cycle of toys, they risk being ushered into the dream world of commodities in the same way adults are. Lured by the promise of commodities, they too enter a collective trance, engaging in compulsive forgetting, in the belief that the abundance and novelty represented by toy store shelves represent progress, freedom and happiness. Their embrace of the new, suggests McNally, is both thrilling (in its proximity to the one truly novel experience, death) and disturbing (in that it “threatens to dissipate our very identities, tied as these are to memories of the past” which we are constantly urged to discard (2002, p.203)). Identifying this ambiguous relationship to commodity culture is critical. It is that experience among adults, perhaps, that helps explain the current anxiety over childhood. While Cross and others tend to see children creating their own “separate menacing worlds” which adults simply can’t relate to, I believe we come closer to the mark if we recognize that our anxieties are fueled by a sense that children, in fact, share our so-called enchanted world, and our ambiguous relationship to it.

Whatever the source of our anxiety, many theorists of childhood are concerned that the dominance of the commercial toy disrupts children’s patterns of play (Cross, Kline). Such toys, tied into pre-packaged storylines of major Hollywood films and television shows, encourage *directed* play over *free* play (as well as the non-play activity of simply accumulating toys for accumulation’s sake). But here again, Benjamin proves helpful, reminding us that play invokes and develops specific cognitive modes that we tend to lose touch with as we age.¹⁰ That is, children’s relationship to the world around them is fundamentally sensuous. They possess a “capacity for mimesis that begins with birth” and allows the child to see herself not just in other people but also in objects (1933, *The Lamp*, p.690). It is this that allows them to embrace an object, or a toy imaginatively, and invest it with meaning. In this way fantasy meets with reality, and out of that meeting something new emerges (1928, *Cultural History of Toys*, p.115). It is precisely this faculty that as we grow older, and become more schooled, gets drummed out of us, replaced by the instrumentalist, goal directed cognitive mode required to get by in a capitalist society. The “gift of mimesis,” suggests Benjamin, “is the natural heritage of mankind in its early stages and which continues to function nowadays only in children” (1933, *The Lamp*, p.691).

It’s feasible then that children who embrace commodity culture at such an early age are also challenged to embrace instrumental rationalism earlier.¹¹ “In the market,” writes Kapur, “to play is to consume rather than to produce, to absorb rather than to invent, and finally to be an object rather than to be the subject of history.” Yet, as Kapur points out, it is crucial to distinguish between how play is imagined by adults, and how it is lived. And according to Benjamin, because children relate to the world in a sensuous, experiential way, they approach all toys – commercially produced, hand crafted or simply nature’s offerings of sticks and stones – imaginatively. Play, and the cognitive mode of play, in other words, does not depend on the object of play involved. Benjamin is concerned with the way in which industrialization

¹⁰Benjamin also writes at length about the effect of technology and industrialization on toys. I plan to incorporate his thoughts on this issue in the longer version of this paper.

¹¹Indeed, such thinking is crucial to equipping a child with the faculty to be a wise consumer – to not spend, for example, her entire year’s allowance on the latest American Girl fashion doll or Sony PlayStation.

of the toy industry in his time has affected the design of toys, disguising their origins and making them increasingly alien to parents and children. But looking beyond the materials of play and at play itself, he finds an “antinomian” relationship between children and the world. Describing children’s use of any object as “chaste,” Benjamin suggests that there is a basic error in assuming that the “imaginative content of a child’s toy is what determines his playing.” In fact, the opposite is more accurate: “A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wasn’t to play with sand and so he turns into a baker” (1928, *Cultural History of Toys*, p.115). Imitation, he concludes, “is at home in the playing, not in the plaything” (116). Thus even the most intensely cross-marketed commodity doesn’t dictate the way in which the toy is played with. What’s more likely to hamper play – and what adults would be wiser to focus on – is the limited space and time modernity permits children for play.¹²

Second, Benjamin is interested in the child’s playful mode of cognition not simply because it represents a break with instrumental rationality, but because in it resides the cognitive mode capable of *resisting* the culture of commodities and capitalism. Play is a pre-contemplative way of knowing the world, and insofar as it represents the meeting of fantasy and reality, it affirms the human pursuit of happiness and freedom – and resembles and rehearses the communal festive ethos of carnival. “Play is always liberating,” he insists (1928, p.100) in his essay *Old Toys*. Adults are drawn to old toys, play and fantasy, he adds, precisely because of a “desire to make light of an unbearable life.” It is only by tapping into such sentiments that adults (onetime children) will come to see that a different sort of world is possible.

CONCLUSION

For Cross, globalization of the toy industry has led to the domination of the toy market by fantasy and novelty toys that have little to do with parents’ past or present lives. Parents have been complicit in this by abandoning the practice of sending messages through the toys they buy their children, and preferring instead to cater to their children’s sense of autonomy. The result has been a widening gulf between parents and children – and the creation of a generation of children ill-prepared to negotiate the complexities of modern social relations. While I see enormous value in the notion of parental messaging, I suggest instead that the messages are more complex and nuanced than those suggested by Cross, insofar as they implicate childhood, play and the tools of play, in the broader process of social reproduction. From this perspective, the significance of globalization vis a vis the toy industry and play lies not so much in the physical attributes of the toys now being produced (the fact that fantasy

¹² Kapur points out the contradictory logic at work in capitalism’s drive to overcome boredom even as it produces boredom.

and novelty toys dominate the market), but in their hyper-commodified form. Drawing on Benjamin's work on fashion and the baroque features of capitalism, it becomes clear that children's and adults' worlds are not so dissimilar after all. And while this may be an important source of our current anxiety of childhood, the redemptive quality of children's play may be a reason to look to childhood today with measured hope rather than despair.