

# The play and the invention of the world in Walter Benjamin and Donald Winnicott<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the play, and uses the fundamental importance of this act for the development of the individual and of culture. This is a theoretical research, which uses discussion and concept articulation of playing present in Walter Benjamin and Donald Winnicott. It starts with an introduction to Winnicott, then putting his line of thought in dialogue with some of Benjamin's ideas about play. Both authors emphasize the importance of the play in culture and evidence its psychological dimension. The transitional phenomena of Winnicott and the similarities doctrine of Benjamin point to the moment when cultural, historical and psychological conditions are created for the invention of the worlds we come to live in.

**Keywords:** the play; Benjamin, Walter; Winnicott, Donald Woods.

Playing is a fundamental activity, present in all cultures and the objective of studies in many different areas of knowledge. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga highlights in his work *Homo Ludens*, of 1938, the importance of playing in culture and defends that “it is in the game and through the game that civilization emerges and develops” (Huizinga, 1999, p. 1)<sup>2</sup>. This is a radical statement, which conceives the act of playing as a founding and permanent aspect in cultural life.

This study main focus is the play, and the objective is to deepen, discuss and articulate the concept of playing in Walter Benjamin and Donald Winnicott, seeking visibility to its importance for the development of the individual and of culture. The choice of both authors was made to contemplate the psychological, social, and historical determinations, among others, that intertwine during the study of the toy and the play. Winnicott, with its psychoanalysis tendency, and Benjamin, with cultural and philosophical studies, point to the fundamental importance of playing in the development of the individual and of culture. Sensitive to creative movement, which cannot be planned or built by organized actions seeking an end, the authors approach the discourse of that which cannot be translated completely into words, indicating the possibility of capturing something that emerges from a state of relaxation, according to Winnicott, and from a state of attention

and the opening of the ‘present time’ (*Jetztzeit*), defended by Benjamin.

The centrality of the play to human development, to life and to culture is a point of convergence between the two authors, which can be viewed in conceptions. For Benjamin (1993b), the contiguity induces the seizure of similarities, which stimulate the human capacity to produce them, through this mimetic ability present in the play. For Winnicott (1975a), there is a moment of continuity/contiguity when the transitional phenomena begin during the life of the baby, inaugurating the intermediate zone between mother and baby, in which the play takes place. I sought similarities between the authors, which might enable new insights on the play.

Benjamin has a diverse collection of works that discuss many themes in the form of fragments, with a non-linear writing, in the form of essays and establishing dialogues with images. Winnicott, on the other hand, has works, which are the result of reflection on the articulated psychoanalytic theory through his clinical experience with children and parents. Due to the characteristics of each author, I decided to begin by going deeper into Winnicott, in order to explain precisely some of the author's concepts, and then bringing them closer to Benjamin's work.

## Introduction to Winnicott

Playing is fundamentally important for the health and the emotional development of the individual, and relates to the continuity of being. In several of his writings, Winnicott (1967/2011a) points out that the most important emotional development process is to ensure the continuity of being. Regarding the purpose of life, he states that “it is closer to the BEING than sex... Being and feeling real are primarily connected to health, and only by guaranteeing the being that we can turn to objective things.” (p. 18). The feeling of continuity of being is fundamental

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2 João Paulo Monteiro's footnote, for his Portuguese translation of *Homo Ludens*, written by Johan Huizinga, reads: “The difference between main European languages (where *spielen*, to play, *jouer*, *jugar* mean playing as well as *the play*) and our Portuguese language frequently forces us to choose one or the other, sacrificing, thus, the accuracy of translation to only one terminological unit that would only be possible in those languages. (T.N.)” (Huizinga, 1999, p. 3)

and is present even before birth and, therefore, before self-consciousness itself:

in the moment of full term birth there is already a human being in the womb, one that is capable of having experiences and of accumulating body memories and even of organising defensive measures to deal with traumata (such as the interruption of continuity of being by reaction to the impingements from the environment in so far as it fails to adapt). (Winnicott, 1990, p.160)

At birth, the baby experiences a break in the continuity of the being, represented by the intrusion, among other things, caused by the change of intrauterine/extruterine pressure; but, according to the author, the baby already has the ability to “build bridges over the chasms of continuity of being, that the reactions against the intrusion represent” (Winnicott, 1990, p. 165).

It is only from the sense of continuity of being that the baby may develop and come to reach the stage of “I am”, which results from the integration process of the ego. Achieving this state of unity and differentiation of self is a basic achievement for health and emotional development; is the conquest of self and the sense of reality. “Feeling real is more than existing; it is finding a way to exist as ourselves, relating to objects as ourselves and having a self to retire to, for relaxation” (Winnicott, 1967/1975e, p. 161). Winnicott connects the discovery of the self to the creative movement, beginning with the mother-infant relationship. Creativity, as used by him, does not have to do with something new, original, but is related to the feeling of reality. In this sense, the world is created anew for each of us and the feeling of reality can be experienced only from that movement. There is something fundamental that happens in the mother-infant relationship, which Winnicott dubbed *the first theoretical feed*, which is decisive turning point for this creative movement. We are talking about the moment when the baby has the illusion that what he finds (the mother’s breast) was created by him, and it is this experience which provides him the feeling of being real. Therefore, it is important for those engaged in mothering to have the sensitivity to give the baby this chance. The first theoretical feed marks the beginning of the baby’s external reality:

The theoretical first feed is represented in real life by the summation of the early experiences of many feeds. After the theoretical first feed the baby begins to have material with which to create. Gradually it can be said that the baby is ready to hallucinate the nipple at the time when the mother is ready with it. Memories are built up from innumerable sense-impressions associated with the activity of feeding and of finding the object. In the course of time there comes a state in which the infant feels confident that the object of desire can be found, and this means that the infant gradually tolerates

the absence of the object. Thus starts the infant’s concept of external reality, a place from which objects appear and in which they disappear. . . . The basis for the infant’s gradual recognition of a lack of magical control over external reality lies in the initial omnipotence that is made a fact by the mother’s adaptive technique. (Winnicott, 1990, p.126)

At first, the almost perfect fit between mother and the baby’s needs is the condition that, by the time you are ready to find something (first theoretical feed), produces in the baby the illusion of having created external objects. “More or less at the right time, the mother offers her breast” (Winnicott, 1990, p. 120). This is about the art of allowing the infant the *illusion* “that what is created out of necessity and through the impulse has real existence” (Winnicott, 1990, p. 124). It is important to give the baby the opportunity to create the object that needs to be found and experience the feeling of omnipotence that accompanies this moment. The sense of reality is born from that illusion, which precedes it, and that is built from the *memory* of repeated feedings. “The illusion must come first, after which the baby has numerous possibilities of accepting and even using disillusionment” (Winnicott, 1990, p. 121). Gradually, the mother reduces the adaptation to the baby’s needs, which concurs with his resources for being creative and dealing with changes in the environment, building continuity bridges.

This moment, when the illusion can be created, is the instant which coincides to the baby’s excitement and the supply of the environment. It is not within the mother’s ability to make this moment happen in a planned manner; there are also no instruments and measures that allow for control, in other words, the unpredictability is part of this event. We can establish here a connection between the similar flash of perception in Walter Benjamin:

But the moment of birth, which is decisive, is just one instant. This evokes another particularity in the sphere of the similar. His perception, in any case, happens in a flash. It goes by, fast, and, though it may be recovered, it may not be fixed, contrary to other perceptions. It offers itself to observation in such an ephemeral and transitional way as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities, thus, seems to be linked to a moment in time. It happens like the approximation of the astrologist, as a third, facing the conjunction of two stars, which is captured in the blink of an eye. Despite the precision of the instruments of observation used, the astronomer cannot achieve similar results. (Benjamin, 1993b, p. 110, modified by the author of this study)

We can assume that the moment when the baby experiences the illusion of having creating the object he needed to find is related to the recognition of similarities that flash in tune with what enables the continuity of being. The ability of capturing this moment belongs to the baby, it is

non-transferable and inaugurates the world he can inhabit. The ability to perceive similarities is a creative act, which we can relate to a transitional phenomena, that originates, according to Winnicott (1975d), in the “the one [place] where the play can be initiated, a place found at the moment of continuity/contiguity, in which transitional phenomena originate” (p. 143). Routine, repetition of expressions, smells, sensations, etc., produces a proximity in the time/space, which invites the flash of similarities, creating new ways to continue the existence. For Benjamin, memory itself – which enables us the sense of identity – is subjected to the logic of the similarities, and not the equality/identity. Memory, voluntary or involuntary, is what results of the moment between forgetting and remembering the lived and the dreamed: “Every morning, when we wake up, generally weak and only semiconscious, we hold in our hands only a few fringes of the tapestry of existence lived, such as forgetfulness has woven for us” (Benjamin, 1993a, p.37). The fabric of remembering is not a reflection of the facts, of life the way it really happened, but of the game of similarities, which happens beyond what our consciousness is able to apprehend:

The similarity between two beings, one we are used to and one we are confronted with while awake, is only an inaccurate reflection of deeper similarity that reigns in the world of dreams, where the events are never identical, but similar, impenetrably similar to each other. (Benjamin, 1929/1993b, p. 39)

The similarity invents a coherent relationship, that does not meet the criteria of causality or functionality, which is living tissue that supports the existence. The continuity of being involves the creation of these support bridges over the unfathomable depths of the breaks in the continuity, which are felt as a threat. Human experience happens in the construction of these bridges. For Winnicott, the temporal dimension deserves attention, both regarding the succession – the illusion, for the healthy individual, must precede the disappointment – and the instant this illusion is produced.

In a text published in 1967, titled “The mirror role of the mother and of the family in child development”, Winnicott (1975e) get inspiration from Lacan’s ideas about the ‘mirror stage’ to reflect on the importance of the mirror function of the mother’s face, through which the baby glimpses the self. It is assumed that during breastfeeding, the baby does not look at the breast, but at the mother’s face, looking down at him “and that which she resembles ends up related to that which she sees” (Winnicott, 1975e, p. 154). After this initial apperception gives way to the real perception of the mother’s face, no longer as a mirror.

I see that I am linking apperception with perception by postulating a historical process (in the individual) which depends on being seen:  
When I look I am seen, so I exist.  
I can now afford to look and see.

I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive.

In fact I protect myself from not seeing what is not there to be seen (unless I am tired). (Winnicott, 1971, p. 114)

Thus, we can postulate that the constitution of being is made through the eyes of the other, though not any other. In this case, it is a loving other (the mother), very involved and interested in the baby. Winnicott stresses the importance of “holding”, which entails physically holding, since intrauterine life, and that takes on greater meaning during the overall adaptive care that occurs during childhood. For this, the adult must be able to identify with the baby, taking note of what he is feeling. “The result is a continuity of existence that turns into a sense of existing, a sense of self, and ultimately results in autonomy” (Winnicott, 2011a, p. 11).

The concepts of non-integration, integration and disintegration are important considerations in relation to the self and the creativity, in the human development process. “The integration takes the baby to a unitary category, to the personal pronoun ‘I’, to the number one; this makes I AM possible, which gives meaning to I DO” (Winnicott, 2011a, p. 11). However, it is in the state of disintegration that the creative impulse can manifest and, as we have seen, this is necessary for the feeling of being real.

Disintegration, in resting and in relaxation and in dreaming, can be allowed by the healthy person, and the pain associated with it accepted, especially because relaxation is associated with creativity, so that it is out of the *unintegrated* state that the creative impulse appears and reappears. Organized defence against disintegration robs the individual of the precondition for the creative impulse and therefore prevents creative living. (1986, p. 12)

Integration is, therefore, fundamental to the experience of the I AM that, in turn, can only be achieved by the creative impulse associated with the disintegration (relaxation). The integration is achieved from single and repeated experiences that happen during a state of non-integration and is motivated by internal factors and also stimulated by environmental care. Initially, it is achieved only briefly, from a non-integrated state, until it can be established in a lasting and reliable way. From this moment on, the non-integration state is no more; the loss of the integration state becomes disintegration and experienced as a threat (Winnicott, 1990). For the author, “the undoing of what had been achieved becomes disintegration instead of non-integration. Disintegration is painful” (Winnicott, 1980, p. 16).

The possibility of integration is also related to the feeling of confidence, the importance of which is highlighted in several of Winnicott texts (1975b), which recognizes

in this design, a close relationship with the work of Erik Erikson (1971), for whom basic trust is the foundation of all human development and its importance continues throughout life. This trust allows the baby to live the mother differentiation process, endure her absence without it being felt as a traumatic event, in other words, without interrupting the feeling of continuity of his being. Reliability and relaxation are necessary ingredients for the integration into the present time, in which the similarities frame constitutes and supports the being.

Confidence in the mother makes an intermediate playground here, where the idea of magic originates, since the baby does to some extent *experience* omnipotence. . . . I call this a playground because play starts here. The playground is a potential space between the mother and the baby or joining mother and baby. (Winnicott, 1975b, p. 71)

In saying that the baby *experiences*, it is important to remember that this is an experience with no words, prior to the acquisition of language, and that deeply marks the child's developmental potential. The feeling of confidence in the environment is a fundamental feeling that will accompany us, in an indispensable way, along our lives. "Gradually comes an intellectual understanding of the fact that the existence of the world is prior to the individual, but the feeling that the world was created for the individual does not disappear" (Winnicott, 1990, p. 131). This creative omnipotence gives way to trust in the other, for which the child starts to realize he is dependent upon.

Winnicott reminds us that the concept of the human individual is modern and suggests that the idea of individual refers to the first Hebrew name for God. "Monotheism seems to be closely linked to the expression I AM. I am what I am" (Winnicott, 2011b, p. 43). It also states that the status of I AM is not achieved by an intellectual exercise of self-awareness, but concerns a non-self-conscious state of being. In this sense, differential of the *Cogito, ergo sum* of Descartes, who intends to prove existence itself as parting from judgment. Managing to gather in to oneself, something that can be claimed as *this is me*, brings as a consequence the refusal of identification of the non-self, which can then become a source of threat. "This portrays precisely the inherent anxiety the arrival of every human being to the stage of I AM" (Winnicott, 2011b, p. 43). The first unit includes the mother, from which the baby initially does not differentiate himself, and which should be stripped and replaced "by the uncomfortable unit of I AM" (Winnicott, 2011b, p. 50). There are, therefore, two sources of threat: the disintegration of the self and the non-self. Since the beginning of their differentiation, the ego faces threats and fights to remain integrated. Amid the tensions, it is crucial to have moments of relaxation, in which creativity is possible.

Winnicott talks about the three lives that healthy people experience: the life in the world (founded in interpersonal relationships), the life of personal psychic reality

and the life of cultural experience, beginning "*in the potential space between a child and his mother when the experience produced in the child a high degree of confidence in the mother*, in the fact that she will not be missing when her child has needs" (Winnicott, 2011a, p. 20, our italics). Trust is the key to the organization of this area of experience. The creative doing inherent in the play, and perhaps only in it, invents the continued existence on the basis of trust.

in health there is no separation, because in the space-time area between the child and the mother, the child (and so the adult) lives creatively, making use of the materials that are available – a piece of wood or a late Beethoven quartet! (Winnicott, 2011a, p. 20)

In several texts, produced over more than a decade, Winnicott emphasizes the importance of what he called transitional phenomena, whose origin lies in the potential space between mother and baby. This space is an area that is neither the inner world of the baby, nor external reality. This is a *third area*, the play area, where all the cultural life is born (Winnicott, 1967/1975d). He emphasizes that this is an area of experimentation in the potential space between the individual and the environment, "that which, at first, both unites and separates the baby and the mother" (p. 142). The possibility of setting up this area is related to the quality of environmental provisions, represented by the *good enough mother*, who initially adapts almost completely to the baby's needs, but gradually decreases this adaptation, as the baby becomes able to handle frustrations (1975a). The frustration is linked to disappointment, fundamental to the sense of reality and emotional development of the baby, as previously mentioned.

The transitional phenomena begin to emerge in the first year of life, and from them anything can appear (blanket, word, melody, mannerisms) which becomes vitally important for the baby, a *transitional object*, which acts as a defense against anxiety, namely, something that has a relief power for the baby and is their first possession not-self, at a time which marks the beginning of his sense of reality.

It is true that the piece of blanket (or whatever it is) is symbolical of some part-object, such as the breast. Nevertheless *the point of it is not its symbolic value so much as its actuality*. Its not being the breast (or the mother) although real is as important as the fact that it stands for the breast (or mother). (Winnicott, 1975a, p. 19, our italics)

The transitional object and actions related to it (the transitional phenomena as, for example, a caress to the ear while smelling the washcloth) can have a vital role at various times of the baby's life. But this will not last forever, and in the proper time to each, the situation changes: the transitional object loses its meaning, while the transitional phenomena expand throughout the cultural field, producing

excitement and the pursuit of interests in the world of culture (Winnicott, 1975a).

Winnicott (1975b) draws attention to the importance of differentiating the excitement present in the play and the instinctual physical arousal. Playing is an experience that produces excitement but has no climax and, in this sense, differs from instinct which has the orgasmic element as essential and satisfaction is achieved through climax. These non-climactic experiences of the play were not, according to Winnicott, treated with due importance by psychoanalysts, who only emphasized the significance of instinctual experience. Psychoanalytic studies have linked the play with masturbation, something Winnicott (1975b) is against, seeking to demonstrate that the masturbatory element is not present during the play. “Bodily excitement of erogenous zones constantly threatens the play and, therefore, threatens the sense that the child has to exist as a person. The instincts are the main threat to both the play and to the ego” (Winnicott, 1975b, p. 77). The pleasurable element of playing does not allow excessive instinctual awakening, which interrupts the play.

It is important to note that the notion of instinct for Winnicott (1990) refers to the “powerful biological forces that come and go in the life of an infant or child and that require action” (p. 57). This biological force is, to him, similar to the one present in animals. Instinct produces an excitement that calls for action/satisfaction. What will distinguish human beings from animals is the ‘imaginative elaboration’ of bodily functions.

The healthy child to some extent fails to tolerate the conflicts and anxieties that reach their climax at the climax of instinctual experience. A solution of childhood’s inherent problems of ambivalence comes through the imaginative elaboration of all function; without fantasy crude expression of appetite and of sexuality and of hate would be the rule. Fantasy in this way proves to be the human characteristic, the stuff of socialisation and of civilisation itself. (Winnicott, 1988, p. 60)

Such concept is radically different from the concept of drive (*Trieb*) in Freud, for whom the drives are not physical, biological forces, but mental representations of endosomal sources<sup>3</sup> (Fulgencio, 2006). Two terms exist in the German language, *Instinkt* and *Trieb*, which Freud uses distinctly. For him, the term *Instinkt* refers to an animal behavior determined by heredity and adapted to an object. *Trieb*, on the other hand, comes from *treiben*, meaning to push, and highlights the irrepressible nature of the internal pressure, whose purpose and satisfaction are not fixed and are connected to the history of the person (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2001).

3 In letter to Roger Money-Kyrle (1952) and to Hans Thorner (1966), Winnicott makes clear his disagreement regarding Freud’s ideas about life and death drives (Winnicott, 2005). However, his critique goes further and he abandons the concept of drive (*Trieb*) though without confronting it (Fulgencio, 2006).

Playing is always a creative experience that has a beginning, a middle and an end: “the play reaches its own saturation point, which relates to the *ability to contain the experience*” (Winnicott, 1975b, p. 77, our italics). Even when it arouses anxiety, the play satisfies it and has therapeutic effects. The baby has a need to attempting to control what he begins to realize is an external object. “To control what is without, there are things to do, not just think or want, and things to do take time. Playing is doing” (p. 63). And in this unavoidable doing, the baby invents and experiences the world.

## The play in Winnicott and Benjamin

The comparison between Benjamin and Winnicott regarding the play is fruitful and highlights the harmony that exists in these two authors, who extoll its importance in culture. The two quotes below, Winnicott and Benjamin respectively, report the movement of children bringing fragments of the cultural reality into the play, reinventing this, a world of their own.

Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality.

In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling. (Winnicott, 1975b, p. 76)

Children are especially inclined to search around all workplaces, where activity of things happens visibly. They feel irresistibly drawn to the debris that originate from construction, from yard or homework, the activity of the tailor or of the mason. In these waste products, they recognize the face the *world of things* turns to them, and only for them. With them, they are less committed to reproducing the works of adults, and more to establishing, among various materials, through what they create in their play, a new and incoherent relationship. With that, children form their own world of things, a little world within the large. We should always bear in mind the standards of this small world when wanting to purposefully create for kids, not letting our activities – with all that is therein requirement and instrument – find itself the way to them. (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 103-104, our italics)

It is possible to note how both authors refer to fragments, debris or waste from external or internal realities. Benjamin relates these debris to activities linked to culture: tailor, carpenter etc. In this sense, it is not the things themselves,

in isolation, but things related to social contexts, the *world of things*, which irresistibly attracts children. The child comes into contact with an outer world and plays with it fragments, investing into them dream elements of their inner world, creating their own world that converses with the culture.

Playing is an activity between worlds; is not between people and isolated objects. A world is a universe of meanings that has a context, where feelings, desires, values, fantasies exist. Benjamin expressed this in several passages. One of them, when he says that the child is not a Robinson Crusoe and that play is a child's dialogue with the people (Benjamin, 2002). Playing is this conjunction of space worlds, where other worlds are created.

Benjamin's report (1995) regarding socks in the closet, in *Berlin Childhood*, when he realizes that the world carries a tradition of folding them, translates the richness of details, the subtlety of dimensions/sensations/emotions that are woven into the play:

Nothing beats the pleasure of plunging my hand inside it as deeply as possible. And not only due to the warmth of wool. It was "tradition" rolled up inside that I felt in my hand and that thus drew me to that depth. When I closed my hand around it and confirmed, as much as I could, the possession of that woolly and soft dough, the second stage of the play began that brought the exciting revelation. For now, I dove into unwrapping the "tradition" of their wool pouch. I brought it closer and closer to me until they consummated its consternation: to be fully extracted from its pouch, "tradition" ceased to exist. I never tired of proving that enigmatic truth: the form and content, the shell and the inside, the "tradition" and the pouch, were one thing. One thing – and undoubtedly a third: that sock both had been converted to. Considering my insatiability in exorcising this wonder, I am very prone to suspect that my device was an entwined equivalence to fairy tales, which, likewise, invited me to the world of spirits or magic to finally give me back promptly and infallibly to raw reality, which welcomed me with as much comfort as a pair of socks. (pp. 122-123)

In this excerpt, a delicacy that accesses the richness of play in its various dimensions, Benjamin describes the interplay between the internal and external world, in a sensuous and revealing way. Form and content alternate to the point where their equivalence is revealed, the result of 'insatiability' of a never-ending coming and going. You can read here the remarkable presence of what, for Benjamin (2002), is the law governing all plays: the law of repetition. "The essence of play is not to 'act as if' but a 'always do it again', transforming the most moving experience in habit" (p. 102). It is the most remarkable experiences – the first happiness and the first horror – that urge us to repetition: "all and any deeper

experience desires insatiably, until the end of all things, repetition and feedback, restoring the primordial situation from which it took its initial impulse" (p. 101). Here is a psychological dimension to the play, which Benjamin links to the discussion of Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a text from 1920. Freud mentions a "repetition compulsion", which refers both to the unpleasant and the pleasurable experiences:

In a child's play, we believe ourselves capable of seeing that the child also repeats the unpleasant experience, because their activity allows them to deal with strong impressions more fully than just passively suffering. Each new iteration seems to improve the control the child seeks to have on the impression, and also in the pleasurable experiences, the child seems to not sated by repetition, insisting relentlessly for the impression to be the same. This character trait will disappear with time. (Freud, 2010, p. 200)

To say repetition is to refer to an abstraction. The child does not want simply to repeat. When the child plays, it is the insatiability caused by domestic markings (of pleasure and horror) produced in their experiences in culture that leads them to want more and again. This insatiability lasts until the play reaches its saturation point and that appeal vanishes while that something is incorporated as experience (Winnicott, 1975b). For Benjamin, this insatiability comes from experiences that are especially poignant and urge a child to play. The compulsion to repetition relates to the world of culture and indicates the strong determination of the internal world of the child on the play:

Today, we might expect an effective breakthrough from that basic misconception that believed the child's play to be determined by the imaginary contents of the toy, when in fact, the opposite occurs. The child wants to pull something and becomes a horse, wants to play with sand and thus becomes a baker, wants to hide and becomes a bandit or a guard. (Benjamin, 2002, p. 93)

The inner world mobilizes and the child seeks inspiration in the culture for their plays. In the play of make-believe, the child seeks dialogue with the culture; he does not play with isolated and meaningless things. The sand texture attracts him, he wants to play with sand, but the sand is not just sand, it is a cake, a tunnel, a castle etc. and play (which is also experimentation) takes place in these various dimensions simultaneously. Here, the relationship established between, for example, the sand and the baker, is mediated by *mimesis*.

The concept of *mimesis* is of great importance to the reflections of Walter Benjamin. In his essay *The Doctrine of the Similar*, from 1933, Benjamin relates the mimetic faculty as a co-determinant for all higher

functions, also present in the origin of language. For him, the mimetic processes do not always present themselves in the same way, they have a historical trajectory that can be recognized. "His main thesis is that the human mimetic capacity has not disappeared in favor of an abstract and rational way of thinking, but retreated and concentrated on language and writing" (Gagnebin, 2005, p. 96). Benjamin (1993) assumes that the similarities shapes us in countless ways without us being aware of it most of the time. To him, the play is the school of mimetic faculty. There are similarities in nature that can be recognized, but the ability of producing similarities is exclusively human, and infinite.

*Mimesis* operates by registering similarities, though not registries of equality, which would correspond to the imitation of a model. The idea of imitating, be it a condition, a behavior or an object, is the logic of identity, to mimic something as it is. A logic of similarities is different, occurring by approximations and its infinite possibilities. "The creativity of mimesis lies in the ability to establish new relationships with *other worlds*, and, from this perspective, mimesis is not to be confused with imitation" (Grigorowitschs, 2010, p. 233, our italics). Mimetic processes involve the ability to get out of yourself, to lose yourself in the other (be it a situation, a person, a place, an object or a word), to empty yourself and become the other; and returning to yourself so transformed by the experience of being another. Here, the neologism is well applied: *outrar-se* (a Portuguese verb that means 'to become another'). On the other hand, the similarities allow the outside world to become familiar, filling it with ideas, feelings and actions that have transformative potential. Making it family may be an effective mechanism to placate the anguish of the unknown. It can also serve the purpose of knowledge. It is the movement of worlds that are born. The perception of similarities allows for glimpses of new possibilities of relationships between worlds, and it is always the perception of the other.

For Winnicott, the break in continuity, produced by the perception of the mother as otherness, is restored by the ego's ability to establish new relationships in this intermediate space where the play takes place. The sense of continuity is achieved through the perception of contiguous situations (close and separate), made possible by the relationships of similarity, that link worlds. According to Gagnebin (2005):

The temporal dimension is not so much about linearity, but more contiguity, not in an after from another, but in one next to the other. In this fundamental discontinuity, there are privileged moments in which occur condensations, meetings between two separate moments that come together to form a new intensity and, perhaps, enable the emergence of a true other. (p. 101)

The blanket that has the mother's smell, for example, acquires value for the baby not just because of the smell, but due to the power of bringing to oneself the world the mother inhabits, and, along with it, the sense of continuity of being. The blanket/transitional object is the child's

creation in which a flash of otherness was condensed into the blanket/object.

The ego's differentiation process produces breaks between self and the other, which are necessary for the emotional development. However, this process should not be experienced as a break in the continuity of being. It is learning to remain, now as a separate self, which is different from others. It is on trust/security, that the child, when finding himself separated from the mother, invents this continuity of other infinite ways through the use of transitional objects and the play.

For Winnicott (1983), from the time the baby reaches the integration of the ego, the stage of the I AM, the necessity of another learning arises: I AM ALONE. He emphasizes the importance of being able to be alone, as a condition for differentiation and relaxation, and states that this capacity can only be developed from the experience of being alone in the presence of the mother.

I consider, however, that "I am alone" is a development from "I am", dependent on the infant's awareness of the continued existence of a reliable mother whose reliability makes it possible for the infant to be alone and to enjoy being alone, for a limited period . . . . It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. When alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do the equivalent of what in an adult would be called relaxing. (Winnicott, 1983, p.35)

It is during relaxation, of the unintegrated, that the experience of the id can occur and be felt as real, a real personal experience.

The individual who developed the capacity to be by himself is constantly able to rediscover the personal impulse, and the personal impulse is not wasted because the state of being alone is something that (though paradoxically) always implies that someone else is also there. (1983, p. 36)

Being by yourself, in a pleasant and shared way. The mother's presence without demands is felt by the child, although not consciously, and enables the necessary delivery to experience of the id. This presence can also be felt through objects and familiar surroundings. The mother's auxiliary ego sustains the still immature ego of the child until it is made stronger and able to really be alone. The identity of self that forms from these experiences is widely transformable by the experiences that follow. Something constant, recognizable and unique persists throughout the course of life of each, until the end, "as the face of a person remains recognizable throughout his life" (Winnicott, 1990, p. 25). Our name shall remain the same; however, we will be different if we can enjoy life as a play

and transforming experience. Perhaps the name is the word that stitches this fluid identity throughout life. Like ourselves (never the same) and, as a possibility, similar to all other human and non-human beings. Different from ourselves, the space of difference keeps the necessary distance from self-consciousness and reality. Similarities and differences constitutes us as people in the world.

The perception of the similarities and the exercise of the mimetic faculty begins with the development of the self in the baby, and continues throughout life, always through play. A toy is anything that supports the play, in the game of similarities that sustains human life. The imaginary content is present in the play, which drives the free flight over worlds. Differences give us shape and reality in this endless transformation process, which forgetfulness guard and the memory accesses.

Winnicott highlights in depth the meaning of the play in the life of the individual and of culture. In the play, that which is initially accessed by environmental care, which are the maternal actions mediated by culture, is by each one reinvented. There is no cultural transmission process that conserves exactly that which is transmitted. By appropriating the culture, we reinvent it, and this process marks our experience. These marks are the differences that makes us and that we can convey as our reading of the world to the future generations. However, as already announced by Benjamin (1933/1993) in the 1930s, “the actions of experience are down” in today’s world. The poverty of experience is related to social issues that affect a time and impact on all mankind. This impoverishment of experience relates to the predominance of production processes, the technical mastery over men, of a balanced life

and of the repression of the id impulses, required by the civilizing project. To delay the gratification of desires is the price of the development of culture, as Freud pointed out. And, the desire that remains is subjected to the forces of the media, pushing us to be consumers as a promised way to find fulfillment and happiness. Nowadays, the toy industry embraced the imaginative activity to themselves and offers children ‘ready-made toys’. In a moment of play, a piece of wood could turn into a cart, an ambulance, a fire truck, an airplane etc., but the cart purchased in the store, which has been painted fireman red, with a water hose etc., strongly appeals to for a conventional use of the toy and ends up hindering the imagination. The ‘ready-made toy’ does not serve the play and, along with the world of television, computer, media, which invade with their pictures and speeches all the spaces we inhabit, acts as an intruder, stifling creativity. Today’s children yearn ardently to consume toys, and oftentimes keep them away, without playing much. They love, oftentimes, videogames; and continue to enjoy playing with sand, water, balls, among others, that have crowded for centuries the plays of children of all ages.

The play includes us in life, human life with meaning, desiring and good to be living. So, I understand that the actions towards the objectives of an inclusive education, in inclusive environments, where there is recognition and respect for differences, have in play a crucial boost. In the living spaces between significantly different people – concept employed by Amaral (1998) to indicate those who are potential targets of prejudice in our society –, the contiguity of the playing relationships will weave the frayed fabric of the similarities between humans, coming from everyday experiences.

### **O brincar e a invenção do mundo em Walter Benjamin e Donald Winnicott**

**Resumo:** O presente estudo tem como tema central o brincar, e parte do pressuposto de sua importância fundamental para o desenvolvimento do indivíduo e da cultura. Trata-se de uma pesquisa teórica cujo objetivo é a discussão e articulação do conceito de brincadeira em Walter Benjamin e Donald Winnicott. Parte-se da introdução ao pensamento de Winnicott para em seguida colocá-lo em diálogo com algumas ideias de Benjamin sobre o brincar. Ambos os autores destacam a importância da brincadeira na cultura e colocam em evidência sua dimensão psicológica. Os fenômenos transicionais de Winnicott e a doutrina das semelhanças de Benjamin apontam para o instante em que se criam as condições culturais, históricas e psicológicas para a invenção dos mundos que passamos a habitar.

**Palavras-chave:** brincar, Benjamin, Walter, Winnicott, Donald Woods.

### **Le jeu et l’invention du monde Walter Benjamin et Donald Winnicott**

**Résumé:** La présente étude a pour thème principal l’acte de jouer, à partir du présupposition de l’importance fondamentale de cet acte pour le développement de l’individu et de la culture. Il s’agit d’une recherche théorique dont le but est la discussion e l’articulation du concept de jouer chez Walter Benjamin et Donald Winnicott. On part de l’introduction à la pensée de Winnicott, pour en suite la met en dialogue avec quelques idée de Benjamin sur le jouer. Les deux auteurs détachent l’importance du jeu dans la culture et ils mettent en évidence sa dimension psychologique. Les phénomènes transitoires de Winnicott et la doctrine de similitude de Benjamin point à l’instante où on crie les conditions culturelles, historiques et psychologiques pour l’invention des mondes que nous habitons.

**Mots-clés:** jeu, Benjamin, Walter, Winnicott, Donald Woods.



## El jugar y la invención del mundo en Walter Benjamin y Donald Winnicott

**Resumen:** Este estudio tiene como objetivo principal el jugar, y asume su importancia fundamental para el desarrollo del individuo y de la cultura. Se trata de una investigación teórica cuyo objetivo es la discusión y la articulación del concepto de jugar de Walter Benjamin y Donald Winnicott. Parte de la introducción al pensamiento de Winnicott para después ponerlo en diálogo con algunas ideas de Benjamin acerca del jugar. Ambos autores destacan la importancia del juego en la cultura y ponen su dimensión psicológica en evidencia. Los fenómenos transicionales de Winnicott y la doctrina de las similitudes de Benjamin señalan el momento en que las condiciones culturales, históricas y psicológicas son creadas para la invención de los mundos que habitamos.

**Palabras clave:** jugar, Benjamin, Walter, Winnicott, Donald Woods.

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