



Imaginative Object and Mimetic Object

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Abstract. The mimetic and imaginative dimension of the object defines the very essence of objects and their use. Their interaction is seen in an exemplary way in that specific object with which every human being begins their relationship with reality: the toy. The aesthetics of the toy thus makes it possible to ascertain how mimesis and imagination cooperate and/or conflate in the constitution of the object. To investigate this dialectic, the essay examines Alma Siedhoff-Buscher's toy *Bauspiel: Ein Schiff* in which imagination becomes the center of the child's user experience. Leaning on a number of theoretical considerations on the toy, from Plato to Benjamin, the essay seeks to emphasize the aesthetics of toy as a space of creative freedom even in its opposition to the mimetic declination of the object understood as the adult's ideological interference in the child's world. Imagination, expressed in play, thus becomes the configuration of a possible world that, in Siedhoff-Buscher's perspective, the mimetic object would seem, on the contrary, to deny.

Keywords: mimesis · imagination · aesthetics of toy · child object · Bauhaus · Alma-Siedhoff-Buscher

1 Introduction

There is a certain ill-concealed awkwardness and at the same time a certain amount of arrogance when some adjectival aesthetic category comes alongside a noun. An epistemological strategy that philosophy, and of course aesthetics in particular, implements with smug assiduity. The title of the present paper only perhaps guiltily consolidates this practice. I have therefore also fallen into this almost constitutive temptation of my discipline, aesthetics. Imagination and *mimesis*, the space of the possible and the space of representation of the real, how do they accord with an object? A rather rhetorical question because it already admits a precise idea of what is meant by an object, that is, that material dimension that always evokes its double, the subject. But also to recall the William Morris of *The Lesser Arts* [1], the idea, perhaps not highly original but always worth remembering, that the object - Morris says - is like a window through which it is possible to glimpse the meanings of an entire civilization: indeed, those who devote themselves to the study of «historical industry», of these lesser arts «are able as if through windows to look upon the life of past» [1, 2, 4]. However, in the object there always remains an ambiguity, as Japer Johns reminds us in some of his remarks. The first one

contained in his notebook dated 1963–1964: «Invent a function / Find an object» [3, 54]. The second, in an interview from the same period: «The moment one says something, it is something - at a certain point, though, it becomes something else, as object, as idea. In which moment is it an object? If one burns a book, in which moment is it something else than a book? » [3, 91].

2 Aesthetics of Toys

To test imagination and *mimesis* I will treat, taking the directions of this panel literally, a determinate object, a case study. Here my case study will be a toy, we will see which one shortly. First of all, the reason why I chose the toy category. The toy is the object that anthropologically marks the beginning of our relationship with the real, we have all, more or less, experienced the toy. Here, starting from this generic premise, I found the imagination-*mimesis* partition precisely in an essay Baudelaire dedicates to the toy in 1853 *The Philosophy of Toys (Moral du joujou)*. Baudelaire writes: «All children talk to their toys, the toys become actors in the great drama of life, reduced in size by the camera obscura of their little brains. In their games children give evidence of their great capacity for abstraction and their high imaginative power. They play without playthings» [4, 198]. They play without objects. They play with imagination. To this dimension Baudelaire opposes the real toy (girls' dolls, children's weapons), the mimetic one that puts into representation the child's social placement in future adult life. Exactly one hundred years ago a toy was designed, perhaps the most famous toy of the twentieth century, which can be taken as a paradigm of the conflict between imagination and *mimesis*: *Bauspiel: Ein Schiff* by Alma Siedhoff-Buscher.

Would you, please, forgive me for taking you one hundred years back, but the centrality of this object to at least an aesthetically oriented thought on design is, in my opinion, inescapable. The *Bauspiel* is an enduring reminder of that *mimesis* of the possible that an human being first grasps in those specific objects rubricated under the somewhat hasty and belittling label of “toys”. *Mimesis*, play, toy, imagination then become the dimensions that *Bauspiel* manifests to the highest degree, in which anthropological questioning and aesthetic analysis are intertwined in the same research.

Working at the Wood Sculpture Workshop under the direction of Josef Hartwig, Siedhoff-Buscher was a key-participant in the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition, the so-called Haus am Horn. Charged with the design of the children's room, Siedhoff-Buscher designed not only the furniture but also a small accessory, a toy, which in miniature echoed the entire formal and functional idea of the room. Thus, *Bauspiel: Ein Schiff* was born. It is the designer herself with a laconic note who describes this toy: «It doesn't want to be anything – no cubism, no expressionism, just a funny play of colors from smooth and angular shapes according to the principle of the old construction blocks» [5, 29].

Siedhoff-Buscher's production during the years of her membership in the Bauhaus finds its own theoretical support in three short contributions (*Kind. Märchen. Spiel. Spielzeug; Kindermöbel und Kinderkleidung*; and *Freie Spiele - Lehrspiele*) in which the aesthetics of childhood proposed by the designer are made explicitly clear: the rejection of a fairy-tale idea of childhood and the adherence to a perceptual-imaginative conception

of the child's potential, the thematization of free play as opposed to didactic play, the consequent critical revisiting of the outcomes of modern pedagogy (from Friedrich Fröbel to Maria Montessori), and the practical translation of this conception into the operational form of the toy as an object of the possible and not as a mimetic object.

To come to an understanding of what the *Bauspiel* really is, it is necessary to start with the children's room in Haus am Horn. The ethorodox heir of Fröbel's Kindergarten and Montessori's "children's house", this room effectively banishes adult intervention. No pedagogical purpose, even implicit, is allowed except to initiate the child on their own path to total autonomy. Siedhoff-Buscher's room is not a place that in miniature reproduces adult space, a mimetic place littered with objects that refer to future adult life (as in the case of the Montessori children's house). The room is thus a perpetually constructible space in which especially the cubes, thanks to their modularity, open up to potentially infinite polyfunctionality. Registering this exclusivity of the child's space is what Siedhoff-Buscher refers to by the term *Phantasie* to be considered in its Kantian sense of productive imagination as the title of the designer's third essay, *Freie Spiele - Lehrspiele*, makes explicit; where, moreover, the opposition between free play and didactic play refers back to the free play of the faculties of the third Kantian critique. I shall not delve into the complex distinction between fantasy and imagination here, which from the eighteenth century onward will find reformulations not only theoretical – precisely Kant's *Phantasie/Einbildungskraft* and Coleridge's Fancy/Imagination – but also pedagogical as in Montessori (who takes up the two terms differentiating them sharply) or in design as in the case of Munari who, however, contrasts fantasy not with imagination but with creativity. The child's room, and in parallel the *Bauspiel*, make visible this free play in which the autonomy of imagination that is activated in the practice of playing is opposed to a heterodirected imagination that Siedhoff-Buscher identifies with the fairy tale. And it is in this assimilation that Siedhoff-Buscher reveals herself to be totally faithful to the anti-romantic philosophy of German functionalism: «Child and fairy tale = confused complex of ideas. Child and fantasy = natural fullness of thought» [6, 188].

The fairy tale is interpreted as extrinsic to the child's cognitive capacity, an artificial imposition on the natural development of thought. Moreover, the fairy tale implicitly or explicitly conveys moral content; it is the way in which the adult's universe begins to shape the universe of the child. Just as the fairy tale is a dimension external to the nature of the child, so decoration is a dimension external to the nature of the object. It is in this parallelism that Siedhoff-Buscher aligns herself with the functionalist rejection of Romantic ideology. The fairy tale represents an already closed world in the same way that the bourgeois toy represents a finite object. Both are expressions that nullify any exercise of the possible, that is, of imagination. The fairy tale confuses the child in the same way that decoration confuses the subject who has to use an object: there is in both the fairy tale and decoration an excess of information that misdirects, disorients.

When the toy was marketed, the designer was asked to include instructions, even cursory ones, for the purchaser. The instructions were affixed directly to the wooden packaging with illustrations: «A ship that can also be a roller coaster, a door, an animal and many other things». The ship then was just one possibility of the toy that negated the idea of the "finished toy" and opened up to the dimension of "free play" in which

shaping the toy was the momentary idea of the child's chosen play. The *Bauspiel* becomes in this sense the perfect translation of imagination, the construction of the possible, *Einbildungskraft*. For if a toy representing a ship always remains a ship (the mimetic or «finished» toy in Siedhoff-Buscher's terminology) and can be anything else: at the cost of enormous imaginative effort on the part of the child, the *Bauspiel* is a ship but, at the same time, also «many other things». It seems from this perspective that Siedhoff-Buscher tends to assign to the toy (*Spielzeug*) itself that imaginative capacity that is, instead, usually attributed only to play (*Spiel*) in the broad sense: «Toy: shouldn't we meet the child halfway? Shouldn't the toy - the child's tool - already be allowed to be serious? Not a finished toy - as offered by the luxury stores - the child develops, in fact he pursues - he searches. A seemingly finished toy, in this search full of attempts, can only become a destroyed toy» [7, 157].

This definition of toy, formulated in a somewhat involute way, to tell the truth, shows, in addition to the explicit rejection of the commercial toy, an ambiguity that needs to be clarified. The insistence on effort, searching, and trying that the child experiences in the toy is not to be read negatively. The child's search is expressed in pleasure. There is no didactic imposition. The child's attempts are expressions of pleasure and not didactic paths. It is in this difference that the obvious parallelism between the *Bauspiel* and Fröbel's *Aufgaben*, the gifts, reveals its limitations. Fröbel's gifts were heterodirected: they defined paths already laid out for the child to follow according to the cognitive development. Play was actually a learning process of shapes, colors and bodies. Described by the designer herself as an entirely coincidental filiation - «The fact that there are parallels between some of my games and Fröbel's is a coincidence» [8, 464] - Fröbel's legacy is rather received as an oppositional pole to her own conception of play. Indeed for Siedhoff-Buscher play, and consequently the toy, is never a dimension that transcends the child's universe. The relationship with Fröbel is, however, more complex and problematic than the perhaps somewhat overly schematic opposition between «free play» and «didactic play» says.

A further parallelism that it is permissible to point to, from this perspective, is that between the *Bauspiel* and Montessori teaching materials. Not so much in the formal modes, where the connection with Fröbel's gifts probably remains stronger, but in the concept of «materialized abstraction»: the mode of making the child's early abstraction processes accessible to experience through concrete objects. Montessori's objects, however, revealed a dual nature that the *Bauspiel* could partially share. The object presented itself as a toy, embracing the child's cognitive interest, but in its essence it was still a teaching material with an explicit purpose: to translate an abstract concept (e.g., quality or quantity) into a concrete medium appropriate for the child. This bipolarity between form and content, toy and teaching material, play and learning was precisely what *Bauspiel* rejected in favor of an integrally playful experience.

3 Mimesis, Imagination, Pleasure

Probably one of the initial sites of an ontology of the toy, useful for understanding the centrality of the *Bauspiel* in twentieth-century design as a whole, is the passage in the *Laws* (634b-d) in which Plato asks whether the problem of the real purpose of play, and

thus the idea that structures every object that is employed in play, is the initiation of the child into their future as an adult. If this is the case, then children would use in their games «miniature tools that copy the real thing» [9, 72] to accustom themselves to future work. These *mimemata* are educational tools, however, which immediately shift the problem to another plane: for if play is a preparatory stage to the adult world, and for Plato it is, it seems clear that the force that the mimetic has toward the child is not so much in its connection with the formative process, but with pleasure. Following a Platonic example (the child-to-be rider who is engaged in «riding a horse for fun»), one must then ask whether play will find its essence in pleasure or *mimesis*: is it pleasure that enables me to turn a piece of wood into a horse or does the very fact of seeing a horse in a piece of wood give me pleasure?¹ In other words: does the game proceed from pleasure to mimesis or from mimesis to pleasure? Plato seems to indicate the first option by combining play and pleasure in the same formula in various places in his work and, even, as a passage in the *Statesman* (288c) points out, by grouping all art forms (*mimesis* and non-*mimesis*) under the banner of amusement and play, those representations «which have been executed solely to give us pleasure. [...] We call a “plaything”. Well, this one name will be fittingly given to all of them; for it is not the case that any of them is for the sake of a serious purpose, but all are done for the sake of amusement» [10, 113]. The primacy of pleasure would also seem to be credited, and unexpectedly so, by an Aristotelian passage in which the pleasure of mimetic recognition recoils before aesthetic pleasure per se. If mimetic pleasure is an intellectual pleasure, (re)seeing a thing always means initiating a process of learning, discernment, and comparison, and pleasure depends essentially on the connection between the representation and the represented object, what happens when one takes pleasure in front of a never-before-seen object? «One’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution, colouring or some similar case» [11, 2318]. What is interesting to emphasize here, beyond the problematic pleasure-mimesis nexus, is how Aristotle points to objective characteristics as the source of eminently perceptual pleasure: an object is appreciated for “how it is made” (*apergasia*), for its color and similar properties. This is the same explanation provided by Siedhoff-Buscher with respect to his *Bauspiel* in order to emancipate himself from the legacy of Fröbelean pedagogy. Pleasure appears here as that connection between aisthesis and techne, between play and toy, which seems to discard the idea that the mimetic appears as the ontology of the toy. Let us repeat: is it pleasure that allows me to turn a piece of wood into a horse, or does the very fact of seeing a horse in a piece of wood give me pleasure? A literal example may be the opening scene of Herzog’s *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*. Kaspar, imprisoned in a cellar (Plato’s cave?) plays with a toy: a wooden horse. We do not know how long Kaspar has been a prisoner, but Herzog seems to suggest that he knows nothing about the outside world, so he has likely never seen a real horse. Kaspar therefore plays not because he has the pleasure of recognizing a horse in miniature nor because he will be a rider in the future (although this may be

¹ It is interesting, if not paradigmatic, that even Gombrich, without mentioning Plato, takes to define his theory of representation precisely as an example a wooden horse, or precisely a hobby horse. In Gombrich, however, the difference posed by Plato is *de facto* nullified. What matters is the function, the play, that allows one to move from *mimesis*, the form of the external object, to fiction, the wood replacing the horse [12].

a possible, though unlikely, future hypothesis) as the mimetic motivation adduced, but then diluted, by Plato in the *Laws* would seem to indicate: he plays because he likes to touch that wooden object and to hear the sound it makes. The only mimetic moment, the first stage of *Bildung*, if anything, is when Kaspar's jailer ("the Stranger") teaches him to name that object with the word "horse", which Kaspar begins to repeat mechanically almost to reinforce the pleasure of his playful experience.

And it is from this perspective that the *Bauspiel* finds its most stringent reading in Benjamin's considerations on the toy, a series of essays published between 1928 and 1930. In the play-toy dialectic Benjamin reinterprets the problem of *mimesis* by disengaging it from any didactic purpose and reinserts it into a more complex reformulation of the imaginative space that is made explicit in play. Play is the ontogenetic translation of what in a phylogenetic perspective is offered in the very history of the mimetic faculty. For Benjamin, play is a pedagogy wholly internal to the development of the mimetic faculty: «the child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train» [13, 333]. In this understanding of the mimetic faculty as an activation of the imaginative process it is possible to discern the deep core of the *Bauspiel*. In his 1928 essay *Cultural History of Toys* Benjamin emphasizes the dimension of mimetic constructibility that the child «assembler» activates in his own play. The *Bauspiel* exhibits, in a completed but not «finished» project, exactly the idea of this imaginative procedure.

The absolute Benjamin and Siedhoff-Buscher convergence lies precisely in the attempt to grant the child this autonomous space, almost alien, one might argue, to the instrumentality of the adult world. Siedhoff-Buscher's children's room through the modularity of its elements exhibits the Benjaminian conviction, which already attests to a precise critical-political orientation, for which *mimesis* (Benjamin) converges in *fantasy* (Siedhoff-Buscher): in this way children «do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one» [14, 53].

Siedhoff-Buscher's ship, and «so many other things», traversed the twentieth century bearing witness to the utopia of the possible and, unintentionally, also to the horror of the real. That of the *Bauspiel* was a long journey that, begun in a workshop in Weimar in 1922, after a hundred years still seems unfinished. Also, the deep meaning of that toy appears almost revealed to us in Siedhoff-Buscher's last words that we were given to know, before she died under Allied bombing. In an interview with *Magazin*, the monthly insert of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the designer's son, actor Joost Siedhoff, revealed the contents of the last letter his mother wrote to him when he was an 18-year-old soldier on the Eastern Front. Happy about a trip to Kronberg im Taunus, 10 miles from Frankfurt where she had been visiting her friend, painter Karl Peter Röhl, also for a while a member of the Bauhaus, the designer wrote, unaware of her impending death, to her son: «Take a breath from the war. I write to you in such detail about Kronberg, so that you would see: in every desolate time there are also bright hours and you should take them with you. This gives new strength. Peter Röhl painted sunsets all the time. From now on he wants to paint sunrises!» [15, 65].

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