***Moderne Spiele*:**
Play and Gender in Walter Benjamin's "Berlin Chronicle"
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This essay performs a reading of Walter Benjamin's "Berlin Chronicle" to show that what is at stake in this work is the question of male sovereignty as it relates to the modern city and the modernist text as spaces of play. This autobiographical sketch draws and, in its form, explores an analogy between the ways city spaces are organized and the way writing organizes a life's memories into spatially distributed groupings of signs. Its fragmentary, reflexive structure purports to challenge the linearity of standard autobiographical writing, subjecting them to the play of associations and the casual stroll of the flâneur*. Given Benjamin's emphasis, here as well as elsewhere, on a method of composition that reflects the "surface play" of 20th-century modernity, it would seem that the reader is also invited to stroll like the* flâneur*, or play like the gambler, through the text. The city and the essay become analogous to each other as spatial constructs the reader is invited to circumnavigate—they create* Spielraum*, or room-for-play. However, Benjamin's game is deceptive, as he strategically entraps the feminine—represented by the rather Oedipal coupling of Benjamin's mother and a variety of lovers and prostitutes—within this space. On a closer reading, gendered difference becomes the protocol by which a textual-urban network operates in "Berlin Chronicle," making it exemplary of the ways in which playful modern media and spaces condition and position subjects within their games.*

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A few minutes into René Clair's Dadaist film *Entr'acte* (1924), two men play chess while sitting on the edge of a Paris rooftop, Clair's beloved skyline receding into the background. As they move their pieces, the film cuts to a tracking shot of neoclassical columns, and then back to the men, who begin to argue. The camera then

cuts to a close-up of the chessboard, its center now cleared of pieces, and an aerial view of the Paris streets is irised in, superimposed on the checkered board. Both men appear surprised to see Paris appearing in microcosm on their game board, but quickly they disappear, and a stream of water of ambiguous origin begins pouring onto the board. A cut to another shot shows that Paris, too, is caught in a deluge—and as the camera pans unsteadily over the roofs of the city, a paper boat is superimposed on the image, seeming to float on top of a now-flooded urban space. The flood happens first in simulation, then in reality: the city has become strategically mapped game-space, and the game-board has become the origin point of everyday phenomena. This gesture in *Entr'acte* should be viewed as quintessentially modernist—its seeming inversion of the relationship between play and reality in which the real imitates its simulation suggests that not only the medium (cinema) but also modern, urban life more broadly are playful and essentially game-like. In addition, with its play of presence and absence, its fade-outs and superimpositions, the film suggests that just as the city is laid out like a chessboard, so does the cinema play games with our perception, making reality into a gamic construct.[1]

The connections that between Dadaism, play, and the ontology of the cinema we can observe in this film are also part of Walter Benjamin's focus in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."[2] Play, in fact, is present as a theoretical topic in a number of essays written in the course of Benjamin's life: it is a crucial part of Benjamin's theory of language and/as mimesis, and therefore of his entire stance toward the historical shift in the perceptual and technical milieu of the modern human subject. "Play" names the effect of modernity's "second technology" on human perception and activity, the potential of cinema and other modern forms to return us to a childlike moment of re-ordering (as if surveying a grouping of building blocks from above). It also describes the activity of Benjamin's favored figures of the detective, flâneur, and the gambler in the city—the city itself provides them their *Spielraum* (variously translated as "field-of-action" or "leeway," but literally "room-for-play"). Play, in Benjamin, is a quality underlying perception, action, aesthetics, and technology—one perhaps present at all historical moments in all human cultures, but which is brought to the fore by modernity's expansion of material and perceptual play-

spaces. Rather than a quality put on the wane by modern technological and political regimes, or an activity separate from the operation of politics, play in Benjamin is a component of both technology and politics, representing part of the threat, but also the revolutionary potential, of modern media.

Dadaist film uses the camera to play with our perception of everyday spaces and objects, a game in which pieces of the everyday are gathered and re-ordered, revealing a multiplicity of possible organizations and suggesting a world in constant flux. This observation applies equally to films such as *Entr'acte*, Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924), and Hans Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* (1928). These films delight in the types of games former surrealist Roger Caillois referred to as "ilinx" and "mimcry," that is, limit-experiences of perception and transitory illusions.[3] Later in *Entr'acte*, as a ballet dancer up whose skirt we have been looking is revealed to be a bearded and hefty man, we see the "moral shock effects" of Dadaism playfully combined with the "physical shock effects" that are the particular domain of film, according to Benjamin's most well-known essay.[4] But, to extrapolate from Miriam Hansen's reading of Benjamin on play, what we also see here is the *Spielraum* opened up by the cinema in its re-mixing of reality, a *Spielraum* that should extend to the spectator as well.[5] It is this potential for play through montage that Benjamin detected equally in Dadaist art and the cinema, and that he often replicated in his own montage-inspired prose.

However, what Benjamin's argument about play masks both in much of Dadaist artwork and in his own prose is a peculiar and restrictive gender dynamic, one that manages to exclude women from the field of play mass media have opened, and with which he, like the avant-garde, associates modern urban space. *Entr'acte*'s amusing reveal that our prurient look has been directed up the skirt of a cross-dressing man is clearly meant to confront the viewer with the disturbing possibility of *his* own homosexuality and thus his emasculation. Notably excluded from this joke, though, is a position for women as spectators.[6] It is hardly a coincidence that the gamers who precipitate the flooding of Paris in *Entr'acte* are two men: the man is the subject who stands outside and above the game-board of the city just as he is the subject of the gaze in cinema. Like the Dadaist film, Benjamin's memoiristic "Berlin Chronicle" (1930) conceptualizes the modern city-text in the age of cinema as a spatial game—a game

dependent on the player's acceptance of a strict gender divide that positions women in fixed positions within the space of the text, and genders the reader, like Benjamin's author, as the masculine game-player.

Play, Mimesis, and Technology in Benjamin

Play has necessarily become an important theoretical topic in addressing the digital culture industry, in which postmodern aesthetic play with artifice has become the "interactive" play of video games, websites, advertisements, and social media. The "network society" integrates modern subjects by making every space a play-space, whether one is sitting at home playing *Call of Duty*: *Modern Warfare* (2007-), standing on the street updating Facebook, or using Google Maps to navigate. For McKenzie Wark, the spaces of the digital age are dominated by the "atopic" game—the gamespace that contains all nodes in the network, in relation to which there is no outside.[7] The question of play—what it is and who gets to do it—is important because *playing* is something subjects are now do, consciously or not, on a regular basis via technological media. As the brief example above suggests, we can see the germs of this gamespace in the expansion of play-space, and in the flourishing of both artistic and theoretical interest in the topic of play, that had already emerged in the first decades of the 20th Century. Johan Huizinga and Caillois, the former surrealist, are well-known examples of a burgeoning theory of play in mid-20th-century Europe, but extensive discussion of play can be found in the work of many of the German intellectuals of Benjamin's generation, such as Willy Haas, Helmuth Plessner, Gustav Bally, and the Dadaists themselves.[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, a philosophy student in the 1920s, would ground the ontology of art in a theory of play in his 1961 *Truth and Method*, and probably the most famous philosophical deployment of the concept of play, *Philosophical Investigations*, was written by Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian three years Benjamin's elder.[9]

Benjamin's own theory of play is closely linked to his exploration of the concept of mimesis, which is the basis for his model of the origins and function of language.[10] As he indicates at the outset of both "The Doctrine of the Similar" and the later "On the Mimetic Faculty" essay, play is an important facet of mimesis, the will to imitate that

forms the basis of both language and *techne*. According to Benjamin, the mimetic faculty has import at both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels, and the latter is most clearly visible in the child's play behaviors.[11] As he will outline in the second version of the "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" essay, play persists in mimesis beyond childhood: *Spiel*, along with *Schein* (semblance), forms the "polarity" of the mimetic faculty:

> the oldest form of imitation had only a single material to work with: the body of the mime himself … One could also say that he plays his subject. Thus we encounter the polarity informing mimesis. In mimesis, tightly interfolded like cotyledons, slumber the two aspects of art: semblance and play.[12]

In order for an imitation to manifest itself, it must be performed, constructed, played. Thus, if for Caillois *mimesis* names just one game that can be played, for Benjamin play is the behavior through which mimesis is expressed.[13] According to Benjamin, childhood "play is to a great extent [the] school" of the mimetic faculty; in play "we experiment early on with basic rhythms that proclaim themselves in their simplest forms in these sorts of games with inanimate objects. Or rather, these are the rhythms in which we first gain possession of ourselves."[14]

Benjamin therefore understands play as central to the changes wrought by modern technological media on art, space, and the subject: the effect of the reorganization of perception and space by means of technology is to bring *Spiel* to dominate over *Schein* within the mimetic faculty. As Miriam Hansen has argued, if one returns to the second version of the "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" essay—before Benjamin revised it according to the recommendations of Theodor W. Adorno—one finds that *Spiel*

> provides Benjamin with a term, and concept, that allows him to imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics on a par with modern, collective experience, an aesthetics that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed—that is, capitalist and imperialist, destructive and self-destructive—reception of technology.[15]

For Benjamin, at the same time modernity expands the reach of the "apparatus" in the everyday lives of the masses, it is also inexorably tied to an expansion of play-space [*Spielraum*] through the means of modern media and mechanical reproduction.[16] Indeed, the central motif of this second version of the “Work of Art” essay, particularly if one is attentive to the footnotes, might be said to be play, as it is in the field-of-action [*Spielraum*] opened up by film that Benjamin specifically locates its revolutionary, anti-fascist potential. The importance of repetition in the “Work of Art” essay should also be understood as subsumed to play, to the *Spielraum* repetition allows. The technical and socio-cultural apparatus Benjamin calls “second technology” operates by the logic of “once is as good as never” (*Einmal ist keinmal*). As opposed to the “once and for all” of the “first technology,” this technology eschews ritualistic forms and “auratic” art in favor of the repeatable event; where the first technology seeks to establish the human’s mastery of nature, the second technology "aims at an interplay of nature and humanity." While the second technology thus poses a danger in its dehumanization of the subject, it also presents an opportunity to redirect this intermixture of the human and the nonhuman toward a new, theoretically nonhierarchical organization of society.[17]

Modern forms of play, however, produce zones of exception that privilege the player as the subject with sovereignty over the field of play, at the expense of Others. Both Huizinga and Caillois see play as something distinct, separate, a “magic circle” cut off from everyday life. As we have seen, in Benjamin, play is a term more broadly applicable to human activity and can even be political: although a child’s play creates a unique and at least provisionally separate world,[18] toys like the tin soldier are still “a silent signifying dialogue between [children] and their nation.”[19] While play remains, as it is for Huizinga, a moment of suspense—the suspending of the normative order—this clearing of room for play is by no means exempt from interfacing with politics and reality. Informing this insight is the particularities of the historical vantage point from which Benjamin formulated his theory of play. The Weimar Republic in Germany (1918-1933) has been described by Peter Sloterdijk as a “cynical” society—a “republic of imposters,” in which ““a dull feeling of the instability of things penetrated into souls, a feeling of lack of substance, of relativity, of accelerated change, and of involuntary floating from transition to transition” persisted.[20] As Germany quickly modernized in the

first quarter of the twentieth century, traditional social hierarchies were upended by advanced capitalism, urbanization, the defeat in the First World War, the end of the monarchy, and a series of political and economic crises from 1919-1924. As a result, according to Sloterdijk, a widespread "enlightened false consciousness" dominated the society.[21] Social reality quickly came to be viewed as a game, easily manipulated by stock market speculators, criminals, and cynical politicians, and identity too became just another artifice by means of which the imposter could manipulate others. Simultaneously, as modern media took root in society, diverting spectacle like the cinema, as well as particularly modern games like the crossword puzzle, became part of everyday life in urban centers like Berlin.[22]

The prominence of play in this society—its creation of playspaces where the norm does not apply—also presented opportunities for a more progressive play, and much recent scholarship on Weimar culture has focused on the progressive re-mixing of identities and spaces in the 1920s.[23] It is through re-engaging this play element that the seemingly closed moments of history can be re-opened and innervated. The "flash" that Benjamin seeks in writing and historiography can be understood as the engagement with the historical image that recognizes its underlying potentiality, its aspect that can still be played with, brought into relation with current reality in a world-creating gesture of innervation. So too does cinema as second technology create opportunities for a playful innervation of the world. Recognizing and exploiting this element of play, even within established habits, becomes an ethical and political imperative when one is caught in the games of the second technology.

However, as Patrice Petro has argued in her study of the cinema and illustrated press, the play with gender identity in Weimar only went so far, particularly as regarded women's roles vis-à-vis consumer culture and visual media.[24] To play with a field of elements not yet settled into an order, to determine that order through experimentation and recombination, requires a position of privilege and power in relation to that field. Indeed, the danger of omnipresent, mediated play would be that its creation of a suspended, anomic zone—over which the player plays his game—puts the writer, historian, or cinema viewer in a visual space "above" the field of play, in an exceptional position of sovereignty. In Carl Schmitt's definition, the sovereign is the subject who

makes the decision in the *Ausnamezustand*, or state of exception.[25] In this political sphere in which constitutional law has been temporarily suspended, the sovereign is the sole bearer of the law and ultimately, holds power over the life of the "sacred men," or *homines sacri*, also caught within the exception.[26] The structure of the exception clearly resonates with the notion of play as creating at least provisionally isolated spaces, but also illustrates that such exceptions cannot be considered as somehow "apart" from "real life," as the sovereign sphere of exception, from which decisions are pronounced, is for Schmitt the very basis of the political and social order.

A close look at Benjamin's and his contemporaries' thought on *Spiel* suggests that this political position of sovereignty is structurally similar to the position of players in their limited, temporary worlds. Huizinga, in fact, connects play to both the sacred and the law, observing that any application of the law can be seen as containing a play element, for "every place from which justice is pronounced is a veritable *temenos*, a sacred spot cut off and hedged in from the 'ordinary' world."[27] Benjamin sketches his own theory of the *Ausnahmezustand* in his late essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History." The historical materialist, Benjamin writes, must recognize that "the 'state of exception' in which we live is not the exception but the rule," and that the state of exception, used by the dominant liberal and fascist powers of Europe to re-order history to justify their own notions of progress, can be appropriated by the historical materialist.[28] The historical materialist must think from a position in which the present moment "is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop."[29] The most well-known metaphor Benjamin uses to describe this position, from which disparate historical elements might be fused into a new constellation in a moment of danger, is the "Angel of History" who has his back turned toward the future as he surveys the single, ongoing catastrophe that is all of human history. Relatively overlooked is the somewhat enigmatic metaphor with which Benjamin opens the essay: the historical materialist is the "hunchback" secretly controlling Wolfgang von Kempelen's fraudulent automaton of 1770.[30] In this metaphor, the automaton, named "historical materialism" in this metaphor, is *playing a game of chess* against the forces of historicism. The state of exception from which history is to be finally ordered, the position from which sovereignty is to be obtained, is again a position of play, looking

over a chess board from above. For Benjamin the historical materialist, this sovereignty is presumably that of the oppressed masses, but as I show in relation to “Berlin Chronicle,” it’s a sovereign position his writing often genders male.

These theories of play positions recall Michel Foucault’s theory of “heterotopia,” secularized zones of indistinction that the philosopher held to have multiplied in modernity. Heterotopic sites “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”[31] Heterotopias are thus exceptional "threshold" zones where the normative order is suspended, and the term can be used to describe urban spaces such as parks, which suspend the order of the urban environment, or cinemas, which suspend the normal order of perception, to facilitate play. In their essay, “The Space of Play: Toward a General Theory of Heterotopia, Lieven De Cautier and Michiel Dehaene propose a third, mediating space within Hannah Arendt’s binary model that splits urban space into *oikos* (the home) and *agora* (the realm of politics). This they identify with the “cultural sphere,” or, following Huizinga, the space of play. In classical society, they argue, this space had a tendency to be identified with the feminine: “Why is it that Greek drama (both tragedy and comedy) so often features women as protagonists, if women are, in the words of Pericles, best responding to their nature and duty when not seen or spoken about at all? Probably because in the female protagonist the antagonism between *oikos* and *agora* is mediated.”[32] Figures such as Antigone must embody the conflict between familial duty and political requirement, and as women were thought to do so more effectively than men. De Cautier and Dehaene argue that this trope provided women, within the heterotopic space of the theater, an agency they were denied in the spaces of both *oikos* and *agora*. This trope, however, also positions women as mediate objects between the explicitly masculine spheres of *oikos* and *agora*, and leaves the “reading” position, from which vantage point this conflict is truly decoded, gendered masculine. Sovereignty over the field of play opened by the drama remains a male privilege, as we shall see it does in Benjamin’s own playful texts.

The *Spielraum* in which the flâneur, writer, reader, historian, or film-viewer is placed is a particularly modern position of sovereignty over the urban field of play. This

peculiar modern positioning is both the threat and the promise of modern media and urban space: it offers the subject the field of action provided for by the second technology, but it also creates a "zone of exception" on the threshold where sovereignty and "bare life" meet, creating an illusion of potency and sovereignty for the subject.[33] Sovereignty over technology and urban spaces is precisely what the Dadaists, on Benjamin's reading, were trying to win. In his own literary works, too, Benjamin attempts to develop a form of prose that gives the reader and the author *Spielraum* in the modern world, but it creates this sovereign position for the reader at the expense of the female figures in his work. In his "Berlin Chronicle," in which the author is both a memoirist and historical materialist, the present moment, like in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," has indeed come to a stand-still in order for the past to be played, but this past is playable only on the terms set by the game, which genders its sovereign subjects male.

Written in nonlinear fragments, "Berlin Chonicle" resembles literary works like "One-Way Street" rather than Benjamin's theoretical essays. Among Benjamin's work, it reflects perhaps most strongly his own attempt to create "a surface-orientation that is less rigid and will permit a … play between the traces of surfaces."[34] Such a methodology also informs his *Arcades Project*, which Willi Bolle sees as anticipating the playful nature of hypertext in its form.[35] By arranging the fragments that make up each work according to the principles of montage and associative (rather than linear) memory, Benjamin seeks to create a network form appropriate to life in the city—a playful form."Berlin Chronicle" functions as a text by assembling fragments which it encourages the reader to understand as traces, compelling us to trace similarities that may "flash together"—similarities, perhaps, between the spatiality of the city and the text as a spatial document that we navigate. Tracing the surface thus becomes a type of game for the reader; however, this play is not entirely free, as Benjamin uses the form to continually assert his and the reader's masculine sovereignty over this textual space. This comes at the expense of the gendered goal (or object) of this game: the numerous female figures, particularly the city's prostitutes, who remain resolutely confined within the spaces of the city and of the text.

"Berlin Chronicle": The Text and the City as Game

The city is central to Benjamin's exploration of the thresholds of modernity: it is "on the threshold—of the metropolis as of the middle class" that the figure of the flâneur stands in 19th-century Paris.[36] It is this position, which arcade-goers and later children will also occupy in front of panoramas, which gives the flâneur's gaze such mobility in the spaces of the city. For Benjamin, as we have seen, play is at the center of modern urban life, and he opens “A Berlin Chronicle” by asserting that “the child, in his solidary games, grows up at closest quarters to the city.”[37] This playful gaze seems also to be granted to the reader of "Berlin Chronicle" as she wanders through the labyrinths of Benjamin's Berlin-text. But while the readers seem to be granted the flaneur's perambulations and free-roaming play—the kind of proto-hyperlink perambulating that Willi Bolle sees Benjamin’s "color sigla" classification system allowing in *The Arcades Project*—the reader of "Berlin Chronicle" is actually caught in a game. In Roger Caillois's terms, while the reader may believe herself to be participating in *paidia*, free play, what Benjamin has constructed is *ludus*: the expression of play in a ruled, disciplining game.[38] Thus ultimately the author is secure in his place as threshold-dweller, as sovereign over the memory-text of Berlin, while the reader remains caught in the labyrinth, with only an illusory sovereignty.

In “Berlin Chronicle,” Walter Benjamin ostensibly sets out to tell the story of his childhood and youth in Germany’s capital, but, as he gets around to warning us, this piece is not necessarily an autobiography: “For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities.”[39] The essay is purportedly not so much a story of the “I” which, as Benjamin points out, appears infrequently in his writing, but a consideration of the relations between physical space and personal memory, and how the spaces of the modern city co-form the memories of its inhabitants.[40] The centrality of spatiality to the text is pointed to by its very form: it is composed of 27 fragments of varying length, some of which Benjamin never completed. The text thus shares a form with his city, as they are both full of “mazes,” “erring paths," and “labyrinths.”[41] And indeed, in his short fragment on books, Benjamin points us toward reading books as spaces:

> located not merely in its binding or its pictures, [the book's content and world] were enshrined in chapter headings and opening letters, paragraphs and columns. You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines … There was nothing finer than to sniff out, on this first tentative expedition into the labyrinth of stories, the various drafts, scents, brightnesses, and sounds that came from its different chambers and corridors.[42]

This passage is one of several clues for how to read Benjamin's work itself—as a *spatial* practice arising from the conditions of the modern metropolis, the "regimen cities keep over our imagination."[43] The text, too, is a labyrinth, with portals and "impenetrable" zones, two of the many recurring motifs in Benjamin's discussion of memory and the city.

In point of fact, Benjamin spells out this strategy as early as the first fragment, where, after establishing some of the most important themes (labyrinths, resentment towards his mother, childhood) and spaces (the Tiergarten, the Zoo, the Herkules Bridge) of the essay, he writes of a youthful dream project of his:

> I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—*bios*—graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map of a city center, if such a thing existed. Doubtless it does not, because of the ignorance of the theater of future wars. I have evolved a system of signs, and on the gray background of such maps they would make a colorful show if I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends …[44]

This fantasy of Benjamin's recurs in different fragments—for example in fragment 13, in which he writes of having lost a family tree-style network of memories, which, if he could re-draw today, would be in the style of a labyrinth.[45] This network of memories is the clear predecessor to the "Color Sigla" system—the one which Bolle studies in the *Arcades Project*—using which he will map out the relations between elements in *Arcades*, his map-text. This passage is the key to reading the rest of his essay, which maps his memories onto the space of Berlin. The defining protocol of the network he

charts—that which determines which spaces are connected to which—is what he indicates here as the spaces of his "friends and girl friends," the distinction made between genders here speaking to the essential divide in the broader text.

The change from "ordinary map" to general staff's map, from family tree to labyrinth, speaks to an historical change that Benjamin is concerned with, one that has affected the organization of life (*bios*), experience, memory, and writing. Benjamin refers to his method as "topographical," and in his navigation of the spaces from his childhood, Benjamin is concerned with the demarcation of regions (places, memories). But some of what he writes suggests something more along the lines of the topological, an approach which abstracts space into vectors and nexes. When he writes of the "paths that lead us again and again to people who have one and the same function for us: passageways that always, in the most diverse periods of life, guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the pupil, or the master," I would argue he is writing about topological relations.[46] That is, the space depicted is determined not by actual geographical variations and relations, but by imagining space as composed of interconnected points ruled by some underlying formula; an informational conceptualization of the city, and of the montagist memoir. In the same fragment, he writes of an exchange of rings that united his group of friends, but that within that group, some friends switched roles in relation to the others: from lover to friend, from friend's brother to husband. The network retains its essential figure, Benjamin writes, despite its superficial alterations: "This is what the sketch of my life revealed to me as it took shape before me on that Paris afternoon. Against the background of the city, the people who had surrounded me closed together to form a figure.[47] In topology, this is known as a *homeomorph*: an object that can turn into another without any disturbance to its basic networked arrangement.

We might, then, to read the shift between an ordinary map and a general's map Benjamin cites above as describing a shift from the topographical delineation of different neighborhoods and social spaces to a topological coordination of points in a network. A general staff's map is a strategic implement, used for planning the logistics of warfare (not just strategic military action, command relays, supply routes, reinforcement strategies). It is thus a way of divining the most effective and efficient ways for the

control and dispersal of information, the coordination of the different points in space overseen by the command. Such thinking is inextricable from the *Kriegsspiel* or war game, a diversion of aristocrats that had developed into a true technology of domination in the 19th-century Prussian Army. Prussia, and in Benjamin's time the German Empire, used the *Kriegspiel* to determine military tactics and outcomes before they could be proven in the real world. An entire apparatus of simulation grew up around the institution of the *Kriegsspiel*, using advancements in printing technology to develop maps that could be used to precisely simulate troop movements and battle scenarios.[48] War simulations, and the *Kriegsspiel* in particular, stand at the nexus of contemporary warfare strategy, the computing revolution, and modern gaming. They create workable simulations of real space within a flexible system that seemingly allows for the free exercise of agency but which is nevertheless hemmed in by allowances and limitations, by their only partial capturing of the real.

The emerging topological logic of spaces networked primarily by abstract, informational relations actually informed the specialized *Pharus Plans* that, in the original German version of the text, Benjamin references as the "ordinary map."[49] Pharus was and remains a German company well-known for publishing maps of urban spaces, and beginning in 1919, they starting issuing a *Kino-Pharus-Plan* of Berlin, which mapped Berlin space according to the growing number of permanent cinemas in the city. Using the map, the reader could view the city as a network connecting clusters of low-rent cinemas to the outliers of film palaces, a navigable web of points and lines. The *Kino-Pharus-Plan*, like Benjamin's proposed de-centered schema for an autobiography, is designed to allow for the flexibility and mobility of its reader while still orienting them toward a particular processing of information. Like "Berlin Chronicle," it also suggests the strong discursive connection between the cinema and modern urban space. Cinema and urban space have an affinity in "Berlin Chronicle," as

> the closer we come to [the city's] present-day, fluid, functional existence, the narrower draws the circle of what can be photographed; it has rightly been observed that photography records practically nothing of the essence of, for example, a modern factory … Only film commands optical approaches to the essence of the city, such as conducting the motorist into the new center.[50]

The cinema creates a fluid experience out of discontinuous moments, an approach equipped to handle the discontinuities connected by the flows of urban life—much as on the one hand, the *Kino-Pharus-Plan* connects diverse geographical and socio-economic spaces under the protocol of “cinemas,” and “Berlin Chronicle” constructs a spatial network around gender. They produce urban space as topological “game space,” which “make[s] space not only something that can be divided and connected by order, but measured and managed by the algorithm.”[51]

Laid out here are the keys to understanding the game that Benjamin plays with the reader: the text, the city itself is a game, arranged as if it were the board of a *Kriegsspiel* as a means of the control of life, cut together of moving pieces as if it were a film conducting the viewer to the city center. Though the arrangement of its pieces would seem to be, like the relations between Benjamin and his friends maintained by the rings, mutable, they continually hinge on the same determining protocol: gender. This is illustrated by the ring exchange itself: "My heart had … gone with the last of the four rings, which the giver had reserved for his sister. And certainly this girl was the true center of the circle's fate, though years were to elapse before we realized it."[52] Contained at the center of the topological spaces of the city throughout the essay are images of women as objects of sexual attraction, sexual fascination, or Oedipal resentment, as in the case of Benjamin's mother. One passage in particular is particularly telling, as it illustrates neatly the gendered conditions on which sovereignty is achieved in the space of the city: the narrator describes his manner of

> …walking in the city, in the stubborn refusal under any circumstances to form a united front, be it even with my own mother. There is no doubt, at any rate, that a feeling of crossing the threshold of one's class for the first time had a part in the almost unequaled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street. At the beginning, however, this was a cross of frontiers not only social but topographical, in the sense that whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution.[53]

Instead of a Kino-Pharus-Plan, what Benjamin calls to mind here is a something like a Prostitute-Pharus-Plan. Here we see the opening up of the city, and implicitly of the text as well, as *Spielraum* only on the basis that the feminine, as mother and/or as prostitute, is contained safely within that network. Numerous times in what follows women frequently appear as prostitutes and in images of containment: as a madam "enthroned in her bay window," as a prostitute encountered in his father's Ice Palace wearing a "tight-fitting sailor suit," or in the red-light district as the unconscious "goal" of pubescent wandering.[54] The open, exceptional threshold spaces—parks, lower-class neighborhoods, the spaces of books—on the other hand, are occupied only by the young Benjamin, and by extension the author himself as he guides us on the deceptively free roam of his memories.

From these threshold spaces, a reflexive metaphor for the position of authorship, the young Benjamin in “Berlin Chronicle” can see and organize his life more clearly, seeming to merge with Benjamin the author, who presides over the dispersed fragments of the text. Thus, as the author assembles his memories associatively on the two-dimensional space of the page, he is located eternally at the threshold of the text, rather than within it, even when using the first person. He describes this position as one inhabited also by the urban wanderer, who remains in his *flanieren* always at the borderland of a different heterotopia, a zone of suspension that reflects or represents another space. The city, like the text Benjamin composes for us, is full of spaces where one can view the rest of the world from a position of untouched sovereignty, as if observing a film or the map of a *Kriegsspiel* from above: “just as there are plants that primitive peoples claim confer the power of clairvoyance, so there are places endowed with such power: they may be deserted promenades, or treetops, particularly in towns, seen against walls, railway level-crossings, and above all the thresholds that mysteriously divide the districts of a town.”[55] At the Liechtenstein Gate near Berlin’s famous Tiergarten Park, an exceptional space where the urban order is illusorily suspended, Benjamin recalls feeling that his life had been paused, describing the site as a kind of interface from which the city could be read. Reading also provides this access to a threshold, or “portal”; Benjamin reflects on his adolescent inability to understand a portion of Schiller’s *Wallenstein Gate*, and that his adulthood would be

achieved not through the "portal" the text was meant to open.[56] The power to stand at and transgress such thresholds is explicitly granted at the expense of the feminine: the accosting of a whore in the street, or the disavowal of the motherly guide through the city.

The recurring motif of Ariadne—the mythical figure who supervises the labyrinth, helping Theseus to conquer it by giving him a red thread, after which he conquers it and marries her—ties together the topological conceptualization of the city, the analogy between text and city as labyrinths, and the role of femininity to achieving mastery over a space thusly conceived. "Berlin Chronicle" refers to numerous feminine figures as Ariadne, both directly and by implication. The first usage occurs on the opening pages of the essay, identifying the first Ariadne as the statues of King Fredrick William III and Queen Louise of Prussia that stood at the entrance to what Benjamin describes as a labyrinth on the Tiergarten's Luiseninsel. These statues acted as a guide to the child Benjamin as he navigated the labyrinth, as he could see them from any point within the maze. Soon, however, the referent of the specifically feminine figure of Ariadne is transferred—as if in a rotating homeomorph—to a much more vaguely adumbrated feminine guide to the city. In the labyrinth's forecourt, "nothing suggests that you stand but a few yards from the strangest place in the city … for here, or not far away, were the haunts of that Ariadne in whose proximity I learned for the first time … something that was to make instantly comprehensible that at scarcely three I was cannot have known: love."[57] "Ariadne" seems at first to be a neutral classical reference to an initial guide through the metaphorical labyrinth of text and city, but as soon as the second page this reference is specifically gendered in relationship to the subject. The five "guides" to city life Benjamin cites in the opening pages of "Berlin Chronicle" are now implicitly (or doubly, as in the case of his mother and his nursemaids) gendered feminine, and unfettered travel between the city's discontinuous spaces and hidden pockets depends on transcending these guides, leaving them behind within the labyrinth.

As we have seen, the prostitute figures in "Berlin Chronicle" as the primary symbol for the woman trapped within the city-labyrinth; it is no surprise, then, that Benjamin refers again to Ariadne and the labyrinth myth when recounting his "penetration" of Paris: "… I penetrated to [Paris's] innermost place, the Minotaur's

chamber, with the only difference being that *this* mythological monster had three heads: those of the occupants of the small brothel on rue de la Harpe, in which, summoning my last reserves of strength (and not entirely without an Ariadne's thread), I set my foot."[58] In "Berlin Chronicle" there is hardly a more direct image of the feminine—here styled as an uncanny other—trapped within the labyrinth while the male subject enjoys free mobility. The key to sovereignty over the city-text is the vanquishing and containment of the feminine, beginning by following Ariadne's thread but eventually acquiring the ability to place her decisively within the map. We might assume, too, that the "strangest place in the city" earlier in the essay is the brothel that appears again at other points in the text, a place before which, seeing it again through his three year-old's eyes, he feels impotent. As Benjamin puts it after describing that point in the labyrinth, "It is likely that no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence; and if you agree you will see that this impotence comes not at the beginning of or before the struggle with the subject, but in the heart of it."[59] At the heart of this text's labyrinth, as at the heart of both its Paris and Berlin, are the Minotaur and the Ariadne, who have been collapsed into the same figure: the woman to be left behind as the author perambulates through the text.

Walter Benjamin's playful prose seems to replicate a certain kind of urban experience for the reader, a position that allows the reader to consume the discontinuous impressions at leisure, to share in the play of their spatial arrangement. This play, however, is predicated on the reader's accepting the ensconcing of the feminine within the frame of the text, and thus the author's masculine sovereignty over the field he has determined. What "Berlin Chronicle" illustrates is Benjamin's acute awareness that the *Spielräume*—the thresholds, zones of exception, and moments of suspense—opened up by the second technology of modernity were places in which bids for sovereignty could be made. The modern world Benjamin observed was, in fact, full of "magic circles" that were not wholly separate from the sphere of reality. In his theoretical work on the media, he understood these magic circles as an opportunity for a collective innervation toward action, the enculturation of new habits of thought and experience, and a revolutionary aesthetics of shock, all achieved through play. In his montage-style writing, however, he uses the playful form of these media to subtly write

the rules of the game, to contain the reader's play within a game of his making, giving him sovereignty over a topological space on which he claims to have arrayed the entire of *bios*, or life. While the move to base his networked composition style around a limited and essentialist protocol dictating gendered positions is politically and ethically inexcusable, the text still contributes to an important theory of the way modernity accentuates, exploits, and offers space for play.

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[1] In his *War Games: A History of War on Paper*, Philip von Hilgers argues that the development of the tabletop war game in Prussia in the 18th and 19th centuries marks the historical point at which the simulation begins to take precedence over the real. Play was, noncoincidentally, a vital concept in the work of postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard. See von Hilgers, *War Games: A History of War on Paper*, trans. Ross Benjamin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Alexander R Galloway, "Radical Illusion (A Game Against)," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (October 2007): 376-391.

[2] Miriam Hansen, "Room-for Play: Benjamin's Gamble with the Cinema," *October 109* (Summer 2004).

[3] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and* Games, trans. Meyer Barash (Glencoe, NY: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 19-40.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 118.

[5] Hansen, "Room-for-play."

[6] Sigmund Freud points out in his *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), women are often the excluded "second party" in bawdy and "obscene" humor, the object of the joke who is "stripped naked" for the libidinal pleasure of the teller and the listener. See Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 95.

[7] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 102.

[8] Benjamin cites Willy Haas's "Gestalt Theory of Play" in his article "Toys and Play." Writing in 1924, Helmuth Plessner sees the value of artificial "society" over authentic "community" in its capacity for play. Gustav Bally, a Berlin psychoanalyst in the 1920s, published a study of play among animals and humans at the end of the Second World War. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously declared language to be composed of games in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Walter Benjamin, "Toys and Play," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1: 1927-1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Roy Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). Helmuth Plessner, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. Andrew Wallace (New York: Humanity Books, 1999). Gustav Bally, *Vom Ursprung und von den Grenzen der Freiheit: Eine Deutung des Spiels bei Tier und Bei Menschen* (Schwabe: Basel, 1945).

[9] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 91-117. It should be further noted that the mathematical sub-discipline Game Theory was developed by John von Neumann at the University of Berlin in the late 1920s.

[10] As early as "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916), Benjamin seeks an alternative to the Sassurean definition of language as composed of arbitrary signs—in Benjamin's words, "language never gives *mere* signs." The language of "man" translates the "creative word" of God into knowledge; thus all language is a translation of the world, and language is something *in* which we live rather than *through* which we communicate. By "The Doctrine of the Similar" (1933), Benjamin is still

seeking an alternate model to Sassurean linguistics, but the concept of translation is replaced by that of mimesis, human language being just one manifestation of the "mimetic faculty [*Vermögen*]." Benjamin claims that among animals, the human has the most advanced capacity for the "generation of the similar," and language has its roots in the compulsion to imitate the world. Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Micharl W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 69, 63, 70. "The Doctrine of the Similar," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 695, 694.

[11] "Doctrine" 694; "On the Mimetic Faculty," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 720.

[12] Benjamin, "Work of Art," 127.

[13] Caillois, Man, Play, and Games, 21.

[14] Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 120.

[15] Hansen, "Room-for Play," 6.

[16] Benjamin, "Work of Art," 117; see also footnote 22, 127: "… what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]. This space for play is widest in film."

[17] Benjamin, "Work of Art," 107.

[18] Walter Benjamin, "Old Toys," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1: 1927-1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 100."Surrounding by a world of giants, children use play to create a world appropriate to their size."

[19] Benjamin, "Cultural History of Toys," 116.

[20] Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason,* trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 483.

[21] Ibid., 8.

[22] Michael Cowan, "Moving Picture Puzzles: Training Urban Perception in the Weimar 'rebus films'," *Screen* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 2010): 200.

[23] See for example Richard W. McCormick, Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and "New Objectivity" (New York City: Palgrave, 2001).

[24] Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 222.

[25] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 12.

[26] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9-11.

[27] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*: *a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 77.

[28] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. (Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-258.

[29] Ibid, 262

[30] *Ibid*, 253

[31] Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Hetertopias,” *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York City: Routledge, 1997), 333.

[32] De Cauter, Lieven and Michiel Dehaene. “The Space of Play: Towards a General Theory of Heterotopia,” in *Heterotopia and the City*, eds. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, 87-102 (New York: Routledge, 2008), 94.

[33] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Life and Bare Power*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Standford University Press, 1998), 10.

[34] Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 30.

[35] Willi Bolle, “Metropole als Hypertext: zur netzhaften Essaystik in Walker Benjamins ‘Passagen-Projekt,’” *German Politics and Society* 74, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 91.

[36] Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, eds. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland, 32-49. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 39.

[37] Benjamin, “Berlin Chronicle,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 3.

[38] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 28-29.

[39] Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle,” 28.

[40] *Ibid*, 16.

[41] *Ibid,* 9, 12, 3.

[42] *Ibid*, 55-56.

[43] Ibid, 30.

[44] *Ibid*, 3.

[45]*Ibid*, 31-32.

[46] *Ibid,* 31-32.

[47] *Ibid,* 33-34.

[48] von Hilgers, *War Games*.

[49] Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 5.

[50] Benjamin,“Berlin Chronicle,” 8.

[51] Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 105.

[52] Benjamin, “Berlin Chronicle,” 33.

[53] *Ibid*, 11.

[54] *Ibid*, 12, 39-40, 53.

[55] *Ibid*, 25.

[56] *Ibid*, 45-46.

[57] *Ibid*, 3-4.

[58] *Ibid*, 9.

[59] *Ibid*, 4.

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