

# The Burnt Doll: The Dialectical Image and Gender Fluidity in Sandra Cisneros' Short Story "Barbie-Q"

**Jørgen Veisland**

Scandinavian Institute, University of Gdansk

80-308 Gdansk, Poland

Email: finjv@univ.gda.pl

**Abstract** Commenting on Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image and its applicability to his study of nature as ruin in allegory, Susan Buck-Morss notes in her work *The Dialectics of Seeing* that "the illumination that dialectical images provide is a mediated experience, ignited within the force field of antithetical time registers, empirical history and Messianic history." Viewing the burnt doll in the short story as a dialectical image will solve what James Phelan in his work *Living to Tell About It* refers to as "the puzzling signals about the relation between time of the action and time of the telling." The burnt doll is an image of the ruin and an emblem of the transient nature of capitalist culture. It is a dialectical image in the sense that it constructs an alternative gender identity that is futuristic and fluid, gathering its building material literally out of a warehouse fire that has caused the new Barbie dolls to be sooty and, in the case of one of them, cousin Francie, disfigurement as it now has "a left foot that's melted a little." The telling is done by an anonymous young girl to her sister and involves an imaginative narration about two dolls which the girls dress and undress; the dolls fight over a boyfriend, an "invisible Ken." They are on the lookout for new dolls on a Sunday that is presumably time present or immediate past and find Career Gal and Sweet Dreams, sooty and water-soaked dolls damaged by fire. The defective, melted left foot may easily be disguised "if you dress her in Prom Pinks." That way "who's to know." The final statement summarizes the ambivalence of an uncertain future project: The dialectics between the natural wholeness of inherent gender and the future fluid, literally melting or melted gender is manifested in the emblematic image of the melted left foot. It is there though hidden from public view.

**Key words** Redundant telling; the fetish; the dialectical image; fluid gender

**Author** Jørgen Veisland, Ph.D., D.Litt., is Professor of Scandinavian and comparative literature at the University of Gdansk, Poland. His teaching and research activities and interests cover 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century drama, fiction and poetry. He has published numerous articles on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American, British and Scandinavian fiction. Books published include a.o. *Kierkegaard and the Dialectics of Modernism*; *The Outcast. Twisting the Plot in Six English Novels*; *Depression and Utopia. A Study of Selected Works by John Steinbeck*; *Mimesis and Metamorphosis. The Self in Contemporary American Fiction*; *Drama and repetition. Time in Selected Plays by Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett*; *Imagism in Laus Strandby Nielsen's Poetry*.

### Introduction

The objective of the article is to interpret and elucidate the relation between first-person narration and an evolving ethical consciousness and attitude in the narrating subject. Socioeconomic deprivation is constructively utilized by the anonymous narrator who turns a restricting, negative condition into a positive challenge, thus opening up a cultural critique of materialism and of societal stereotyping of the feminine. The ultra-short story makes up a textual fragment that contains a dense and subtle comment on the psychological and intellectual strategy employed by the narrator as she negotiates and constructs an individualized ethic.

### Redundant Telling

Sandra Cisneros' short story "Barbie-Q" is part of the collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). The most comprehensive interpretation of the story to date has been done by James Phelan in his work *Living to Tell About It. A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. In his examination of the story and in his work generally Phelan is concerned with "the multilayered communications that authors of narrative offer their audiences, communications that invite or even require their audiences to engage with them cognitively, psychically, emotionally, and ethically" (Phelan 5). I will begin by focusing on character narration in the story, as does Phelan. The elucidation of this phenomenon will be followed by a discussion of Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image in the *Passagen-Werk*, his work on the Paris Arcades — commercial passageways constructed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and consisting of shops with display windows - which he started writing in 1927. My discussion necessitates that I reproduce the story in full here; it is ultra-short, consisting of only six paragraphs:

Barbie-Q  
For Licha

Yours is the one with mean eyes and a ponytail. Striped swimsuit, stilettoes, sunglasses, and gold hoop earrings. Mine is the one with bubble hair. Red swimsuit, stilettoes, pearl earrings, and a wire stand. But that's all we can afford, besides one extra outfit apiece. Yours, "Red Flair," sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included. Mine, "Solo in the Spotlight," evening elegance in black glitter strapless gown with a puffy skirt at the bottom like a mermaid tail, formal length gloves, pink chiffon scarf, and mike included. From so much dressing and undressing, the black glitter wears off where her titties stick out. This and a dress invented from an old sock when we cut holes here and here and here, the cuff rolled over for the glamorous, fancy-free, off-the-shoulder-look.

Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid-looking boydoll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make do with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubble-head Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including sock dress.

Until next Sunday when we are walking through the flea market on Maxwell Street and *there!* Lying on the street next to some tool bits, and platform shoes with the heels all squashed, and a fluorescent green wicker wastebasket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails. *There!* Where? Two Mattel boxes. One with the "Career gal" ensemble, snappy black and white business suit, three-quarter-length sleeve jacket with kick-pleat skirt, red sleeveless shell, gloves, pumps, and matching hat included. How much? Please, please, please, please, please, please, until they say okay.

On the outside you and me skipping and humming but inside we are doing loopity-loops and pirouetting. Until at the next vendor's stand, next to boxed pies, and bright orange toilet brushes, and rubber gloves, and wrench sets, and bouquets of feather flowers, and glass towel racks, and steel wool, and Alvin and the Chipmunks records, *there!* And *there!* And *there!* And *there!* and *there!* and *there!* and *there!* Bendable Legs Barbie with her new page-boy hairdo. Midge, Barbie's best friend. Ken, Barbie's boyfriend. Skipper, Barbie's little sister. Tutti and Todd, Barbie and Skipper's tiny twin sister and brother.

Skipper's friends, Scooter and Ricky. Alan, Ken's buddy. And Francie, Barbie's MOD'ern cousin.

Everybody today selling toys, all of them damaged with water and smelling of smoke. Because a big toy warehouse on Halsted Street burned down yesterday — see there? — the smoke still rising and drifting across the Dan Ryan expressway. And now there is a big fire sale at Maxwell Street, today only.

So what if we didn't get our new Bendable legs Barbie and Midge and Ken and Skipper and Tutti and Todd and Ricky and Alan and Francie in nice clean boxes and had to buy them on Maxwell Street, all water-soaked and sooty. So what if our Barbies smell like smoke when you hold them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them. And if the prettiest doll, Barbie's MOD'ern cousin Francie with real eyelashes, eyelash brush included, has a left foot that's melted a little — so? If you dress her in her new "Prom Pinks" outfit, satin splendor, with matching coat, gold belt, clutch, and hair bow included, so long as you don't lift her dress, right? — who's to know. (Cisneros 14-16)

The character-narrator is unnamed and apparently addresses her sister, the narratee. It is difficult to identify the narrator's age, but we may venture an educated guess through what is revealed by the dialogue between the Barbies in the game the two girls play: "You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky!" which would indicate that the "I" is a pre-adolescent. Phelan states that "Cisneros also shows how impressionable the character narrator is by having her voice echo the language of the marketing division of Mattel toys: for example, "sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included" (Phelan 8). Phelan notes further that Cisneros, as implied author, reveals not only the age of the character narrator but also her naivete and "thus establishes substantial distance between herself and her speaker" (loc. cit.). The way I read the story, it seems to be clear already early on that the ethics of narration that Phelan points to is conditioned upon the approximation of one perspective to another, i.e. to what extent the informed perspective of the implied author will eventually be embraced by the character narrator whose heightened knowledge of her situation and of the fake perfection of the Barbie doll will in turn inform the readers and elicit their sympathy. Phelan is right, of course, in claiming that there is "substantial distance" between Cisneros qua implied author and the character narrator. However, I am wondering whether this distance is not already subtly eliminated at the very begin-

ning. Answering that question depends on how much irony and self-consciousness we read into the game the two sisters are playing with the Barbies. “Dumbbell” and “stinky”, for example, may carry overtones of mockery and satire, but it is difficult, not to say impossible, to place the mocking voice; does it belong to the implied author or to the character narrator?

Race or ethnicity is not identified in the text. The focus is on social class. Phelan notes that “this is a story about the desire of a lower-class girl” (loc. cit.), whereas all the other stories in the collection *Woman Hollering Creek* is explicitly about Chicano/a experience. So the cultural narrative behind “Barbie-Q” is to be identified as something other than the narrative about Chicano/a experience. Phelan states that two cultural narratives are relevant in connection with the story; he calls the first “Dangerous Role Model Barbie”: Here, “Barbie’s plastic body — white, curvaceous, blond, tall, and thin — becomes an impossible ideal created by corporate America against which American girls can’t help but compare themselves negatively” (9). — The second cultural narrative Phelan calls “Endlessly Acquisitive Barbie”; here “Barbie’s outfits and other accessories, which proliferate incessantly to keep up with changing fashions in clothes and other personal items as well as with changes in society, become a sign of Barbie’s upper-middle-class identity and the conspicuous consumption that goes with it” (loc. cit.).

Phelan points out that the progression of the story is lyric. This is significant. For lyric progression, according to Phelan, is a “progressive revelation of characters and their static situations” (10). In some stories the reader’s judgment of the characters’ choices and actions is replaced by sympathetic identification. And in others, e.g. “Barbie-Q,” judgment is tied “not to characters’ choices but to the relation among their vision of their condition, that of their implied author, and ours; at the same time, these judgments will be mediated by our emotional responses to the characters” (10-11).

The relational dynamics or dialectics generated by the two (three, if we include that of the reader’s) perspectives, that of the implied author and that of the character narrator, is imbedded in the overall construction of the narrative. The occasion for the narrative cannot be inferred till we reach the last paragraph, and as Phelan notes it is difficult to locate the speaker in time; the difficulty is compounded by the “present tense of the first five paragraphs as well as the shift from the iterative narration of the second paragraph to the singular narration of the next three” (11). The last paragraph shifts to the past tense (“didn’t get”) and we become aware that some time has passed since the acquisition of the damaged dolls (“smell like smoke .... even after you wash and wash and wash them”). Now, says Phelan, “we can reinter-

pret the tense of the first five paragraphs as historical present and plausibly surmise that the occasion is within a few weeks of the Sunday on which the girls got their new dolls and outfits — perhaps even as early as that afternoon or evening” (11). It is still difficult to resolve what Phelan refers to as “the puzzling signals about the relation between time of the action and time of the telling” (loc. cit.), for when exactly is “next Sunday?” “Next” seems to be *prior* to what happened next. Phelan gets around this temporal paradox by seeing it as a sign that “the character narrator is a young girl, one that has not fully mastered the handling of temporality in storytelling” (loc. cit.).

However, an even more puzzling feature is manifested by the technique of the first five paragraphs where the narrator, as Phelan notes, is “needlessly telling the narratee what she already knows” (loc. cit.). Phelan calls this technique *redundant telling*, defining it as “a narrator’s apparently unmotivated report of information to a narratee that the narratee already possesses” (loc. cit.). Phelan concludes that “redundant telling resides in the *author’s need* to communicate information to the audience, and so we might use the longer phrase *redundant telling, necessary disclosure* to describe it” (12). Phelan notes that the redundancy, in the case of “Barbie-Q” is unusually extended and therefore needs to be refined “because the technique reveals that the implied author’s indirect address to the authorial audience can interfere with the narrator’s direct address to the narratee” (loc. cit.). We may identify two tracks in character narration, “the narrator-narratee track, and the narrator-authorial audience track” (loc. cit.). The narrator-narratee track shows the narrator as reporter and interpreter of information for the narratee, and the narrator-authorial audience track makes the narrator assume the function of unwittingly disclosing information to the audience. The adverb ‘unwittingly’ is used here by Phelan to characterize the nature of the author’s indirect address to the audience and of the interference of that address with the narrator’s direct address. I am speculating, as I have indicated earlier on, that the interference may be symptomatic of a higher awareness being immanently present in the character narrator already from the onset. If that is indeed so, we may infer that what Phelan calls “the predominance of disclosure functions over narrator functions” as well as “the artificiality of the narration” and “the synthetic component of both the character narrator and the narrative as a whole” (15) may actually be potential signs of a subtle confluence of the character-narrator and the implied-author functions. What purpose might such a confluence serve? It might serve to indicate that the awareness achieved at an unspecified point in the future designated as “next” is achieved prior to the historical present of the first several parts of the narrative, and this results in the “synthetic” and “artificial” nature of the

narrative as a whole, artificiality being propelled by the character-narrator's heightened knowledge and endowing the narration with the tone and style of parody.

It is this heightened awareness that makes it abundantly clear that the narrator of "Barbie-Q" is not socialized. She desires the sooty, smoky and water damaged dolls. As Phelan points out, just as "Francie's barbequed leg can be hidden under her outfit, so too can the character narrator's poverty and even her ethnicity become beside the point: "who's to know" (17). Phelan concludes that the character narrator shows defiance and expresses a strong spirit, and this elicits the audience's sympathy. Thus the story makes a powerfully ethical point. Phelan notes that "Barbie-Q" is ethically challenging because our response to the character narrator contains the following elements: "(1) our sustained emotional investment in her desire; (2) our recognition of Cisneros' departure from stereotyped treatments; and (3) our positive judgments of some aspects of the character narrator's response to her situation" (25). We are guided by the author "to share her respect for the girl," as Phelan puts it (*loc. cit.*).

Phelan proceeds to speculate that there are a number of ways "to counter the explanation that Cisneros is employing redundant narration": "(1) to read the narrator and the narratee as the same character — that is, to understand the narrator's monologue as addressed not to a playmate or a sister but to herself, perhaps in the guise of an imaginary friend; (2) to define a specific occasion for the narration that makes it mimetically plausible; and (3) to find a specific rhetorical purpose for the narrator's telling the story to the narratee" (26). Among the three statements listed by Phelan as hypothetical ways to counter the author's use of redundant telling, I am most intrigued by the first one. The narrator's subsuming or incorporating the narratee and her turning the narratee into herself, or into the other, may be read as part of a general process in the story whereby the subject subsumes the object, here the Barbie doll. The doll, the desired object, is projected from the subconscious onto external reality and then re-introjected. The doll circulates as an image literally "pirouetting" on the borderline between internal and external reality: "On the outside you and me skipping and humming but inside we are doing loopity-loops and pirouetting." The spinning motion performed by the two (if there are two) preadolescent girls expresses a state of mental vertigo, a psychophysical dizziness staged around an invisible center occupied by a heterogeneous image which, despite its being loaded with multiple meanings, becomes obscure. Read this way the Barbie becomes 'the obscure object of desire', to borrow the title of Luis Bunuel's film, even to the extent that the object is erased. Perhaps the most radical description of this phenomenon is to be found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Experience" when he says:

We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. (Emerson 77)

I will explore further the subject-object relation in my discussion of Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (volume V of the *Gesammelte Schriften*), highlighting Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image and his comments on the fetish. But first I turn to a brief discussion of Benjamin's fascinating interpretation of children's games.

### Children's Games

The character narrator of "Barbie-Q" and her sister are playing house, or rather playing doll house. The dolls form an extended family mirroring a real nuclear family consisting of related female and male children and their friends: "Bendable legs Barbie with her new page-boy hairdo, Midge, Barbie's best friend, Ken, Barbie's boyfriend. Skipper, Barbie's little sister. Tutti and Todd, Barbie and Skipper's tiny twin sister and brother. Skipper's friends, Scooter and Ricky. Alan, Ken's buddy. And Francie, Barbie's MOD'ern cousin." The conspicuous absence of adults in the series is indicative of the authorial intent, i.e. to highlight the world of children as pregnant with discovery, with discovering the new anew as Benjamin would have it. It is, of course, also significant that the new damaged dolls are found in a flea market, scattered among miscellaneous discarded objects that make up the refuse of a consumer society: "... some tool bits, and platform shoes with the heels all squashed, and a fluorescent green wicker wastebasket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails." Benjamin comments on a specific game played by children where they have to construct a short sentence: "Game in which children construct out of given words a very short sentence. This game appears to have been to order for goods on display. Binoculars and flower seeds, wood screws and banknotes, makeup and stuffed otters, furs and revolvers" (Benjamin 994).

In her work on Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss notes that, according to Benjamin, children are "less intrigued by the preformed world that adults have created than by its waste products. They are drawn to the apparently valueless, intentionless things" (Buck-Morss 262). Children gather different materials and bring them together in new intuitive rela-

tionships. The series of dolls referred to and cited above is such a new intuitive relationship. The series is particularly interesting because it presents, in a dense form, a temporal acceleration accompanied by a spatial contraction. In a word, *montage*, a filmic technique whereby ever more distant relatives and friends are brought together in a form so condensed as to practically constitute an assembly of dolls on top of one another, or within one another, like a Russian doll set. The dolls are scattered in space yet assembled, curiously, in the child narrator's mind. Susan Buck-Morss notes:

What Benjamin found in children's consciousness, badgered out of existence by bourgeois education and so crucial to redeem (albeit in a new form), was precisely the unsevered connection between perception and action that distinguished revolutionary consciousness in adults. This connection was not causal in the behaviorist sense of a stimulus-response reaction. Instead it was an active, creative form of mimesis, involving the ability to make correspondences by means of spontaneous fantasy. (263)

According to Benjamin, children exhibit a mode of cognition that had deteriorated, phylogenetically and ontogenetically, thus impairing the mimetic faculty. Children restore and empower the mimetic faculty by playing games where they impersonate not only adults but also objects, for example toy trains. Dance is of course one of the most ancient mimetic performances, enacted in order to stimulate the cognitive functions of magical correspondences and analogies. Buck-Morss notes that Benjamin "holds open the possibility of a future development of mimetic expression, the potentialities for which are far from exhausted. Nor are they limited to verbal language — as the new technologies of camera and film clearly demonstrate" (267). I find Benjamin's interest in film particularly relevant to my reading of "Barbie-Q," especially the scene at the flea market where I see the character narrator's eye acting as a camera lens zooming in on the dolls and the objects lying next to them: "... and Alvin and the Chipmunks records, there! And *there!* And *there!* And *there!* and there! and there! and there!" The refuse in the flea market is no longer refuse. It gains significance as it forms new correspondences while increasing the child narrator's ability to engage in mimesis. The accidental, scattered assemblage of discarded objects in the market place serves to accomplish more in the narrator's and the reader's mind than a mere critique of capitalist consumption. The objects, telescoped by the narrator's camera eye, "pirouette" and perform a spinning dance that place them in a new order whereby their value is re-evaluated. The damaged dolls retrieve the

original, immanent meaning that they had lost in their undamaged state.

Benjamin claims that capitalism caused Europe to fall into a dream state, a sleep, while it at the same time, paradoxically, reactivated mythic powers. Collective symbolic meaning, in the premodern era, was transferred through literature, the arts and history as the narration of tradition. Benjamin states that this is no longer possible. In a comment on Marcel Proust he writes:

the present process of childrearing boils down simply to the distraction of children. Proust could appear as a phenomenon only in a generation that had lost all bodily, natural expediences for remembering, and, poorer than before, was left to its own devices, and thus could only get a hold of the children's world in an isolated, scattered, and pathological fashion. (Benjamin 490)

However, as Susan Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin is not pessimistic about the loss of tradition; for him “the rupture of tradition now frees symbolic powers from conservative restraints for the task of social transformation, that is, for a rupture of those social conditions of domination that, consistently, have been the source of tradition” (Buck-Morss 279). — The damaged Barbies are a sign that the child narrator is waking up from the world of her parents. The repeated supplication “Please, please, please, please, please, please, please” is a manifestation of this waking up. The waking up is a breaking up of the same story: “Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight.” The little word ‘okay?’ with a question mark appended to it indicates that the character narrator's consciousness of her own situation has progressed to a point where she is able to conduct an ironic staging of a trivial fight between the two Barbies, a banal sexual contest that is all the more ironic and absurd because the presumed boyfriend, Ken, is invisible. The girls (if there are two of them) prefer asking for “a new Barbie outfit next Christmas” to asking for money for “a stupid-looking boy doll.” The rhetoric of parody is the effect of a willful transformation of sexual desire and the investing of that desire in the purchasing of outfits, the external paraphernalia belonging to the commodity. Benjamin is in agreement with Marx concerning price tags. When given a price on the market, the commodity becomes an abstraction, losing its real particularity and assuming a phantom-like objectivity. It turns into a bewildering thing, full of metaphysical subtleties. In a discussion of the commodity and allegory Benjamin comments:

How the price of the commodity is arrived at can never be totally foreseen, not in the course of its production, nor later when it finds itself in the market. But just this is what happens with the object in its allegorical existence. The meaning which the melancholy of the allegorist consigns to it is not one that was expected. But once it contains such meaning, then the latter can at any time be removed in favor of any other. The fashions of meanings in Baroque allegory changed almost as rapidly as the prices of commodities change. The meaning of the commodity is indeed: Price; as commodity it has no other. (Benjamin 466)

The character narrator plays around with the “meaning of the commodity,” however, “From so much dressing and undressing, the black glitter wears off where her titties stick out. This and a dress invented from an old sock when we cut holes here and there, the cuff rolled over for the glamorous, fancy-free, off-the-shoulder look.” The “dressing and undressing” indicates an effort to search for a substance, perhaps a “metaphysical subtlety,” underneath the outfits. The search reveals nothing, the *nothing* of the bodiless doll, the mannequin *en miniature*, originally dressed up for her appearance in the display window and now taken apart, undressed and re-dressed with an old sock, a piece of human clothing. Thus the Barbie enters the creative field of the dialectical image.

### **The Dialectical Image**

Susan Buck-Morss comments that Benjamin “replaces the lost natural aura of the object with a metaphysical one that makes nature *as* mortified glow with political meaning. Unlike natural aura, the illumination that dialectical images provide is a mediated experience, ignited within the force field of antithetical time registers, empirical history and Messianic history” (Buck-Morss 245). The dialectics of the image is examined and applied to the commodity by Benjamin in the Arcades Project, the *Passagen-Werk*. The commodity exhibits contradictory faces: fetish and fossil, wish image and ruin. Poised in between waking and dreaming, the commodity participates in a dialectics made up of contradictory terms: natural history as fossil/historical nature as ruin; petrified nature/transitory nature; mythic history: fetish (phantasmagoria/mythic nature: wish image (symbol). Buck-Morss explains the terms of the contradictory dialectics outlined above, saying that Benjamin places the fossil within the “discourse of ur-history,” as the visible remains of the *ur-phenomena*. Benjamin sustains “the physiognomy of the fossil,” seeing it as a trace, an imprint of objects visible “in the plush of bourgeois interiors or the velvet linings of

their cases.” Buck-Morss continues:

The *fetish* is the keyword of the commodity as mythic phantasmagoria, the arrested form of history. It corresponds to the reified form of new nature, condemned to the modern Hell of the new as the always-the-same. But this fetishized phantasmagoria is also the form in which the human, socialist potential of industrial nature lies frozen, awaiting the collective political action that could awaken it. The *wish image* is the transitory, dream form of that potential. In it, archaic meanings return in anticipation of the “dialectic” of awakening. The *ruin*, created intentionally in Baudelaire’s allegorical poetry, is the form in which the wish images of the past century appear, as rubble, in the present. But it refers also to the loosened building blocks (both semantic and material) out of which a new order can be constructed. (211-212)

The Barbie doll is the fossil, the imprint of an object that, at the beginning of “Barbie-Q,” is part of a bourgeois, upper-middle class consumer society: “Yours, ”Red Flair,” sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included. Mine, “Solo in the Spotlight,” evening elegance in black glitter strapless gown with a puffy skirt at the bottom like a mermaid tail, formal-length gloves, pink chiffon scarf, and mike included.” The subtle, hardly noticeable inclusion of the ‘mermaid tail’, adds a potentially revolutionary dimension to the Barbie already at this early point. The mermaid tail is that which Benjamin calls a *trace* of an ur-phenomenon, a vestige of nature appearing in a haphazard series of items of clothing that threaten to render it invisible. Yet it is there, and it is for this reason that the apparently insoluble puzzle of the distance between the time of telling and the time of action in the story may be cleared up. I would suggest that the time of telling and the time of action are one in “Barbie-Q.” They seem to diverge in the story, but the divergence is only apparent. Telling and action coincide as a *montage*, spatial and temporal, of ur-history and modern history. In the dialectical image, here the doll as commodity, past and present intersect. At the intersection the *same* may suddenly, almost subconsciously, in the dream state that is, turn into the *different*.

That is what happens here. Inserted into the Barbie outfits, the mermaid tail manifests an immanent dialectic that crosses time and space. “Every time the same story” becomes, on the one hand, the fetish, i.e. the doll, as an arrested form of history, and on the other hand fetishized phantasmagoria that breaks through the always-the-same. Further, Barbie as wish image is the dream form of a potential

awakening. Finally, Barbie as ruin appears as rubble, miscellaneous discarded objects in the flea market, but the new damaged dolls found there are also building blocks out of which the character narrator constructs the beginning of a body out of the bodiless.

Commenting on fashion, Benjamin compares it to death. Buck-Morss notes that fashion makes “the inorganic commodity itself the object of human desire” (101). Benjamin writes that fashion is “the dialectical switching station between woman and commodity — desire and dead body” (Benjamin 111). Commodity fetishism is connected with sexual fetishism as it “lowers the barrier between the organic and inorganic world” (118). Mimicking the mannequin the modern woman enters history as a dead object, thus repressing her own productive power. Changing fashions is a way of teasing death. “Barbie-Q” exposes this teasing ironically by having the character narrator assume a rebellious stance even from the beginning. The rebellion that culminates at the end begins with the insertion of the mermaid’s tail, the beginning of a new body. The discovery of the damaged dolls at the flea market is accompanied by the pirouetting ‘inside’, literally signifying a “revolving” around in a swirling motion both propelled by and propelling the *montage* composed of burnt, water-damaged dolls. The burnt fetish in the market place continues the construction of a body initiated by the mermaid’s tail. The two Mattel boxes spotted by the character narrator contain smoke-damaged, sooty Barbies: One with the “Career Gal” ensemble, one with “Sweet Dreams,” an ironic division of the work and home spheres the major signifiers of which are the “black-and-white business suit” and the “dreamy pink-and-white plaid nightgown.” The fetish and the wish image go through a parallel, simultaneous descent and ascent as they are foregrounded by the character narrator’s perception.

### **Fire and Water**

Walter Benjamin conceived of his *Passagen-Werk* as a fairy tale containing two temporal dimensions, mythical time and historical time. The fairy tale was imbedded with dual strands of dreaming, the collective dream and the personal dream. European civilization as Benjamin saw it was submerged in a collective dream from which it had to wake up. In order to wake up from the dream the subject would have to be immersed deeper into the dream state so as to re-discover the mythic dimension. As I have noted earlier, the child is uniquely equipped to re-discover the mythic potential lost in industrial society. As Susan Buck-Morss says, the creative consciousness of the child “reinvests the objects with symbolic meaning and thus rescues for the collective memory their utopian signification” (274). Benjamin’s

fairy tale comes close to a Jungian collective unconscious containing archetypes. In his essay “The Concept of the Collective Unconscious” C. G. Jung offers the following definition:

The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition. While the personal unconscious is made up essentially of contents which have at one time been conscious but which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed, the contents of the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity. Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of *complexes*, the contents of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of *archetypes*. (Jung 59-60)

Jung adds that the concept of the archetype “indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere” (loc. cit.). It is these “definite forms in the psyche” that the child is singularly well adapted to retrieve, and which Benjamin tries to retrieve through the “fairy tale” of the *Pas-sagen-Werk*. As I have indicated earlier, Benjamin is not pessimistic about industrialization per se. On the contrary, like the French Surrealists who used industrial products and a variety of technological items and innovations to compose their art works, among which we find a one-armed, humanlike gas pump, Benjamin’s sees industrialism as a potential reactivation of the utopian. Commenting on children Benjamin writes:

The fact that we have been children in this time is part of its objective image. It had to be thus in order to release from itself this generation. That means: we look in the dream-connection for a teleological moment. This moment is one of waiting. The dream waits secretly for the awakening; the sleeper gives himself over to death only until recalled; he waits for the second in which he wrests himself from capture with cunning. So it is too with the dreaming collective for whom its children become the fortunate occasion for its own awakening. (492)

The archetypal symbol of the mermaid’s tale in the first paragraph of “Barbie-Q” is there as a potential awakening of the character narrator’s consciousness, facilitated

by the association of the mermaid with water and with the ensuing metamorphosis. The merging of the mermaid, water and nature, and the human, the “old sock,” produces a duality that is not a division but at least a tentative fusion. In the two last paragraphs the toys are described as “all of them damaged with water and smelling of smoke.” The smoke I still rising in the air “from a big toy warehouse on Halsted Street” that burnt down the day before. Hence the fire sale and the deflated prices. The character narrator (and her sister, if there is one) can now get the Barbies and outfits they want, and they don’t care if the dolls are water-soaked and sooty, or if they “smell like smoke when you hold them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them.” The allusion to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* may not be intentional, but it certainly reinforces the impression of a stain, here soot instead of blood, and a smell of smoke that cannot go away no matter how much you scrub. The natural elements of fire and water have done their work. Through water the mermaid has re-emerged, fusing with the female child, and through fire Francie has been endowed with “a left foot that’s melted a little”: the plastic shell of the doll/mannequin has been partly perforated by fire and is starting to melt, beginning to be metamorphosed into the live, fluid skin that inaugurates a feminine gender different from the stereotype represented by the upper-middleclass whole Barbie.

Precisely as Benjamin will have it, the awakening is undertaken secretly and with cunning: “If you dress her in her new “Prom Pinks” outfit, satin splendor with matching coat, gold belt, clutch, and hair bow included, so long as you don’t lift her dress, right? — who’s to know.” The Barbie Francie *in herself* represents one of those “definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere.” Francie has thus turned into the character narrator, or vice versa if you will, the character narrator has become Francie. The metamorphosis is complete.

### **Conclusion**

One may thus conclude that the burnt doll with the partly melted foot represents a significant, even revolutionary step into adulthood and reality. The real world is a state of continuous flux and so is identity, here a feminine identity that is presented as a forceful challenge to conventional middleclass culture and ethics. The transitory nature of things, potentially negative and destructive, becomes a powerful vehicle for internal and external change.

### **Works Cited**

Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972.

- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The MIT Press, 1989.
- Bunuel, Luis. *Cet Obscure Objet du Desir*. First Artists, 1977.
- Cisneros, Sandra. "Barbie-Q." In: *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Vintage Contemporary, 1991.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Experience." *Essays*. Boston and New York: The Riverside Press 1876.
- Jung, C. G. *The Portable Jung*. Ed. Joseph Campbell. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. New York: Penguin Books, 1971.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell About It. A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2005.

责任编辑：郑红霞