

New Europe College
Ștefan Odobleja Program
Yearbook 2012-2013



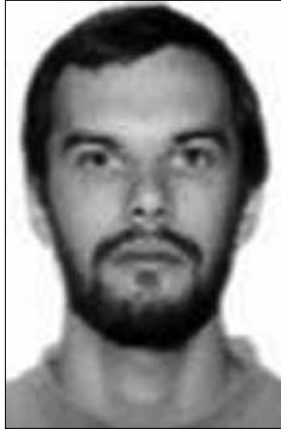
CONSTANTIN ARDELEANU
CRISTIAN CERCEL
ALEX CISTELECAN
COSTIN MOISIL
RALUCA MUȘAT
MARIUS STAN
IOAN ALEXANDRU TOFAN
RĂZVAN VONCU

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

Copyright – New Europe College
ISSN 1584-0298

New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



IOAN ALEXANDRU TOFAN

Born in 1979, in Iași

Ph.D. in Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University "Al. I. Cuza", Iași

Ph.D. Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University "Al. I. Cuza", Iași

Fields of interest: critical theory, philosophy of religion, 19th century philosophy

DAAD scholarhip, KAAD scholarhip in Berlin, Humboldt University
Research grants in Konstanz, Konstanz University

Participation in conferences and workshops in Romania, Switzerland and
Germany

Articles on secularization theories, political theology, Hegelian philosophy,
Walter Benjamin

Books:

Logica și filosofia religiei. O re-lectură a prelegerilor hegeliene,
Editura Academiei, București, 2010

City Lights. Despre experiență la Walter Benjamin, Humanitas, București, 2014

ILLUSTRATED BOOKS AND OLD PHOTOS. *IMAGE* IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S WORKS

Introduction

There are very few places where Walter Benjamin makes direct references to Hieronymus Bosch. Apart from an excerpt from *Pariser Brief II (Malerei und Photographie)* (1936) and another from *Passagen Werk* (on Baudelaire), other notes only appear in his drafts and annotations on his essays about Kafka and Flaubert, the latter never completed. Even so, his works evoke the figure of the Dutch painter many a time in his writings. The first instance regards the physiognomic representation in caricature:

So ist es bei den großen Karikaturisten gewesen, deren politisches Wissen ihrer physiognomischen Wahrnehmung sich nicht weniger tief eingesenkt hat, als die Erfahrung des Tastsinns der Raumwahrnehmung. Den Weg haben Meister wie Bosch, Hogarth, Goya, Daumier gewiesen.¹

Then, Flaubert refers to Bosch and the way he grasps “der Anheimfall des Lebendigen an die tote Materie.”² Finally, there are other two places where Benjamin mentions the painter in order to justify his representation of *monstrosity*: James Ensor’s mask “chamber” and Kafka’s “demonology.”³

In the following, we will attempt a discussion on the manner in which Benjamin construes *image* in some of its more important occurrences: on the one hand, illustrations in children’s books, and photography and moving pictures as benchmarks of mechanical reproduction, on the other. Of course, these cases are not direct references to Bosch. In a subjective reading though, Benjamin meets the Dutch painter. The following lines give the key to this possible reading. It does not aim to identify traces of 15th century artistic imagination in the illustrations Benjamin mentions and analyses. Also, it does not aim to investigate the technique of baroque painting in contrast to “mechanically reproduced” art. Rather,

the similarities between Bosch's work and the pictures Benjamin is studying belong to a metaphysics of representation and its theological stakes. In attempting such a reading, we assume that this metaphysics of image involves a critique of idolatry and thus a reappraisal of materiality as an ultimate, irreducible reference of Creation. The metaphysics of representation we will explore below entails a theological amendment to traditional theories of aesthetics.

It is important to make a methodological note. The present approach is not strictly historical, nor systematic. It starts from an imaginary interaction between two interpretations of art: the one by Marin Tarangul on Bosch,⁴ and Benjamin's notes on the illustrations in various editions of children's books (together with his opinions on photography in *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, 1931). Apparently, there is an underlying principle of "critique" in both cases, which Benjamin formulated in a 1933 preface to *Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen* (Berlin, 1931) and which revisits an issue raised in *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (1922):

Sie hätte mehr von der Erkenntnis zu erwarten, daß der Bedeutungsgehalt der Werke, je entscheidender sie sind um desto unscheinbarer und inniger, an ihren Sachgehalt gebunden ist.⁵

The attention given to the insignificance of the object (*Andacht zum Unbedeutenden*) becomes essential: it is the only way of understanding the relationship between its material constitution and its historical expression. To Benjamin, it is important that meaning, in the former case, and the messianic power, in the latter, do not lend themselves to sight, but rather lie in the shadow of the detail or in the dormant content of memory.⁶ This is important because of the way in which the aesthetic object is assumed, but also as an issue in the philosophy of history. It is the *power of the detail* that will make both interpretations possible and interconnected.

Marin Tarangul about Hieronymus Bosch and the naturalness of the fantastic

According to Tarangul, in Bosch's work the expressiveness of the fantastic resides in the fact that, despite his "intention" of denouncing the moral (even ontological) decay of the world, he does not employ obvious, elitist artistic means, with generalizing symbols or direct references:

Bosch does not attempt to present the concept of death or the idea of ruin; he shows what causes death, the ways in which one can die, or the visage of destruction and the human deeds that make of it a tangible experience.⁷

Fantastic creatures, improbable characters springing from all around the painting, do not embody metaphysical typologies, which annuls any pattern of allegorical interpretation. Still, we do recognize a moral thread in the composition, it does reveal the corruption of the world, the lack of meaning in a sinful existence. How is a representation possible under the circumstances? Tarangul suggests here that generality possesses a certain type of physiognomy perfectly recognizable through its mundane elements but at the same time foreign to this world:

With Bosch, the creatures that appear are fantastic only because they have no visible counterpart. But they have a real counterpart; for though not seen it is imagined by all our senses concomitantly.⁸

Thus, a new domain of visibility opens before us beyond the physical one. Artistic representation as Bosch envisages it is conditioned by the possibility of fall, of history as erosion and vice. In Tarangul's view, the real but invisible nature of Bosch's characters comes not from their morphology, but their syntax, i.e. the way in which composition is negotiated. In a traditional metaphysical language, Bosch's creatures are fluid syntheses of various *determinations* which give the *general* various *individual* forms and turn the law into recognizable matter: "we recognize the material form of the law."⁹

It is difficult to define the theoretical basis of such a representation. Tarangul succeeds in describing it as a process of cooperation among many "material qualities" of objects and characters while their "metabolism" takes place on a spiritual level. But the material and the spiritual are not connected in an alchemic or esoteric manner. Neither is it psychological or drug-induced, as some commentators suggested. The real nature of the passage between the two ontological levels can be observed through a gazing technique ("the rapid movement of perceptions"¹⁰) where perceptions become less random and their fluidity is perceived as a transcendental support of matter (its spiritual metamorphosis), or through a magical "reasoning" (revealing the lack of meaning in the world and the fantastic nature of existence found in the reversed logic of carnival). The transcendental and the law are thus well represented in their very

absence: the ruin of matter, the frenzy of forms and the disorder of forms depict a world where meaning is missing.

An illustrative principle of composition is found in Bosch's late works. In *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (aprox. 1500), now at El Escorial, Tarangul notices that "Christ no longer forms the centre of attention. Each passion seems to spend itself separately, isolated from centre, and Christ in the centre is only a reminder of the theme. The characters independently satisfy the hubris that possesses them. Christ, His face not very prepossessing as if belonging to that negative world Himself, is surrounded by people turning their face away from Him."¹¹

The evil becomes syntactically radicalized precisely through the indifference the characters display towards Him – the assumed source of meaning. Tarangul comments: bestiality is represented through the very absence of its intentionality, as it does not aim at a specific target, but proliferates from its own nature. The man in the top left corner (Bosch's self-portrait, according to both Jan Mosmans and Tarangul) contemplates the evil in its glory while keeping the key of interpretation: he looks on the mad show where the Meaning is crowned with thorns, but his look pours melancholy, not understanding.

Bosch's painting technique, according to Tarangul, allows the representation of oddity lurking behind any natural form ("weird, but natural") as it loses its meaning and original imprint of divinity. Such a composition is based on the transfer (as Benjamin will call the principle of such a physiognomy) of determinations, and on the flow of matter in invisible patterns and directions. Indirectly, these patterns of meaning and directions in Bosch's paintings become characters in their own right. The image is but a ruin and, in order to decode it, we first need to decode this aspect, but not in the sense of looking for a transcendental meaning or law in a symbolic-allegorical representation, but rather by looking at the frantic materiality of its characters, the "natural" deconstruction of nature herself. Bosch's monsters are not symbols because they are organic constructs. The circus of their interaction resists any "suspicious" reading. Thus, it would be a mistake to hastily identify a list of concepts and meanings in his painting.

Having in mind a later reference to Benjamin, this is a good place to draw two conclusions. First, the meaning of a painting resides in the quality of the detail ("minute precision of the detail") and not in the whole, the characters, or the composition. As Tarangul remarks, Bosch uses the technique of *framing* used nowadays in cinematography in order

to emphasize the detail, the play and dual character of determinations. Secondly, the metaphysics of such a drive begets a world where the evil, abnormality, oddity, or vice are not negative counterparts of a heavenly world, but result precisely from the way the latter functions. Excess corrupts the principle of creation to the point of monstrosity: "Nature is denuded into skeleton-like forms as if it had been buried. There is a massive, unruffled stillness everywhere, like a graveyard recalling the passage of death. In other words, the demoniacal is a secretion of nature in its abnormality."¹² In the same way, the fantastic world Benjamin creates will not originate in a world different and estranged from ours, but from its very recesses that deconstruct its forms, outline, and all recognizable boundaries.

We will briefly stop at another moment in the history of art in anticipation of Benjamin's vision. It is necessary to tackle the issue of the place the subject has in such a metaphysics of image. The ontology of ruin is found inside an experience, and thus in relation to a subject who is not just the poor character accountable for the damage his sin is causing the world. His place is well defined in the painting, he is present in the story to which he gives a dialectic incipit. As we have mentioned, at least in *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, Bosch's self-portrait embodies an onlooker in melancholic contemplation. In other paintings, as Tarangul argues, it is the fool who announces the madness of the picture. It does not only present the reality of cosmic decay; at the same time, it reflects the conscience of the person who confesses this truth. Whether it is the painter himself, or the viewer, he is involved in the cosmic drama narrated in shape and color. Otherwise Bosch would be reduced to a mere aloof moralist who happens to use the language of painting. But if the metaphysical perspective were to be taken as such, then his paintings do more than just communicate something about the world: they create this world. The traditional difference between subject and object subsides in an experience whose setting is the painting itself.¹³

Victor Ieronim Stoichiță explains this starting from Manet's work.¹⁴ Beginning with the 17th century, he argues, the gaze becomes an important theme in painting. If before this point we can only speak of "assisting/echoing characters" designed to guide the perception of the painting towards its main focus, Caravaggio's *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608) brings forth the secondary elements. The onlookers become participants in the plot. Impressionism will exploit this thematic reorientation to the full. In *The Railway* by Manet (1872-1873), "the

viewer eclipses the character; the latter is only a representative, a mere figure, of the viewer.”¹⁵ The character facing the iron rail, the girl peering through the thick steam, is a transposition of the viewer. The observation point for this painting is no longer outside it, but included in it. Stoichiță concludes that “We now have a definite specular experience where the representation as a whole is mirrored.”¹⁶ Manet’s *Self-Portrait* (1879) is a clear illustration of such a mirroring since we find in the painting the filter of the mirror that makes representation possible.¹⁷

The painting is thus “speculative” as it describes not an object, but an experience, a relationship between a subject and an object. This aspect is present in Benjamin’s work as well together with other elements depicted from Bosch’s fantastic ontology. These two hallmarks in the history of art, which Benjamin nearly overlooked, will provide an interesting starting point in our metaphysical discussion of image as announced above.

Illustrated books. The child’s metaphysical gaze

To Benjamin, the child represents a separate metaphysical “character”. His experience illustrates a privileged experience of the world and historical assertion: “Benjamin sees the child as having a privileged proximity to, and special tactile appreciation of, the urban environment. The child sees the city ‘at first sight’, with a gaze unencumbered by the tedium of familiarity and habit, with a receptivity and acuity the recovery of which occupies Benjamin in *One-Way Street* and in his later reflections on Berlin.”¹⁸ Childhood has a magical way of relating to the world and activates a mimetic function of knowledge where objects lose from their evident, functional appearance and engage in unusual relationships that are foreign to adults. That is why the illustrations in the children’s books preserve a familiarity with other areas of daily life such as the attic with its old treasures, the complex mechanisms of glorious 19th century technology, or construction sites. In the latter case, the adult “learns” to see beyond them: the useless junk of the past, the technological progress or the final stage of the construction, the building “as it should be” and which obliterates the construction process as an *an und für sich*. Adults are only able to look hastily, in a reductionist manner and driven by the Hegelian strive for concepts (*Bestrebung des Begriffs*). But children have a candid gaze, sensitive to surprising familiarities and a syntax that marks the path to the Motherland, the origin of all things.¹⁹ Childish perception

comprises the entire “ontological” construct that supports the old magic and its power.²⁰

Moreover, from a historical point of view, children have been seen by Benjamin as saviors of the past. A series of fragments from *Berliner Chronik* and *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* illustrate this. It’s the manner in which historical monuments are perceived, e.g. Siegersäule or Friedrich Wilhelm’s statues in Tiergarten. Monuments freeze historical time and represent symbols of oblivion, not memory. The victory of Prussia over the French army, immortalized in the Victory Column, becomes an irony after the Versailles treaty.²¹ Inscriptions in the urban blueprint, the monuments are what writing is to the truth-searching soul: a vehicle and a way to forget. The child does not recognize the significance of historical events. To him, the pedestal is more important than the very statue as the former comes first before his eyes. Material details such as the soldiers’ uniforms or the bishops’ vestments in the background, as well as the swarms of visitors fill the perception of that moment. Thus, in the absence of an abstract meaning or a precise historical reference, the child’s gaze focuses on the reality of the monument as ruin and not as celebration of history. The historicity of the world is recognized unconsciously but genuinely, as an ontological decay, as a sign of wear or punishment and not as a principle “reifying” the past. Children, more than revolutionaries or dreamers, know how to wait among the ruins for the coming of the Messiah.

In this context, children’s books are complex historical and metaphysical exercises. Given that Benjamin views children as embodying a magical experience, the books written for them are in fact phenomenological descriptions of this universe of spirit. The child’s play, mentioned above only in passing, is aptly illustrated in these books. But another consequence of these illustrations is that they pose a radical problem about the very idea of representation. The question at this point is not *What can be represented in children’s books?*, but *What is representation so that it may find a place in these books?*

The first precaution Benjamin takes is not to read children’s literature with the adult’s concern for meaning. In a 1924 text, *Alte vergessene Kinderbücher*, following a review to the homonymous book by collector Karl Horbrecker, the author mocks one of the most widespread genres of the so-called children’s literature – the fable. An educational and moralizing text, the fable is the favored didactic instrument during the Enlightenment. However, children seem to show very little interest for it, which indicates a pedagogical failure as Horbrecker shows:

Wir dürfen auch bezweifeln, daß die jugendlichen Leser sie der angehängten Moral wegen schätzten oder sie zur Schulung des Verstandes benutzten, wie es bisweilen kinderstubenfremde Weisheit vermutete und vor allem wünschte. Die Kleinen freuen sich am menschlich redenden und vernünftig handelnden Tier sicherlich mehr als am gedankenreichsten Text.²²

The miracle is not in the meaning just as, to children, stories are not episodes in the history of spirit, or instances of universal wisdom, but rather the ruin and debris of it (*Abfallprodukt*). Specialization, i.e., the intention of writing for children only, of conveying a message designed to “come to their level” is misguided from the beginning:²³ play, amateurism, hazard, or sometimes the author’s melancholy can make a book more than childish – i.e., authentic in its address.

Illustrations and children’s books have parallel histories. In anticipation, we may say that, while the story evolves away from the authorial moralizing intention, the picture is freed from its representational status and its largely pedagogical function of revealing reality. Illustrations in children’s books can be somewhat “inauthentic” in that they are subordinated to, and mimic the word. Benjamin mentions, among others, Comenius’ *Orbis Pictus* (1658) and *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (1792-1847) by F. J. Bertuch. It is in the 19th century that the picture gains its independence of the word and, consequently, of the world:

Die Kinderbücher dienen ja nicht dazu, ihre Betrachter in die Welt der Gegenstände, Tiere und Menschen, in das sogenannte Leben unmittelbar einzuführen. Ganz allmählich findet deren Sinn im Außen sich wieder und nur in dem Maße wie es als ihnen gemäÙes Inneres ihnen vertraut wird. Die Innerlichkeit dieser Anschauung steht in der Farbe und in deren Medium spielt das träumerische Leben sich ab, das die Dinge im Geiste der Kinder führen.²⁴

What comes to the forefront now is color.

To Benjamin, color is the means used to translate the world into children’s imagination. Here, things are visible not in their traditional definitions, but in the scope of their potential and surprising relationships they create outside their technical physiology. Absolute color (*absolute Farbe*) provides images with an indefinite outline as the border between two colors is not discrete but rather continuous, with hues leading from one color into another:

[die kindliche Auffassung der Farbe] sie erhebt diese Bildung zu einer geistigen, da sie die Gegenstände nach ihrem farbigen Gehalt anschaut und folglich nicht isoliert, sondern sich die zusammenhängende Anschauung der Phantasiewelt in ihnen sichert.²⁵

The knowledge the child acquires through color resembles heavenly knowledge in its intricate pattern of original connections between things. In the following, we will try to show how this reference becomes a modality of memory and of positioning in history. For the time being, from an “epistemological” point of view, this is a special relationship between subject and object which Benjamin invokes in other texts as well (e.g. the hashish-induced perception, or the so-called “physiognomic” knowledge typical of *flaneur*) – the transference/colportage (*Kolportage*). Thus, traces and determinations migrate from one thing to the other with a deconstructive effect on their identity which results in an ontological continuity. This process enables us to contemplate the world as a receiver of revelation. As revelation cannot be contained in distinct things taken separately, it resides in the space between things, in their differences, in the intrinsic negativity of the world. The original wholeness of revelation²⁶ is recaptured by a contemplation at the surface of the world, which bears the traces of the divine unity of forms: “Denn nirgends ist so wie in der Farbe die sinnliche Kontemplation zuhause.”²⁷ A vivid illustration of this is the magical topography in *Abendländischen tausendundeinen Nacht* by J. P. Lyser, where a fantastic Europe is suggested by a collection of obscure tiny German towns.

For the time being, we need to mention one more text to support the metaphysics of this image: *Der Regenbogen* (1915),²⁸ a fictional dialogue on color and the “epistemological mechanisms” of fantasy. Benjamin defines the role of color in the perception of innocence (*Unschuld*) of the world by putting aside the boundaries and singleness of things which are justified in a metaphysics of substance. Color is not substance (*Substanz*), but mere characteristic (*Eigenschaft*), or infinite determination. More than that, through color, the world gives itself to a receptivity unlimited by some form or intellectual law:

Diese Empfängnis aus Phantasie ist keine Empfängnis des Vorbilds sondern der Gesetze selbst. Sie würde den Dichter seinen Gestalten selbst vereinigen im Medium der Farbe. Ganz aus Phantasie schaffen, hiege göttlich sein. Es hieße ganz aus den Gesetzen schaffen, unmittelbar und frei von der Beziehung auf sie durch Formen.²⁹

Thus, if we put aside the synthesizing functions of the intellect and so convert the concept into a mere effect instead of principle of knowledge, then we open the way to a strange Neo-Platonism: color appears as simplicity of origin and its infinite multiplication. Emanation is now a hue movement, a varying intensity, a deviation from the initial order of the rainbow. Moreover, color guides the gaze on finite things: color gives them a face, a physiognomy. It is not the outline that gives things their face and identity, but the contrast against a background.³⁰ Thus, their identity is spatial and exclusive. The line separates and identifies. By contrast, color shows the object and brings it to the foreground. Color does not delineate, but gives shape to a face. It is an innocent appearance, devoid of intentionality that might disrupt the primordial harmony. Children's books, as Benjamin suggests at the end of the dialogue, are the solid proof of this innocent nature,³¹ just like their magic games which, in fact, belong to the same metaphysics of color, faces and hues.

If, to a child, the color of illustrations translates a metaphysics of the original continuity of the world, black and white illustrations play a complementary epistemological role: "Das farbige Bild versenkt die kindliche Phantasie träumerisch in sich selbst. Der schwarz-weiße Holzschnitt, die nüchterne prosaische Abbildung führt es aus sich heraus."³² Color entails a sensitivity for a "pure receptivity" of the world, whereas black and white illustrations draw the viewer right into the universe of the image. As Benjamin notes in his piece *Aussicht ins Kinderbuch* (1926), the incompleteness of these illustrations calls for an imaginative addition to them: they invite the word, or rather it invites the gazing child to the word. As the illustration in the book needs its word (*Aufforderung zur Beschreibung*), it can be compared to a hieroglyph. Some considerations in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925) are illustrative. In the section regarding allegory, Benjamin considers hieroglyphic writing as the most evident link between modern people and the ancient: the enigmatic writing of the Egyptians inspires in the Romantic soul a "mysticism of nature" where writing is not related to the sounds the words are made of, but to the very things. The hieroglyph is an image of things (*Dingbilder*) after being an image of the divine logos thousands of years before (*Abbild der göttliche Ideen*). To understand the unchanging and eternal character of the world is to have access to the secret knowledge of sacred art. This revelation though does not come in the form of a statement or spiritual symbol, but it deconstructs either of these:

Das Bild im Feld der allegorischen Intuition ist Bruchstück, Rune. Seine symbolische Schönheit verflüchtigt sich, da das Licht der Gottesgelahrtheit drauf trifft. Der falsche Schein der Totalität geht aus. Denn das Eidos verlischt, das Gleichnis geht ein, der Kosmos darinnen vertrocknet.³³

Hieroglyphic image does not contain a symbolic, but an allegoric message. In other words, it requires going through an infinite network of encryption and reference that comes from the power of a meaning and is part of the world of magical similarities. With black and white illustrations, the child is awoken to these allegorical similarities of the world and the magical reading of the runes.

Illustrations, both color and black and white, form a separate universe of childhood, albeit a separate metaphysical instance where things exit their daily "reified" functional routine so that they can speak of their own origin. Thus, the child's knowledge becomes a form of memory. In *Zu einer Arbeit über die Schönheit farbiger Bilder in Kinderbüchern* (1918/1921), Benjamin equates reading illustrated children's literature with Platonic anamnesis: "Sie [die Kinder] lernen in der Erinnerung an ihre erste Anschauung."³⁴ The transferral of perception coming from pure color on the one hand, or the network of allegorical similarities of monochrome images on the other, enable the child to gain knowledge of a part of the world by generalizing on significant detail. In his imagination, a cloud is recognizable because of its shape which, just a minute ago, was running in the field as a rabbit, while the cold hues in the big urban buildings are seen every time in a different manner: now in strong contrast to a spring view, then in a grey monotony of winter. All these modalities of looking cause a deconstruction of the conceptual identity of things and a reconstruction of their appearance as a face saturated with fluid features. The child's memory-based knowledge does not seek (*sehnsuchtslosen Erinnerung*) the field of ideas or primary knowledge. Memory is a continuous flow of knowledge. The child's experience (*Erfahrung*) reflects this continuity in the way he reconstructs disparate details into a physiognomy. It is not immediate, nor is it a form of synthesis. In this sketch, Benjamin notes that one of the important principles in the analysis of children's literature by Heinrich Hoffmann is "[die] Ablehnung jedes synthetischen Prinzips,"³⁵ or the absence of the concept as principle in learning about the object. Also, the immediate character of the experience is denied because, in both cases, the experience of memory is compressed in its final point – the awareness of an end-result reached too soon and, "therefore" so

to say, too slowly. In children's experience, just like in the case of the idler³⁶ (mentioned in another place), there is no rush for the end-result. Memory unfolds the world in an authentic, unlimited manner, comparable to another example of waiting: the waiting for the coming of the Messiah is just as genuine when people are not constantly watching for signs or maintaining a hysterical fear about the end.

If we translate this into a theory of image in children's books, we may say that such a theory implies a modality of deconstruction of representation, a mechanism of identification/separation of objects and, at the same time, their symbolic character. Outlines, color, and forms are reconstructed by the laws of nuances and similarities, and the reader is, in a "real" way, a character in the image. We will come back to show how hyper-reality³⁷ as it is reflected in children's literature goes beyond the idolatrous representation of the world and enables a fantastic universe not strange to the one in Bosch's paintings.

Another example of Benjamin's theory on image is photography. The main concern he expresses in his discussion of photography though is different from his views on children's literature. In this case, it is not about constructing a face of the world, but rather of assuming its memory. The political implications of photography will be left in background for the benefit of its historical status. The main question becomes now, *How can memory be represented?* Finally, another path will take us from this answer back to Bosch: experience itself, and not the idea of it, is under scrutiny because of the relationship between photography and reality.

Photography. On memory and aura

Published in *Die literarische Welt* in 1931, the piece *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*³⁸ announces some of the important points in *Passagen-Werk*, as well as his far more famous article *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935/1939). In this position, the small account on the beginnings of photography presents an important thematic node regarding the relationship between art and technology, image and its reproducible character, and the political relationship between the "new" arts and their public.

For the current approach, it is important to remember an observation Benjamin makes at the beginning of the text. It is about the difference between the way we perceive the subject of a painting versus the subject

of a photograph. In the former, the interest for the represented character fades in time. The painter's art will remain with the public, and painting testifies of this art, and not of its own subject. But in photography, its subject transcends the artist's technique:

in jenem Fischweib aus New Haven, das mit so lässiger, verführerischer Scham zu Boden blickt, bleibt etwas, was im Zeugnis für die Kunst des Photographen Hill nicht aufgeht, etwas, was nicht zum Schweigen zu bringen ist, ungebärdig nach dem Namen derer verlangend, die da gelebt hat, die auch hier noch wirklich ist und niemals gänzlich in die *Kunst* wird eingehen wollen.³⁹

Unlike Beaudelaire, in the early days of photography, Benjamin believes that technology can create a magical impression of reality and a depth that painting is unable to convey. Photography is the image of a past captured in the contingency of an instant. The optic unconscious of the image (*Optisch-Unbewußten*) generates the future fascination for the represented fragment of life. The detail becomes more significant than the whole, the insignificant instant more relevant than the one carefully chosen to immortalize history. Benjamin questions the debate on the relationship between photography and reality as making/taking even before it is clearly formulated. Photography creates a world which is real and imaginary at the same time, like in dreams just about to break into waking (*Wachträumen*). Benjamin uses the same comparison to describe one of his central concepts – dialectic image⁴⁰ (*Dialektisches Bild*). Even in the early days of photography, the magical effect (which will disappear) is given by the ephemeral captured for eternity, the central detail, and the unveiled anonymity. In the anonymous picture (1850) selected by Benjamin, the folds in Schelling's coat are immortalised for eternity together with the coat's owner.

Early photographs, such as those of David Octavius Hill, preserve this role of magical revelation of traces, details, gazes of the past. The slow technology and long exposure time contribute to the "fantastic" effect of representation because of a visible continuity in the nuances of light, "absoluten Kontinuum von hellstem Licht zu dunkelstem Schatten,"⁴¹ a reminiscence of the *mezzotint* and premise for the aura effect (auratische Erscheinung). The advancement of photographic technology will eliminate this effect. An example is the studio photograph of the child Kafka.

The studio creates an artificial setting and proposes a fake photographic intention, which results in a less-than-real impression upon the viewer. Its stillness and conventionality display a search which reality can no longer match but technology tries to. Commercial/advertising photography, just like its programmatic opposite “art” photography, eliminates the auratic effect of reality: the former falsifies it, the latter refuses it.

But how is this effect to be understood? “Aura” is difficult to define in an unvarying manner in Benjamin’s writings. As Miriam Bratu Hansen notes,

Benjamin’s deployment—and remarkably longtime avoidance—of the term *aura* is informed by the very field of discourse from which he sought to disassociate the term.⁴²

We will refer to the meaning of the term in relation to *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*; more specifically, as a possible representation of memory. Here Benjamin defines aura as “Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag.”⁴³ So, initially, the aura represents the unique quality of photographic representation, its irrepeatability and thus its invisibility to ordinary perception. The infinite reproduction of commercial photography leads to a loss of the aura just because it is repeated for the sake of the disposability. Of course, even in reproducible art technology can forge an aura; but even this case it must be denounced as a mere ideological product. As long as the aura is an integral part of representation, it is legitimate to inquire into its sources. Bratu Hansen supplements this definition with another one from *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1939): “Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen.”⁴⁴ The two, the author argues, meet in a third in *Passagen-Werk*: “meine Definition der Aura als der Ferne des im Angeblickten erwachenden Blicks.”⁴⁵ So, the aura can be defined in the light of Benjamin’s later texts as a singular point of contact between the past and the present contemplated by the viewer or reader. The interest for the particulars of the characters in the picture is not just a curiosity of the present, but a reply to a call from the past.

According to Bratu Hansen, a first consequence is that the aura is not emanated by the represented character or thing, but comes from the environment, the magical interval connecting the two gazes:

In other words, aura implies a phenomenal structure that enables the manifestation of the gaze, inevitably refracted and disjunctive, and shapes its potential meanings.⁴⁶

Just like language, thought or memory, she argues, the “auratic” environment of the represented gaze is the intermediary space which constructs and conveys meaning. The camera as a technical object that reflects this gaze immortalises it, transmits it and thus enables the present response of the viewer. What is said in the text about Beaudelaire becomes of essence. In Section XI, Benjamin understands the aura as the entire universe of representation (*Vorstellungen*) with which involuntary memory surrounds the perception of an object.

The reference to involuntary memory in the description of the auratic medium indirectly suggests another point of interest in Benjamin’s texts: the modern positioning in history as a form of Messianic wait. In Benjamin’s view, the Messianic wait is distorted by the ideology of progress and by a form of historicism forever looking towards the future. But the angel of history, an image long discussed in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940), only looks back towards the past. In other words, the Messianic calling does not come from a present time heading towards an “empty” future, but from an endangered past calling for its salvation. In the case of the aura seen as involuntary memory, the Messianic calling represents a warning to the present to beware of oblivion. The temporal aspect of aura becomes of essence as now we can answer the original question, *How can memory be represented in photography?* It is not by capturing a souvenir, a moment or thing the photographer wants to remember. Memory is not represented as intention, but as an invisible interpellation of the picture, as an experience of a world it reveals where the character’s gaze and the viewer’s answer are magically included.

The text about Beaudelaire denies the auratic value of photography, considering it just a matter of technical reproduction designed to satisfy the subjective need of memory. Other texts mentioned here though, such as the one about the history of photography, admit this value in its early days. But fashion imposes that the aura be simulated, which turns it into a commodity. We do not intend to explain this distinctions here.⁴⁷ But at least from one point of view, image can hold a magical function of triggering involuntary memory and giving the viewer a mediated, mirrored encounter with his own self “separate from and outside our waking, everyday self.”⁴⁸ This encounter is an experience in its own right:

Wo Erfahrung im strikten Sinn obwaltet, treten im Gedächtnis gewisse Inhalte der individuellen Vergangenheit mit solchen der kollektiven in Konjunktion.⁴⁹

As Benjamin shows further below, experience comes from the very interpellation, not from intention, from the calling of the past and not from the intended action of the present.

In a short text about Proust quoted by Bratu Hansen – *Aus einer kleinen Rede über Proust, an meinem vierzigsten Geburtstag gehalten* (1932) – Benjamin compares involuntary memory to our dreams in which we participate, or to the quick succession of images from our own life when we are facing death. The strangeness and familiarity meet in the same act of perception, like meeting one's own pre-historical origin (*Urvorgangenheit*), or like crossing the Mothers' land – which Benjamin often invokes, thinking of Goethe.

The optic unconscious of photography redefines subjective perception. Benjamin describes perception not as an empirical reconstruction of the object's identity, but as the development of its own determinations (traces and features) that compose a face. He often chooses to recall Novalis' words: "Die Wahrnehmbarkeit [ist] eine Aufmerksamkeit." Attention, similar to the "monastic"⁵⁰ character of the gaze, is already an important concept in *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1919) from an ontological point of view. It refers to the speculative character of nature seen as reflexivity:

kann doch jene Aufmerksamkeit auf den Sehenden sinngemäß nur als Symptom für die Fähigkeit des Dinges, sich selbst zu sehen, verstanden werden.⁵¹

The metaphysical theme of subject-object opposition is first tackled in Hegelian philosophy, and then in Romanticism. Benjamin explores this critique of representation and, in his early texts, views it in connection with a philosophy of nature before he turns back to art. Involuntary memory is the "medium" of reflexivity, the aura of the work of art. In memory, the object speaks to a subject which recognizes and defines itself in this "dialogue." The experience of such an object becomes a messianic crossing of memory.

In *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, photography is the star of such an experience. The representation it contains is not of an abstract

and artificial image (*Vorbild*) of the world but, as Bratu Hansen notes, an original image thereof (*Urbild*) which can transmit the calling of the past. The original/authentic character of the historical world, which is persistent though invisible, forms the content of a photograph, its initial message.

The negative connotation of the aura in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, or the simplification of photography down to reproduction technology we find in Baudelaire's essay, can be explained starting from the fact that Benjamin took a new interest in the archaeology of modernity and its theory of representation. For the purpose of present enterprise two main aspects of this archaeology are important. First, it is the impossibility of experience caused by the hysterical novelty of modernity which brings the "form" of shock. Then, it is the decline of the aura through ideological forgery which determines political changes in the status of art. In the following, we will deal with the first aspect. For the time being, we can only give a brief account of the second without losing sight of the initial question about the representation of memory.

In the essay about Beaudelaire, Benjamin defines the impression of modernity as "die Zertrümmerung der Aura im Chockerlebnis."⁵² Here, as in the other text about the reproduction of art, aura has a new meaning: it is still a gaze, an interpellation of the object, but at the same time it indicates the inclusion of a work of art in a tradition. The aura of a historical object, unlike the natural object, indicates its worship value. The disappearance of ritualistic art (including the secularized form of aesthetic contemplation) causes the destruction of the aura, especially by technical reproduction. On the one hand, it tears the artistic object out of its meaningful and unique context:

Die Kathedrale verläßt ihren Platz, um in dem Studio eines Kunstfreundes aufnahme zu finden; das Chorwerk, das in einem Saal oder unter freiem Himmel exekutiert wurde, läßt sich in einem Zimmer vernehmen.⁵³

On the other hand, it is taken out of the viewer's reach, which gives it a significant political function. Last but not least, in photography and cinema, attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) goes to detail and aspects which escape ordinary perception. The new status of art is secular, public and "materialistic."

In modernity, the aura – ideologically mimicked in fascist art – is rapidly fading away in order to make room for the "new" image liberated from the brutal status of uniqueness, from the ritualistic function it is prone to in the

political religions of the century. In this political confrontation between various statuses of art, memory gradually becomes a simple recollection, a souvenir, because it no longer implies the authentic calling of the past, but pinning it down forever. The “aesthetics of the political,” as fascism shaped it, implies an artificial ritualism of memory and a hyperbolized view of total destruction. But we still have to ask whether the communist politicization of art,⁵⁴ which Benjamin substitutes for this disintegration of image, has resources for recovering the “truth” of art. The answer is negative, and Scholem draws attention on that. Instead, there are a number of alternatives for reassuming an experience scenario, such as the restoration of the narrative in *Der Erzähler* (1936), or even the discussions on caricature in *Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker* (1937), albeit indirectly.

This approach can be further explained with Susan Buck-Morss’ text *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered*.⁵⁵ The author describes the modern strategies of defence in front of the shock caused by novelty and the disappearance of the requisites for experience, e.g. memory:

Under extreme stress, the ego employs consciousness as a buffer, blocking the openness of the synaesthetic system, thereby isolating present consciousness from past memory. Without the depth of memory, experience is impoverished. The problem is that under conditions of modern shock-the daily shocks of the modern world-response to stimuli without thinking has become necessary for survival.⁵⁶

Daily automatism, drugs, or entertainment show how the thing becomes a phantasmagoria, a veil of verisimilitude. At least theoretically, and Benjamin’s text about the reproduction of art allows this reading, there can be dramatic consequences.

How can modern humanity, in full crisis of experience, look upon its own destruction with content? Buck-Morss echoes Benjamin’s question. Her reply starts from a 1936 conference Lacan held in Marienbad. The fact that a child aged between six and eighteen months can recognize his own reflection and, in his imagination, identifies himself with it is explanatory:

This narcissistic experience of the self as a specular “reflection” is one of mis(re)cognition. The subject identifies with the image as the *form* (*Gestalt*) of the ego, in a way that conceals its own lack. It leads, retroactively, to a fantasy of the “body-in-pieces” (*corps morcelé*).⁵⁷

Infant narcissism can be used as an analogy to the historical perception of Nazism and its specific construct, i.e., the image of a strong, mechanical, apparently invincible body, created in response to the phantom of the “dismembered body.” Its aesthetics, Buck-Morss argues, serves to anaesthetize the perception of pain and shock in front of an estranged modernity. At this point, with a narcissistic projection in mind, Benjamin’s theory of aura takes a dramatic turn. When aura disappears from the image (at the onset of critical and political photography), it activates the mechanism of this phantasmagoria which veils the utter degradation of reality and, in the end, our own body. Criticism keeps aesthetics away from its anaesthetic effect, and the disappearance of aura becomes the typical deconstructive act. The futuristic motto *fiat ars – pereat mundus* illustrates the preference for a destructive image which is not based on experience but emanates pure ideological violence. In such an aesthetic context there is no room for memory. As we tried to show, it does not reside in the content of representation, but in the space which separates and connects representation and viewer, i.e., the experience of image.

Interpretation: experience and trace

This study is based on two ways of understanding the conception of image. First, in Bosch’s painting, based on the outstanding interpretation of Marin Tarangul. On the other hand, the magic in the illustrations made for children’s books, as viewed by Benjamin, completed with the magic in old photographs. As we stated at the beginning, there are few direct connections between these two hallmarks in the history of image. And yet, they cannot be overlooked. The “physiognomy of the General” in Bosch’s paintings, the reality and peculiarity of his characters are also found in the illustrations made for children’s books as performances of color rather than lines. The fluidity of determinations transferred into Bosch’s compositions, instrumentally joined by perception as “reading method”, is related to Benjamin’s metaphysics of color and the photographic representation of the “optic unconscious.” The two interpretations of image share the view of material ruin and the hieroglyphic value of detail.

Another short text by Benjamin, *Malerei und Graphik* (1917), can suggest an interesting approach to both painting and illustration/photography. The author notes that, as a rule, the painting is exhibited for viewing in a vertical position, whereas in the case of graphics, drawing or mosaic, the picture

is laid horizontally. The different positioning is more than a circumstantial difference, it suggests different ways of reading and ontological responses to the world: "Man könnte von zwei Schnitten durch die Weltsubstanz reden: der Längsschnitt der Malerei und der Querschnitt gewisser Graphiken."⁵⁸ At the crossing point between these two planes, so to say, we find the gaze of viewer who plunges into the image and is drawn by it. In other words, this is the very point for a dialectic of image as experience, its dual condition. The brief account of Manet's potentially speculative painting indicates one such prerequisite for this experience. Another one is suggested in Benjamin's imaginary dialogue between the child and the illustration, or the fascination triggered by David Octavius Hill's photography. In fact, in both situations, experience implies an availability for the invisible through image. In conclusion, we will try to outline an aesthetic-metaphysical reading, at least in Benjamin's case, of the idolatry ban.

"Experience" is, like most others Benjamin explores, a plural concept.⁵⁹ This becomes manifest especially where priority is given to the modern crisis of experience rather than the concept itself, i.e., its conversion into a mere lived experience (*Erlebnis*), due to a more profound crisis of memory. The essay about Beaudelaire is of essence here because Benjamin understands modernity both as a loss of the sense of history, and as a crisis of perception or the political coming of a new subject – the urban masses. Experience has a different meaning for each of these three. There are three issues on the matter of image discussed here.

One of them is a specification of experience in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (1918). In a fascinating critique to Kant (seen as a source of any "future philosophy"), Benjamin separates the concept from the limits of knowledge on nature so as to extend it to other domains the philosopher denied a scientific approach: religion, history, language. When Benjamin defines experience as "die einheitliche und kontinuierliche Mannigfaltigkeit der Erkenntnis,"⁶⁰ he assumes it unifies the system of disparate areas of knowledge. This merge occurs when the object is perceived through its divine (later, historical) origin and the world of the intellect itself appears as a whole. Thus experience gets a first "epistemological" meaning: the perception of the object not as related to a subject's intention, but as an ontological wholeness visible through its origin.⁶¹ Later texts such as *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920) or *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925) follow this idea and shape the experience as a Platonic salvation (*Platonische Rettung*) of the thing in its divine idea, principle, or origin.

In other texts, later on, Benjamin focuses on the object in its historical placement. He undertakes a noticeably theological-political approach grounded in the issue of Messianism. Here, experience is an act where the “historical index” of the thing is released from the reification of the present. This historical index is in fact the messianic calling of the past: “Die Vergangenheit führt einen heimlichen Index mit, durch den sie auf die Erlösung verwiesen wird.”⁶² In other words, historical experience means a realization of all the possibilities of the past in danger of extinction. To Benjamin, an illustration of historical experience is the patcher who (*Lumpensammler*) collects the junk left behind by technological progress in order to put it to a new use. The ruins of things, Benjamin shows, have a weak messianic calling, a need to be remembered and to realize lost possibilities. The answer to this messianic calling is the meaning of historical experience: two gazes meeting, one discarded from the past, the other saving from the present. Involuntary memory is their meeting point. In this context, the present moment bears the supreme responsibility of unexpectedly welcoming the Saviour. Benjamin calls this present of responsibility the “now” of recognition (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*).⁶³ So, historical time is not the empty and homogeneous time of historicism – see *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940) – but turns up during the experience as a pregnant time of Messianic wait. Benjamin’s theological discourse has political implications too. The messianic present is a prerequisite for the revolution that saves the “tradition of the oppressed.”⁶⁴ Once again, experience shifts meanings in terms of political context of this discussion. In fact, chronologically speaking, the political meaning prevails in Benjamin’s preoccupations. In 1913, the *Anfang*, the press voice of the movement Freie Studentenschaft headed by Gustav Wyneken, Benjamin publishes the article *Erfahrung* intended as a programme of (ideal) renewal. But the political meaning of the concept is only visible after a theological re-reading. In this text, it represents an attempt to deconstruct the present, to break the continuity and the generalizing instances of history; it fights against ideology and the noisy domination of the winners. But keeping in line with the theology of the concept, Benjamin indicates as agents of such an experience those figures rejected by the professional fighters of early 20th century, i.e., the “pub revolutionaries” that Marx loathed. Theologically speaking, the endless chat seems to have more relevance than fighting proper or the planning thereof.

These meanings of experience can also be found in the experience of image. In fact, as Martin Jay shows in a European synthesis of the concept

of experience, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*,⁶⁵ Benjamin's interest for experience grows in the same time as his preoccupation for the metaphysics of color. Howard Caygill, in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, radicalizes this hypothesis. On the one hand, it is Benjamin's understanding that, in children's eyes, color comes before forms: in fact, the mixing of colours gives distinct individuality to objects and characters. On the other hand, children's play represents an implicit critique of school Kantianism in that it is a (secularized) reiteration of the original mimetic ability, of the confusion between magic and the real thing,⁶⁶ which is more than a mere reduction of knowledge to phenomenon and the hazy subject-object distinction in Western metaphysics. In the illustrations for children's books, as well as in children's play, historical experience (which Benjamin attributes especially to the idler, collector or story-teller) plays the role of aura in the perception of color. As for early photography, experience acquires various values depending on memory as a meeting point and speculative mediation between subject and object. The intrinsically narrative character of experience described in *Der Erzähler* refers to the consistency of this medium:

By memory . . . not as the source but as the Muse, Benjamin seems to have meant a mode of relating to the past that did not claim the ability to recapture retrospectively the entirety of what had preceded the present as if it were a single coherent plot.⁶⁷

Thus, the image experience is nothing more than sensing a double invisibility: that of color continuity of the world, and that of the calling from the past to the arrogant present. To catch the invisible gaze of the thing, the refined perception of the child or the materialist historian is in fact a double act caused by the invisible interpellation: to deconstruct the conceptual identity of the visible, and to reconstruct its face. The hard identity of things is deconstructed by halting perception at the surface of the world with respect for its concealing veils:

Not surprisingly, Benjamin would once again invoke Goethe's concept of "tender empiricism," the non-dominating relationship with objects that he had employed in his analysis of mimesis, to characterize the work of one of his favourite Weimar photographers: August Sander.⁶⁸

In the end, experience may be restored (now, as an aesthetic experience) in the context of its modern decline in the act of reading the image by simply sensing the surface. Where man lacks the magic mimetism of yore and is incapable of a real and ritualistic identification with the world, he has a perceptual identification in its own right. We need to mention another important concept in Benjamin's view, even if in passing. The trace (*Spur*) is the antonymic counterpart of the aura (*Aura*):

Spur und Aura. Die Spur ist Erscheinung einer Nähe, so fern das sein mag, was sie hinterließ. Die Aura ist Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah das sein mag, was sie hervorruft. In der Spur werden wir der Sache habhaft; in der Aura bemächtigt sie sich unser.⁶⁹

The two engage in a dialectic conflict when the face of things is reconstructed. The photographic aura implies that the picture itself gazes from afar in the direction of the viewer. The two gazes meet in the space of memory as they reconstruct the face of the past and the experience of recognition. Involuntary memory releases the features of this face in the form of traces and floating determinations (e.g. perfume or taste in Proust's writing) which are then transferred and reconstructed with each realization of the possibilities of the past:

Erfahrung, in contrast, involved the ability to translate the traces of past events into present memories but also to register the temporal distance between now and then, acknowledge the inevitable belatedness of memory rather than smooth it over, and preserve an allegorical rather than symbolic relationship between past and present (and thus between present and potential future).⁷⁰

The connection between interpellation and recognition describes the experience of image as possibility of deconstruction of identity and of releasing the singularity of the face.

We can illustrate this with a fragment, already mentioned above, from *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* where Benjamin speaks about the Victory Column, Siegessäule, in Berlin. In children's perception, there is no significance attached to the monument. Erected in the glorious memory (albeit ironical after the Versailles treaty) of Prussian victories, in children's eyes it is not perceived by its traditional symbolic representation. There is no connection between object and its significance. What children understand is the way lesser details of the monument come to the forefront:

dann wandte ich mich zu den bei den Vasallen, die zur Rechten und Linken die Rückwand krönten, teils weil sie niedriger als ihre Herrscher und bequem in Augenschein zu nehmen waren.⁷¹

The portico surrounding the base of the Column magically resembles the hell previously seen in an illustrated book. Similarly, the people on top appear as tiny dots on a cardboard (*Klebebilderbogen*). The characteristics of the monument are detached from the block of stone and transferred to foreign areas in play or dreams. The symbolic identity of the column becomes a face which can be recognized independent of its significant pedestal.

In these examples, image recreates things in a similar manner. In the end, we will try to look at this condition of representation in a more precise theological context, as an aesthetic interpretation of the idolatry ban. Benjamin does not manifest this intention explicitly. His texts show surprising inter-relations every now and then, so that some themes come back in different guises in other parts of his writing. In *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (1921) we find a theory of non-idolatrous representation. Without going too deep, we can notice that divine and absolute violence beyond legitimacy (similar to God's violence in the Old Testament) is invisible:

die entsöhnende Kraft der Gewalt für Menschen nicht zutage liegt. Von neuem stehen der reinen göttlichen Gewalt alle ewigen Formen frei, die der Mythos mit dem Recht bastardierte.⁷²

The invisibility of the power-holders in Kafka's novels is also an example of forbidden representation. In its ruined state, the world cannot host, or even mirror its origin. But it can be made visible at the edge of things, in the space separating and differentiating them, not in the things as such. Benjamin's texts about image are based on the same truth.

In the following, we will start from the concept of idol from a metaphysical point of view. In a strictly religious context, Alain Besançon,

God is not unrepresentable because of his nature, but because of the relationship he wishes to maintain with his people. (...) The (concealed) plans God has about this people justify the interdiction.⁷³

This observation gives idolatry a context confined to theology and politics. Still, a complementary remark about the original Judaic choice

leads to a metaphysical discussion: a theophany denied to sight is available to hearing. Without showing himself, God generously talks to people. The “logic” of the revelation of the word is different from that of plastic form and remains fundamental regardless of later history (often tolerant of image). “The most metaphysical of senses” as it was called, hearing implies a type of perception of a distinct dialectical form unlike optic representation. In a certain aspect of image, Benjamin finds this specific domain that transgresses form and guides the gaze towards a subtle ontology of color.

Apart from this historical and cultural point where idolatrous representation is banned, Benjamin adds a second reference point. We can trace it in Jean-Luc Marion’s work *L’idole et la distance*.⁷⁴ The author notes:

Le propre de l’idole tient donc en ceci: le divin s’y fixe à partir de l’expérience qu’en fait l’homme qui, pregnant appui sur sa méditation, tente d’attirer la bienveillance et la protection de ce qui y paraît comme dieu. (...) Elle [l’idole] se caractérise seulement par la soumission du dieu aux conditions humaines de l’expérience du divin.⁷⁵

The idol is not a deceiving representation, it is not insincere. But, before the interpellation of the divine, it is tailored to man’s liking, not the god’s. The problem is that the idol, though not false, is accessible, “ [elle] manque la distance qui identifie et authentifie le divin comme tel.”⁷⁶ In Benjamin’s terms, the god is a representation of the divine minus the aura, the distance that enables the two gazes to meet or, as Besançon argues, the verbal address. As Marion shows, the concept is an idol: it intermediates the possession over the thing, it makes the thing available (it objectifies it, in Kantian terms). The metaphysical representations of the supreme being are thus idolatrous, and Nietzsche puts an end to it.

A first way to step outside idolatry, according to the French philosopher, is the icon – an image whose intuition saturates the viewer’s intentionality. It certifies and melts the separating distance between the divine and the human:⁷⁷ it allows the eyes to meet. Then, we might ask whether Benjamin’s discussion about image is in line with this approach. There is a fragment at the beginning of his book that gives such a hint. It is a comparison Marion makes between icon and idol, starting from a metaphor.⁷⁸ The idol can be seen, analogically, as a “mirror topology,” an authentic but close image of our own experience of the divine. Conversely, the icon is like a prism that breaks white light into its component colours, a prerequisite of any sight. The invisible becomes visible across the prism.

For example, the colours of the icon do not resemble the colours of the real thing; their liturgical justification and coherence are strictly codified. The icon colours are a prismatic decomposition of the blinding light of the invisible.

Benjamin used the prism metaphor almost literally:

Der historische Materialist, der der Struktur der Geschichte nachgeht, betreibt auf seine Weise eine Art von Spektralanalyse. Wie der Physiker ultraviolett im Sonnenspektrum feststellt, so stellt er eine messianische Kraft in der Geschichte fest.⁷⁹

The historical experience is spectral because objects are not seen in their conceptual identity, but in their material texture, in the seemingly insignificant detail that give them a face. The state of ruin tells more about the thing than any encyclopaedia, and a spectral analysis makes this material face visible, historical (ephemeral, like any living reality) beyond its conceptual identity. Benjamin speaks in many places about how, in the trembling light of gas lamps, we see the city better than in the persistent brightness of electric streetlamps. In the same way, the moonlight makes a child's room come alive, with animated things, details and shapes which would go unnoticed in broad daylight. So, historical experience is not a matter of clarity of perception, but rather of shade, transferring features and effects of the surface rather than identities, details rather than the whole, color and sound rather than form.⁸⁰

The image experience is in turn related to the historical experience. In Marion's terms, it walks the infinite distance between the image and the viewer, between the visible representation and the thing which "narrates itself" through it. It is not an immediate aesthetic lived experience (*Erlebnis*), or an instantaneous reception of image by a subject, but a mediate crossing. In photography, involuntary memory fills the space where the two gazes meet. In book illustrations, the magical effect of color guides the view beyond form, towards its original continuity. In Benjamin's terms, the auratic image is (as mentioned before) an "Urbild," not "Vorbild," meaning that it is banned as idolatry, it does not represent the invisible dialogue of the eyes, but only makes it possible. Here, the history of image, its memory, occurs at the same time as post-history – i.e., the "realization" or the recognition of this memory.

Sound, voice, as an unseen and ineffable sign of an absolute presence, has a match in the magic of the illustrated books for children, or in the

old photographs: they all speak of interpellation, distance, hearing, sobriety, and decisive answer. With Benjamin, the interdiction of divine representation in Biblical Judaism becomes an interdiction of seizing in the image an outlined form, concept, or intellectual meaning. The perception of auratic image implies an ontological order where form, conceptual identity and message are mere abstractions.

What is this order? In fact, it is the same order that includes Bosch's fantastic creatures: "authentic" but unrecognizable, real but invisible, syntactically bound but individually evasive. The answer comes from an old spiritual tradition – *mundus imaginalis*, where the thing and its perception mirror each other.⁸¹ Image is the face of this world, the face of the things that can be seen only here. Once freed from conceptual synthesis, determinations can be magically recombined in epidemic identities which communicate with each other in infinite patterns. Only the moonlight or the gas lamp can give access to this realm. Just like the memory in *Berliner Chronik* (1932): when he was a child, one night, as he was walking with his mother in the snow-ridden city, little Walter had a revelation. The streetlamps made the Hallesches Tor, or the Belle Alliance square look like a postcard he had at home. The light, the magical colours, recombined into a face that stayed in his memory and later became decisive. The uncertainty of present perception is an undoubted sign of its "truth":

Vielleicht war an jenem Abend die Oper, auf die wir uns hinbewegten, jene Lichtquelle vor welcher die Stadt mit einem Mal so sehr verändert strahlte, vielleicht aber ist es auch nur ein Traum, den ich später von diesem Wege gehabt habe und von dem die Erinnerung sich an die Stelle derer gesetzt hat, die vordem Platzhalterin der Wirklichkeit war.⁸²

NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *GS III*, p. 506.
- 2 Benjamin, *GS V*, p. 448.
- 3 Benjamin, *Möbel und Masken. Zur Ausstellung James Ensor bei Barbazanges, Paris, GS IV*, p. 479, and a note in *GS II*, p. 1198.
- 4 Marin Tarangul, *Bosch*, Meridiane, București, 1974, pp. 5-25.
- 5 Benjamin, *GS III*, P. 367.
- 6 See Ioan Alexandru Tofan, *City Lights. Despre experiență la Walter Benjamin*, due for publication, Chap. I.
- 7 Tarangul, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 8 *Ibidem*, p. 6.
- 9 *Ibidem*, p. 5.
- 10 *Ibidem*, p. 15.
- 11 *Ibidem*, p. 21.
- 12 *Ibidem*, p. 18.
- 13 Hegel's definition: "Diese *dialektische* Bewegung, welche das Bewußtsein an ihm selbst, sowohl an seinem Wissen als an seinem Gegenstande ausübt, *insofern ihm der neue wahre Gegenstand* daraus *entspringt*, ist eigentlich dasjenige, was *Erfahrung* genannt wird." (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1998, p. 71). His *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* can be read as attempts to surpass traditional metaphysics. Hegel considers the latter, a philosophy of representation (*Vorstellung*), as a privileged example of abstract and finite thinking where the subject-object opposition is a premise of certainty. Speculative/concrete thinking goes beyond the opposition and changes representation into concept (*Begriff*). Taken in this sense, experience is the movement of a conscience which, knowing the object, knows its own self and finds itself as object. We will attempt to find the same speculative function of experience but without using Hegel as a direct source. The Romantic philosophy of nature, somewhat indebted to speculative philosophy, has the stronger influence in Benjamin's theory, in terms of both theme and concept.
- 14 Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Vezi? Despre privire în pictura impresionistă*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2007.
- 15 *Ibidem*, p. 21.
- 16 *Ibidem*, p. 55.
- 17 See Stoichiță's analysis in *ibidem*, pp. 61-64. Another interesting comparison is between Manet's and Degas' mirrors. Stoichiță shows that, to Manet, the mirror is the medium of "self-representation," whereas to Degas it is the space where the subject disappears.
- 18 Graham Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin. Critical Constelations*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 2002, p. 95.

- 19 See Ioan Alexandru Tofan, *op. cit.*, chap. IV.2.
- 20 The child is a magician, and the game hide-and-seek is a magical ritual of transformation. Benjamin's description in *Einbahnstrasse* (GS IV, p. 116), and in *Berliner Kindheit*, is endearing: "Das Kind, das hinter der Portiere steht, wird selbst zu etwas Wehendem und Weißem, zum Gespenst. Der Eßtisch, unter den es sich gekauert hat, läßt es zum hölzernen Idol des Tempels werden, wo die geschnitzten Beine die vier Säulen sind. Und hinter einer Türe ist es selber Tür, ist mit ihr angetan als schwerer Maske und wird als Zauberpriester alle behexen, die ahnungslos eintreten."
- 21 See Gilloch, in *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996.
- 22 Benjamin, "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher", GS III, p. 17.
- 23 See the 1929 text, *Kinderliteratur (Literarische Rundfunkvorträge)*, GS VII, pp. 250-257.
- 24 Benjamin, "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher", *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 25 Benjamin, *Die Farbe vom Kinde aus betrachtet* (1914-1915), GS VI, p. 110.
- 26 See Tofan, *op. cit.*, chap. II. Here, a discussion on the sources of Benjamin's view on history gives prominence to the 16th century Lurianic Kabbalah. In the philosophy of history, the recovery of the entirety of revelation is the task of memory. From an epistemological point of view, the transference of determinations can replace the Messianic role of memory. In the case of the hashish consumer (whose experience is basically theological, as Benjamin shows), or the child, the transfer is not in danger of subsequent conceptual re-formulation or forgery.
- 27 Benjamin, "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher", *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 28 Benjamin, *Der Regenbogen. Gespräch über die Phantasie*, GS VII, pp. 19-26.
- 29 *Ibidem*, p. 24
- 30 See *Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal* (1917), GS II, pp. 603-608.
- 31 "Das Bunte und Einfarbige, die schöne seltsame Technik meiner ältesten Bilderbücher. Weißt du, wie dort überall die Konturen in einem regenbogigen Spiele verwischt waren, wie Himmel und Erde mit durchsichtigen Farben strichhaft getuscht waren! Wie die Farben geflügelt immer über den Dingen schwebten, sie recht sehr färbten und verschlangen." in Benjamin, *Der Regenbogen*, ed. *cit.*, p. 25.
- 32 *Ibidem*, p. 20.
- 33 Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, GS I, p. 352.
- 34 *Idem*, *Zu einer Arbeit über die Schönheit farbiger Bilder in Kinderbüchern*, GS VI, p. 124.
- 35 *Ibidem*, p. 125.
- 36 See Tofan, *op. cit.*, chap. 3.
- 37 Concept also found in G. Steiner, "To speak of Walter Benjamin", *Benjamin Studien* 1/1, 2002. See I. A. Tofan, *op. cit.*, Introduction.

- 38 In *GS II*, pp. 368-385. A few translated fragments are in Anca Oroveanu, *Rememorare și uitare. Scrieri de istorie a artei*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 232-235. Also see Baudelaire Arnheim's texts, in *Antologie*, and Anca Oroveanu's discussion on the relationship between photography and "reality".
- 39 Benjamin, *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, ed. cit., p. 370. It is a photograph by David Octavius Hill, *Newhaven Fishwife*.
- 40 Benjamin defines dialectic image in *Passagen-Werk*: "Das dialektische Bild ist ein aufblitzendes. So, als ein im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit aufblitzendes Bild, ist das Gewesene festzuhalten." (*GS V*, p. 592) The complex of meanings in this concept is in constant change. So do the interpretations thereof (also see Tofan, *op. cit.*, chap. I.2). But the strategic role of "dialectic image" in discourse can be reduced to two main functions: to recover a past, in conflict with the present, by a necessary calling and a Messianic wait; and to deconstruct the dominant ideological and reifying instances of the present to make room for memory. In other words, the noise of the present needs to stop so we can hear the silence of the past. Among the metaphors used for this concept, Benjamin often invokes the boundary between dreaming and waking. It is Adorno's main objection regarding a subjective understanding the dialectic character of history, to which Benjamin replies in letters, insisting on the receptive role of the subject in this historical time.
- 41 Benjamin, *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, ed. cit., p. 376.
- 42 Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura", *Critical Inquiry* 34/2008, pp. 336-375.
- 43 Benjamin, *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, ed. cit., p. 378.
- 44 Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*, *GS I*, pp. 646-647.
- 45 Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, *GS V*, p. 396.
- 46 Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- 47 Bratu Hansen's text is brilliant in this sense.
- 48 Bratu Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 347.
- 49 Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 611.
- 50 One of the most frequently invoked texts on attention is the essay about Kafka: "Wenn Kafka nicht gebetet hat - was wir nicht wissen - so war ihm doch aufs höchste eigen, was Malebranche *das natürliche Gebet der Seele* nennt - die Aufmerksamkeit. Und in sie hat er, wie die Heiligen in ihre Gebete, alle Kreatur eingeschlossen." (*Franz Kafka. Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, 1934, *GS II*, pp. 409-438.) To Malebranche, prayer implies receptivity, receiving the grace or the unilateral act of the infinite upon the finite open to receive it. As a form of attention, prayer has the same receptive and unintentional character: binding the detail, the object's feature, is free listening to it and to the story it tells. Another text, *Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit*, in *Denkbilder* (1933, *GS IV*, pp. 407-408), is a dialectic completion to the theory on attention: the latter has meaning when it

- permanently claims its space (das Feld bestreitet) from habit (Gewohnheit). Benjamin describes the permanent oscillation between the two, listening and reply, or between strangeness and familiarity, in several paradigmatic situations such as the urban perception of the child, the physiognomy of the idler or the detective's investigation.
- 51 Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik, GS I*, p. 56.
- 52 Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire, ed. cit.*, p. 653.
- 53 Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (dritte Fassung), GS I*, p. 477.
- 54 See *Ibidem*, p. 508: "Das ist offenbar die Vollendung des l'art pour l'art. Die Menschheit, die einst bei Homer ein Schauobjekt für die Olympischen Götter war, ist es nun für sich selbst geworden. Ihre Selbstentfremdung hat jenen Grad erreicht, der sie ihre eigene Vernichtung als ästhetischen Genuß ersten Ranges erleben läßt. *So steht es um die Asthetisierung der Politik, welche der Faschismus betreibt. Der Kommunismus antwortet ihm mit der Politisierung der Kunst.*"
- 55 Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered", *October*, 62/1992, pp. 3-41.
- 56 *Ibidem*, p. 16.
- 57 *Ibidem*, p. 37. In what follows, we remain close to the author's considerations.
- 58 Benjamin, *Malerei und Graphik, GS II*, p. 603.
- 59 See Thomas Weber, "Erfahrung", in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. M. Opitz and E. Wizisla, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2000. In Tofan, *op. cit.*, we tried to integrate these starting from the three-dimensional character of the concept: epistemology, theology and politics are the main bases for the meanings which Benjamin attributes to experience.
- 60 Benjamin, *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie, GS II*, p. 168.
- 61 Gershom Scholem, in *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1975, pp. 73 și urm.), remarks Benjamin's prolonged interest in the meaning of philosophical reflection as *Lehre*, in a traditional Judaic sense: "Unterweisung nicht nur über den wahren Stand und Weg des Menschen in der Welt, sondern über den transkausalen Zusammenhang der Dinge und ihr Verfasstsein in Gott." Experience is, Scholem shows, an occupation whose object is spiritual order (geistige Ordnung), which it positions in place of the Kantian discussion on concepts. But spiritual order must not be seen as a spiritual model, nor essence, but the divine origin of the world which contains an absolute hierarchy of species.
- 62 Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte, GS I*, p. 691. Werner Hamacher also comments on this understanding of the historical index of the world (in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. A. Benjamin, Continuum, London, 2005): "The true historicity of historical objects lies in their *irrealis*. Their un-reality is the store-place of the historically possible. For their *irrealis* indicates a

direction through which that which could have been is referred to those for whom it could have been and for whom it is preserved as a – missed – possibility.”

63 See note 40 for one such famous occurrence of this concept.

64 See *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, section VIII. Also, Jacob Taubes, *Eschatologia occidentală*, TACT, Cluj, 2008, on Israel as “place of revolution.”

65 Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005.

66 In *Einbahnstrasse* (1923) and then in *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (1934), Benjamin gives a fascinating description of the mimetic “logic” of the hide-an-seek game: “Das Kind, das hinter der Portiere steht, wird selbst zu etwas Wehendem und Weißem, zum Gespenst. Der Eßtisch, unter den es sich gekauert hat, läßt es zum hölzernen Idol des Tempels werden, wo die geschnitzten Beine die vier Säulen sind. Und hinter einer Türe ist es selber Tür, ist mit ihr angetan als schwerer Maske und wird als Zauberpriester alle behexen, die ahnungslos eintreten” (Benjamin, *Einbahnstrasse*, GS IV, p. 116).

67 Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

68 *Ibidem*, pp. 338-339.

69 Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS V, p. 560.

70 Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 340..

71 Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*, GS IV, p. 241.

72 Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, GS II, p. 203. Benjamin Morgan comments, in his article “Undoing Legal Violence: Walter Benjamin’s and Giorgio Agamben’s Aesthetics of Pure Means”, *Journal of Law and Society*, 34/1, 2007, p. 52: “Where the recursive visibility of mythic violence offers a criterion for understanding it as its own end, the invisibility (sic!) of the ends of divine violence allows it to appear as pure means.”

73 Alain Besançon, *Imaginea interzisă. Istoria intelectuală a iconoclasmului de la Platon la Kandinsky*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1996, p. 79.

74 Jean-Luc Marion, *L’idole et la distance*, Grasset, Paris, 1977.

75 *Ibidem*, p. 23.

76 *Ibidem*, p. 25.

77 *Ibidem*, p. 277. Here, Marion starts from Lévinas’ considerations in *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l’extériorité* (1961). It does not refer to the icon directly. Other texts, e.g. *De surcroît. Études sur les phénomènes saturés* (2001) or *La croisée du visible* (1991), allow a parallel reading of these discussions. An almost literal translation.

79 Benjamin, *Paralipomena to Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, GS I, p. 1232.

80 In the Afterword to *Walter Benjamin, Vise*, Art, Bucharest, 2012, Burkhardt Lindner notes the presence of this preference for detail especially in the

narration of dreams: "The details are extremely clear and narratively closed; many a time, the colour and sound of the dream are specifically emphasized" (p. 136). The same can be said about historical experience which, in Benjamin's view, is intimately bound to dreams. See Tofan, *op. cit.*, section *Istoricul ca "Lumpensammler"/"chiffonier."*

⁸¹ See Andrei Pleșu, *Despre înșeri*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2003, especially pp. 69-70.

⁸² Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik GS VI*, p. 507.

Bibliography

- Benjamin, W., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (eds), vol. I–VII, Supl. I–III, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1972–1999.
- Benjamin, W., *Vise*, Art, Bucharest, 2012
- Besançon, A., *Imaginea interzisă. Istoria intelectuală a iconoclasmului de la Platon la Kandinsky*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1996
- Bratu Hansen, M., “Benjamin’s Aura”, *Critical Inquiry* 34/2008
- Buck-Morss, S., “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *October*, 62/1992
- Gilloch, G., in *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996.
- Gilloch, G., *Walter Benjamin. Critical Constelations*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 2002
- Hegel, G. W. F., *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1998
- Jay, M., *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005
- Marion, J.-L., *L’idole et la distance*, Grasset, Paris, 1977.
- Morgan, B., “Undoing Legal Violence: Walter Benjamin’s and Giorgio Agamben’s Aesthetics of Pure Means”, *Journal of Law and Society*, 34/1, 2007
- Oroveanu, A., *Rememorare și uitare. Scrieri de istorie a artei*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004
- Pleșu, A., *Despre înșeri*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2003.
- Scholem, G., *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1975
- Steiner, G., “To speak of Walter Benjamin”, in *Benjamin Studien* 1/1, 2002.
- Stoichiță, V. I., *Vezi? Despre privire în pictura impresionistă*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2007
- Tarangul, M., *Bosch*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1974
- Taubes, J., *Eschatologia occidentală*, TACT, Cluj, 2008
- *** *Benjamins Begriffe*, (eds. M. Opitz and E. Wizisla), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2000.
- *** *Walter Benjamin and History*, (ed. A. Benjamin), Continuum, London, 2005