

**Sensing-through Architectural Scenographies: Tactility, Language  
and Natural History in the Work of Walter Benjamin**

Anat Messing Marcus

Trinity Hall

September 2019

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Sections of Part One and Two have appeared in *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 93 (2018).

# **Sensing-through Architectural Scenographies: Tactility, Language and Natural History in the Work of Walter Benjamin**

**Anat Messing Marcus**

In its consideration of the work of the senses, notions of truth and language and political aesthetics in Walter Benjamin's epistemology of images, this thesis takes as its touch-stone Benjamin's somewhat overlooked meditations on the sensorial faculty of tactility ("das Taktische"). According to the first version of the "Work of Art" essay, along with the distinctive structures of perception of the new modes of reproduction, film and photography, architecture is the artistic domain which tactility most intimately inhabits, in which it is at home, "more originally". The nexus between tactility, through figures of touch, and affect as the absence of intentionality informs the Benjaminian settings of "natural history". These are scenographic sites permeated with "creaturely life" and perceived by way of melancholy and lament, as explicated in the early work *The Origin of the German Baroque Trauerspiel*. In this constellation, the sensual realm, mediated through the allegorical mode and the more non-intentional dimensions of signification, bears deepest affinity to the linguistic grounds of philosophical representation in Benjamin's terms.

The thesis develops this argument in a set of interlinked moves and theoretical directions, organised in three parts. Firstly, Benjamin's conceptualisation of architecture "as more than origin" is subjected to encounter with Hegel's account of architecture as symbolic art. In as much as tactility is indeed more originally "in der Architektur zuhause", this formulation also provides an intimation of the "Unzuhause", leading to Freud's interrelated theories of the uncanny and the articulation of the death drive, beyond the pleasure principle. Secondly, a reconstruction of Theodor W. Adorno's arguments set out in "The Idea of Natural History" exposes the juncture between Benjamin's and Martin Heidegger's approaches to the "secularisation of history" and the politico-theological dimension of historicity. The spectral character of spatiality in works by Kafka and Rilke, as mediated through the philosophical writings of these thinkers, proves significant for the scenographic thinking of this polemic on the essence of historical time. The third move explores auditory and tactile motifs at the border of language as they outline both Benjamin's essay on translation and his autobiographical writing in *Berliner Kindheit*. The core premise underlying these different moves is that sensorial experience "in tactility" bears on what this thesis takes as a persistent architectonic figure reverberating through Benjamin's work: the towering, ruinous logic of Babel.

## Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	i
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	ii
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	iii
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1

The Image – The Tactile – The Architectural – The Natural Historical

### Part One:

<b>Body Meets Architecture in Benjamin's Thinking of the Image</b> .....	21
I.    Architecture and the Teaching of Distraction/Dispersal.....	24
1) Architecture and Film .....	32
2) Tactile Embodiment.....	35
II.   The Image-like, the Imageless, the Name.....	39
1) The <i>Hülle</i> as the Organiser of the Symbolic.....	39
2) On the Definition of the Aura .....	42
3) The Mythic Archetype of the House in the <i>Wahlverwandtschaften</i> Essay. 46	
4) “Too Close” .....	50
III.  Namelessness and Speechlessness in/of Nature .....	54
1) Semblance and Play .....	54
2) The Image of Mute Nature.....	58
IV.  Language and the Tactile Unhomelike .....	61
V.   Habit and Attention.....	66
VI.  Back to Babel.....	69

### Part Two:

<b>Sites of Ruins, Ruination of Time: The <i>Stimmungen</i> of Natural History</b> .....	77
I.    The Ear Which Is Attuned to Lament .....	84
1) Profanation and Secularisation .....	84
2) The Presentiment of Mourning .....	88
II. <i>Stimmung, Stimme</i> .....	96
III.  Architectural Sections of Bare Life .....	100
1) Rilke's Wall and Baroque Allegory.....	100



2) Kafka's <i>Der Bau</i> .....	104
IV. Melancholic Immersion and the Sense of the Deep.....	108
V. The Secularisation of History in Space in The Dialectical Image .....	113
VI. A Baroque Balcony and the Allegorical Disclosing of an Empty Space.....	117
1) Baroque Body- and Image-Space .....	117
2) "No Pictorial Detour": The Borderline Case of Architecture.....	121
3) Baroque <i>Schauplatz</i> and the Being of Architecture.....	126

### **Part Three:**

<b>The Crypt, the Funnel and the Presentiments of Myth in <i>Berliner Kindheit</i> .....</b>	<b>132</b>
I. The Echo from the Crypt .....	133
II. The Architectonics of Original and Translation .....	138
1) On Some Tactile Motifs in the "Translator" Essay .....	138
2) Translation as <i>Schauplatz</i> .....	144
III. "Phantasie" between Expressionlessness and Inconspicuousness.....	149
1) On the Power of Deformation in the "Phantasie" Fragment.....	150
2) The Eye That Lays Bare .....	155
IV. The Presentiments of Natural History.....	157
V. "Der Mond" as a Critique of Violence .....	163

### **Tactility and the More Than Origin of the Law (Benjamin With Kafka)**

<b>(Conclusion).....</b>	<b>170</b>
--------------------------	------------

Bibliography .....	177
--------------------	-----

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Cambridge Trust for funding my doctoral research in the University of Cambridge. I am thankful to my college, Trinity Hall and to the German Department for the generous support which enabled me to participate in conferences and workshops in Dublin, Hannover, Oxford, Berlin and Philadelphia, as they led to many discussions and conversations that have informed this work.

I would like to express my extended gratitude to my supervisor, Andrew J. Webber, for his insightful comments and intellectual generosity throughout the whole process. I am extremely thankful for his patient guidance that allowed to stir ideas and thoughts. He had the vision to imagine the architectural scenographies in the texts, that are explored here and of this thesis.

I would like to thank my advisor Martin Crowley for ensuring I had a soft landing in my first term here. I thank Irit Katz for encouraging me to apply at Cambridge and for her support throughout these years. This research has been built upon the foundations that were laid while studying at Tel Aviv University alongside friends and colleagues. For their longstanding support and encouragement even from far away, I thank Carmella Jacoby Volk and Dror K. Levi.

I would like to thank Rabbi Mordechai Zeller and the Zohar reading group guided by him, which provided me with a space where mysticism and philosophy could meet. Many thanks and appreciation to Elizabeth Vargas Holguin who had the idea to set up together a Walter Benjamin Reading Group at Cambridge.

I would like to acknowledge the unconditional support of my parents, Haya and Yehoshua Messing. I thank Jessa Leff and Yael Pilowsky Bankirer for their invaluable intellectual companionship as well as their true friendship. This thesis is dedicated to my daughters Aya and Avigail and my husband David for their patience in bearing with me and love.

## List of Abbreviations

- NG*     Theodor W. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”, in *Philosophische Frühschriften, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 345-365
- NH*     Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History”, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (1984), 111-124
- GS*     Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols I-VII, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989). Followed by the volume number
- SW*     Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vols 1-4, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996). Followed by the volume number
- AP*     Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999)
- AW*     Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” [First Version], trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room* 39 (2010), 11-38.
- O*        Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019)
- VÄ*     Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vols I-III, in Hegel, *Werke* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1970). Followed by the volume number
- VA*     Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vols I-II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Followed by the volume number

## List of Figures

- FIGURE 1: “Plate 24”, scanned from Carl Linfert, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”, Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen I, 1931. p. 122
- FIGURE 2: “Plate 30”, scanned from Carl Linfert, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”, Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen I, 1931. p. 125
- FIGURE 3: “Plate 23”, scanned from Carl Linfert, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”, Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen I, 1931. p. 129

## Introduction

### *The Image*

The category of the image is perhaps the most perplexing of theoretical constructs underlying Walter Benjamin's thought, and it has accordingly proved to be a persistent concern of scholarship engaging with his work, including some of the most trenchant. The epistemological significance of visual perception has been accounted for by Sigrid Weigel in her reading of Benjamin. "For Benjamin", Weigel notes, "images are not the object, but rather the matrix and medium of his theoretical work."<sup>1</sup> According to Weigel's designation, Benjamin's figurative way of thinking is underscored by an "image-like" or "image-based (*bildliche*) epistemology".<sup>2</sup> It is an epistemology which is both complex and ambivalent. Alison Ross has shown that, throughout Benjamin's writings, the epistemological significance of visual perception unfolds in conjunction with a rigorous critique of the integrity of the image defined as "material or sensuous presentation of meaning".<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Winfried Menninghaus gave an account of Benjamin's "active production of the imageless", his "action of breaking with aesthetic phenomenality" in pointing to the fact that the *bildlos* aspect of the visual or the idea of *Scheinlosigkeit* have their roots in the Jewish prohibition of the image. As Menninghaus also remarks, "God's imagelessness has counted as a paradigm of aesthetics of the sublime since Kant and Hegel", and accordingly, the Judaic ban on graven images "informs almost all areas of Benjamin's thought: his theories of art and of language, moral philosophy and anthropology".<sup>4</sup>

According to Rebecca Comay, the inescapable imbrication of law and transgression prescribed by the *Bilderverbot* incites a desire for the manifestation of an absence and therefore an immersion within the imaginary, a dialectic reaction to the Judaic predominance of language over vision.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the image of an incorporeal God is the source which inevitably engenders an intensification of images. What is enhanced, however, is the sensuous body, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space, Rereading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (London: Routledge, 1996), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Weigel, "The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History", trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith and Christine Kutschbach *Critical Inquiry* 41.2 (2015), 344-366.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Variations of Imagelessness", *Critical Horizons* 14.3 (2013), 407-428 (p. 408).

<sup>5</sup> Comay, "Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*", in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 32-59 (p. 36; p. 35).

body that, according to same tradition, was created *in* the image of God. And yet the image ban, integral to Benjamin's writings, is subject to further displacement. This has been indicated by Helga Geyer-Ryan who evaluates the transgressive essence of Benjamin's use of images in positioning the latter in relation to language, the site of the symbolic order. As she observes, "Benjamin's fundamental violation of taboos consists of reintroducing images, both as object-representation and as tropes into the very territory of the logos: the written language."<sup>6</sup> Installing the image in the place of language provides the grounds for the logic of the scenography, a term extrapolated from Benjamin's meditations on the German Baroque setting or *Schauplatz*. This is the place of showing and looking, but also, the place whose scenic logic is worked through allegorical speech, through lament, and, through what Benjamin calls "expressionlessness".

Primarily, the image operates as a substitute for physical presence and bears on degrees of embodiment, in its relation to externality and otherness. Grounded on the exclusion of touch and restricted to the visual, what is to be embodied in the image is dialectically abstracted into that which is not only untouchable, but also rendered as a trace. This twofold displacement – from touch to sight and from presence to trace – mounts Benjamin's fundamental understanding of the image as bearing on an inconspicuous spot, or the place without the capacity of *Schein* – the "unscheinbare Stelle" – as it is formulated in "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie" (1931) (*GS* II:371, *SW* 2:510). According to the theory of allegorical "contemplative immersion" developed in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, it is the "abyss between image-being and meaning" (*GS* I:342, *O* 173) that emerges as a space subject to re-embodiment. The irrevocable gap incited by the economy of the image is a making room for the allegorical '*speaking* otherwise', as the etymology of allegory denotes. The interpenetration of speech and sound in the image, and with this, linguistic transmission, is therefore the focal point that comes to be manifested in Benjamin's epistemology of images. Moreover, the image, glossed as a visual, "image-being", calls on the ineliminable spatial attribute of allegory, namely its etymological indication of a materialised setting – a scenography – for the speaking other within the agora. This place of a collective assembly is the political space that is also organised around an inconspicuous spot – the interior space of the home, namely, the *oikos*, not least the space concerning gender, procreation and sexual difference.

The disfigurement of a particular way of speaking enacted by allegory informs the focal figure of the image in Benjamin's later conceptualisation of the image in the context of a new

---

<sup>6</sup> Geyer-Ryan, "Effects of Abjection in the Texts of Walter Benjamin", *MLN* 107.3 (1992), 499-520 (p. 516).

way of thinking historical time as set out in the *Passagen-Werk* and in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte”. For precisely, it is (linguistic) ambiguity – “Zweideutigkeit” – that is the “law” constitutive of the “dialectical image”; and therefore, “language”, in turn, is “the place”, “der Ort”, wherein the “(dialectical) image” is “encountered” ([N2a,3], *GS* V:577, *AP* 462). To the extent that “Bild ist Dialektik im Stillstand”, the thinking that is prompted by the “dialektische Bild” renders the present of the one who experiences it as a sequence of singular ‘nows’, pertaining, that is, to the intransmissibility of time. As the much-cited definition has it,

The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast-as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue [Die Rettung] that is carried out by these means – and only by these – can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost. [N 9, 7]

(*GS* V:592, *AP* 473)

The dialectical image, an image enflamed by dint of an optical exposure to the blinding, flashing light that it entailed, releases moments of corporeal danger and crisis. This experience, also designated as “Erlebnis”, draws away from the linear conception of time, from the experience defined as “Erfahrung” (an idea already set out in the early essay *Goethes Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, *GS* I:190, *SW* 1:347). The dialectical framing of the futile “rescuing” of that which inevitably succumbs to oblivion amounts to a “prophetic gaze that catches fire from the summits of the past”, as Benjamin remarks in ending the above-cited entry from the *Passagen-Werk*.

What is recorded in the dialectical image or in the thinking image that is classically constructed around it, is the experience of *intransmissibility* and *incommunicability*.<sup>7</sup> This negation of the semiotic functioning of language is nevertheless a dialectical attestation to its magical, immediate and mimetic side, namely, the paradisiac language prior to its fall, the underlying idea of Benjamin’s programmatic essay on language of 1916, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen”. The pertinence of the image to resemblance and likeness conveys a reference to the arbitrary meanings of sensual forms and therefore to the “bourgeois view of language”, the fallen language underscored by the prevalence of signs over names. Against semblance, Benjamin systematically sets forth the linguistic stance of the “expressionless” or “das Ausdruckslose” (for example in the early essay on Goethe), the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin, Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 140.

corollary of that which is *bildlos* on the level of the visual. The visual or the scopic might be displaced into the sphere of thinking, but this all the same means that thought is arrested into a configuration of “shock”, as it is famously stated in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte”.<sup>8</sup> The shuddering experience of tremor or shock, of “Erschütterung”, bears on the broken gaze (that of “Das brechende Auge”) which is the “ur-phenomenon of sinking semblance [verlöschende[n] Schein[s]]” (*GS* V:402, *AP* 302, translation modified), as Benjamin writes in one of the entries in the *Passagen-Werk*, in the convolute dedicated to Baudelaire. Not only do the image-like structures of Benjamin’s thinking need to be seen even as they are thought, but the fact that the images eradicate themselves suggests that they cannot break away from their manifestation within the sensory bounds of the lived body. And this, in turn, necessitates a critical consideration of the relation between images and the sensorium beyond the visual.

### *The Tactile*

This study’s aim is to pursue the complexities of Benjamin’s concept of the image by an examination of the various ways in which what is construed here within the notion of “tactility” – “im Taktischem”, to use Benjamin’s idiom – operates in them. This undertaking involves bringing into one focal point two of Benjamin’s most salient theoretical positions. On the one hand, there is the assumption regarding the image’s adherence to sensory experience beyond the visual. On the other – language’s trait of communicability beyond designation and difference. That Language performs the function of pure “Mitteilung” is disclosed by the disparity between “language as such” and the language of human beings.

The exploration of the tactile departs from one of Benjamin’s explicit formulations regarding the discrepancy of the aesthetic object, as cast between the optical and the tactile. According to the first version of the “Kunstwerk” essay, along with the distinctive structures of perception of new modes of reproduction, of film and photography, architecture is the artistic domain which “the tactile dominance” most intimately inhabits, in which it is at home, “more originally”, as the first version of the “Kunstwerk” essay has it. According to this essay, tactility, assigned to the medium of architecture in various historical and conceptual ways, partakes in Benjamin’s contention regarding modernity’s new political conditions shaped by the spatio-temporal displacements within the system of the sensorial, as it is prominently

---

<sup>8</sup> “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad”. (*GS* I:702-703, *SW* 4:396).



epitomised by the phenomenon of the decaying aura. Against the backdrop of the proliferation of reproducibility in the form of the image, the sensory character of architecture, according to Benjamin, is in no way limited to the visual; the meanings produced by architectural forms are equally, indeed more particularly, accessible to the more corporeal sense of touch.

In keeping with this fundamental disposition of the architectural, the scope of the three parts comprising this thesis is confined – albeit in a broad sense – to Benjamin’s treatment of architectural representations, spatial formations and significances permeating through his writings and to which a particular attentiveness seems to be ascribed. As I shall demonstrate, not only is the idea, or the medium, of architecture the persistent aesthetic site in Benjamin’s oeuvre that provides an insight into an evaluation of the sensuous body beyond the domains of the visual. Also, in posing the question of the tactile, what is opened up is a purview of Benjamin’s concept of life, or, more precisely, of “the question of the relationship of works of art to historical life”,<sup>9</sup> a question addressed most lucidly in his essay on translation, as we will see here in Part Three.

Despite the centrality of Benjamin’s reconstruction of the image being contiguous with an elaboration of a historically conditioned body whose envelope is a tactile flesh,<sup>10</sup> his thought has been curiously inapparent in much of the more recent discourse on aesthetics and the politics of touch.<sup>11</sup> It is surprisingly absent, for instance, from Derrida’s genealogy of corporeality and the tactile in his *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*.<sup>12</sup> Nor does tactility play the role it would warrant in scholarly interpretations of the significance of the category of the image

---

<sup>9</sup> As Benjamin writes in a letter to Florence Christian Rang, December 9, 1923: “I have been reflecting on the way in which works of art relate to historical life. In so doing, I proceed from the conviction that there is no such thing as art history. In human life, for example, not only does the concatenation of temporal events contain essential causal links, but we may also say that, were there no such links to constitute development, maturity, death, and similar categories, human life as such would not really exist. With works of art, on the other hand, the position is quite different. Art is in essence ahistorical.” (*SW* 1:388).

<sup>10</sup> Some of Benjamin’s early fragments such as “Wahrnehmung und Leib” (1918/1920-1921) draw on the phenomenological distinction between the lived and the simply physical body (*Leib / Körper*). For Benjamin’s theme of “Eros of distance” which also informs these explorations, see Sigrid Weigel, “Eros”, in *Benjamins Begriffe*, eds. Michael Opitz & Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), pp. 299-340. Gerhard Richter’s *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000) provides an analysis of Benjamin’s rhetoric of corporeality. See especially the section on the “problem of touch” as underlying Benjamin’s “Moscow Diary”, pp. 146-150.

<sup>11</sup> See also my “‘Im Taktischen’: Figures of Touch in the Work of Walter Benjamin”, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 93.3 (2018), 298-316 (p. 299).

<sup>12</sup> In tracing sights of non-seeing in *Memoirs of the Blind*, on the other hand, Jacques Derrida does discuss the figuration of portraits and self-portraits with reference to Benjamin’s account of the baroque ruin in the *Trauerspiel* book. According to Derrida’s notion of the deconstruction of the depicted face by the very gaze of the draftsman, wherein visibility is “eaten away”, this gaze, mediated by the hand, is aligned to the incompleteness of the visible monument and so binds visual perception to recollection and to history. See Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 69.

in Benjamin's oeuvre. A case in point would be the paradigmatic scene of childhood play: the hand that repetitively retrieves a rolled-up sock from its pocket. According to this emblem of the unraveled sock, evoked in Benjamin's essay on Proust ("Zum Bilde Prousts", 1929), the disfigured relations of the similarities between "form" and "content", and the "veil" and "what is veiled" release the "third" – "the image" (*GS* II:314, *SW* 2:240). In *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (1934/1938), where this childhood scene also appears, Benjamin adds, with a nod to Goethe's literary autobiography: "It [the sock play] led me to draw truth [Wahrheit] from literature [Dichtung] as carefully as the child's hand retrieves the sock from 'the case'" (*GS* IV:977-978, *SW* 3:374, translation modified). The image, as is made explicit in the structure of these scenographies of child's play, could be given only by an active intervention of physical contact. However, it is this logic of touch that underscores the loss of the object, the loss henceforth inscribed into the very presence of the image. Furthermore, coupled with "truth", the image is underpinned by the double-sidedness of the German *Sinnlichkeit*, a word already marked by the ambiguous split between the system of the sensorium and intellectual knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Part One of the thesis, "Body meets Architecture in Benjamin's Thinking of the Image", explores the rupture between tactile, corporeal immediacy and the more optical figural presentation as it is accounted in the "Kunstwerk" essay's thesis on optical and tactile architecture. The intimation of touch, together with the set of terms that surrounds the remarks on architecture – namely habit, the close-up view, collective distraction and the disintegration of aura in the experience of shock – are constituted by this medium as a counter-movement in the direction of the optical. According to the "Kunstwerk" essay, the double significance of architecture is the medium's relatedness to origin and to the more mythical, archaic sensation of the 'tactile'. This part of the thesis addresses the dialectics of origin that consist in this medium according to Benjamin, in relation to three main threads. The first concerns Benjamin's early explorations of the limitation of bodily perceptions and their link to myth; the second focuses on G.W.F. Hegel's definitions of architecture as "pre-art", and as art's "symbolic form" as the earliest form of sensuous representation, as well as on architecture's dismissal as an artform apposite to the development of spirit, as set out in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*; and the third turns on Freud's articulation of *das Unheimliche* and the uncanny

---

<sup>13</sup> In his 1993 book *Le sens du monde*, Nancy gives an account of sense ("sens") as a concept denoting sensuality, sense as meaning, and sense as "the movement of being-towards" – all meanings that are inescapably intertwined with one another. In the chapter on "Sense and Truth" it is noted that according to its German etymology, the word 'Sinn' "first signifies 'the process of carrying-oneself-toward something'". See Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeremy Libbetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 12.

dis-inhabitation of space. This threefold foreclosure at stake here – that of myth, of architecture as aesthetic form and of space as such – recalls Benjamin’s attentiveness to the “refuse of history”, the paradigmatic methodological procedure of the *Passagen-Werk*.<sup>14</sup>

The primal architectural scene identified by Hegel stems from “the double architecture” presented by the pyramids (*VÄ* I:459, *LA* I:356). Their ambiguity, as will be discussed in Part One, subsists in the Hegelian characterisations of these structures as “enormous [ungeheure] crystals” and “unconscious symbolism” (*VÄ* I:418, *LA* I:323). For Hegel, the pyramids stand for an external surroundings (“Umgebung”) in which an inner meaning rests in concealment (*VÄ* I:460, *LA* I:356). Not only did the pyramids anticipate, in their very shape, the unfolding of the optical out of the tactile, as established by Alois Riegl in his grounding of the history of art on the changing degrees of optical and tactile forms of reception (to be discussed also in Part One). But neither is the ideality, construed as a freedom from sensuousness and hence from the somatic body, to which the pyramids aspire, the pure optical point of their tip, a “positive construction”, but rather, as Hegel stresses, a “removal of a negative” (*VÄ* II:289, *LA* II:649). What is removed and thus sublimated is an excavated architecture, the foundational subterranean spaces that lie underneath the towering monumental structures, the underground housing a corporeal refuse, the matter of natural historical life.

Part Two, “Sites of Ruins, Ruination of Time: The *Stimmungen* of Natural History”, is focalised around Theodor W. Adorno’s 1932 lecture “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” (“The Idea of Natural History”). The mood of *Unheimlichkeit*, Dasein’s un-homely being, as it has been explicated in the work of Martin Heidegger, is one of the lecture’s critical targets. Heidegger’s conceptualisation of Being is employed in Adorno’s appraisal of Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study as an “ontological reorientation of the philosophy of history: the idea of natural history” (*NG* 355, *NH* 117). It is in exposing the affinity and the divergence between Benjamin and Heidegger, however, that Adorno here provides a further understanding of ‘tactility’ in the context of his uncovering – in drawing on Benjamin – of the allegorical structure of *Naturgeschichte*. The arguments in this part largely evolve out of Adorno’s figure of a “world densely walled up by/from sense [Sinn]”, an emblem cast into an architectural imagery that remarkably unfolds Benjamin’s understanding of the chiasmic exchange between history and nature. The shattered transcendence exposed by the German Baroque *Trauerspiel* and with it, the intensifications of (tactile) attachment to the optical, worked through with the

---

<sup>14</sup> “To grasp the construction of history as such. By way of commentary. The refuse [Abfall] of history” (*GS* V: 575, *AP* 461).

desire for images, bring into the open the entanglement of bare or creaturely life and the redemptive undertone as it configures Benjamin's idea of natural history.

Part Two also gives an account of the acoustical sphere (the *Stimme* drawn from *Stimmung*) surrounding Benjamin's description of the sensuous withdrawal of history into the setting. The key auditory dimension of lament was coupled with the *Schauplätze* of architectural ruins, the quintessential objects that populated the stages of the German *Trauerspiele*. Lament expunges the 'place of showing and looking', as sight is subject to a sensory displacement. The final thinking image of Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is that of a ruined palatial construction that bears upon the disclosure of fallen language and mute nature as the allegorical expression of history. The reconstruction of the rapport between Benjamin and Heidegger and the polemic of *Stimmung*, or moods, evoked by it, is further explored in this part not only through reference to the Baroque architectural ruin but also through other architectural imageries – the burrow qua construction ("Der Bau") and a remnant of a wall – surfacing in the work of Franz Kafka and Rainer Maria Rilke and treated by Benjamin and Heidegger respectively.

The reading of the selected architectural references featuring in the three parts of this thesis is viewed as operating within the frame of what Benjamin's calls in the *Passagen-Werk* the "science of thresholds" ("Schwellenkunde"). These are constellations in which the setting into place of temporal or historical relations is concretised as a *topos*, a site of textual construction. As thresholds, however, these settings are – in a particular sense – topological in nature; they put forward an optics of spatio-temporal displacements of those elements which have been separated by the threshold that also binds them and by reason of which they cannot break away from their other. A key architectural feature that sets forth the "science of threshold" is the balcony. A projected, imaginary balcony, an uninhabitable space for viewing and for being seen, is the allegorical and architectural site upon which Benjamin's final passages in the *Trauerspiel* book are configured. An architectural element of a 'real' balcony described in the segment "Der Mond" from *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* generates the ultimate *Schauplatz* discussed in the final part of this thesis.

Part Three, "The Crypt, the Funnel and the Presentiments of Myth in *Berliner Kindheit*", explores auditory and tactile motifs at the border of language as they outline both Benjamin's essay on translation and his autobiographical writing in *Berliner Kindheit*. In focusing in particular on three sections in the latter ("Todesnachricht", "Die Mummerehlen" and "Der Mond"), I show how the merely acoustical trait of language is linked in these texts to the tactile dimension of the mimetic beyond resemblance and to repetition and to the uncanny

sensation of the ‘having-been’. In “Der Mond”, in particular, it is the bourgeois constructions of habitation, the focal point of *Berliner Kindheit* as a whole, that are subject to an uncanny deformation of a vortex-space, a foundation of ruin, carried out by the focal figure of the funnel. The allegorical device of the funnel, a figure that is also, interestingly, used by Adorno in “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” as a dialectical component in his construal of mythic “Schein”, additionally underscores Benjamin’s thinking-image of divine, “law-destroying violence”. In “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”, the swallowing ground in the story of Korah, as evoked by Benjamin, is the exact ‘geological’ negative in the direction of the sensuous image of mythic violence: guilty Niobe who has been transformed into a weeping rock. “Der Mond” ends with the moon’s striking violence of pulling apart the ground. It swallows up “everything”, including the frozen bodies standing on the allegorical balcony, the threshold between the interior space of the bourgeois flat and the city. And what is exposed by the funnelled, violent movement of the moon, is the substratum of experience, the primal history of modernity.

### *The Architectural*

At this juncture, it is worth considering an abridged view of the place of architecture in Benjamin’s oeuvre, as well as the contribution of Benjamin’s writings to architectural theory. Architecture plays a role in Benjamin’s writings most evidently through the figure of the covered interiors of the Parisian passages and through the new technologies of space and image such as the diorama and the panorama.<sup>15</sup> The arcades, urban interior passageways covered by iron construction and glass panels and illuminated by gaslight, were created at the beginning of the nineteenth century as places for commodity display. Neither inside nor outside, the arcades signified the ‘modern’ while being already on the verge of disappearance, as Haussmann’s grand boulevards swallowed up most of the arcades by the end of the century. The arcades, when grafted onto Benjamin’s figurative language, remain caught between sensual perception and recollection.<sup>16</sup> Architectural scholarship has responded to Benjamin’s

---

<sup>15</sup> For an account of the cityscape and modern metropolis as a site of phantasmagoria and myth in Benjamin’s work see Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> “All this is the arcade in our eyes. And it was nothing of all this. The arcades radiated through the Paris of the Empire like fairy grottoes. For someone entering the Passage des Panoramas in 1817, the sirens of gaslight would be singing to him on one side, while oil-lamp odalisques offered enticements from the other. With the kindling of electric lights, the irreproachable glow was extinguished in these galleries which suddenly peered from blind windows into their own interior; it was not decline but transformation. All at once they were the hollow mould from which the image of ‘modernity’ was cast. Here, the century mirrored with satisfaction its most recent past” (*GS* V:1045, *AP* 874).

thought predominantly in regard to his critique of modern experience. In this frame, Anthony Vidler employed Benjamin's theory of modernity in his remarkable account of the functioning of space and of architecture in relation to psychoanalytical theory.<sup>17</sup> Andrew Benjamin's philosophical accounts of architecture and of the politics of space and of time are a 'working through' of Walter Benjamin writings.<sup>18</sup> The critique of architecture as a medium underwritten by new means of cultural production mostly prompts the reading of architectural productions as material objects and the viewing of architecture as a prominent site for cultural signs.<sup>19</sup> Benjamin's writings on the proximity of film and architecture have informed theoretical discussions on architecture, technicity and art,<sup>20</sup> and his writings on the experience of architecture in a state of distraction substantially shape architectural theory's debates on (post-) critical architecture and on architecture's autonomous disciplinary status.<sup>21</sup>

Benjamin's attentiveness to the aesthetic and the semiotics significances of architecture is most discernable, however, in one of his preparatory notes for his study on Kafka: "No human art appears as deeply compromised as the art of building in Kafka. None is more vital, and none makes perplexity more perceptible [*vernehmbarer*, also more audible]. ('The Great Wall of China', 'The City Coat of Arms' and 'The Burrow')" (*GS II:1219*, my translation). In this commentary, Benjamin alludes to the confusion of hearing and to the blockage of linguistic comprehension, the subject matter of these Kafkan short stories and fragments, parables in which Kafka revises and explores the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel. The story "Der Bau", in which the act of building reveals itself as the activity of digging brings to mind the "digging

---

<sup>17</sup> Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 81-97, 114-118.

<sup>18</sup> To mention but a few of these works: Andrew Benjamin, "Porosity at the Edge: Working Through Walter Benjamin's 'Naples'", in *Walter Benjamin and Architecture*, ed. Gevork Hartoonian (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 39-50 and *Style and Time, Essays on the Politics of Appearance* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> See Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, "Walter Benjamin and Architecture", *Journal of Architecture*, 12.5 (2007), 471-475.

<sup>20</sup> For my paper (together with Carmella Jacoby Volk) that reflects on the critical potential of diagrammatic thinking for architectural design, an argument that largely builds on Benjamin's distinction between the optical and the tactile, see "Haptic Diagrams: From Cinematography to Architectural Performance", *Journal of Architectural Education*, 62.3 (2009), 71-76.

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Andrew Benjamin, "Passing Through Deconstruction: Architecture and the Project of Autonomy", Hilde Heynen, "A Critical Position for Architecture?", Patrick Keiller, "Film as Spatial Critique" and Charles Rice, "Critical Post-Critical Problems of Effect, Experience and Immersion", in *Critical Architecture*, eds. Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 40-47, pp. 48-56, pp. 115-123, pp. 261-268, respectively. For the treatment of Benjamin's thesis regarding the "politicization of aesthetics" in the context of architecture, see David Cunningham, "Architecture and the Politics of Aesthetics: Autonomy, Heteronomy, and the Philosophy of Art", in *The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture*, ed. Nadir Lahiji (London, New York: Bloomsbury 2014), pp. 35-54.

of the pit of Babel” mentioned in another related parable, “Der Schacht von Babel”.<sup>22</sup> Buildings and social praxis, the organisation of the senses and the comprehensibility of the aesthetic object, as they are put into play by Kafka – all these are the motifs informing the architectural intimations in the “Kunstwerk” essay. Pointing to the idea of a collective state of distraction, the architectural references are critical to the decipherment of the theses on media reproducibility as they are developed in the essay, as it will be reviewed in Part One.

Architectural activity as the symbolic and physical organisations of the social order is also the theme of Benjamin’s review of Paul Scheerbart’s novel “Lesabéndio: ein Asteroiden-Roman” (published in 1913, Benjamin wrote his review in 1917 and in 1919). The novel’s narrative construct “focuses on nothing but the building of the tower” by the humans (“Menschen”) on this star, “creatures” from whom, as Benjamin observes, any indication of sex (“Geschlecht”) is consistently absent. In Benjamin’s set of notes related to this review, we read that Scheerbart’s “utopia of the body is linked to its eccentric rebellion against its convention”. Here Benjamin also accords the idea that “*architecture becomes the canon of all productions [Architektur wird der Kanon aller Hervorbringungen]*” with his undertaking aimed at the “blasting of the contemplative in art [Sprengung des Kontemplativen in der Kunst]” (GS VI:148, Benjamin’s italics, my translation). For Benjamin, it is significant that the architectural activity in Scheerbart’s novel exposes an aesthetic “law” as it traverses the space between “art” and “mythical forms”, between cognitive sense and the sensual as such. “The law runs [Das Gesetz heißt]: true interpretation grasps [erfaßt] the outer surface of things, their purest sensuality [reinste Sinnlichkeit]; interpretation is the overcoming of sense [Sinn[es]]” (GS II:618, my translation).

In the essay *Goethes Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (written between 1919 and 1922, published 1924-1925), in distinguishing between two modes of interpretation: “Kommentar” and “Kritik”, Benjamin refers to historical distance as that which increases the power or the violence (“Gewalt”) of the work. “Critique”, he writes,

seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content. If, therefore, the works that prove enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken in their material content, then, in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes, in German and English*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1975), p.35.

course of this duration, the concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world.

(GS I:125, SW 1:297)

The decaying life of the work, Benjamin also writes, is comparable to a “burning funeral pyre” – “flammenden Scheiterhaufen”. He continues the comparison between commentary and critique by comparing the commentator to a chemist who is left only “with wood and ashes as the sole objects of his analysis”. The critic, by contrast, is compared to an alchemist who is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: “the enigma of being alive” (GS I:126, SW 1:298). For the critic, the flame, the work, do not denote any meaning or entail any memory traces. The work of the critic is engaged with an awareness of a failure (the *Scheitern* that is compounded in the “Scheiterhaufen”<sup>23</sup>). And if “consciousness arises in place of the memory trace”, as Benjamin cites Freud in “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, and “the real work of Eros [is] *thanatos*”, as is noted in the essay on Goethe (without reference to Freud), then alchemical *Kritik* is inescapably allegorical. The critic, for whom the flame blurs any distinction between life and death, arrives at a new conception of life that is released from fate and guilt (“the mythical essence” of Goethe’s novel, according to Benjamin), a life conceived of as “natural history”.

In the review “Streng Kunstwissenschaft” (1933), the same claim regarding the mortification of works is reproduced, albeit that now the law of critiquing literary works is displaced into a critique of the visual in the context of art history. According to this review, in which Benjamin speaks highly of Carl Linfert’s dissertation on the topic of the “borderline case” of architectural representation, Linfert is regarded as “the new type of researcher” that holds the “capacity to be at home in marginal domains”, that is, amongst natural historical figures of finitude, immersed within the loss of semblance. The architectural manifestations in drawings, as Linfert analyses these, produce architecture which is not primarily “seen” but rather experienced, in Linfert’s words, as a “sensing- or tracing-through of structures [Durchspüren]”, as it is cited by Benjamin (GS III:368, SW 2:670, translation modified). In Part Two, Linfert’s reference to Benjamin’s theory of allegory in his study serves to illuminate the architectural imageries used by Benjamin to capture the Baroque allegorical *Schauplatz*. The

---

<sup>23</sup> This has been pointed out to me by Sabine Gözl. The semantics of Benjamin’s reception of Kafka is imbued with terminology of unsuccessfulness: “an understanding of Kafka’s productions involves, among other things, the simple recognition that he was a failure” (as Benjamin writes in a letter to Gershom Scholem, quoted in Hannah Arendt’s introduction in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 22. In my conclusion remarks I will tease out Benjamin’s critical evaluation of Kafka by drawing on Kafka’s architectural Imaginaries in light of Benjamin’s construal of Kafka as a literary “failure”.



allegorical cogency of these visual representations as the passages between the pictorial and the architectural, is weighed up by a discussion of Linfert's thesis regarding the "sensing-through" non-optical manner by which architectural drawings are experienced.

Howard Caygill, in focusing upon Benjamin's early reflections on painting and in reading the latter as informed by the Kantian structure of experience, articulates "the colour of experience" as the underlying idea of Benjamin's oeuvre, in which "chromatic differentiation" is to be considered in place of linguistic signification. As Caygill comments,

instead of the visual being regarded as an appendage to the linguistic, as in the many readings of Benjamin's theory of allegory, it is here given its proper dignity, shifting the motivation of Benjamin's work from problems of signification and expression to those of inscription and the mark.<sup>24</sup>

From his early writings, signs and marks partake in Benjamin's conceptualisation of forms of interruptive expressionlessness, as his early set of remarks on painting and graphics conveys. In the two essays "Malerei und Graphik" and "Über die Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal", written in 1917, painting is defined as a compositional set of marks given to the act of naming. These reflections not only anticipate, in their articulations of the "absolute sign [Zeichen]" and the "absolute mark [Mal]", the foiled communication of the (dialectical) image, but also make it possible to identify the ethical function of the body and of corporeality in Benjamin's method of thinking in images between signs and marks. For Benjamin, as these perplexing passages indicate, the act of thinking visual objects is indissoluble from politico-theological contents. The picture or image, "das Bild", is constituted upon mythical and theological orders, and although these orders incessantly evade human perception, the shifting relations between signs and marks render them perceivable in the realm of pure *Schein*.

Significant to this argument is Benjamin's claim that both sign and mark resist their resemblance to something else. The "absolute sign", Benjamin writes, is "the line that has its magical character as such not the line made magical by whatever it happens to represent" (*GS* II:603, *SW* 1:83). By this, the visual is brought into close proximity to his theory of language formulated a year earlier in 1916, in the essay "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen". The mark too, though operating within a sphere of a medium (the *Mal* in *Malerei*) is manifest – "ist im Erscheinen" – without resembling something other

---

<sup>24</sup> Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. xiii.

than itself: “nichts anderem ähnlich”. In analyzing Benjamin’s remarks on signs and marks Andrew Benjamin commented that “here, both the object and its projective quality – its having that quality is, of course, part of its magic – both form part of the object. It is as though the object now has a thickness.”<sup>25</sup> Acquiring density, a perception more associated with touch subdues the predominance of sight to the extent that the mark demonstrates a mode of being (*Sein*) bereft of semblance (*Schein*). The corporeal impact of the being of the mark is also made evident by Benjamin’s contention that the absolute form of the mark appears on the outer surface of a living body as the manifestation of guilt or shame: “the mark appears principally on living beings (Christ’s stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks)” (*GS* II:605, *SW* 1:84).

Notably, underlying these characteristically condensed and encrypted reflections is the idea that there is a spatial, ‘architectonic’ mode of representation that subsists in any pictorial creation. In “Malerei und Graphik”, Benjamin uses an architectural terminology of longitudinal and cross sections, the “two sections” that cut through the “substance of the world [Weltsubstanz]”. The first, the “Längsschnitt”, is related to marks, to the method of working in painting and to the pictorial space which is more descriptive or representational in nature (“darstellend”). The essence of the second, the cross section or the “Querschnitt”, is graphic and symbolic. The cross section is underscored by an abbreviated perspective which Benjamin also likens to the act of viewing mosaic on which the beholder’s feet are placed (*GS* II:603, *SW* 1:82). This more ‘spatial’ nature of the sign is bound to the conjuration it entails. “Über die Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal” ends with a reflection on the functioning of the mark in spatial creations (“räumlichen Gebilden”), after a reference to drawing – “Zeichnung” – has already been given. There Benjamin notes that the graphic line, by the opposition it forms with the surface (“Fläche”), gives rise to a “metaphysical significance” which is not given to the bare eye or gaze (“bloßem Auge”) for which this significance is not distinguishable, “unterscheidbar[er]” (*GS* II:604, *SW* 1:83). Precipitating that which is imperceptible within the visual, the medium of the drawing discloses the manner in which it is the more architectonic and spatial significances of the line that are indifferent to the aesthetic experience of *Schein*.

In ending the short essay “Über die Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal”, Benjamin turns to accounting for the meaning of the mark within spatial artistic productions with particular

---

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Benjamin, “Framing Pictures, Transcending Marks: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Paintings, or Signs and Marks’”, in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: Re:press books, 2009), pp. 129-142 (p. 134).

resonance for the architectural. “Das Mal im Raum”, he notes, is evidently bound up with the “sphere of the mark”, and this through “architectonic meaning” and yet in a way that still remains open to exploration. “Above all”, Benjamin thus concludes, marks in space “appear as monuments to the dead or gravestones [Toten- oder Grabmale], but these are marks in the exact meaning of the word only if they have not been given an architectonic and sculptural shape” (GS II:607, SW 1:86). Neither sculptural shape, which does not lend itself to bodies to dwell (only to spirit, according to Hegel),<sup>26</sup> nor architectonic meaning in the primal sense of providing cover to the human body, but only its direct opposite, namely, housing the remains of the dead, can count as marks in space. As Benjamin’s reflections on painting, signs and marks convey, the architectural or the spatial mark is intimately connected to the atmosphere of violence and to the dimension of corporeal refuse, the ideas surrounding the figuration of allegory in the *Trauerspiel* book, as is expounded here in Part Two through the key figure of the ruin.

### *The Natural Historical*

According to Benjamin’s theory of language, it is from nature’s muteness – “Stummheit”, that a disclosure of a melancholic (“traurig”) acoustical trait is set forth. With this suggestive characteristic, Benjamin seems to set the demarcation line between the human and the non-human (also rendered as the earthly profane and the theologically sacred), the limit that powerfully intervenes between those domains, but also, that which brings them most closely into accord. This postulation reaches a comparable point in Heidegger’s “Grundbestimmung” of his ontological thought: namely, *Dasein*’s fundamental existential moods, or *Stimmungen*. This intricate relation between the order of language and the sensuous, worldly aspect of experience, at play in the perceptual conditions of mood (Heidegger) and, in particular, the melancholic mood of the Baroque (Benjamin) – forms the focal point of Adorno’s conceptualisation of *Naturgeschichte*.

The dialectical relation of nature and history as outlined by Adorno is also reflected in Giorgio Agamben’s explication of the term “form-of-life”. This concept refers to a life that

---

<sup>26</sup> For Hegel, as Rebecca Comay notes, “the role of classical sculpture is to provide a visible proof of both the necessity and the possibility of spirit’s own embodiment. It demonstrates that the human body is the ultimate dwelling place [Wohnsitz] for spirit, the site of nature’s essential transparency to spirit and vice versa.” Comay, “Defaced Statues: Idealism and Iconoclasm in Hegel’s Aesthetics”, *October* 149 (2014), 123-142 (p. 127).

cannot be separated from its form, “a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life”.<sup>27</sup> In his articulation of the idea “form-of-life” Agamben uses the Aristotelian terms of *zoe* (natural life, the fact of being) and *bios* (political life, the habitual way of life). These terms, just as in Adorno’s theoretical move with natural history, overlap and accordingly disavow conceptual stability and identification; they can only collapse (in both senses of the word), just as in the mutual falling apart of nature into history, of history into nature. By the very same token, natural creaturely existence crosses over into the historical sphere from which it was originally barred. As Eric L. Santner notes, this state of exception immanent to the law as uncovered by Agamben, is the dimension of “creaturely life” that pervades Benjamin’s thought. Benjamin’s work, as Santner also points out, represents the ways in which creaturely life “comes to be transmitted and disseminated through the political, economic, and cultural institutions of modernity, becomes embodied in its objects, enters the texture of their materiality, becomes the very substance of their ‘mattering’.”<sup>28</sup> In his review on the Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen (written in French in 1934-1935), Benjamin provides a pinpoint description: it is “death”, says Benjamin, that “in the final analysis, [is] the prudent mediator between nature and history: that which had been historical finally falls back, through death, into the domain of nature; that which had been natural finally falls back, through death, into the realm of history” (*GS* II:222-23, *SW* 3:14).

In his study on the concept of “creaturely life”, Santner explicates Benjamin’s view of natural history by stressing that “we truly encounter the radical otherness of the ‘natural’ world where it appears in the guise of historical remnant”.<sup>29</sup> According to this, *Naturgeschichte* refers “not to the fact that nature also has a history but to the fact that the artifacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life (think of the process whereby architectural ruins are reclaimed by nature)”. “Natural history” aims to evoke, as Santner further notes, the “space between real and symbolic death.”<sup>30</sup> *Naturgeschichte* thus embodies the recourse to the moment of Spirit’s differentiation from nature. For Hegel, it was architecture as an aesthetic symbolic form, as we will see in Part One, that was left forever as a sediment of a failure, namely, an aesthetic object caught up in the relay between nature and history.

---

<sup>27</sup> Agamben, “Form-of-life”, in *Means without End, Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 3-12 (p. 4).

<sup>28</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 86.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

Natural history illuminates the paradox that lies at the origin of “absolute knowledge”, a term that persistently functions as an indissoluble reminder for spirit’s not being at home. In drawing on Benjamin’s configurations of the melancholic gaze, Julia Reinhard Lupton has noted that he “identifies the creaturely with a peculiar form of consciousness, impelled by idealism yet forever earthbound by the weight of corporeality, at once sullen angel and pensive dog”.<sup>31</sup> What underlines Reinhard Lupton’s observation here is the fundamental opposition that seems to infuse Benjamin’s procedure of thinking in images. This divide is portrayed through vocabularies of the perspectival optical, of infinite erotic distance on the one hand, and through extreme closeness and touch on the other. And yet, this disparity seems to eventually coalesce in the groundless abyss, the inconspicuous space of the underground. This is mostly expressed in the trope of “under-going” (“Untergang”, also “going down into”) of a decayed or sinking living thing, the paradigmatic site of “beautiful semblance” (“schönen Schein”), an idea that is constitutive to the dialectic of the image and unfolds in the analysis of *Goethes Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. It is the emergence or cropping up of corporeality into the sphere of the image that is one of the profound underlying ideas set out in this essay on Goethe.

Relevant as well to this configuration of the imagistic in relation to the symbolic nature of the architectural sign (Hegel), is Rebecca Comay’s comment regarding the perplexity that imbues Benjamin’s theory of allegory. As Comay observes,

Hegel’s own determination of the symbol in the *Aesthetics* would correspond more precisely to Benjamin’s notion of allegory, insofar as it exemplifies the gap or discrepancy between ‘meaning’ and ‘shape,’ *Bedeutung* and *Gestalt* — in Benjamin’s terms, the ‘abyss between visual being and meaning’ – and thus stands as a cipher of radical non-reconciliation.<sup>32</sup>

Adorno’s lecture, as we will see, culminates with a rejection of domesticity and with the alliance of natural history to the sensation or mood of *Das Unheimliche* (as shown by Freud and Heidegger). Adorno’s contention is that “the promise of reconciliation” (between the subject and the object) is implicated in a “world” whose sense or intelligibility is always already related to the senses, to the system of the sensorium.

Relegated to the “sign-script of transience” (“Zeichenschrift der Vergängnis“), natural history is an expression not only of what Benjamin conceptualises as “creaturely life”

---

<sup>31</sup> Reinhard Lupton, “Creature Caliban”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (2000), 1-23 (p. 5).

<sup>32</sup> See Comay, “Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*”, p. 254, footnote 36.

(“kreatürliches Leben”), but also of creatureliness that is always concerned with “Schöpfungsstand”, with the condition of being created. And creation, according to Benjamin, bears the significance of the linguistic. What here grounds the reconstruction of the concept of natural history is Benjamin’s focalisation in the *Trauerspiel* book of “the allegorical physiognomy of natural history” (*GS* I:353, *O*:188) around the figure of the architectural ruin (in a section entitled “Die Ruine”). Benjamin employs Hegel’s aesthetic-historical theory in a dialectical manner: “Architecture”, he writes in the “Kunstwerk” essay, “has never had fallow periods” (*GS* I:465, *AW* 33). For Hegel, architecture is the artform in which the idea of an original act of impressing meaning on meaningless material becomes discernible. And yet, in its symbolic phase, architecture, by dint of its very presence, cannot cross the threshold of its essence of non-signifying object. At its origin, architecture does not represent; it can only exist – and hence signify nothing other than itself – as a shelter. This idea is played out in Benjamin’s review of Linfert’s study on architectural drawings. The “architectures” featuring in this study are made “present in the first place” by the images (“Sie [sie Architekturen] geben sie allererst”); they do not represent – “wiedergeben” (*GS* III:373, *SW* 2:669, Benjamin’s emphasis). As a cover, the essence of architecture is primarily attached to its material presence and its content cannot be “unveiled”, to use here one of the key tropes that Benjamin uses in his articulation of art criticism. Thus, in the essay on Goethe, we read: “the task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful” (*GS* I:195, *SW* 1:351).

Architectural objects, when they are, as Hegel says, “strictly symbolic or independent”, are bereft of any meaning outside their own being. This point illuminates the degree to which the “life of creaturely things” as denoted by Benjamin in his discussion of melancholy in the *Trauerspiel* book – is mostly embodied in architecture. It is of significance for the arguments unfolded in this thesis regarding the indispensability to Benjamin’s thought of the set of ideas that assemble into the constellation of ‘tactility’ that for Hegel, it is the tower of Babel that is the most succinct expression of symbolic architecture. Hegel accentuates the social function of the tower (*VÄ* II:276, *LA* II:638), the labour of its building that was made possible by the unity of speech. As we read in Genesis: “all the earth was one language, one set of words [‘one lip’ is the literal translation of the Hebrew phrasing]”.<sup>33</sup> The consideration of *Naturgeschichte* as an idea that has its origin in an architectural undertaking thus prefigures this medium to be the artform that paradoxically encompasses both the “naming language” of man and the

---

<sup>33</sup> Genesis 11:1 in Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York, NY: Norton, 1996), p. 46.

arbitrariness of the sign; both the symbolic and the allegorical, or, put in the terms of the “Kunstwerk” essay: the “optical and tactile”. As will be detailed in this thesis, the logic of decay that is set forth with the purview of *Naturgeschichte* is also the working of the tactile within the economy of the sinking *Schein* of the image. And this correlates with the status of translation within the functioning of language. As is demonstrated in Part Three, the “fore- and after-history” of translation could be gleaned from the logic of natural history. This is the logic that lies at the foundation of the tale of the Babylonian tower; the cry for a “name”, as we read in Genesis, is set against the fear of the dispersion of family lineage, the fear of assimilation and of exile. Analogously, translation, in Benjamin’s terms, is concerned with the ‘organic’ survival (“Überleben”) of the original, as the rhetoric of natural growth and “unfolding” (“Entfaltung”) in the translator essay suggests (*GS* IV:11, *SW* 1:255).

The critical treatment of architectural sensing-through is advanced in the following three parts of the thesis through a series of reconstructions of spatial configurations or scenographies and architectural sites that cut through Benjamin’s oeuvre in both horizontal and vertical fashions, as both marks and signs. These scenographies are regarded as material contents that bind us closer – by the act of reading them critically, in the proper sense of *Kritik* – to the “truth contents” of Benjamin’s own mode of applying critique. The analysis that is advanced here also calls for a montage-like approach, as prescribed by Benjamin.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is not a single text that is subject to discussion in what follows, but rather the trajectory of architectural signs and marks across diverse writings and fragments. By weaving them together, the thesis sets out to precipitate the critical conditions for the semantics of tactility to come into view – or, perhaps, to be ‘sensed-through’. While there is a logic of interweaving at work here, the discussion is not without focal points of organisation. Thus, as already mentioned, particular attention is given to Benjamin’s theory of language as it was set out in the early essay on language and in “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”. It is through the prism of these meditations on translation, language and the theory of the name, informed by the “twists and tropes” of the architectural edifice of Babel (but also of the subterranean labyrinths of the pyramids) that the after-life of cultural artefacts or material contents are grasped as affectively persistent in their tenacity as a ruin.<sup>35</sup> Viewed from this stance, there is an elective affinity between the key figure of the

---

<sup>34</sup> “Notes on montage in my journal. Perhaps, in this same context, there should be some indication of the intimate connection that (exists) between the intention making for nearest nearness [nächste Nähe] and the intensive utilization of refuse [Abfalls] – a connection in fact exhibited in montage” (*GS* V:1030, *AP* 861).

<sup>35</sup> “Des Tours de Babel”, the title of Derrida’s essay on Benjamin’s translation essay, conveys the meanings of ‘turn’ and ‘trope’ residing in the French word *tour* which also means ‘tower’. “Des Tours de Babel”, in *Psyche*:

cinematic ruin-scape of second nature that makes an appearance in the “Kunstwerk” essay and the failed project of Babel that wanders – nameless, as an incremental heap of rubbish and refuse – into the field of view of the angel of history in the Ninth Thesis.

What I aim to show in the thesis, following on from what has been outlined in this introduction, is that the “dominant feature” of tactility, which is “more originally” at home in architecture, as it is formulated in the “Kunstwerk” essay, is to be regarded as the residue of *Naturgeschichte* in the sphere of the image and in the thinking that is configured by its dialectics. What flows from this is that tactile reception is the predicament upon which the bonds and links between ethics, life and aesthetics are hinged. Benjamin’s concept of life, in drawing away from salvation history, or *Heilsgeschichte*, is displaced into “messianic passing away”. Framing tactility, therefore, would also correspond to what Weigel systematically uncovered as “motifs of a dialectic of secularization” in Benjamin.<sup>36</sup> Just as with the fatal flame which is an expression of a new signification of life inferred by the commentator, the motivating contention here is that the architectural semantics that run throughout Benjamin’s whole work – from the settings of ruins of the Baroque to the etuis of the bourgeois subject – are to be read as a cipher for the force of removal that Hegel attributed to the subterranean spaces of those “enormous”, but also monstrous or uncanny (“ungeheure”) “crystals”, the Egyptian pyramids. The architectural sites of sensing-through unfolded in this thesis testify to a set of banishments that are critically enacted in the scenographies deployed by Benjamin: the banishment of the corporeal within the symbolic, of the tactile within the optical, and, of the acoustical – the *Stimmungen* of lament and melancholy and the Fall – within language.

---

*Inventions of the Other* vol. I, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Joseph F. Graham (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 191-225. In Hegel’s writings on the Egyptian architecture he glosses the underground spaces of the pyramids as spaces marked by “twisting and turning” which are “not designed for the silly problem of finding the way out, but for an intelligent wandering amongst symbolic riddles” (*LA* II:647).

<sup>36</sup> See for example the chapter “On the Threshold between Creation and the Last Judgment” in *Walter Benjamin, Image, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, pp. 3-78.



## Part One:

### Body Meets Architecture in Benjamin's Thinking of the Image

*Erstens* steht als der durch die Sache selbst begründete Anfang  
die *Architektur* vor uns da.

[In the first place what stands before us, as the beginning  
grounded in the matter itself, is architecture.]

– Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*

in Ursprünglicher ist sie [die taktische Dominante] in der  
Architektur zuhause.

[More originally it [the tactile dominant] is at home in  
architecture]

– Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk” essay (first version)

According to “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (written in three versions between 1935 and 1939), along with the distinctive structures of perception of new modes of reproduction, of film and photography, the idea of ‘tactility’ is most succinctly articulated, by the medium, or the idea of architecture, through its domination by this perceptual faculty. Architecture, posited in close proximity to film, is an artistic discipline by which Benjamin’s central premise – namely, the historicity of the medium of perception and its organisation – is made manifest. As Benjamin states, architecture is generally associated with collective “Rezeption in der Zerstreuung”, the laws [Gesetze] of such reception are “most instructive [sind die lehrreichsten]”, and buildings, and with them this mode of distracted or dispersed reception, “have accompanied human existence since primeval times [ihrer Urgeschichte]” (GS I:465, AW 33). The sensuous experience of architecture is predicated on the “laws” of perception. And with the following allusion to *Lehre*, translated as doctrine, in the superlative “lehrreichsten”, architecture, in Benjamin’s terms, verges on the paradox of tradition and transmission, between laws and their teaching. At the same time, reception in distraction draws away from the assumption that architecture is above all received as an optical phenomenon; in the sphere of the arts it is the proper object in which the disintegration of appearances is transmitted, mediated. According to a passage in the first version of the “Kunstwerk” essay, a passage that was omitted from the succeeding two versions, while it is active in film, the perceptual faculty of tactility – “das Taktische” – which countervails the

“optical”, resides within architecture in a concealed form. Architecture is the artistic domain which tactility inhabits in a particularly intimate way, in which it is at home “more originally”.

This first part of the thesis starts from this constellation of architecture, “das Taktische”<sup>1</sup> and origin, aiming at its decipherment by accounting for possible returns to a self-effacing origin, to what is more original. These returns, as they are specified in Benjamin’s view of this category (to which we shall come back in Part Two), are in themselves endless. The category of origin, which is not “purely logical” but “historical”, as is argued in the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” to the *Trauerspiel* book (GS I:226, O 25), does not signify an unequivocal, actual spatio-temporal beginning.<sup>2</sup> Origin, strictly speaking, inescapably points to its own incompleteness; it is therefore always already an excess, *more* than origin.

Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (delivered between 1818 and 1829 and first published in 1835), although clearly attributing the category of origin to architecture, at the same time give an account of this medium as ‘more original’, to borrow Benjamin’s construal of the concept, a comparative to be viewed here also as ‘more than origin’. In Hegel’s lectures, architecture is positioned at the beginning of art, at the stage of the “properly symbolic” (“Die eigentliche Symbolik”), an origin exemplified by the sensory sign system of the Egyptian pyramids. And yet the symbol, in the sense given by Hegel in the context of his historicity of the aesthetics, is also designated as “pre-art” (“Vorkunst”); the symbol is not yet the union between inner meaning and external form, a unity accomplished in classical art with the idea of “beautiful semblance”. It is the conceptualisation of the decline of the latter, of “schöner Schein” – most prominently epitomised through the concept of the aura – that the “Kunstwerk” essay grapples with. Framed by architecture’s dialectic of origin as argued by Hegel, Benjamin’s deployment of the sensory experience of tactility and of the notion of the “optical

---

<sup>1</sup> Tobias Wilke bases his interpretation of “tactility” set out in the “Kunstwerk” essay on the semantic ambiguity of the word “taktisch” which could also be read as referring to the field of military “tactics”. This reading is grounded in the fact that in Benjamin’s French translation of the essay, published in his lifetime and authorized by him, the word “taktisch” had been translated as the French word “tactile”, and hence, the editors of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* replaced the German adjective *taktisch* that holds the twofold meaning of tactical and tactile, with the single adjective *taktil*. See Wilke, “Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin’s Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses”, *Grey Room*, 39 (2010), 39-55. In alignment with this ambiguity, the translation of the first version presents “the shifts between the two English terms tactical and tactile, depending on which of the two meanings takes relative precedence at any given point in Benjamin’s text” as the editors and the translators explain. See Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke, “Editors’ Introduction Walter Benjamin’s Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art”, *Grey Room* 39 (2010), 6-10. Based on Benjamin’s early writings, in which the tactile is situated in alignment with other sensual faculties, such as the optical and the acoustical, and in line with the German text of the first version of the essay, I have kept the translation of the word “taktisch” as “tactile” in all cases. However, the semantics of tactics with its connotative connection to notions of concealment and veiling are still held within the interpretation of the tactile that this thesis advances.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin’s conceptualisation of origin inverts Hermann Cohen’s analysis of the concept of origin set out in his *Der Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1914).

unconscious” may be seen to be informed by “symbolic architecture”, posited at the threshold of art, as we will see. In the chapter on independent and symbolic architecture, drawing on the proximity of language to what he defines as symbolic or independent art, Hegel evokes the tower of Babel as an exemplary “masterpiece” of symbolic architecture (*VÄ* II: 276, *LA* II:639). According to this primal architectural scene of both material and linguistic destruction, architecture, in its connection to the sacred, binds human beings together and enables them to act collectively. Significantly, the Hegelian evocation of the story of Babel brings the idea or the medium of architecture into close proximity to Benjamin’s theological account of language, which is constitutive as well for the construal of the faculty he names “tactility”.

In as much as “die taktische Dominante” is indeed more originally “in der Architektur zuhause”, this formulation is also an intimation of what we could call the ‘Unzuhause’. The argument here would be that this architectural thinking image evidently points to Freud’s interrelated theories of the uncanny and the articulation of the death drive, beyond the pleasure principle. That the tactile is a corporeal sensation or affect that is *unheimlich* in kind could be gleaned from Benjamin’s portrayal of this sensual faculty to be more originally at home in architecture. Apparently dispossessed of any sense of unsettlement, it is in fact not self-identical as origin, only ever comparatively more original. As such it is uncannily suspended between being at the beginning of a historical process and the bearer of immemorial time. Being outside of historical time, on the side of myth, it is barred from what is ‘new’. As a note in the *Passagen-Werk* has it, “Architecture as the most important testimony to latent ‘mythology’” (*GS* V:1002, *AP* 834), and herein lies the archaic unsettlement of the architecture of modernity, as epitomised by the arcade and the dream logic housed in it.<sup>3</sup> When framed by Freud’s theory of *das Unheimliche*, what is revealed to be “in der Architektur zuhause”, at once conspicuous and concealed, is the prefix “un-”, “the token of repression” according to Freud.<sup>4</sup>

Building on these purviews, the Hegelian and the Freudian, Benjamin’s thinking image of the tactile can be read against the backdrop of his consideration of the mythic. In the seminal study *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, the mythic is evoked in relation to the erotic and to the unattainability of bringing things closer under the imposition of the image. Here the mythic is also played out in some points of architectural significance that surface in or are dispersed through the essay. More particularly, these architectural allusions and the evocation of the

---

<sup>3</sup> The note from the *Passagen-Werk* continues: “And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade. – The effort to awaken from a dream as the best example of dialectical reversal. Difficulty of this dialectical technique” (*GS* V:1002, *AP* 834).

<sup>4</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (1917-1919), ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 217-256 (p. 245).

archetype of the house – all converge in the focal point of Benjamin’s analysis: Goethe’s heroine Otilie. Otilie’s death, the intention of which is concealed and unpronounced, inconspicuous and expressionless, could not be considered a moral choice according to Benjamin’s argument. Moral choice, he emphasises, has no existence outside the order of human language; it is always an object of pronouncement and of transmission (*GS* I:176, *SW* 1:336). Nevertheless, this feature of expressionless unleashes the *perceptibility* of the “mythic powers of the law” (*GS* I:130, *SW* 1:301). Otilie’s living body, Goethe’s exemplar of the aesthetic construction of beautiful semblance, brings about the “truth content” of the novel according to Benjamin: the fading away of semblance, a sunken *Schein*. Taking its cue from this constellation, this part of the thesis focuses on Benjamin’s deployment of the sensorial level of tactility and of architecture in his theory regarding the deteriorative quality of “beautiful semblance”. A comprehensive reading of the range of meanings unfolded by what is postulated here as the architectural-tactile shows how this category is also in play in different configurations across Benjamin’s writings.

## I. Architecture and the Teaching of Distraction/Dispersal

It is towards the end of the “Kunstwerk” essay, in its eighteenth thesis, entitled “Taktile [Taktische] und Optische Rezeption”, that the commentary on architecture appears. Here Benjamin attempts to elucidate the social phenomenon of the distracted masses and their refrained mode of “collection” (“Sammlung”) in relation to the artwork. For, so Benjamin argues, it is common to lament (“Man klagt”) the fact that the masses seek distraction in the artwork which is no longer considered as an object for private worship; the masses see it as a cause for entertainment (“Unterhaltung”, also conversation). Still, this apparent opposition (“Gegensatz”) of “Zerstreuung und Sammlung” requires a closer look, says Benjamin. He uses the legend of the “Chinese painter who disappeared into his own painting while viewing it” as the paradigmatic example of the distanced yet absorbed singular viewer of the auratic art object, such as painting in its classical mode, which has declined. This is performed through “close collection” – “mit Sammlung nahe”: an individual, self-possessed yet absorbed mode, the mode of reception that is said to oppose the distracted form of reception associated with the masses and, mediated through architecture – with tactility. And yet the word “Sammlung”, recalling indeed a scenography of religious congregation, is also characteristic of the assembled yet distracted masses. The masses, therefore, in accordance with the dialectical relation between “Zerstreuung” and “Sammlung”, are *collectively* dispersed, scattered, in a new form of

concentration or cognition. The distracted/dispersed masses (“die zerstreute Masse”) absorb into themselves, “for their part”, the artwork; “they play around it [umspielt] with their breaking waves [Wellenschlag] and encompass it with their tide” (GS I:465, *AW* 33, translation modified).

It should be noted that the figures of thought used by Benjamin in order to portray the masses’ reception of buildings seem to suggest reference to Ludwig Klages’s interrelated tropes of “Eros der Ferne”, “der Wirklichkeit der Bilder”, and “Rausch” as a “wave of life” – “Lebenswelle”.<sup>5</sup> In *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros* (published in 1922), Klages speaks of an all-encompassing “electric” and “magnetic charge”, a “stream”, stating that “Eros is elemental or cosmic” since it has the power to unify “all events that separated bodies, space and time” into this “omnipresent element” of an ocean.<sup>6</sup> In ecstasy, being out of itself, the individual returns to a more primordial state linked to the “soul”, which, for Klages, stands for the opposition of “Geist” (as he stated in *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, published in 1929). “In the soul” he writes, “the individual is not truly an individual, but a cosmic wave.”<sup>7</sup> The drawing closer character of Eros is imagined as an all-pervasive ocean, and yet, “whoever seeks to negate distance is characterized by a possessiveness that is fatal to Eros, to the glowing nimbus of the world, and, ultimately, to actuality itself.”<sup>8</sup> If “the glowing nimbus of the world” – the ‘aura’ in Benjamin’s terms<sup>9</sup> – is actuality in the sense of the nearness of what is most distant in Klages’s disposition, then Benjamin’s thesis regarding the “decimation of the aura” is directed at exposing this double stance of nearness and distance amidst the historical conditions of the reproducibility of the image.<sup>10</sup>

According to the passage just cited from the “Kunstwerk” essay, the measure for an aesthetic object which in effect is absorbed by the masses (the collective body portrayed by Benjamin as an inhuman veil of water) – the object which is experienced in tangible proximity, yet still is not consumed in this process of the destruction of contemplation – is architecture. “This [the oceanic metaphor] is most obvious with regard to buildings” (GS I:465, *AW* 33).

---

<sup>5</sup> See Ludwig Klages, *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1963). In a passage discussing the content of intoxication (“Rausch”) and its conditions, Klages says that “by nature, any intoxication” endows the spectators in the crowd with “an overflowing wave of life [überströmenden Lebenswelle]”, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> See the chapter “Der elementare Eros” in *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros*, pp. 49-58 (p. 56). On “Der Eros der Ferne” see pp. 90-94.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Klages, *Cosmogonic Reflections*, trans. Joseph D. Pryce (London: Arktos, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> On the tracing of the lineage of Benjamin’s concept of the aura to Klages’s theory of the image see Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura”, *Critical Inquiry* 34.2 (2008), 336-375.

<sup>10</sup> On the departure and differentiation of Benjamin from Klages, see Irvin Wahlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros. A Tentative Reading of Zum Planetarium”, in *Perception and Experience in Modernity, Benjamin Studien*, ed. Helga Geyger-Ryan (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 65-110.

Architectural buildings are material objects producing – through a particular constellation with the masses – what the essay “Der Sürrealismus, die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz” (1929) delineates as an “image-space” (Bildraum) which is the outcome of a “dialectical justice”. Although this particular concomitance of image, space and body (“Leibraum”) “can no longer be measured out by contemplation”, the image, defined as the “long-sought image sphere” that opens up when “nearness [Nähe] looks with its own eyes”, is indispensable to what Benjamin calls the world of actuality: “die Welt allseitiger und integraler Aktualität”. This world, in which there is no more “Parlour” (the bourgeois “gute Stube”), is where body and image, interiority and its expulsion in the form of bodily dismemberment reach their touching point: until “no limb remains untorn” (*GS* II:309, *SW* 2:217).

This thinking image of collective-corporeal dispersion brings us back to the postulation of architecture in the context of the theses that Benjamin develops in the “Kunstwerk” essay. The experience of architecture by the masses dialectically retains the aesthetic experience of the Chinese painter whose body, contrary to the intensification of corporeality felt by the masses, disappeared completely into his painted surface. The object in the mode of architectural reception is perceived in the course of the abolition of distance and as a shared activity, to the extent that the contemplative posture of the individual body dissolves into a new body-image. Therefore, what is indicated, is not that the auratic experience entailed and required by the traditional art object has disappeared. Rather, it is its deformation, the somatic experience of its decay, its “Verfall” – famously designated by Benjamin as ‘breathing’ (*GS* I:440, *AW* 15)<sup>11</sup> – that calls forth the critical attention to the historical significance of this phenomenology of self-consummation. For, as is also argued in the “Kunstwerk” essay, “The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history”. This idea regarding the organisation of perception is derived from the “great scholars of Viennese school”, Alois Riegl (to whom we will return shortly) and Franz Wickhoff, who were able to conceptualise human perception and forms of embodiment in historical terms, as a transition from the late-Roman to the classical era (*GS* I:440, *AW* 15).

To the extent that the human relation to aesthetic objects is transformative, and so historical, this relation finds its expression most succinctly in architecture, according to the

---

<sup>11</sup> The aura of the artwork, whose loss is ambivalently lamented in Benjamin’s essay, is explained in the following claim: “in even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking, the here and now of the artwork – its unique existence in a particular place.” And this loss of the artwork’s distinct place, its unique presence in space, is further followed by another sense of spatial loss, namely the withdrawal of space as such: “every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image [Bild], or, better, in its reproduction [Abbild]” (*GS* I:440, *AW* 16).

commentary on this medium. And yet, as Benjamin nonetheless claims, regardless of the historical changes in human perception, now modelled on the different mode of existence (“Daseinsweise”) of the historical collective, architecture has forever served as a “prototype of an artwork”. Its featuring of “Rezeption in der Zerstreuung”, as enacted “through the collective”, has been the gesture of architecture “from time immemorial” (“von jeher”). Architecture is an aesthetic form that is intimately tied, in Benjamin’s words, to *Lehre* – a teaching, doctrine or tradition, also in the religious sense, so that “Die Gesetze ihrer Rezeption sind die lehrreichsten” (GS I:465, *AW* 33).<sup>12</sup> The ‘teaching’ of the law of architectural reception might proceed from the fact that, as an intimation of timelessness, architecture seems to lack any “historical index” and as such, it never reaches “readability” (“Lesbarkeit”), to invoke the terminology set out in the *Passagen-Werk*.<sup>13</sup> Yet all the same, and for that very reason, architecture is an expression of transience and therefore – of history, or, to be more precise, of what will be extensively discussed here, following Adorno’s observations on the topic, that is, “natural history”.

Claudia Brodsky Lacour, in her reconstruction of the significance of architecture in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, notes that the symbolic form of architecture as represented by the Egyptian pyramids, “those enduring, self-determined structures and first representations of ‘immortality’, take on the aspect of passing phenomena in a history of spirit surpassing all phenomenal manifestation”.<sup>14</sup> What she characterises as the act of *representing* death in

---

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin’s reflections on the concepts of tradition and transmission are formulated through the semantics of modern architecture: “The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward the well-lit and airy, has nullified dwelling in the old sense” (GS V:292, *AP* 221). And it is the very way of dwelling framed by steel and glass, as he informs us in “Erfahrung und Armut” (1933), that modernity’s rhetoric of progress, functionalism, liberation and purity renders the expression of loss *and* the loss of expression, captured with the emergence of modern architecture (GS II:213-219, *SW* 2:731-736).

<sup>13</sup> In an earlier version of this section, Benjamin attempts to ascribe such a “historical index” to architecture by associating it with advertising: “Wie steht es mit unsern heutigen Bauten? Sie sind, wie sich in der Großstadt erkennen läßt, zu Trägern der Reklame geworden” (GS I:1043). Benjamin had reflected upon the long lost “Verfall der Kritik”, whose false lamentation is evoked in one of the aphorisms in *Einbahnstraße* (1928). “Kritik,” the matter of “right distancing”, “was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was possible to take a standpoint [...] ‘ingenuousness [Unbefangenheit]’ and the ‘autonomous gaze’ have become a lie [...]. Today, the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved” (GS IV:131-132, *SW* 1:476, translation modified). In viewing architecture as the physical bearer of advertisements, Benjamin sets out a double negation, of both secularisation and theology entailed by “world historical constellation”. The “attitude of collection in front of the work of art” could, at any time (“jederzeit”), come to be transformed back into the sphere of religion, while the distracted one, whose experience remains at any time that of the mass, is therefore related to political attitude. This, “for the time being”, Benjamin says, “must be confirmed in the statement that in the world historical constellation, extremes touch each other (“in weltgeschichtlicher Konstellation die Extreme einander berühren”). Therefore, “in front of the poster, just as before, in front of the image of devotion [Andachtsbilde]”, “there is neither art lover nor philistine” (GS I:1043-1044, my translation).

<sup>14</sup> Brodsky Lacour, “From the Pyramids to Romantic Poetry: Housing the Spirit in Hegel”, in *Rereading Romanticism*, ed. Martha B. Helfer (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 327-366 (p. 341).

symbolic form that signals “the principle of freedom”, namely, the dialectics of origin instated by Hegel in his consideration of these architectural housings of preserved corpses, can also be discerned in the following comment on architecture made in the “Kunstwerk” essay. “Buildings”, Benjamin writes,

have accompanied human existence since its primal history [Urgeschichte]. Many art forms have come into being and passed away. Tragedy begins with the Greeks, is extinguished along with them, and is revived centuries later. The epic, whose origin lies in the early days of the tribes, dies out in Europe at the end of the Renaissance. Easel painting is a creation of the Middle Ages, and nothing guarantees its uninterrupted existence. But the human need for shelter is permanent. Architecture has never had fallow periods. Its history is longer than that of any other art, and its effect ought to be made present in any attempt to account for the relationship of the masses to the work of art according to its historical function.

(GS I:465, *AW* 33)

The ephemeral singularity of life and the most immutable entities within human creation are circumscribed within architecture. This art form, according to Hegel, in its symbolic form – designated by Hegel also as “unconscious”<sup>15</sup> – of the pyramids, expresses the ascendancy of matter over spirit. For Benjamin, architecture is the form in the field of perception most apposite to the historical condition marked by “Verfall”, the collapse or withering away of the aura, which he associates with the functioning of ritual and cult in the course of the artwork’s reception. And yet, what is also indicated in architecture is mythic time, the mere repetition of what has always been, a temporality more associated with ‘nature’. And this, in turn, brings to the fore the historical function of the artwork. In Hegel’s terms, art’s task is *historical*: to make conspicuous, by means of sensory experience, the “freedom of spirit”. And yet, it is in the dissolution of the natural within aesthetics as initiated with architectural activity, as the symbolic form of “the immortality of the soul”, that the latter “lies very close” to this “principle of freedom”. This is why, symbolic forms – and by implication (symbolic) architecture – are ahistorical in nature. For, what Hegel designates as ‘symbol’ is a not yet, what Benjamin would call, a ‘readable’ *sign*:

---

<sup>15</sup> See the chapter entitled “Unconscious Symbolism” (*VÄ* I:418, *LA* I:323).



The symbol, in the meaning of the word used here, constitutes the beginning of art, alike in its essential nature and its historical appearance, and is therefore to be considered only, as it were, as the threshold of art. It belongs especially to the East and only after all sorts of transitions, metamorphoses, and intermediaries does it carry us over into the genuine actuality of the Ideal as the classical form of art.

(*VÄ* I: 393, *LA* I:303)

What Benjamin glosses as architectural ‘timelessness’, associated with myth and repetition, is not in keeping with the time of the physical body (“*der Körper*”), the body which is limited in time but also in space by its connectedness to nature, according to the fragment “*Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem*” (written 1922-1923). These “outlines” present the intersected meanings that traverse the definitions of *Seele*, *Geist*, *Leib* and *Körper*, which can be translated as the soul, spirit or mind, the lived-body (that which signifies both the dwelling place for the spirit and the sphere of its sensuous embodiment), and the corporeal, substance-body. This body, according to these reflections, cannot be perceived as a totality, for all forms of delimitation (“*Begrenzung*”) belong to the lived, historical body – “*Der Leib*”.<sup>16</sup> As Benjamin also notes, in contrast to what is perceived by touch or through a sensation aroused in the skin – “*Tastwahrnehmung*” – the limitless *Körper* finds its counterpart within the realm of perception (“*Wahrnehmung*”) in the dimension of the visual. “*Gesichtswahrnehmung*” is the sense “least bound by limitation”, adhering that is, to spirit’s “freedom”. This indicates the substantial body to be, “if not without limits then at least with fluctuating, formless boundary” (*GS* VI:79, *SW* I:394). This body, charged with affective sensations, is akin to a state of spiritless intoxication or “*Rausch*”, a term Benjamin uses here with a reference to Klages, whose writings serve as the theoretical backdrop to these “outlines” (*GS* VI:84, *SW* I:398). Establishing the ambiguity of the split between *Körper* and *Leib* seems to be the undertaking of this early fragment. The limitless substance body incites a tactile image-space borne by the fact that the outer surface of the body as *Körper* subjects the inwardly embodied body, the *Leib*, to be spatially dispersed, unbounded and unlimited, and thus, put in terms of the “*Kunstwerk*” essay – distracted. With this, the historical function of the body unfolds between a concentrated mode of reception and a distracted one.

---

<sup>16</sup> This opposition, between the physical and the lived, experiencing body, was set out first by Max Scheler and then, more rigorously, by Edmund Husserl. See Donn Welton, “Introduction: Foundations of a Theory of the Body”, in *The Body: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Donn Welton (Malden, Mass., Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 1-8.

The idea of a tactile reception and its interdependency with what is visually perceived also leads to the ground-breaking theory of art history of the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl's influence on Benjamin's oeuvre has received considerable scholarly attention and is also well documented by Benjamin himself.<sup>17</sup> In his 1901 book *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Riegl presupposed the extremities of the tactile and the optical as the sensory dimensions first setting into motion his attempts to historicise the fine arts through the categorisation of different epochal forms of "Kunstwollen". "Kunstwollen", glossed here as will-to-art, also carries a resonance of the will of art, a double sidedness in which the incompleteness of the ongoing movement between the subject and object, history and nature, is therefore inscribed. Going beyond the question of the beautiful and the conditions for its judgment (pace Kant), at issue, according to Riegl, is pictorial art's "will-to-art". This, in turn, is made visible to the historian by "the appearances of objects as form and colour on the plane or in space", as they are manifested by the artistic means of an era. This notion of art's striving for its own self-identity, until the point of its own absorption, is already expressed in the Hegelian *Idea* of the spirit's development towards its own pure self-knowing. With the final stage of "an und für sich", absolute spirit is in touch with itself, transparent to itself, only by means of overcoming any signifying sensuousness, the sensory matter that is produced by the body designated as "Leib", the proper body inhabited by "Geist".<sup>18</sup>

The tactile is designated as the first level of the *Kunstwollen* characterising ancient Egyptian art in Riegl's chapter on architecture. As follows from this assertion, the persistent element in any aesthetic creations is that they presuppose the beholder as located at a 'touching' distance in their acts of vision, just as they can only appear through the relations they constitute with one another within the image space. Riegl classifies these relations by degrees of bodily proximity in optical terms, as "nah-sichtig", "normalsichtig", and "fern-sichtig".<sup>19</sup> Yet tactility pertains not only to the expression of an extreme connection of the eye or the body to the plane.

---

<sup>17</sup> The opposition of the optical and the tactile is also found in other studies in aesthetics read by Benjamin, for example Heinz Werner's *Grundfragen der Sprachphysiognomik* (1932), as pointed out in Fredric Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 228. On Benjamin's reception of Riegl's theory of art history, see Wolfgang Kemp, "Fernbilder: Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft", in *Links hatte sich noch alles zu enträtseln ...* 'Walter Benjamin im Kontext', ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt a.M.: Syndikat, 1978), pp. 224-228.

<sup>18</sup> See Jacques Derrida's remarks on Husserl for whom "the body of the sign [is] animated by the intention of signification, just as a body (*Körper*) when inhabited by *Geist* becomes a proper body (*Leib*).". Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's *Semiotics*", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 69-108 (p. 82).

<sup>19</sup> Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1985), pp. 24-25. These are discussed as historically distinct modes of perception from Classical architecture, sculpture, painting and the decorative arts. Riegl emphasised that already in late Roman art the development of the modern, optical mode of apprehending the world can be discerned.

The category of the tactile is originated in an unattainability of the void, a void that is to be covered and blocked, put out of sight. According to Riegl, architectural-tactile beginnings manifested the manner in which the art of building was more involved in the restriction of the spatial (“Raumbegrenzung”), therefore concealing and literally “pushing back” any space that has been created, any “Raumbildung”,<sup>20</sup> and this by creating external surfaces of covering. Within these manifestations of “close vision” – “Nahsicht”, the mutually exclusive sensorial orders of touch and sight lie buried together.

In a pivotal passage of the “Kunstwerk” essay, the mutual interspersing of the optical and tactile receptions entailed by architecture – is weighed up. As Benjamin observes:

Buildings are received in a double fashion: through usage and through perception [Wahrnehmung]. Or better: the tactile [taktisch] and the optical [optisch]. There can be no conceiving of such reception if it is thought of according to the model of collection as is routine for instance for travelers standing in front of famous buildings. For, on the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation stands for on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not only by way of attention [Aufmerksamkeit] but also by way of habit [Gewohnheit]. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which by its nature [von Hause aus] comes about less in the form of a tense observation [gespannten Aufmerken] but rather by way of a casual noticing [beiläufigen Bemerken]. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. For the tasks of the perceptual apparatus [Wahrnehmungsapparat] at historical turning points cannot be formed by way of mere opticality [Optik]; these tasks cannot be resolved by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually, taking their cue from tactile reception through habit.

(GS I:505, *AW* 34, translation modified)

For Benjamin, tactility’s adherence to the removal of distancing bears upon an abbreviated mode of perception in condensation. It is within this nexus that architecture is capable of transmuting the habit of attentive contemplation into new habitual and collective forms of bodily distraction/dispersal – *Zerstreuung*. The distinction between attention and habit discloses how opticality assumes an uncustomary attentiveness, as it is captured in the scene of the “congregated” or “gathered” – “gesammelten” – travellers, situated at a contemplative

---

<sup>20</sup> “Thus we must conclude that in antiquity, architecture at least at the beginning gave preference to and foregrounded limitation of space whenever possible, while it must have suppressed and concealed its other responsibility, the creation of space.” Ibid., p. 21, Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie nach den funden in Österreich-Ungarn* (Wien: K. K. Hof- und staats-druckerei, 1901), p. 17.

aesthetic distance in front of famous buildings. Its counterpoise, the tactile, constitutes the more corporeal contact with the materiality of the perceived phenomenon, beyond the aesthetic realm of the beautiful. To the extent of having no counterpart to what contemplation *is* on the optical side, what the “tactile side” foreshadows is the sensuous apprehension or intuition of non-opticality. This countervails the phenomenon of aura: instead of “the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be” (*GS* I:440, *AW* 15), for all the proximity the tactile bestows on experience, in the tactile mode of reception beyond the visible there is no presence to be sensed. It is a counterpart (“Gegenstück”) whose content is rendered inconspicuous, *unscheinbar*. Therefore, it is the kind of distraction carried out in the sphere of art by tactility and habit (a concept that will be further elaborated below by turning again to Hegel) that secretly and privately (“Unter der Hand”, also connected to that which is *heimlich*) makes it possible to envision the historical “new tasks of apperception” (*GS* I: 466, *AW* 34).

### 1) Architecture and Film

Notably, architecture participates in accounting for the distinctive structures of perception of the new modes of reproduction, of film and photography, through its domination by tactility:

Reception in distraction – the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in perception – finds in the cinemas its central place. And there, where the collective seeks distraction, the tactile dominant element [die taktische Dominante] that rules over the regrouping of apperception is by no means lacking. More originally, it is at home in architecture [Ursprünglicher ist sie in der Architektur zuhause]. Yet nothing more clearly betrays the violent [gewaltigen] tensions of our time than the fact that this tactile dominant element asserts itself in the very form of optics. And precisely this occurs in film through the shock effect of its image sequences. In this respect, too, film proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception that the Greeks called aesthetics.

(*GS* I:466, *AW* 34, translation modified)

“The violent tensions of our time”, namely the infamous “aestheticizing of politics” (but also “politicizing art” [*GS* I:467, *AW* 36]) is the politicisation of what is ‘perceptible by feeling’ as etymologically originated from the Greek word *aisthetikos*. In the age of image reproducibility, it is the optical (moving) image, that now triggers the tactile body: “[The] distracting element

in film is also primarily tactile. It is based on successive changes of scenes [Schauplätze] and settings [Einstellungen] that by jerks [stoßweise] penetrate the spectator” (GS I:464, AW 32, translation modified).

In another key passage, Benjamin regards film’s disruption of the order of visual perception, worked through an imagined liquidation of modern environment. Here, a mode of collective perception is set in an opposition to the scene of the collected travellers. Now it is film’s activation of collective bodily innervations that engenders an image-space of architectural confinements struck by explosive destruction – *Zerstörung*. As Benjamin writes: “Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second.” Cinema’s medial transformations – those of “close-up” and “slow motion” are effected through an explosive destruction of these architectural confinements. And it is for that very reason that film “manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected [ungeheur[en] und ungeahnt[en] field of play [Spielraum]” (GS I:461, AW 30).

The spatial distance as the condition of the image,<sup>21</sup> conditional indeed in the case of viewing architectural objects, is displaced in film into temporal nearness. The indistinguishability of past and present is captured in the scattered materiality that defines – and so circumscribes – the whole of the image-space that Benjamin portrays. In it, the dispersal of spaces coincides as it were with the distracted beholders. The *Zeitraum* of human environment, of forms of dwelling and habituation – is now *strewn* with its own residues of destruction, and so, spatiality gains ascendancy over temporality, over the nature of film as time-based medium. The transformation made manifest, we might say, is that time, constitutive of the objective thinking of the (transcendental) subject, is *visually* apprehended. Transitoriness, which abides enduringly within the image reproduced in a medium grounded on the passing of time as such, is shared between subject and object as the time of being, the ephemerality of both body and world.<sup>22</sup> Although cinema’s medial form is that of temporal succession, it is a medium in which form radically breaks with its content and dialectically destroys time. This thinking image thus coincides with the field of vision associated with the “angel of history” in the Ninth Thesis on history, the catastrophe which stands in contrast to

---

<sup>21</sup> On the category of distance in the act of viewing, see the thinking-image entitled “*Die Ferne und die Bilder*” (GS IV:427).

<sup>22</sup> See in this regard Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on the “flesh of the world” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 83-84.

any “chain of events” (*GS* I:697-698, *SW* 4:392) a contrast establishing the idea regarding the loss of historical progress.

Spatial order, however, is likewise subject to displacement: Film inverts this claustrophobic characterisation of social space into what Benjamin calls “a play-form of second nature”. The current historical demand, as Benjamin asserts, is for the conversion of human sensibility into another, collective tactile disposition: “To make the enormous technological apparatus [die ungeheure technische Apparatur] of our time an object of human innervation – that is the historical task [die geschichtliche Aufgabe] in whose service film finds its true meaning” (*GS* I:445, *AW* 19). According to Benjamin’s scattered remarks on first/second nature, and also on first/second technology (“Technik”), made in the different versions of the “Kunstwerk” essay and also in fragments related to them, “first nature” is primarily connected with organic nature, “the bodily organism of the individual human being”. And yet, “the revolutionary demands of first, organic nature” are still far from being fulfilled in the collective’s appropriation of “second nature as its first in technology [Technik]” (*GS* VII:666, *SW* 3:135). “Technology”, Benjamin writes in *Einbahnstraße* (written in 1925, published in 1928), means the “mastery not of nature but of the relation between nature and man” (*SW* 1:487). In the “Kunstwerk” essay he contends that “humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront” (*GS* I:444, *AW* 18). Second nature is, in effect, first.<sup>23</sup> The cinematic technique, coupled to the “play-form of second nature” (or second technology), yields a “play-space” (“Spielraum”) (*GS* I:461, *AW* 30, translation modified) capable of displacing the primal relation to mythical nature. It is ‘first nature’, glossed here as mythic and as that which lies beyond or before the human, that is uncannily glimpsed through the ruin-scape of second nature as exposed by film.

With the cinematic ruin-scape of second nature, an image that seems to be extracted by Benjamin out of a real image of reproduction, forms of human habitations appear to disintegrate and to be no longer used in the form of possession or of sheltering. Human, symbolic “second nature”, succumbing to real, natural death, is fashioned – and this is still to be elaborated – as a conjuration of expressionlessness and of the sublime (as hinted by Benjamin’s semantics of *Ungeheuerlichkeit*). Furthermore, in as much as the cinematic is inextricably bound up with a procedure of destruction, only this state of ruin, one of a lost modern space, no longer a space qua dwelling space for bodies, is that of itinerant happiness and fortune: “now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris

---

<sup>23</sup> This would be Adorno’s dictum in “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”, as we will see in Part Two.

[weitverstreuten Trümmern]” (*GS* I:461, *AW* 30). What is surfacing in this passage is the idea of “Glück” and its ties to “messianic nature” and to redemption, as prescribed by the “Theologisch-Politisches Fragment”: “For Nature is messianic by reason of its eternal total and passing away” (*GS* II:204, *SW* 3:306).

## 2) Tactile Embodiment

Architecture and the effect of the teaching associated with it exhibit an artistic domain that borders on the two forms of human corporeality. On the one hand, the historical experienced body, the “Leib” bound to the perceptual faculties, and, on the other, this body’s corporeal essence. According to Benjamin’s early anthropological or psychophysical reflections, the physical, habitual body, the body which is given, in its having, is – from the standpoint of the body designated as “Leib” – unimaginable, devoid of semblance. In a fragment probably written in 1918 entitled “Wahrnehmung und Leib”, Benjamin binds the empirical sensual semblances engendered by the human body to language in its highest or purest form. As he writes: “We are ultimately placed into the world of perception, into one of the highest realms of language, by our bodiliness [Leiblichkeit], our own body.” In this scenography of body and language, the natural body (“Naturleib”) is laid bare – being there, it extends up (“ragen”); and this occurs in the “most immediate [am unmittelbarsten] fashion”, which has nothing to do with visual registering, but rather is negatively guided by a distinction between “Schein” and “Sein”, a distinction made according to “the measure of the messianic form [messianisch[en] Gestalt]”. What is significant, says Benjamin, is that our body is inaccessible to us in so many ways: “We cannot see our face nor our back, projected into the world with our feet, not our head.” Hence the inevitability, so Benjamin concludes, that marks “the present moment of pure perception [im Augenblick der reinen Wahrnehmung]” in which “our body is transformed unto us [sich uns verwandeln]”; thence the “sublime suffering of the eccentric in relation to his body” (*GS* VI:67, my translation).

Body and language, at their projected origins, share a lack of mediation; the nakedness of being, the (un)embodied *Körper*, is analogous to the highest realm of language designated by Benjamin as pure communicability. It is the affective flesh that functions here as a medium between spirit and corporeality, as if turning the inside (consciousness, mind) to an outside tactile cover, the layer of experience, according to this *Denkbild*, in which the appearance of one’s body dissolves. Thereby, with the rendition of the resulting alienated sublimity or uncanniness, that is, the inevitable and disinterested exposure to the repressed awareness of

that which is finite and non-human – the irredeemable transience unfolds. It exceeds the bodily mode called *Leib*, accompanied by physical suffering (and also pleasure, which Benjamin distinguishes from happiness, from “Glück” [GS VI:81, SW 1:395]). This scenography of the body brings to mind an image of bodily stature glossed in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay. There, the body, inconspicuous to itself, comes into play in the idea that the upright standing of the human is a corporeal posture that lays itself bare before God.<sup>24</sup> In the context of the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, this statement appears in relation to the concept of love:

The human being appears to us as a corpse and his life as love, when they are in the presence of God. Thus, death has the power to lay bare like love. Only nature cannot be unveiled, for it preserves a mystery so long as God lets it exist. Truth is discovered in the essence of language. The human body lays itself bare, a sign [ein Zeichen] that the human being itself stands before God.

(GS I:197, SW 1:351)

The idea regarding the sensuous body’s transformation into the body one already has, releasing an experience otherwise associated with that of the bodily mode of *Körper*, is further developed and problematised in the aforementioned “Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem”, with the exposure of the crossing of meanings between “Leib” and “Körper”, but also between “Geist” and “Sexualität”, “Natur” and “Körper”. According to these crossings of meaning, the natural progression of the corporeal individual body through time, its “körperliche Natur”, flips over from its trajectory towards passing away into an oppositional (messianic) sphere of “resurrection” (“Auferstehung”).<sup>25</sup> Corresponding to this movement, in which all things earthly and transient are bound to the divine by dint of their decline, is a counter-nature, that of the lived, “leibliche” body – through which, according to Benjamin,

---

<sup>24</sup> In reading this scenography as a reference to the Jewish day of atonement, mediated through Benjamin’s drawing on the work of Hermann Cohen, Rochelle Tobias comments that it is by this invocation of “der Versöhnungstag” that Benjamin marks the distinction between art and ethics in the course of his uncovering of the sacrificial logic of Goethe’s novel. See Tobias, “Irreconcilable: Ethics and Aesthetics for Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin”, *MLN* 127.3 (2012), 665-680 (p. 666).

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin’s category of the messianic resolves around the split between nature and history. As stated in “Theologisch-Politisches Fragment”, “Only the Messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the messianic. For this reason, nothing historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic.” And yet, the historical is imbued with the messianic through its enmeshment with the natural, thus “nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.” (GS II:203, 204, SW 3:305, 306).



man partakes in the collective process of history – that advances towards its dissolution.<sup>26</sup> These two opposed progressions of the body, dissolution and resurrection, coincide, as Benjamin notes, in “natural history” – “in der Naturgeschichte” (*GS* VI:81, *SW* 1:395). What is given in Benjamin’s perplexing account of the psychophysical problem is his view of the moral, political world as obtaining its significance from the idea regarding a tactile body, invisible to the senses, hence the aforementioned proximity between “Leibraum” and “Bildraum”. In the Surrealism and the “Kunstwerk” essays, this duality of the body is now cast into the idea of a collective corpus that is capable of surpassing the realm of *Schein*.

Benjamin’s discussion of architecture in the “Kunstwerk” essay bespeaks this artistic medium as the form of historical co-existence, the political being-with of bodies, in which the psychophysical problem and the peculiar discrepancies of bodily modes unfold. Architectural forms are not only objects of use, but also experienced, to recall – in “perception: or better: the tactile and the optical”. This means, according to the “Schemata”, different degrees of bodily perception, between the limited yet formless “Person” and its “maximum extension” associated with the “people [das Volk]” (*GS* I:80, *SW* 1:394-5). In the essay on Surrealism, Benjamin talks about a “residue” (“Rest”), claiming that the “collective is a body [in the sense of *Leib*] too” (“Auch das Kollektivum ist leibhaft”) (*GS* II:310, *SW* 2:217). It seems that what underlines Benjamin’s intentions in these remarks is the attempt to lay bare consciousness and mentality as something corporeal; a physiological being that, in lacking contours, is thus gesturing back towards that which is intangible and so illegible.

In the section of the “Schemata” entitled “Geist und Sexualität / Natur und Körper”, it is noted that spirit is, at the origin (“im Ursprung”), “something natural”, just as sexuality is. Here, natural life – “natürliches Leben” – of which sexuality and spirit comprise the “two vital poles”, is described through a metaphor of the currents of the sea: the confluence of spirit and sexuality flows (“mündet”) into the physical body and in it they are “differentiated”; these aspects of human nature are regarded as the human body’s “fluctuating boundaries with nature” (*GS* VI:81, *SW* 1:396). And perception (“Wahrnehmung”) is one of the “most important organs of this differentiation of the body [Körper]” into spirit and sexuality. The comment continues as follows: “The zone of perceptions also shows clearly the variability to which it is subject as a function of nature. If nature changes, bodily perceptions change too” (*GS* VI:82, *SW* 1:396,

---

<sup>26</sup> On the link between the “Theologisch-Politisches Fragment” and the “Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem” and their underlying notion of politics in Benjamin see Uwe Steiner, “The True Politician: Walter Benjamin’s Concept of the Political”, *New German Critique* 83 (2001), 43-88 (pp. 50-53).

translation modified). In a phrasing that resonates, in its intimation of “the anguish of nature”, with the later “Kunstwerk” essay, as we shall see, Benjamin says:

In the utter decline [Verfall] of corporeality such as we experience in the West at the present time, the last instrument of its renewal is the anguish of nature [die Pein der Natur] which is no longer grasped in life and therefore roars in wild torrents over the body [Körper].

(GS I:81, SW 1:396, translation modified)

In the second part of the aforementioned fragment “Wahrnehmung und Leib”, Benjamin refers to “the history of perception which is in the end the history of myth”. He describes primordial modes of perception which are more tactile than optical in nature: “already man’s upright walk, achieved only gradually, allows for earlier different modes of perception.” The history of perception “comes into being from the factors of change in nature [Naturveränderung] and change of the body [Veränderung des Leibes];” yet these changes received their “spiritual meaning and their crowning (their mastery, synthesis [Bewältigung, Synthese]) in myth.” The mythic essence of perception, the manner in which “body and nature stand in relation to one another” – is rendered by its culmination in a “crowning” in the form of a spatial net: “right, left – above, below – in front, behind” (GS VI:67, my translation). “Krönung” here seems to evoke coronation, and the body, when it is subordinated to myth and to the category of sovereignty, is at the same time the mark of the inaccessibility of one’s own body to visual perception. When this unavailability of the realm of *Schein* and of embodiment is expressed *within* myth, it is the latter that is thereby revealed to be bound up with non-communicability, with “the highest realm of language”.

In the section in the “Schemata” entitled “Nearness and Distance” (“Nähe und Ferne”), these oppositions are considered as part of the aforementioned spatial order in which the body is placed. As is also noted there (with a reference to Klages), “[nearness and distance] are particularly prominent in the life of Eros and sexuality. The life of Eros is ignited [entzündet sich] by distance. On the other hand, and instead, there is a kinship between closeness and sexuality” (GS VI:83, SW 1:397, translation modified). The exchange between closeness and distance in these notes is associated with death. This idea is brought to the extreme in dreams: “in itself we see the greatest nearness in dreams; and also – perhaps – the furthest distance?” Thus, the life-likeness of dreams enacts a desire for the inanimate: “however marvellously they are formed, dreams are no more than the lifeless remains from the womb of the depths [nur das

Tote aus dem Schoße dieser Tiefen]” (*GS* VI:85, *SW* 1:399). There is another death in question here, that which is famously formulated in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book as the “death of intention” (a trope to be detailed later on). Following from the problem of the reality of dreams and their relation to truth and actuality, Benjamin remarks that “in the world of truth, the world of perception has lost its reality. The world of truth may well not be the world of any consciousness.” The problem of the relation of dreaming and waking (a problem indispensable to the theory of “recognizability” developed in the *Passagen-Werk*), is a problem not of the “theory of knowledge” but of the “theory of perception” (*GS* VI:85, *SW* 1:399).

## II. The Image-like, the Imageless, the Name

### 1) The *Hülle* as the Organiser of the Symbolic

The “Kunstwerk” essay’s intimations of the faculty of touch are directed at the assumption (already set forth in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay) regarding the decay of “beautiful semblance”. Touch is the basis for the “peeling of the object out of its cover/veil” – “*Die Entschälung des Gegenstandes aus seiner Hülle*” – an image, or better a scene, that is said to accord with “the decimation [Zertrümmerung] of the aura” (*GS* I:440, *AW* 16, Benjamin’s italics, translation modified). The allusion here is to the theory of the un-unveilability (“Unenthüllbarkeit”) of “truth” developed in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay and in the

Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book. In the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, Benjamin interprets Goethe’s work as a manifestation of the idea that the veil or cover – of appearances and beauty, of “beautiful semblance”, and the veiled/covered object (“truth”) cannot be separated from each other: they form a configuration of image, distance and touch (*GS* I:195, *SW* 1:351). A veiled object, that of a female body, also appears in the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede”, in the evocation of the figure of the goddess Isis standing at the temple of Saïs, accounting for the futile striving for truth (“Only nature”, and therefore, the body, “cannot be unveiled”, to recall the just cited statement from the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book). As Benjamin comments on this programmatic image: “Truth is the death of intention. Precisely this can be gathered from the fable of a veiled image at Saïs, the uncovering [Enthüllung] of which is fatal to anyone who seeks to ascertain the truth by questioning” (*GS* I:216, *O* 12). The ‘tactile’ impulse of unveiling is issued here from this manifested series of extirpations of distance as the condition of *both* image, body and of truth. The *Schauplatz*, the place of looking and showing, is of

significance to this constellation. The veiled body is a statue standing probably outside or before the Egyptian temple. It is the relation of architecture to sculpture, we might say, that shifts and displaces the image of veiled Isis into another plane of representation and of the question of truth. Isis, whose body is devised to remain inaccessible to the human eye, is in effect susceptible to an *image* that is unconcealed; it has stepped out of the temple, and with this covered body-image, an image-space emerges as the power of the veil diminishes.

With the question of the truth as idea, disconnected from “appearances” (“Erscheinungen”), the idea reaches its self-consciousness, and that is in contrast to the dialectic of truth and beauty, as Benjamin draws on Plato’s *Symposium*, according to which truth “is beautiful not so much in itself as for the one who seeks it”; for the beautiful is determined by “the stages of erotic desire”. And the same relation between truth and beauty, beauty which is always expropriated by the sensuous body, thus

obtains when it comes to human love: the human being is beautiful for the one who loves, though in himself he is not – and precisely because his body presents itself in a higher order than that of the beautiful [sein Leib in einer höheren Ordnung als der des Schönen sich darstellt].

(GS I:211, O 6)

A few passages later, Benjamin calls upon a reactivation, not of originary language (“Ursprache”), but rather, of originary apperception, or better – hearing – “Urvernehmen” – which underlies the task of the philosopher. The latter’s concern is, “through presentation [durch Darstellung], to reestablish in its primacy the symbolic character of the word” (GS I:216-217, O 13). This symbolic character could be traced in the union of the veil of beauty/appearance and the body as its covered object, a body which is in itself a tactile cover, a union involved in a violent conjuncture between corporeality and knowledge. This demise is grounded on a radical representation of closeness, that of the subject to its object, which, at the same time, is also an irrevocable separation of truth from its “presentational moment”. For “this presentational moment [darstellende Moment] in truth is the refuge of beauty in general” (GS I:211, O 6). What is untouchable in truth, requiring in itself to be posited as and in philosophical presentation, is a sheltered province where beauty resides; whilst truth enacts a desire for closeness (as glossed in the double meaning of sensuous clasping and mental understanding of

the word “grasping” – “Fassen”<sup>27</sup>), it is beauty that maintains this desire through and as distance.

“The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil” (GS I:195, SW 1:351). With the covered nature of the artwork or the object (“der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle”), the *Hülle* as a veil is inescapably subject to a “presentational moment” featured by touch. This figure is ‘tactile’ in the dual sense of the bodily proximity it brings to the ‘object’ through the substance covered by it and the touching that is obstructed in the *banned* act of unveiling. The moment of disclosure or of truth lies neither in the uncovering of an afterimage in the form of the veil or cover, nor in conceptualising any original moment that has preceded it in the form of the “veiled object” before the act of its veiling. More than anything else, this image seems to disclose a refusal in the sense referred to by the Jewish prohibition of the image (of graven images, likenesses, or the image-like).<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the moral obligation to be faithful to the one and indivisible God is also fused with the non-semblance that is inherent to any imagistic portrayal of the body. Architecture is an object that shelters the body, delimits its optical extension and enables awareness of the tactile dimension within the visual by its interior and exterior formations. Yet the body, as content, is never architecture’s form (and this is dialectically enacted by the sheltered corpse, according to architecture’s Egyptian origins). It is from this stance of the Jewish motif of the *Bilderverbot* that architecture did not fall into the worship of visual images.<sup>29</sup> With this idea of iconoclasm in mind, we might say that it is precisely the sensory dimension of the tactile that evinces a certain attentiveness to the decimation of the aura, to the abolishment of ‘the Eros of distance’.

The alliance between the rhetoric of touch and the non-communicability of the linguistic sign can be read against the backdrop of Winfried Menninghaus’s interpretation of Benjamin’s conceptualisations of death and of the “production of the corpse” in the *Trauerspiel* book, as a theory of the sublime and the critique of the beautiful.<sup>30</sup> This procedure, according to Benjamin, is nevertheless still animated by an impulse or “Moment” of presentation, underscored by the name, a mode of representation that has no connection to the realm of appearance: “The being – distant from all phenomenality – in which alone this power inheres

---

<sup>27</sup> See Hegel’s comment in the *Aesthetics*: “When we take ‘grasping’ something in the spiritual sense, for example, it never occurs to us in any connection to think about the act of sensuous clasping with the hand”; cited in Werner Hamacher, *Pleroma: Reading in Hegel: The Genesis and Structure of a Dialectical Hermeneutics in Hegel*, trans. Nicholas Walker and Simon Jarvis (London: Athlone, 1998), p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> On the ban on graven images as the foundation of political aesthetics see Gertrud Koch, “Image Politics: The Monotheistic Prohibition of Images”, *Critical Horizons* 14.3 (2013), 341-354.

<sup>29</sup> See Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason, Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Frederick Ungar: New York, 1972, published in German in 1919), p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> Menninghaus, “Walter Benjamin’s Variations of Imagelessness”, p. 411.

is that of the name” (*GS* I:216, *O* 13). And this is also the case with the crucial category of expressionlessness – “das Ausdruckslose” – dialectically threaded into Benjamin’s materialistic media theory, as will be discussed below. The expressionless is that which lies *beyond* language, communicability and the symbol. Pertaining to the mediality of language-ness, of “language as such”, whereby language does not partake in processes of communication, the expressionless adheres to a particular destructibility which has the power to liquefy the appearances of the beautiful.

In *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* it is noted that “only the expressionless completes [vollendet] the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of the symbol” (*GS* I:181, *SW* 1:340). The symbol, taking the shape of a torso, in itself mutates into that through which sensorial perception is denied, that is, it is an image concretising the bodily state of being imageless and unembodied, devoid of sensuous perception.<sup>31</sup> However, and in light of Benjamin’s theory of language, it is also possible to map into this thinking image – namely, the violent completion of the work by dint of the “expressionless” and the torso of the symbol that is left in ruins – the primal scene of the tower of Babel. In the story of Babel, God’s interruption into the linguistic order gave way to language becoming not only expressionless, but also non-auditory: “come on, let us go down and baffle their language there so they cannot understand each other.”<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that the Hebrew phrasing stresses sensual reception: “they would not *hear* each other”, and this bears on a resonance with the philosopher’s primal concern, the task of reinstating a “primal hearing” (“Urvernehmen”).

## 2) On the Definition of the Aura

As already indicated, it is the bodily envelope out of which a sensation of limitlessness dialectically flows, disclosing the crossed meanings between natural and historical life. This informs, albeit in a reversed manner, the Hegelian account of the Egyptian pyramids as the prototype for “the *symbolical* art-form [*symbolischen Kunstgestalt*]” (*VÄ* I:459, *LA* I:356). According to Hegel, “the inorganic nature of spirit is given [in] its appropriate artistic form by architecture” and it is only in (Greek) sculpture, the proper aesthetic “classical form”, that “the

---

<sup>31</sup> This calls upon the idea, to cite Weigel’s note regarding “Benjamin’s epistemology of images”, that “thought learns from the images’ own mode of perception”. See Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, p. xxiv.

<sup>32</sup> *Genesis* 11:7, in Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, p. 46.

spiritual itself now enters so that the work of art acquires and displays spirituality as content” (*VÄ* II:351, *LA* II:701). Yet still, it is in architecture that the infinite is held within finite form in a condition of difference. What is sensuously present to the embodied body is transmitted into the knowledge of the soul’s absence; however, it is an absence in aesthetic terms, that of *Schein*, that in turn is a sign of spirit’s immortality. Symbolic architecture serves as the foundation for the whole edifice of Hegelian aesthetics, in which spirit is alienated in the face of transitoriness and outer nature, whence sensuous forms issue nothing but arbitrary images and meanings.

We could point here to Benjamin’s famous dictum regarding his theory of dialectical images: “ambiguity [*Zweideutigkeit*] is the appearance of dialectics in images [*die bildliche Erscheinung der Dialektik*], the law of dialectics at a standstill” (*GS* V:55, *AP* 10). With the pyramids, body and architecture form a constellation of what Benjamin terms elsewhere “distorted similarity”<sup>33</sup>: substance body (“*Körper*”), (un)inhabited by spirit, sets the dialectical grounds for the experiencing, historically conditioned body (“*Leib*”) whose corporeal envelope is an unbounded and limitless tactile flesh. Therefore, what is foreshadowed by Hegel and seen to be grasped dialectically by Benjamin, is that bodily visions of the image-like, that is, what is imagined, represented as of the body – “*die sinnliche Vorstellung*” in Hegel’s terms – thwart the imageless. To be taken as true content of absolute knowledge, the image-like has to be absolved in passing away.

In the age of reproducibility, under the rubric of semblance, art is the realm through which dissolution and natural decay are experienced, as is accounted for in the natural semantics, organised around the body, that Benjamin uses in order to define the aura’s effacement. The aura, to recall the often-cited key passage, is “a strange tissue [*Gespinst*] of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be”. The spectral character of the aura is hinted at by the word *Gespinst*, which – as a simultaneity of materiality and immateriality – can be said to be haunted by the word *Gespenst*.<sup>34</sup> The aura, as Benjamin

---

<sup>33</sup> The idea of distortion within the visible, the “*entstellte Ähnlichkeit*” as the underlying principle of memory and writing is pivotal to the Proust essay and to the autobiographical texts on Berlin childhood. See Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space*, esp. pp. 125-127.

<sup>34</sup> This spectral quality of the word *Gespinst* was pointed out by Gerhard Richter. In his reading of Adorno’s employment of Benjamin’s concept of the aura in his *Aesthetic Theory*, Richter signals this dialectical tension of the spectre as a signifier for “the usefulness of the aura as politically charged category of aesthetic experience”, according to Adorno’s conviction. See Richter, “Adorno and the Excessive Politics of the Aura”, in *Benjamin’s Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura*, ed. Lise Patt (Los Angeles, Calif.: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2001), pp. 25-36 (p. 33). The spectrality of the aura and the uncanny feeling it evokes is captured in another definition from “On some Motifs in Baudelaire” when it is also regarded as a form of perception in which the awakening of nature comes about: “To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back” (*GS* I:646, *SW* 4:338).

remarks, makes itself felt within the field of vision of a natural setting. “To track while resting on a summer afternoon a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (*GS* I:440, *AW* 15). The aesthetic relation to nature and the auratic consummation (‘aura’ – from the Greek means ‘breath of air’) of natural beauty serve as the grounds for the phenomenon of the withering aura. Thus, the scene of the aura can be viewed as a reminiscent of the expulsion of nature from the realm of the beautiful which sets into motion Hegel’s aesthetic theory. “The first existence of the Idea is *nature*, and beauty begins as the beauty of nature [die erste Schönheit ist die *Naturschönheit*]” (*VÄ* I:157, *LA* I:116). It is the sublation of natural beauty by way of “breathing”, by the breath of a living thing, that is recorded in the scene of the aura.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, breathing/consuming the aura coincides, according to this scenography, with two modes of taking shape, of *Gestalt*. The one is a projected delimiting line of a natural mass as figured by the human eye, the other is a projected shadow. Significantly, the decisive moment of perceiving the aura of natural entities, the material mass of mountains or branch, is mediated by a specific gaze. This gaze seems to be incorporated into the more acoustical dimension of breath, imagined in this *Denkbild* to be an attribute of the mute, in the sense of inarticulate, natural world. Thus, it also draws into this scene Benjamin’s early theories of language, lament and pure mediality. Notably, the breathability of the aura occurs in conjunction with another kind of bodily deformation: the shadow that is cast. The cast shadow transforms the point of view of the whole scenography, exposing the beholder’s bodily appearance, his or her “Erscheinung”. As such, the whole scenography is rendered as a body-space marked by “die bildliche Erscheinung der Dialektik” (*GS* V:55). For, it is the fact that the aura is *not* seen that incites the dialectical tension of *Schein* and *Sein* that it prompts.

This imagistic being becomes tangible by the fact that the entire scene of the enactment of the aura’s consummation is underscored by different degrees of perceptibility and carried out by painterly characteristics; that is, the horizon and the fixed topographical lines of natural entities and the natural phenomenon of light and shadow. Yet at this point, another, ‘tactile’-like deformation makes itself felt in a temporal moment: the dissolution of the beholder’s bodily contours by way of the shadow that is cast. Just as ruins befall architecture, the body, losing its delimited form in the landscape, reverts to its meaning as *Körper* – the body as thing in its bare natural materiality. The natural body, yet to embody free spirit – “the principle of

---

<sup>35</sup> For Hegel, the concept of beauty in the realm of the “philosophy of fine art” is expressed only by its connection to nature: “the beauty of art is *higher* than nature” (*LA* I:2).



freedom”, is what is to be excluded at the beginning of art according to Hegel.<sup>36</sup> As we will see, the repression of natural beauty as propounded by Hegel underscores Benjamin’s attentiveness to architecture and to architectural scenographies.

The shadow, however, might be regarded as the ‘tactile’ correlative to the aura: it is precisely a projection which is an “appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth” (to use here the definition of the aura that appears in the *Passagen-Werk* [GS V:560, AP 447]). Shadows keep cowering to their objects, as the title of Benjamin’s two collection of *Denkbilder* – “Kurze Schatten (I, II)” discloses. In one of them (entitled “Short Shadow”), the shadow is envisaged to be distorted into an architectural element, into a burrow or (underground) building: “Toward noon, shadows are no more than the sharp, black edges at the feet of things, preparing to retreat silently [lautlos], unnoticed [unversehens], into their burrow [in ihren Bau], their secret being [Geheimnis]” (GS IV:373, SW 2:272).<sup>37</sup> The allusion to Kafka’s world through the figuration of the *Bau* is intensified once this reflection is read together with one of Benjamin’s remarks on Kafka’s “Vor Dem Gesetz” (first published in 1915). “The reader of this parable “may have been struck”, says Benjamin, by “the cloudy spot at its interior [die wolkige Stelle in ihrem Innern]” (GS II:420 SW 2:802), indicating, that is, the ambiguous, parabolic functioning of the law in Kafka’s story. For the law, it could be interpreted, is taking place not only in the prohibition of its representation but also, in the presentation of its inaccessibility.<sup>38</sup>

In as much as the breathing body, in the scene of the aura, is clouded, it silently and suddenly retreats into its ‘burrow’; and as semblance withers away from it, bodily perception is released *from* semblance. Thus, it is also possible to read the scenography of body and aura against the backdrop of the Judaic ban on the image.<sup>39</sup> It is the faint intimation of the imageless image of the body, evolving out of the idea of a breathing body, and therefore by intimation – out of the suppression of natural beauty – that is also incorporated into the shadow that is cast.

<sup>36</sup> See Adorno’s remark in his *Aesthetic Theory*: “Hegel sacrifices natural beauty to subjective spirit, but subordinates that spirit to a classicism that is external to and incompatible with it, perhaps out of fear of a dialectic that even in the face of the idea of beauty would not come to a halt.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> The rest of the short piece continues as follow: “Then, in its compressed, cowering fullness, comes the hour of Zarathustra – the thinker in ‘the noon of life’, in ‘the summer garden’. For it is knowledge that gives objects their sharpest outline, like the sun at its zenith.”

<sup>38</sup> On the negative *topos* of the law see Derrida’s analysis of the parable, “Before the Law”, trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 181-220 (p. 196). The theme of architecture and the law will be taken up again in the conclusion.

<sup>39</sup> For an account of the origination of Benjamin’s concept of the aura in Jewish mysticism and theology see Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura”, *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), 336-375. In this article Bratu Hansen draws on Gershom Scholem’s interpretation of the Kabbalistic notion of the *tzelem* (“image”) as a concealed theory informing Benjamin’s concept of the aura (see pp. 370-371).

Mediated by the idea of the image ban, the juncture of the consummated natural beauty and the shadow exposing the substantial body could be seen to be informed by the proximity in Hebrew of the word shadow ,*tzel*, to *tzelem*, literally “image”, “Bild”.<sup>40</sup> And with this affinity, the aspect of nature as bound to mythic violence, can be discerned as well. As already alluded here with these comments on the concept of the aura, the built environment is implicated in Benjamin’s critique of the disintegrated auratic “beautiful semblance”. This alliance is in play in Benjamin’s attention to the architectural scenographies in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay.

### 3) The Mythic Archetype of the House in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* Essay

In several passages in *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjamin reflects on the activities of building in Goethe’s novel, stressing their connections to (a rejected) sacrifice and so to mythic violence. Evoking the novel’s “episode of the crystal glass”, Benjamin notes that the crystal glass, “destined to shatter, is caught in mid-flight and preserved. It is a sacrifice to the building [Bauopfer] – a sacrifice that is rejected at the consecration of the house in which Otilie will die”. And in the following remark Benjamin uncovers an ominous “reminder of a grave [Gräbermahnung]” in what is being said with a “masonic undertone” at the occasion of the laying of the house’s foundation stone: the intimations of “the depths of the earth” and a “hollowed out space” (*GS* I:136, *SW* 1:306). These remarks evolve out of the discussion on the connection between guilt, fate and natural life, the crux of Benjamin’s response to Goethe’s novel.

In unfolding the ambiguity of “Das verschuldete Leben”, according to which natural life is displaced into guilty life, the mythic order of Goethe’s novel is revealed, as natural life appears guilty. Thus, “Fate is the nexus of guilt among the living” (*GS* I:138, *SW* 1:307). Under the sign of guilt, “natural life” is coupled with the category of bare or “mere life” (“bloßes Leben”) (*GS* I:139, *SW* 1:308). This category flows out of the depiction of an uncanny sensation of *Schein* in the novel. The strange resemblance of Otto, Charlotte’s dead baby, to Otilie and the Captain – the respective objects of erotic desire of the infant’s biological parents – uncannily and demonically materialises, in the most literal sense of semblance, the criss-crossed erotic elective affinities between the characters. With this portrayal, the devastating

---

<sup>40</sup> “And God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them”. Genesis 1:27, in Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, p. 5. For the proximity of the word ‘shadow’ to the word ‘image’ in Jewish mysticism see Gershom Scholem, “The Tzelem”, in *The Fundamentals of the Kabbalah and its Symbols* [in Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1975), pp. 358-380 (pp. 369-370).

powers of Eros in the context of marriage are arrested into an image of foreboding, an inversed mirror image of Kant's definition of marriage (in *The Metaphysics of Moral*, to which Benjamin refers, *SW* 1:299). In as far as procreation *did not* cease, notwithstanding the dissolution of the moral content of marriage, namely, fidelity, according to Kant, the mythic essence of the novel (and of marriage) reveals itself in this demonic merging of mind and sexuality.<sup>41</sup> It is a dialectical image (marked by ambiguity) according to which marriage, the structure of the bourgeois family, when it enters into a constellation with biological life, displaces natural life into guilty life.<sup>42</sup>

This configuration of life that "corresponds to the natural condition of the living"<sup>43</sup> is portrayed by Benjamin as tied to the image of the house. In a subsection of the essay entitled "Das Haus" (*GS* I:836)<sup>44</sup> it is noted that human mythical existence in its "natural" state of "misfortune" ("Unglück") and guilt, is the effect of the "fading away of supernatural life in man". As Benjamin's subsequent note reads: "When once man has sunk to this level, even the life of seemingly dead things acquires power." For, "The incorporation of the totality of material things into life is indeed a criterion of the mythic world. Among them, the first has always been the house" (*GS* I:139, *SW* 1:308).<sup>45</sup> The following thinking images, emanating from architectural descriptions in Goethe's novel, are indeed instructive, not only in terms of "architecture's reception", insinuated here by the trope of nearness ("Nähe"), but also, by means of architectural activities, of building and dwelling. In them, an imparting of a mythic law, of fate ("Das Fatum"), is architecturally mediated, inscribed into a scenography of the completion of the house and its inhabitation by the living. As Benjamin comments: "Thus, to the extent that the house approaches completion, fate closes in [wird das Schicksal nah]." And destined fate is closing in in both temporal and spatial terms: "The laying of the foundation stone, the celebration of the raising of the roof beams, and moving in mark just so many stages of decline [Stufen des Unterganges]" (*GS* I:139, *SW* 1:308). This architectural scenography

---

<sup>41</sup> Miguel Vatter comments: "Benjamin focuses on the guilt of mere life as symbolized by the fate of a child, here, the child born to Charlotte and Eduard and conceived the very night on which they each realized that they are in love with someone else. The death of the child caused by a distraction on the part of Otilie, will make it impossible for either of the parents to remain with the partner for which they felt such 'elective affinity'". Vatter, "Married Life, Gay Life as a Work of Art, and Eternal Life: Toward a Biopolitical Reading of Benjamin", *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44. 4 (2011), 309-335 (p. 312).

<sup>42</sup> On Benjamin's response to Kant's doctrine of marriage in the Goethe essay see *ibid.*, pp. 314-317.

<sup>43</sup> See Benjamin's essay "Fate and Character" (*SW* 1:204).

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin omitted the subheadings from the published version of the essay.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin rehearses this argument in the *Trauerspiel* book in the context of his discussion of the "creaturely life of things", as we will see in Part Two.

resonates with a note made a little earlier: “Otilie’s nature profoundly touches the architect” (*GS* I:137, *SW* 1:306).

Benjamin likewise comments on the spectrality of the house, pointing out to the participation of architectural forms in the novel’s motif of *Scheinwelt*: “The house lies isolated, without a view of other dwellings, and it is occupied almost unfurnished. Charlotte, in a white dress, appears on its balcony, while she is away, to her woman friend” (*GS* I:139, *SW* 1:308). Not only do the process of building and bodily disintegration, which diametrically oppose each other, intersect; the subsequent evocation of an architectural archetype, that of “the mill”, resonates with the semantic field surrounding the “Kunstwerk” essay’s treatment of architecture. That is, architectural construction as a site of gathering, associated with material distraction, dissolution and transmission, entailing not only *Zerstreuung* but also – *Zerstörung*:

Consider, too, the mill at the shady bottom of the woods, where for the first time the friends have gathered together [sich versammelt] in the open air. The mill is an ancient symbol of the underworld. It may be that this derives from the pulverizing and transformative nature [auflösenden und verwandelnden Natur] of the act of milling.

In this circle [in diesem Kreis], the powers [die Gewalten] that emerge from the disintegration of the marriage must necessarily win out. For they are precisely those of fate.

(*GS* I:139, *SW* 1:308)

What underscores this remark is the mythic enactment of eternal reoccurrence or reproduction: the dispersibility of matter, continuously splitting itself, is carried away from existence as material density, thus expressing a spectral relation to being. Not least, this spectrality or semblance is to be regarded as related to “the faith in immortality which must never be kindled from one’s own existence” (*GS* I:200, *SW* 1:355), as Benjamin puts it. Hegel too, characterises the realm of death and of the invisible in the pyramids as structures that are initially a symbol of the underworld. What is exposed with the pyramids, says Hegel, is

the true content of art [warhaft[en] Kunstgehalt], namely that of being removed from immediate existence; and so this realm is primarily only Hades, not yet a life [zunächst nur der Hades, noch nicht eine Lebendigkeit – literally, a liveliness] which, even if liberated from the sensuous as such, is still nevertheless at the same time self-existent and therefore in itself free and living spirit. On this account the shape for such an inner

meaning still remains just an external form and veil [Form und Umhüllung] for the definite content of that meaning.

(*VÄ* I:460, *LA* I:356)

Benjamin's focal thinking image in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, that of the "object in its veil" captures precisely the power of the imagination to make the absent present, an indissoluble bond that is at once intensified and shattered in Goethe's novel according to his reading.

Claudia Brodsky Lacour, in her foregrounding of the architectonic impulse in Goethe's novel, notes that "the novel cancels the historical experience and significance of the aesthetic by making death and life each other's reflection." In her reading, she takes Otilie's body that was made available to viewing at all times by dint of a "glass lid" to bear a resonance with Benjamin's "critical illumination of an oddly similar nineteenth-century structure": "Eduard's design makes the 'heavenly' 'arch' housing Otilie a prototype or precursor of the profane consumer arcade."<sup>46</sup> The foundational motif of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* is that of the preservation of beautiful semblance which means "effacing the limits of transient, individual corporality by fixing it as image below and amid painted heavens in an arcade whose sole commodity is a glimpse of that 'pious body'".<sup>47</sup> As she comments further, citing from Goethe's novel,

Eduard allows Otilie to be "laid to rest" [beigesetzt] in a specific, concrete sense. For, rather than interred beneath the ground, Otilie will instead be set aside – the use of *beisetzen* here recalling *beiseitesetzen* – so as to "remain among the living." Yet Eduard's assent to installing Otilie in the "side-chapel" "arch" is premised on the further "condition" that her body be made available to viewing at all times, "covered," as noted previously, "only by a glass lid" and artificially illuminated by an "eternally burning lamp."<sup>48</sup>

With regard to this uncanny image of the 'object in its veil', Benjamin comments that Otilie's death as mournful ("trauervoll") and not tragic could be considered. It is her wish to become 'Körper', substantial nature, which is bereft of spirit, is a mute and expressionless (death-) "drive". Her "Plant-like muteness" (*GS* I:175, *SW* 1:336) draws away from the silence

---

<sup>46</sup> Claudia Brodsky Lacour, *In the Place of Language: Literature and the Architecture of the Referent* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 74.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

of the tragic hero, disclosing, as Benjamin stresses, the dialectical opposition to “Schein”: “das Ausdruckslose” (*GS* I:194, *SW* 1:350). In Benjamin’s reading, both Otilie’s life and death are reduced to semblance; she neither lives nor dies but carries on indefinitely as an auratic image, an appearance of a distant object, however close it may be: “This beauty, as long as the novel’s world endures, may not disappear: the coffin in which the girl rests is not closed” (*GS* I:179, *SW* 1:338).

Weigel emphasises here Benjamin’s encounter with Freud’s *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920). “For Otilie this process was initiated in the very moment when Eros vanished, that is, when her life drive gave up counteracting her death drive or the ongoing mortality of organic life.”<sup>49</sup> To the extent that, preserved under a glass cover, Otilie’s inanimate body becomes the site of what Benjamin would call a *Schauplatz*, this place of showing and looking is a dialectical image of the Freudian opposition of the death drive to Eros: the repression of the corporeal substance’s death drive is sublated by Eros, taking shape in the ego as the phantasmagorical preserver of life.<sup>50</sup> What Weigel terms “*vanishing* Eros” is the force which strives for tactile closeness and for presence *within* opticality and Schein. Tactility, it follows from this observation, as circumscribed within allegorical Eros whose “real work” is “*Thanatos*”, as Benjamin writes, informs the messianic structure of Benjamin’s *Kritik of Die Wahlverwandtschaften* to which Weigel points.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4) “Too Close”

The focal architectural activity in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* – namely, the projected mausoleum, the presence of the architect and the plans for the project, the constant references to gravestone and cornerstone, and with this, the idea that the physical vulnerability of life is bound up with the act of building – is seen to be reflected in the “Kunstwerk” essay. The most extreme expression of the ephemerality of human life and forms of dwelling, however, is manifested, according to Benjamin, in the interior space. In other places in his writing, architecture also bears on the meaning of furnishing. Bourgeois interior spaces are cast as dwellings in the form of the “case-human” (“*Etui-Mensch*”). Abounding with tactile covers

<sup>49</sup> Weigel, “Fidelity, Love, Eros: Benjamin’s Bireferential Concept of Life as Developed in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’”, trans. Chadwick Smith, in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, eds. Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 75-92 (p. 82).

<sup>50</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18 (1920-1922), ed. James Strachey et. al., (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 7-64 (p. 54).

<sup>51</sup> “Fidelity, Love, Eros”, pp. 81-82.

and containers, these spaces, as they are described in the *exposé* for the *Passagen-Werk*, are soft architecture in which all imprints of bodily contact are preserved: “The traces of its inhabitant are molded into the interior”, for “To live means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated” (*GS* V:53, *AP* 20). In the interior, to put it differently, life is always already naked or unveiled, and the substance body leaves the traces of its tactile being with and within the internal covers, the convolution of this living space. “*Das Interieur, die Spur*” is the title of one of the *Passagen-Werk*’s convolutes.

In another convolute, Benjamin formulates the relation between trace and aura:

Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth [sie hervorruft]. In the trace, we get hold [are habhaft] of the thing; in the aura it takes possession of us.

(*GS* V:560, *AP* 447, translation modified)

The imprinted trace inside concealments created for the human body, although tantamount to a manifested image – “*Erscheinung*” (appearance, apparition, phenomenon) – of nearness qua touch, indeed, ‘there’ by dint of a physical contact, testifies to immediate existence. Yet, this is existence in its absolute reality as no more present. Whereas the trace amounts to the dimension of time, the aura, by dint of the acoustical registration of “calling forth” and of the dimension of vocation associated with it seems to bear not only on spatiality but also on transitoriness. To grasp the “thing” (“*Sache*”) in the form of a trace means to succumb to that which is irrevocably inaccessible to the perceptual body. The trace is allegorical in nature. It embodies the demonic trait of allegory, the inevitability by which allegory “signifies something other than what it is”: “it signifies precisely the nonbeing of that which it represents” (*GS* I:406, *O* 255). As a form of knowledge, the aura conveys a structure of desire since it is constituted through a relation to alterity. By contrast, what is enacted “in the trace” is the desiring of “Otherness” as such, for, the trace might be considered a no longer ambiguous sign, in as much as the material testimony for ‘what has been’ also stands for a removal of nonbeing.<sup>52</sup> It is in this sense that Adorno, in “*Der Idee der Naturgeschichte*” (the text out of

---

<sup>52</sup> The trope of the trace is fundamental to Derrida’s thinking, figuring the condition, the image, of the non-presence in the present. For Derrida’s discussion of the trace in the context of Heidegger’s metaphysics see “*Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from Being and Time*”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 29-67 (pp. 65-67).

which the arguments of Part Two unfold), comments that “what is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but an historical relationship” (NG 358, NH 119).

The trace, the image/sign that is a result of extreme closeness and exposes that subjective perceptibility’s alliance with the eye or the optical field, is displaced into, and so consummated by, the sphere of tactility – the con-tact through which it arises, and which it – mimetically – prompts. The closeness marked by the trace is always on the edge of being too close. And this applies also to relations between the perceiving body and the architectural exterior. In the *Denkbild* entitled “Zu Nahe” (1929), a title that in itself betrays one of the characterisations of the tactile, namely, physical and always inherent proximity to the object of perception in a way that elides optical perspective, what is “imageless” (“bildlos”) is referred to as “the refuge of all images”: “Zuflucht aller Bilder” (GS IV:370, SW 2:269). In this *Denkbild*, a *Zeitraum* is deformed within a dream recounted by Benjamin. Portrayed by the more optical dimension of the *fern-sichtig* (as specified by Riegl), a visual experience is transformed into a scenography of getting “too close” to a famous building – Notre Dame cathedral (a name in which the feminine/maternal and the architectural are fused). The objective position of a contemplative distance is disfigured as, and through, the *Entstellung* of psychic meanings – following the logic of the dream indicated by Freud as the principle of displacement and disfigurement.<sup>53</sup> The object distorted by proximity entails, as Benjamin says, “yearning”. It is not so much the anxiety recognised by Freud as *das Unheimliche* that is the feeling evoked by the ambiguous image of the city, but an experience cognate to that of the sort of *déjà vu* that occurs in dreams: a yearning to be where you ostensibly already are, caught in an image oscillating between the familiar and the unfamiliar, past and present: “and what overwhelmed me was yearning – yearning for the very same Paris in which I found myself in my dream”, says Benjamin (GS IV:370, SW 2:269).

In the early fragment “Das Skelett des Wortes”, explicating what he terms the “Wortskelett” (“word skeleton”), Benjamin notes that, crucially, there must be certain contents, objects (“Gegenstände”), that are pure meanings and yet cannot be designated – “bezeichnet” – such as “God, life, yearning”. These objects or concepts are borne by their “Bedeutbarkeit”,

---

<sup>53</sup> As Samuel Weber observes, the dream, in the Freudian account of the narration of dreams, “is already present-to-itself; the dream only comes to be in and through a process of narration that Freud significantly labels not *Darstellung* (presentation), but *Entstellung*: distortion, dislocation, disfigurement. If such distorted articulation can be ‘true’ to the dream, it is only because the latter is already a process of distortion, *Entstellung*.” This is considered in spatial terms, for “the distance that separates narration from narrated, like that which separates spectator from spectacle, is not an empty interval, not the space of *Darstellung* but of *Entstellung*. It is in short, a space on the move”. Weber, *Freud-Legende, Expanded Edition* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 53-54.



which is prior to any act of communication and the ascription of meaning; and hence they are informed by sheer “communicability” – “Mitteilbarkeit” (*GS* VI:16). In the dream recounted by Benjamin, the object, the city, the famous building – all set the scene for another disfigurement of getting “too close”. For, it is the content of the dream, the yearning, that, according to Benjamin’s assertion, is in effect what is subject to the optical displacement of getting “too close”, and therefore, to “Entstellung”. In getting “too close” – the annihilation of distance as the condition of the image – what withdraws is the “yearning that flies to the image from afar.” Consequently, what is gained from losing the image is the more “blissful” (“selig[e]”) yearning, the one that “has already crossed the threshold of the image and possession.” This “too close” yearning thus “knows only the power of names”, the power from which “the loved one lives, is transformed, ages, rejuvenates, and imageless is the refuge of all images” (*GS* IV:370, *SW* 2:269). The veil-less Isis might be recalled here,<sup>54</sup> a figure that could be seen to dovetail with that of ‘imageless’ Otilie. Otilie, indeed the refuge of all (feminine) images, is constituted as an image in which the erotic relentlessly collapses into the nexus of mere life and eternal life sealed by sexual difference.

This dialectical tension inscribed in the concept of Eros, that is preservation by dint of a flight towards the object of desire, underwrites Otilie’s characterisation and actions, according to Benjamin. Moral choice, he emphasises, has no existence outside the order of human language; it is always an object of enunciation and transmission. Calling into question the morality of Otilie’s wish for permanence, Benjamin comments on the latter to be “not a decision” but a [speechless] “drive” (*GS* I:176, *SW* 1:336-337). And as Weigel points out, “Benjamin alludes to Freud’s remarks on the ‘inertia inherent in organic life’, when he writes of Otilie that ‘In her death drive, there speaks a longing for rest’”.<sup>55</sup> Eros, according to this, bears on the unnatural, and therefore on a ‘second nature’ dimension, of those ‘expressionless’ objects – “God, life, yearning” – that resist, according to the aforementioned comment, entering into any symbolic designation.

---

<sup>54</sup> For Goethe’s interpretation of Isis as having no veil see Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), pp. 253-255.

<sup>55</sup> Weigel, “Fidelity, Love, Eros”, p. 81.

### III. Namelessness and Speechlessness in/of Nature

#### 1) Semblance and Play

The “Kunstwerk” essay’s references to the faculty of touch bind tactility to destruction and transitoriness – with respect to images, but also, to the bodies involved in the act of looking. The radical destruction bound up with aesthetic construction and attributed by Benjamin to film, entailing a sort of “distorted similarity”, is precisely what is worked through in the “representation of [man’s] environment by means of this recording apparatus [Aufnahmeapparat]” (GS I:461, *AW* 30). Embodying the collision between image and bodies, film discloses an image-space that is inexorably a body-space, prefiguring what Benjamin calls the “Spielform der zweiten Natur” (GS I:1045). This extreme (cinematic) semblance or image-likeness, taking effect as the expulsion of what is imagined, the extinction of *Schein* which is materialised within the sphere of the image as ruin, to recall Benjamin’s scenography of film, is specified as “playing” – “Spielen”.

The double logic of “Spiel” – meaning “play” and “game” – pervades Benjamin’s writings. “Spielen” is predominantly related to the sense of touch and to the hand, in particular to child’s play and the play of imagination more broadly, and so – to the phenomenon of compulsive repetition. The automaton – inside it a little hunchback is hidden, guiding the artificial hand – eternally wins the game, as the First Thesis on history establishes (GS I:693, *SW* 4:389). In a text entitled “Spielzeug und Spielen” (published in 1928) Benjamin, drawing on Freud’s *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, considers the law of repetition that governs the entire world of play to eschew both aesthetic mimesis and mimetic enactments of the body. “The essence of play”, Benjamin asserts, is “the transformation of shattering experience [erschütterndsten Erfahrung] into habit [Gewohnheit].” Evading the realm of *Schein* and of beautiful semblance, “play and nothing else is the midwife [Wehmutter – literally, labour-pain-mother] of all habits” (GS II:131, *SW* 2:120, translation modified). And it is not only that the lived body is structured as an image. As is argued in “Lehre vom Ähnlichen”, the essay of 1933 in which the idea of language as “the highest application of the mimetic faculty” is pronounced, the “gift [Gabe] of seeing similarity” (“Ähnlichkeit zu sehen”), and also to “long for” it, is coupled with a “flashing up” (“Aufblitzen”). This “Zeitmoment”, although of a spatial kind, cannot be held fast (“festgehalten”) (GS II:210, *SW* 2:689). What is occasioned is a figure, an image, that “offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars” (GS

II:206, *SW* 2:695-696); a singular fleeting moment which is unrepeatable, and as such excludes the meaning of mimesis and similarity as repetition.

According to the rhythmic exchange between presence and absence, famously recorded by Freud in the course of his analysis of the child's "fort/da" game in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, the visually disappearing object ("gone" – "fort") is, by the constant crossing between time and being, language and desire, an inscription of the vanishing of Eros.<sup>56</sup> The shattering experience of the separation from the mother, governed by the death drive, is repressed by the act of bringing back into view – "da" – as mediated by touch – the child's hand pulling back the cotton reel. For Freud, the act of mastering the primal scene of traumatic partition from the mother, her displacement into an invisible Other which the infant subject yearns to have present and visible again, is constructed as a displacement of the optical into the tactile, but also – into the acoustical. It is the speech of the child accompanying the game that veils over the loss of the original object, naming it, with sounds that imitate "fort" and "da". Eros, the enactment of preservation and bringing closer, is displaced, via speaking, into symbolic manifestation in language. Moreover, what is 'there' is only to be sensed by means of an absence and through habit, the compulsive repetition which Freud, in locating it *beyond* the pleasure principle, has also associated with the sensation of the uncanny. Eros, on the one hand, is a tendency that enacts a preservation of distances: from death, from touch and from natural, bare life, but it is also the force that, on the other hand, secretly eliminates them. Eros impedes completion; standing for unfulfillment, it is the direct opposite to completion found in the notion of love, as Benjamin argues in the essay on Goethe.

In the essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Freud refers to his *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, writing of "the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner repetition-compulsion is perceived as uncanny."<sup>57</sup> For Benjamin, as already discussed, what goes beyond images and semblances is the presentational impulse he calls the name. In the essay "Zum Bilde Prousts", Proust, it is said, lay on his bed "racked [*zerfetzt* – torn to pieces] with homesickness, homesick for the world distorted in the state of similarity" ("Heimweh nach der im Stand der Ähnlichkeit entstellten Welt"). Children, Benjamin comments, know an emblem of this world,

the stocking which has the structure of this dream world when, rolled up in the laundry hamper, it is a "bag" and a "present" at the same time. And just as children do not tire

---

<sup>56</sup> On Freud's case of the fort/da game see for example Andrew J. Webber, *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 123-126.

<sup>57</sup> "The Uncanny", p. 238.

of quickly changing the bag and its contents into a third thing – namely, the stocking – Proust could not get his fill of emptying the dummy [Attrappe], his self, at one stroke in order to keep garnering [einbringen] that third thing, the image, which satisfied his curiosity – indeed, assuaged his homesickness.

(GS II:314, SW 2:240)

Bringing forth the image (moving forever *towards the image* of Proust – “Zum Bilde Prousts” – or the “present”, the “stocking”) results in an original tactile and formless surface, fashioned for and in relation to the body, but also apart from it. In as far there was no substance that was to be covered in the first place, interiority is consummated yet without its sublimation in the Hegelian sense, as the refusal of the interior of the rolled-up sock to be seen seems to intimate.

This scenography of childhood play also surfaces in the *Denkbild* of “Der Strumpf” in *Berliner Kindheit*. Here the constitution of the image upon a dialectical arrest between play and semblance emanates from the movement through a series of domestic enclosures: the bedroom, the wardrobe, the sock and, importantly, the “present” (or that which you bring with you) – “Das Mitgebrachte” – that it encases. The revelatory moment, Benjamin emphasises, transpires in “the second part of the play/game”, as the object is teased out of itself:

For now I proceeded to unwrap “the present”, to tease it out of its woollen case [Tasche]. I drew it ever nearer to me, until something that shocked me [das Bestürzende] would happen: I had brought out “the present”, but “the case” in which it had lain was no longer there [“Die Tasche”, in der es gelegen hatte, war nicht mehr da]. I could not repeat the experiment on this phenomenon often enough. It taught me that form and content, the veil and what is veiled are the same [Das Form und Inhalt, Hülle und Verhülltes dasselbe sind]. It led me to draw truth [Wahrheit] from literature [Dichtung] as carefully as the child’s hand retrieves the sock from “the case”.

(GS IV:977-978, SW 3:374, translation modified)

The retrieval of a rolled-up sock from its case or pocket by the child’s hand that penetrates this space releases an object devoid of intention: there was not any empty space at all. What transpires with the second part, the act of unveiling – “Enthüllung” – is that the ‘object’ is completed only by means of a process of its own annihilation, revealing, that is, the impossible state of its being subject to unveiling – what we saw Benjamin call “Unenthüllbarkeit”. This is a process also embedded in mechanical repetition, like the quotidian domestic habit of the unrolling of a sock, which, bodily habituated, engenders the degradation of subjective

attentiveness. Habitual passage out of and into architectural interiors and their cognates exposes here the vanishing point at which the abyss between *Schein* and truth is seen to be mediated by corporeality – the persistent presence of the hand. In going beyond the image by dint of tactility, what cannot be imparted in the field of art and therefore remains intact in aesthetic procedures of *Schein* – comes forth, as and in con-tact.

In a long footnote that appears in the second version of the “Kunstwerk” essay (1936) and was removed from the finalised version, the “significance of beautiful semblance” is reflected. Here Benjamin credits Hegel for his breaking out of the aesthetic tradition that is based on “auratic perception”, and – by implication – on the ritual or cult value of the artwork. He locates this deviation in the Hegelian formulation set out in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*: “Art takes away [yet also carries along or away: nimmt ... fort] the semblance [*Schein*] and deception of this bad, transient [*schlechten, vergänglichen*] world” (Hegel, cited by Benjamin, *GS* VII:368, *SW* 3:127). What is sublated is to be retained, annulled yet preserved in the Hegelian conception, dialectically constituted through the negativity of art, meaning or being itself. With art, what is merely external, sensuous and transient – “the true content of the phenomena [*wahrhaften Gehalt der Erscheinungen*]” – is given in the form of “highest actuality”, “born out of spirit”, as Hegel further states (*VÄ* I:22, *LA* I:9). For Hegel, art is the representation of the Absolute in sensuous forms, an idea that centres the experience of art on the corporeal sensorium, namely on aesthetics, with its origins – as we recall – in *Aisthētikos*, the ancient Greek word for that which is “perceived by feeling” (*VÄ* I:13, *LA* I:1). The sensory enactments of art, transient in themselves,<sup>58</sup> dialectically expunge the sensuous body from transient nature,<sup>59</sup> that is, *Leib* from its inevitably transient material dimension – *Körper*. “Art”, as Hegel writes, at its “highest stage”, “transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of reconciled embodiment [*Versinnlichung*] of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination [*Vorstellung*] to the prose of thought [*Denken*]” (*VÄ* I:123, *LA* I:89). As Rebecca Comay has commented, “the whole ‘hermeneutic’ turn described by Hegel in the *Aesthetics* is the eclipse of art by criticism-of-art.”<sup>60</sup>

The view regarding the decay (“Verfall”) of beautiful semblance as already expounded in the essay on Goethe,<sup>61</sup> and of the aura, makes it doubly urgent, says Benjamin in the

<sup>58</sup> And so, art itself: “Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.” (*LA* I:11).

<sup>59</sup> And therefore, in a dialectical fashion, “Spirit apprehends finitude itself as its own negative and thereby wins its infinity. This truth of finite spirit is the absolute spirit” (*LA* I:93).

<sup>60</sup> Comay, “Defaced Statues: Idealism and Iconoclasm in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*”, p. 141. The Romantic concept of criticism was Benjamin’s subject for his dissertation, written in 1919 and published as a monograph in 1920 entitled *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*.

<sup>61</sup> Here Benjamin evokes his own previous argument from the Goethe essay: “Goethe’s work is still imbued

aforementioned footnote from the “Kusntwerk” essay, “to look at its origin”. It is this origin that became scattered, arrested in a dialectical ambiguity in the current historical moment of reproduction. The origins of the aesthetics, that of mimesis, and with it the two “interfolded” aspects of art, namely, “semblance and play”, return in a constellation of mimesis and mechanical reproduction, which in turn yields a crucial loss of disparity between semblance (“Schein”) and play (“Spiel”):

What is lost in the withering of semblance, or decay of the aura, in works of art is matched by a huge gain in play-space [Spiel-Raum]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance [Scheinmoment] has entirely withdrawn in the face of the element of play [Spielmoment[es]].

(GS VII:369, SW 3:127, translation modified)

Mimetic enactments of the body lack any subject matter and hence are the disclosure of similarity as such (“Der Nachmachende macht, was er macht, nur scheinbar”); it is a sheer act of repetition, yet without the reflective, repetitive and mimetic element of “play”, an appearance that is, paradoxically, devoid of an object to be transmitted as copy or resemblance. Therefore, the suggested chiasmic pairing of play and semblance touches upon the linguistic dimension Benjamin theorises as “sheer communicability”, a “spiritual essence/being” (“ein geistiges Wesen”), as it is dubbed in the early essay on language (GS I:141), which is therefore – pre-semiotic.

## 2) The Image of Mute Nature

The threshold of the image – the image as a passage from its status as image as such to the sphere of the unsayable and the wordless – also transpires in the aforementioned thinking image of film as “play-space”, a space now released by way of the withdrawal of semblance. Here, the distance that irrevocably arises by dint of an intensified nearness takes the form of an inaudible expression – glossed in what Benjamin calls elsewhere the “Lautbild” or phonetic

---

with beautiful semblance as an auratic reality. Mignon, Ottilie, and Helena partake of that reality. ‘The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object *in* its veil [der Gegenstand *in* seiner Hülle]’; this is the quintessence of Goethe’s view of art, and that of antiquity” (GS VII:368, SW 3:127, Benjamin’s emphasis).

image (GS VI:15).<sup>62</sup> Nature, it is said, speaks differently to the camera than the eye. And this otherness of speech is projected out of the visual field:

It can be grasped [So wird handgreiflich] that it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. Other above all in the sense that in the place of a space that is permeated by human consciousness there is an unconsciously permeated space.

(GS I:461, *AW* 30, translation modified)

The sphere of reproduced images begets a space that is manifest there but subject to unconscious optical perception. To this sense of manifestation of the photographic unconscious, now released from the intentional subject, corresponds nature that in speaking otherwise discloses the allegorical structure indispensable to Benjamin's imagistic thinking (a structure that is to be discussed in Part Two). According to this *Denkbild*, what is proffered to acoustical perception, mediated through mechanically reproduced appearances or semblance, could only adhere to the destruction of this aesthetic form.

In the "Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem" it is stated that "nature itself is a totality", that "fate" is the "movement into this abyss [Unergründliche] of total vitality", and that "art" is the countermove, that of "the movement up [hinauf] this abyss". As is also commented there, any other form of expression must lead to "destruction", beyond the "conciliatory effect" ("versöhnliche Wirkung") of art (GS VI:81, *SW* 1:396). The thinking image of "nature's speech" alludes to a speech which is inextricably "speechless" by dint of nature's impeded sorrow, according to the formulations made in the essay on language and in the *Trauerspiel* book, and hence it is a form of speech that nonetheless leads to the degradation of expression or symbolic meaning.<sup>63</sup> In Benjamin's words, the decline of the *Scheinmoment* in film, recuperating "the anguish of nature", is an image that dialectically seizes on the impartability of language.

According to the "Kunstwerk" essay's passing evocation of nature's speech(lessness), the otherness of speech is tantamount to the otherness of space, which, in turn, is disclosed by an uncanny thinking image hinged upon that speech(lessness), that of the optical unconscious, as revealed by the work of the camera:

---

<sup>62</sup> In the aforementioned fragment "Das Skelett des Wortes".

<sup>63</sup> The centrality of the motif of the sorrow of nature will be further discussed in Part Two.

This is where the camera comes into play. With its many resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.

(GS I:461, *AW* 30)

It is in the earlier essay “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931), however, that the references to nature’s speech(lessness) and to the “optical unconscious” first appear. Here, the particular communication of nature, its speaking to the inhuman apparatus which looks at it, is bound up with the silenced gazes of nameless women, recorded in early photographic portraits:

With photography, however, we encounter something new and strange: in Hill’s Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony [Zeugnis] to the photographer’s art, something that cannot be silenced [was nicht zum Schweigen zu bringen ist], that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in “art”.

(GS II:370, *SW* 2:510)

The desire Benjamin alludes to here is enacted by both ‘name’ and ‘knowledge’. Sabine Gözl reads Benjamin’s analysis of photography as underscoring the idea of the momentariness of legibility, as it is evident in Benjamin’s denotation of the photographic reproduction due to a “proper light” (*SW* 2:508). She shows how Benjamin’s critical commentary on these early photographs of feminine anonymity corresponds to the theory of the readability of dialectical images developed in the *Passagen-Werk*. It is the entry of nameless femininity into the space of the image that marks the novel and the peculiarity of photography, according to Benjamin. At issue, Gözl observes, is a mutation “vom Bild einer Namenlosen zum *Bild des Namenlosen*.” She reads the indirect gaze as an address of a twofold demand: the demand to be named together with the demand to remain nameless, an ambiguity inscribed in the word “sie” through which “sexual difference is called forth” as a “third opposition” between past and present, between desire and consciousness.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Gözl, “Geistesgegenwart als Lichtung im Ähnlichen: Bachmanns ‘Heute’ oder Benjamins ‘Jetztzeit’?”, in *Re-Acting to Ingeborg Bachmann*, eds. Caitriona Leahy and Bernadette Cronin (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), pp. 97-109 (p. 104). Weigel too, attributes to images of the feminine in Benjamin’s textual practice the ability to transform this writing into dialectical thinking images, see *Body- and Image-Space*, p. 69.



It follows, that it is the category of the name that cannot be incorporated into the optical image, nor does it participate in the mimetic function of the camera. “Her gaze” (here Benjamin refers to another photographed woman) is “absorbed in an ominous distance [unheilvolle Ferne].” Yet this distance is overcome by the viewer: “Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us” (*GS* II:371, *SW* 2:510). The dimension of in-operative opticality which the “Kunstwerk” essay terms tactility pertains here to what Benjamin portrays as a scorching that, in emerging out of the image-space (as “durchgesengt”), exposes an “inconspicuous spot [unscheinbare Stelle]”. This spot or place requires a particular attention, to the degree that “in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.” With the latter sentence, the speechlessness of nature is (again) expounded: “For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious” (*GS* II:371, *SW* 2:510). We might say that “play-space”, prevailing over the mimetic function or semblance, emerges out of a concealed spot or place – “Stelle”, and although pertinent to the ‘historical index’ of the image, this inconspicuous place, or place without “Schein” (“unscheinbare Stelle”) within the photographic space resists its own incorporation into it, as the shift from the spatial register of “Stelle” to that of “Raum” in Benjamin’s formulation conveys. It is the place – the *Stelle* – of *Entstellung* as the corporeal-architectural condition of the unconscious.

#### IV. Language and the Tactile Unhomelike

In as much as architecture partakes in the polarity of the optical and the tactile, it is also the place, the medium, in which this heterogeneity is most indissoluble, closest to the dimension of “Nahsicht”, in Riegl’s account, or, “zu nahe” – as in Benjamin’s *Denkbild* of the imageless encounter with Notre Dame. In Benjamin’s contention in the “Kunstwerk” essay, in as much as the tactile is that which habitually and familiarly resides within a sensuous form, that of architecture, this mode of reception in effect transcends the realm of sensory perception. Blocked and non-habitual space is recast as a dwelling space, and so, an unattainable void is rendered into an interior. And yet, this sensuous form does not propel semblance into meaning. In fact, it is the tactile that is now designated for and consigned to meaning or significance. And insofar as it is “in architecture” that “the tactile dominant element” is “at home”, to recall

Benjamin's convoluted definition, this idea of dwelling in, unconsciously and yet "at home", hints at another, psychoanalytic, notion of spatial latency as set out – in a remarkable way – by Freud.

In the accumulation of entries comprising the first part of his essay *Das Unheimliche*, Freud, ceaselessly aiming at arresting the oscillating meanings of *heimlich/unheimlich*, transcribes in spaced type Schelling's definition of the uncanny. It is a definition, he admits, that is to be adopted. According to Schelling, *das Unheimliche* "is what we call everything that should have remained in secret [Geheimnis], in concealment, but stepped forth [hervorgetreten ist]". As the reading of Hoffmann's novella, *Der Sandmann*, which then leads the essay, shows, this emergence or stepping forth of what is supposed to remain concealed is in particular a function of domestic architecture and its recesses. According to another of Freud's cited sources, uncanniness is also related to theological practice of veiling: "to veil the divine, to surround it with a certain *Unheimlichkeit*".<sup>65</sup> We recall the veiled statue of Isis before the temple of Saïs. What this scenography of veiling indicates is that the repression that is lodged in the negative prefix "un-" and is concealed as it were in the enactment of the negation of negation, is that of the sense of touch and the dialectics of nearness and distance.

For Freud, what is most home-like, and that includes the human body in its disposition for dwelling in the home, is inescapably also the ground for what is most *unheimlich*. In Benjamin's architectural account, the uncanny feeling arises from the figuration of the fragmented body and so from the notion that the sense of touch is cut off from other bodily functions, predominantly that of vision. It recalls the dismemberment associated by Freud with the castration-complex, worked through with the feeling of the uncanny. The state of being of the tactile and fleshly body, possessing a life of its own – uncannily "at-home" – flips over into a sensation that arises from the exposure of the unembodied fleshly body, the *Leib* rendered as *Körper*. In Benjamin's reading, as we have seen, the latter mutation takes place not in the private sphere: it is attributed to the affective dimension of the historical life of the collective.

*Das Unheimliche* begins with the contention that the feeling of the uncanny is notably absent from aesthetic treatises; not even as the negation of aesthetic themes such as "the beautiful, the splendid and attractive ("[das] schöne[n], großartige[n], anziehende[n]").<sup>66</sup> As Freud argues, it is not the semblance of life captured in the automaton Olympia that is the locus

---

<sup>65</sup> Freud, "Das Unheimliche", in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 12 (London: Imago, 1947), pp. 229-268 (p. 235), "The Uncanny", p. 224, translation modified. On this passage by Schelling see also Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> "Das Unheimliche", p. 230, "The Uncanny", p. 219, translation modified.

of the uncanny in Hoffmann's tale, i.e., the "intellectual uncertainty" through which Jentsch thought to explain uncanny sensations.<sup>67</sup> The uncanny, more than anything else, has to do with the story's presentation of the "enucleated eyes", a violent anti-opticality which is absorbed, according to Freud, in a twofold *name* ("Namen"): that of the novella, and that of its subject-matter: "das Motiv des *Sandmannes*", as Freud puts it.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, it is not a matter of relating the anxiety about the eyes ("Augenangst") to the dread of castration that is the key to the decipherment of the uncanniness of Hofmann's novella. The Sandman is not only a proper name, it is a placeholder: the novella's somehow meaningless and arbitrary lines of narrative, says Freud, become meaningful only when the figure of a castrating father is posited, emerges from domestic hiding, in the place of the Sandman.<sup>69</sup>

This empty space is inscribed in the prefix of the names of the two figures into which the identity of the Sandman is projected by the protagonist Nathaniel – Coppelius/Coppola: "coppo", a footnote in Freud's text indicates, is "eye-socket".<sup>70</sup> According to Freud's analysis, "the conclusion of the story makes it quite clear that Coppola the optician really is the lawyer Coppelius and thus also the Sandman."<sup>71</sup> And although Freud ascribes to the sensation of the uncanny the phenomenon of the Doppelgänger, uncanniness is not dispelled due to a disclosure of an answer to the mystery ("Geheimnis") of the double, its semblance as it were, as presented by the literary piece. Put in terms of Benjamin's theory of language, the uncanny, the sense of being *not-at-home* – makes its appearance when language obstructs meaning. That is to say, when the expressionless – the withering of the communicating and symbolic force – is encountered within aesthetic presentation; or, when the latter is transmitted as "communicability as such" yet without designation. Suggestively, it is precisely the linguistic character of the uncanny that the third part of Freud's essay addresses, contending that the uncanny demarcates the gap between reading (*Lesen*) and experiencing (*Erleben*),<sup>72</sup> the two realms which are at the same time closely related.

The uncanny sensation that is attached to repetition is evoked in the beginning of the aforementioned fragment on the idea of the "skeleton of the word" ("Wortskelett"). "It is peculiar", Benjamin writes,

---

<sup>67</sup> "Das Unheimliche", pp. 237-238, "The Uncanny", pp. 226-227,

<sup>68</sup> "Das Unheimliche", p. 242, "The Uncanny", p. 230, translation modified.

<sup>69</sup> "Das Unheimliche", p. 245, "The Uncanny", p. 232.

<sup>70</sup> "Das Unheimliche", p. 241.

<sup>71</sup> "Das Unheimliche", p. 242, "The Uncanny", p. 230.

<sup>72</sup> On this point see David Farrell Krell, "Das Unheimliche: Architectural Sections of Heidegger and Freud", *Research in Phenomenology* 22.1 (1992), 43-61 (p. 48).

that when looking at a word again and again, the intention towards its meaning disappears in order to make place [Platz zu machen] for another intention, the intention towards what may justifiably be called the word-skeleton [Wortskelett]. (One can designate the skeleton of any given word, for instance the word “Tower”, in the following way: “-tower-”).

(GS VI:15, my translation)

This statement resonates with Benjamin’s pronouncement in “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire” (written in 1939, published in 1940) that “words, too, have their aura. Karl Kraus has described it thus: the closer you look at a word, the more distantly it looks back” (*SW* 4:354). In referring to this observation, in which the communicability of words, bordering on language’s corporeal existence, is weighed up, now in the essay “Karl Kraus” (1931). Benjamin notes: “Language has never been more perfectly distinguished from spirit [Geist], never more intimately bound to Eros, than by Kraus” (*GS* II:362, *SW* 2:453). Intentional acts of linguistic signification are linked, according to this remark on Kraus, to the dialectics of nearness and distance enacted by Eros, a sensual experience that uncannily brings cognitive meaning into non-existence. For precisely when words are aesthetically perceived, the split between spirit and corporeality, between names springing out of the divine “Sprachgeist” (*GS* II:153, *SW* 1:71) and signs which mark its fall, the split constitutive to Benjamin’s theory of language – is that which steps forward. In demonstrating “the skeleton of the word” in the semiotic form of writing “-Turm-”, the principle of “word-skeleton” (and the uncanniness of the expression “das Skelett im Schrank” cannot be overlooked here), is envisioned as the stepping out of something that otherwise has to remain concealed, characterised by Benjamin as “something originary [etwas Ursprünglich[es]]”. However, in the becoming communicable of “originary spiritual being”, the word only partakes in what Benjamin designates as “Bedeutbarkeit”. The word “tower”, he writes, “means nothing yet; “bedeutet [...] noch nichts” (*GS* VI:16). Put differently, from the outset, every word contains the decay of its own intentional dimension towards an object and yet in step with this decay, and for that very reason, communicability is communicated.

Thus, the word “tower” as a “word-skeleton” encapsulates the grounds of Benjamin’s language theory, a *Schauplatz* arresting into an image the Fall of language:

Once men had injured the purity of name, the turning away [Abkehr] from that contemplation of things [Anschauen der Dinge] in which their language passes into

man needed only to be completed in order to deprive men of the common foundation of an already shaken spirit of language [erschütterten Sprachgeistes]. *Signs* [Zeichen] must become confused when things [die Dinge] are entangled. In this turning away from things, which was enslavement, the plan for the Tower of Babel came into being, and linguistic confusion [Sprachverwirrung] with it.

(GS II:154, SW 1:72)

The fall of language, according to this comment from the essay on language, has always already taken place. The human word is underwritten by the turning away from things which *is* the linguistic subjugation to things. The objects in the world, however, are already entangled, subject to *both* names and signs. The existence of things through language, their linguistic essence, thus instigates an unbridgeable distance, a desire that is in play in the scenography of the distant looking back of the word. And the word's "already shaken spirit of language" indicates the condition of being of language. It is the semantics of shock, of "Erschütterung", that signals here the almost 'tactile' existence of language, 'tactility' that is henceforth subject to displacement into "Sprachverwirrung". Linguistic confusion is that which at once informs and is the outcome – in the sense of 'more than origin' – of the architectural scene of Babel, as this is indicated by Benjamin. Confusion or distraction also amount to existence and being underscored by material dispersal, as manifested by the scene of Babel. And yet, distraction is the perceptual condition testifying to an original contemplation – the contemplating act that is engaged with "primal hearing" ("Urvernehmen", as the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* has it), a receptiveness that invokes the linguistic transmission of names by things. The architectural references that bring the "word skeleton" of the word "tower" and the primal perception into close proximity might be seen to be reflected also in the "Kunstwerk" essay's contention regarding the more than original lodging of the tactile, the counterpoise to the optical – within architecture.

The co-presence of opticality and tactility, which primarily resides, according to the "Kunstwerk" essay, in architecture, was occasioned by the Fall. The division of human reception into these poles stems from its relation to the inhuman world: the world of things originally possessed a mute language that was nevertheless communicated to man as names. This is what Benjamin calls the magical aspect of language, its power of immediate mediality, of "Unmittelbarkeit" (GS II:142-143, SW 1:64). The triangulation of opticality, tactility and acoustics is in play in the following citation that appears in the essay on language:

Hamann says, “Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close, and as easy as a child’s game [so natürlich, so nahe und leicht, wie ein Kinderspiel]”.

(GS II:151, SW 1:70)

The subsequent scene to this paradisiacal state which was “close and easy” as child’s play – is that of the Fall. The latter is “the hour of birth of the *human word* in which the name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were, externally, magic” (GS II:153, SW 1:71). The pre-history of the expressive function of words, their tendency of intending to be “ausdrücklich” is inscribed in Hamann’s “Kinderspiel”, which is thereby exposed as ‘entstellt’. It follows the same pattern, that is, as the compulsive displacements of the fort/da game or the turning inside-out as disfigurement of the stocking.

## V. Habit and Attention

Habit *draws* something new from repetition – namely, difference.

– Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*

Die Gewohnheit ist mit Recht eine zweite Natur genannt worden

[Habit has, with justification, been called a second nature]

– Hegel, *Die Philosophie des Geistes*

According to the “Kunstwerk” essay, the historical phenomenon of the masses is coupled with architecture; buildings, to recall, are “umspielt” by their wave, configuring the triadic complex of play-, body- and image-space. In as far as play is born out of habit, now “the masses” are the “Matrix” (the ‘womb’ in Latin) “from which all customary behavior [alles gewohnte Verhalten] toward works of art is today emerging newborn [neu geboren hervorgeht]” (GS I:464, AW 18). With the claim that “buildings [Bauten] are received in a twofold manner” (in keeping with “use” and “perception”, the “tactile” and the “optical”), Benjamin famously states: “Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention but also by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which originally takes the form less of an attentive observation [gespannte[s] Aufmerken] than of a casual

noticing”. Yet in what fashion, then, does this negative “path of attention” – that of the “laws” of architectural reception – translate into the way (or the law) of habit or habitation?<sup>73</sup> “Under certain circumstances”, Benjamin writes, “[the tactile] form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value” (*GS* I:465-466, *AW* 34).

In this framework, it is the Hegelian concept of habit – “Gewohnheit” – that warrants consideration. Catherine Malabou, in centring her analysis of Hegel’s concepts of plasticity, temporality and the dialectic on the concept of habit, argues that habit, “a process whereby the psychic and the somatic are translated into one another, is a genuine plasticity”. This ‘plasticity’ is mostly associated with classical Greek: “The ‘exemplary individuality’ which is man ‘sculpted’ by habit discloses, as if in a Greek statue, the unity of essence and accident.”<sup>74</sup> According to Hegel’s *Philosophie des Geistes*,<sup>75</sup> the transition from nature to spirit is dialectically cast into the notion of habit. The soul (“Seele”) is for Hegel spirit in its *natural* state, thus soul and corporeity are fashioned by habit as both *first* and “second nature”:

Habit is rightly called a second nature; nature, because it is an immediate being of the soul; a second nature, because it is an immediacy created by the soul, impressing and moulding [Ein- und Durchbildung] the corporeality [Leiblichkeit] which enters into the modes of feeling as such and into the representations and volitions so far as they have taken corporeal form.<sup>76</sup>

Habit, as Malabou observes, engenders a moment of difference in which the corporeal body is translated into “man as the sensuous medium of spirit”,<sup>77</sup> displaced that is, into *Leib*. Spirit sensuously mediates by having a body, as is glossed in the Latin origin of the word habit – “habere” (“to have”). As a state of having a body, habit is the crossing point of two forms of

<sup>73</sup> For the pyramids too, as Hegel notes, “nothing is captivating” about them, “the whole thing is surveyed and grasped in a few minutes” (*VÄ* III:43, *LA* II:652). As for the other part of Benjamin’s explication, that of *Gewohnheit*, the twofold meanings inscribed in the term, that of habit and habit(u)ation, are in effect divorced in the pyramids. For, they were spaces meant for the perennial habitation of bodies expelled from spirit, however *not* by way of habit. The pyramids, Hegel notes, were to remain closed and not to be used again.

<sup>74</sup> Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 26.

<sup>75</sup> That is, the third part of the *Encyclopaedia*, *Die Philosophie des Geistes*, which dialectically negates by preserving (“aufheben”) the two preceding parts, *Logic* and *The Philosophy of Nature*. In *The Philosophy of Mind* it is contended that “the science of the idea comes back to itself out of that otherness”, as Derrida cites Hegel in “The Pit and the Pyramid”, p. 73.

<sup>76</sup> Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse, Dritter Teil, Die Philosophie des Geistes*, in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 10 (Frankfurt a.M: Schurkamp Verlag, 1970), 184; Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 141.

<sup>77</sup> Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 73.

death, spiritual and natural. Habit, in the Hegelian philosophical system, pertains to what we already denoted as ‘more than origin’, in the exact sense that it is, as Malabou points out, a concept that “plays the role both of result and of origin.” For, as she explains, in habit,

the transition from nature to spirit occurs not as a sublation, but as a *reduplication*, a process through which spirit constitutes itself in and as a *second nature*. This reflexive reduplication is in a certain sense the “mirror stage” of spirit, in which the first form of its identity is constituted. Man appears as the inverted lining of the animal and not as its opposite.<sup>78</sup>

The Hegelian idea, that habit serves not only as a force of death but also as the preservation of sensory content in the conscious spirit seems to be dialectically treated by Benjamin in the short reflection “Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit”, a text that is part of the *Ibizenkische Folge* (1932). Here the double bind of habit and attentiveness is formulated as follows:

All attentiveness has to flow into habit, if it is not to blow us apart, and all habit must be disrupted by attentiveness, if it is not to paralyze us. To note something and to accustom oneself to it, to take offense and put up with a thing – these are the peaks and troughs of the waves on the sea of the soul.

(GS IV:408, SW 2:592)

This statement resonates with the “Kunstwerk” essay’s argument that “even the distracted person can form habits. What is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction first proves that their accomplishment has become habitual” (GS I:466, AW 34). Distraction and habit form a dialectical image grounded on embodiment, as contemplative absorption makes itself manifest by a twofold form of heightening or intensification, set forth by Benjamin’s dialectic approach to the phenomenon of distraction. As Vivian Liska notes, “in contradiction to the idea that defamiliarization is the stipulation for true attention, Benjamin posits the power of habit”. By conflating “both absorption and concentration” she writes, he enlists “the apparent antagonists of these two modes of perception” in order to constellate “another form of attentiveness.”<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>79</sup> Vivian Liska, “Walter Benjamin's Dialectics of Attentiveness”, *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 65.1(2011), 16-24 (p. 17).



In “Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit”, this form of distracted attention flowing out of the concept of habit finds its expression in the extreme oppositional phenomena of “dreams” and “pain”: “In dreams there is no astonishment and in pain there is no forgetting, because both bear their opposites within them, just as in a calm the peaks and troughs of the waves lie merged in one another” (*GS* IV:408, *SW* 2:592). There is no astonishment in dreams since in them, the optical unfolds in a conscious manner, inciting no forgetting, and hence no astonishment. The lack of (the tactile) body in dreams is diametrically in play in the phenomenon of pain. There, it is the full awareness of the body that enacts “no forgetting”, the forgetting found on the “optical side”, that, in opposition to the “tactile side”, is thereby marked by unconsciousness. Thus “attention”, according to Benjamin, “struggles to emerge from the womb of habit.” Instead of the optical fantasy of compulsive repetition (of the traumatic scene of loss and death according to Freud), tactile reception transforms what has become habitual as such, and does this gradually, and so historically, beyond the compulsion to repeat, but, significantly, also beyond symbolic representation. Therefore, it follows that “the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be accomplished solely by optical means – that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – guided by tactile reception – through habit” (*GS* I:466, *AW* 34). Tactile transmission contains a dimension of eternal return that cannot be historicised, and this has already been made evident in the cohesion of tactility and play. In as much as “play” yields habit, namely, the act of repetition without the intentional content associated with similarity, repetition is figured as devoid of the consciousness of remembering.

## VI. Back to Babel

For Hegel, to recall, the idea regarding “the true content of art, namely that of being removed from immediate existence”, has its origins in the architectural constructions of ancient Egypt (*VÄ* 460, *LA* I:356). Architecture, in the Hegelian philosophy of the arts, is the first of the fine arts (although ambiguously defined as such) to be recognised as an inadequate form for the embodiment of the spirit. The Hegelian subsumption of art by philosophy, namely the coalescence of the “poetry of the imagination” or of representation into “the prose of thought”, and with it, the dissolution of any signifying sensuousness, resonates, yet in a manner that is somehow reversed, Benjamin’s celebrated conclusion in the “Kunstwerk” essay. In as much as what is discharged by the consummation of art is philosophy, according to Hegel, for

Benjamin, in turn, what ensues out of art's self-absorption is "Kunstpolitik". Film (and so, by implication, its more originally tactile counterpart, architecture) countervails the "consummation [Vollendung] of *l'art pour l'art*", and so, makes "*the aestheticizing of politics* [*Ästhetisierung der Politik*]" perceptible. "Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure" (GS I:469, AW 36).

According to Hegel's organisation of the senses, before absolving itself, however, in its highest phase, art enacts the sublation of the visible into the audible.<sup>80</sup> "Spirit appears in art as made sensuous"; yet, excluding the immediate sensual qualities of smell, taste and touch, "the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two *theoretical* senses of sight and hearing [Gesicht und Gehör]". And these senses, in turn, conform to a dialectical procedure. According to the Hegelian theme of consumption,<sup>81</sup> sight, in being 'theoretical', unlike touch, taste or smell, does not consume its objects, the fact of their being there, for sight "lacks desire" – it is "begierdelos[e]" (VÄ II:255, LA II:622, translation modified). We can recall here the more symbolic trait of the "optical side" conveyed by architecture, to which "there is no counterpart" on the "tactile side". In the Hegelian system of aesthetics, sight's dialectical counterpart lies in the acoustical sphere, whose characterisations are projected as a mirror image, as it were, of the "the integrity of sight". Corresponding to this integrity, which is made known "only in shape and color", is the oscillation of the body ("Schwingen des Körpers"), so that the soul ("Seele"), dialectically mediated by the temporal nature of sounds, does not partake in a "process of dissolution" – "Auflösungsprozeß" (VÄ II:256, LA II:622, translation modified). According to Benjamin, as we have seen, it is an absolute absence "on the tactile side" that prescribes the manner in which it is 'tactility' that is capable of apprehending the image, and therefore – the experiencing, lived body – in its passing away.

It is with regard to the pyramids, however, that Hegel comments that "it is of importance for architecture that here there ensues the separation out, as it were, the spiritual as the inner meaning which is portrayed in its own account while the corporeal shell [leibliche Hülle] is placed round it as purely architectural enclosure" (VÄ III:42, LA II:651). To Hegel, the architectural sign of the pyramid is likewise the body of the sign marked by arbitrariness: "[the sign] is the *Pyramid* [Hegel's emphasis] into which a foreign soul [eine fremde Seele] has been

---

<sup>80</sup> See also Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid", pp. 92-93.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

conveyed [versetzt] and where it is conserved [aufbewahrt].”<sup>82</sup> As a “mere sign” that bears upon “an indifference between meaning and its expression” (*VÄ* I:394, *LA* I:304), architecture dialectically inaugurates the symbol, which is not “purely arbitrary sign” (*VÄ* I:394, *LA* I:305), an idea that constitutes Benjamin’s entanglement of allegory and symbol in the *Trauerspiel* book (this will be detailed in Part Two). In the essay “The Pit and the Pyramid”, Derrida observes in accounting for the relation between sign and symbol in Hegel:

the production of arbitrary signs manifests the freedom of spirit [...] there is more manifest freedom in the production of the sign than in the production of the symbol. In the sign spirit is more independent and closer to itself. In the symbol, conversely, it is a bit more exiled into nature.<sup>83</sup>

Not only the pyramids, we might say, unfold the different degrees of the tactile and the optical. The pyramids, in Hegel’s system of aesthetics and also in his theory of semiotics, are empty signs, signs that convey no meaning, hence the demonic character that is attached to them which is also the trait of the allegorical intuition or beholding (“*Anschauung*”), according to Benjamin. Art, as Hegel has it, is configured out of this gulf between sign and symbol, yet it cannot be assigned to the idea that the symbol is a mere sign: “art as such consists precisely in the kinship, relation, and concrete interpretation of meaning and shape” (*VÄ* I:394, *LA* I:304). This ambiguity of sign and symbol, grounded as it is on the distinction between the sensuous and the linguistic, thus runs throughout the whole Hegelian system of aesthetics, till the point at which it coils back upon itself in Romantic poetry.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, “in the system of the arts we can regard poetry as the polar opposite of architecture.” As Hegel further explains: “[poetry] reduces the opposite of heavy spatial matter, namely sound, to a meaningless sign [bedeutungslos[es] Zeichen] instead of making it, as architecture makes its material, into a meaningful symbol” (*VÄ* III:235, *LA* II:968). This interfolded relation of matter and spirit has its origins in architecture. If, with poetry as the proper art form of art in its Romantic stage, signs provide concentration yet are devoid of signification (or serve to point up the conditions

---

<sup>82</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, cited in Derrida, “The Pit and the Pyramid”, p. 83. Derrida unpacks the semantics of the two verbs in Hegel’s formulation: *versetzt* means also “transposed, transplanted, translated: *versetzt*; *versetzen* is also to place on deposit; *im Leihhause versetzen*: to place in the pawnshop”; “*aufbewahrt*: consigned, stored, put in storage”. As Derrida also comments, “if the Egyptian pyramid, in the *Encyclopaedia*, is the symbol or sign of the sign, in the *Aesthetics* it is studied for itself, that is, as a symbol right from the outset”, p. 85.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>84</sup> On plasticity and the Hegelian writing on art see Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago, Ill., Bristol: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 151-173.

of possibility of representation as such), this idea has already figured with architecture, the outlived among aesthetic genres. This evaluation, to repeat, of ‘more original’ architecture, could also be gleaned from Hegel’s striking description of the pyramids as “ungeheure Kristalle” – “prodigious/monstrous crystals” (*VÄ* I:459, *LA* I:356). With this figuration, both construction and perception, matter and spirit, recede into the remote tip of the pyramid, an optical, ideal, theoretical point, as stone becomes tantamount to crystal, at once plastic form (prefiguring sculpture and the plasticity of classical art), and transparent, adequate to the transmission of meaning. And yet, this ideality of meaning, according to the constructional logic of the pyramids, is *architectonically*, and also allegorically, fixed to the labyrinths that subsist in its foundation, as the labyrinth of language.

Transmission and communicability were occasioned with the destruction of an architectural sensuous form, the Tower of Babel. Babel, not just the tower but the city too, surfaces in Hegel’s account for symbolic architecture, and with it yet another sense of Benjamin’s architectural topos of *Rezeption in der Zerstreung* – is profoundly laid bare. In the section “Die selbständige, symbolische Architektur”, what Hegel calls “die eigentliche Symbolik”, architecturally expressed, is exemplified by the Tower of Babel. Here the art of building is considered symbolic for the reason that it architecturally expresses nations’ religion, a “unifying point of their consciousness”, a “place where they assemble” (*VÄ* II:275, *LA* II:637). The meaning of the tower as symbolic architecture is to be found, however, also on the level of its external surface, a surface that has been erected collectively by the builders of Babel. This externality subsists in the costumes, the habitual life (“Gewohnheit”) and the “legal constitution of the state”, the laws that unite people. All these are symbolically in play “by means of the excavated site and ground [Grund und Boden], the assembled blocks of stone, and the as it were architectural cultivation [architektonische Bebauung] of the country” (*VÄ* II:276, *LA* II:638).

The erection of upright structures, in the Hegelian sense, *is* strictly second nature. As he comments, “to make a nest in the ground, to burrow, is more natural than to dig up the ground, look for material and then pile it up together and give shape to it” (*VÄ* II 289, *LA* II:649). The story of Babel as it unfolds in Genesis, gives an account of what Hegel glosses as the “architectural cultivation of the earth.”<sup>85</sup> And yet, in the symbolic architecture of Babel, first and second nature, or better, nature and history, are inextricable: the Tower is a positive

---

<sup>85</sup> “and the brick served then as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar”, Genesis 11:3, in Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, p. 46.

creation bound to the “removal of the negative” (*VÄ* II 289, *LA* II:649), the more ‘natural’ way of creating excavated dwelling spaces. Hegel also points out that God does not inhabit the tower, nor is it allegorically represented by its very absence, signalled by hollow interiority. Furthermore, the story as recounted by Hegel is not about idolatry, nor about a wrathful or jealous God. God’s locus is indicated by the enterprise to touch the heavens. According to Genesis, God indeed descended down to earth, to get closer and see, to watch over the action of man, to judge and thence to enact a punishment: the material dispersion of the Tower and the confusion of speech. The entrepreneurial act of the people of Babel is susceptible to both linguistic and material ruin.

The idea of construction as never to be touching the ever-receding clouds proclaims the unattainability of the sacred and resembles the foundational case of the pyramid. With the pyramids, too, the labour of raising (“aufheben”) non-organic matter out of the ground corresponds to an oppositional trajectory that advances only by its passing away and so, is more tactile in nature – the withdrawal of matter as such.<sup>86</sup> To recall here again Benjamin’s classification of the distinction between the optical and the tactile, the optical, within the scope of architecture, gives way to contemplation and thence to the aesthetic experience of beautiful semblance; yet this experience is inescapably tactile. With this foreclosure, what is aesthetically constituted shifts into sublimity and uncanniness, an original move, a leap, *Ursprung*, that was imparted to the realm of the aesthetic by the medium, or the idea, of architecture.

Babel, the tower, is an optical-tactile symbol of the city, the *topos* and the site for habits and laws, shaping ways of life and taking place between families, in the units comprising homes and houses. The city, the dwelling place, in housing and sheltering, is more commensurable with the tactile habitual side, the “most instructive laws” of architectural reception. The idea of the city deforms the visibility of the tower into reception in distraction/dispersion, the double meaning inscribed in the word *Zerstreuung*. We recall that the travellers in Benjamin’s scenography from the “Kunstwerk” essay, are concentrated, “gathered” – “gesammelt[en]” – in front of a famous building (much as Benjamin was in his dream of the too proximate Notre Dame).<sup>87</sup> The builders of the tower, as Genesis has it, were

---

<sup>86</sup> This double meaning of lifting up and cancellation, or better, cancellation by way of lifting up, is captured in the double meaning of the German verb “aufheben”.

<sup>87</sup> A traveller in front of ruins is also portrayed by Hegel: “The sight of the ruins of some ancient sovereignty directly leads us to contemplate this thought of change in its negative aspect. What traveller among the ruins of Carthage, of Palmyra, Persepolis, or Rome, has not been stimulated by reflections on the transience of kingdoms and men, and to sadness at the thought of a vigorous and rich life now departed – a sadness which does not expend itself on personal losses and the uncertainty of one’s own undertakings, but is a disinterested sorrow at

also travellers who toured the land for a dwelling place. According to one commentary, it was a “strange power” that was revealed to them with a sight of an empty valley, which triggered the act of construction; also according to this tradition, the site they found and founded was not in fact empty, it was a place of burial, a trace in the landscape encountered as the removal of nonbeing. To use a term with central significance for the way in which this thesis unfolds the relations between body and architecture, it is a *Schädelstätte*: Golgotha, or Calvary.<sup>88</sup>

It is possible to interpret this montage-like procedure that brings two spatial instantiations – the Tower of Babel and the *Schädelstätte* (the spatial figure that lies at the core of “natural history”, as will be discussed in Part Two) – into the time-space of a single image, or constellation, according to the model set out by Benjamin in the Ninth Thesis on history. Here we encounter the mute creature depicted in Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus”: “There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*.” And the named angel is arrested amidst the force field of an image: “an angel is depicted there”; and the degradation of the power of the name, as the movement from the named angel to “an angel” – the angel as word skeleton – intimates, is cast into the idea that the angel “seems about [im Begriff] to move away [sich entfernen] from something he stares at.” The angel is “im Begriff” here in three senses: in the process, in the concept, and in the grip. The figure’s implicitly dysfunctional bodily organs of perception, those of sight, speech and touch are described: “His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread”. Standing still and speechless and in a state of shock, body space yields an image space:

This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky [der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst]. What we call progress is *this* storm.

(GSI:697-698, SW 4:392)

---

the decay of a splendid and highly cultured national life!”. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 89

<sup>88</sup> That is, the burial site for the people punished by the flood. See *The Zohar*, vol. 1 trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1931), p. 254.

Although this thesis, with the angel of history as its focus, has been endlessly recounted, it is possible to put into practice Benjamin's own procedure described above as the optical unconscious, to spot, that is, an "inconspicuous place", the place in the image that cannot bear on *Schein*, as the place of its legibility. The Ninth Thesis seems to set forth an image- and body-space, also with their complement in the triad of spaces, that of play-space. *Spielraum* is intimated by the portrayal of the pile of debris sprawling at the angel's feet which are then, as in a sort of cinematic shot – towering up and fixing his gaze. And it is with the "Turm" that is veiled and 'entstellt' in the "Trümmerhaufen" that the failed project of Babel wanders – nameless – into the thesis.<sup>89</sup>

The encounter between the (angel's) body and the towering, ruinous remains of architecture is an encounter twice described. In the first case, there is an unbridgeable gap between being and seeing, between historical time and the pictorial. In close proximity, wreckage upon wreckage ("Trümmer auf Trümmer") piles up, condensing the chain of events (that is, historicity, in the standard view) into a "single catastrophe" that lies at the angel's feet. This refuse of history, the matter of natural history, is nevertheless 'seen', as bodiliness here is "placed into the world of perception, into one of the highest realms of language", to evoke here Benjamin's fragment on body and perception, discussed above. For the angel *is* literally, in the place of language, the place of origin out of which the Tower rises to the sky or to the heavens. This happening is marked by 'de-formation' and is 'in tactility', to use here two of Benjamin's tropes that are yet to be discussed in the next parts. In the second scenography of perception and architectural ruin, it is by dint of the distance that the blowing storm opens up between body and ruin, and through which a field of vision thereby unfolds, that "the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky". The more the angel is drawn, facing back, toward the future, the more the ruinous, uninhabitable anti-architecture grows. Babel here is susceptible to an unredeemed world, an object of desire whose fragments the angel is unable to repair. His wings, resembling in fact claws or hands,<sup>90</sup> are forestalled from touching by the storm of progress, the "storm that is blowing from paradise [the verb here is "wehen"; *Wehen*, as we recall, are also "labour-pains"] and is entangled in the angel's wings.

---

<sup>89</sup> As Michael Löwy observes, in the Ninth Thesis, the expulsion from paradise is "now represented by the dialectical image of 'a storm blowing from Paradise' which 'irresistibly propels' the angel of history 'into the future'. The new figure of the Tower of Babel reaching to the heavens is 'the pile of debris growing skyward' produced by the storm – a storm which is nothing other than 'what we call progress'". See, Löwy, "Revolution Against 'Progress': Walter Benjamin's Romantic Anarchism", *New Left Review* 152 (1985), 42-59 (p. 53).

<sup>90</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, "Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption", in *Potentialities, Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 138-159 (p. 141).

Giorgio Agamben, drawing on Scholem's analysis of the theory of the Kabbalistic image of 'Tzelem', reads the angel of history as modelled after the personal angel, the *Tselem* or astral body. This theme, for Agamben, links "the prehistory and pre-existence of man, and prophetic and redemptive motifs, which concern the destiny and salvation of man – or, in other words, his history and posthistory."<sup>91</sup> That the angel is displaced into an image of the lived body marks the differentiation between our gaze and his: the discrepancy between history and nature. Crossed between history and nature or being, between the spectacle of the broken tower and the drive of the wind, this double scenography around which the Ninth Thesis is organised in chiasmic form thus prepares the ground for a consideration of Adorno's idea of natural history, an idea not least suffused with architectural scenographies, as we will see in the next part of this thesis. Adorno's preoccupation with the theme of natural history unfolds out of critique of the Heideggerian focus on the project-ion – "Entwurf" – of "Being as historicity [Geschichtlichkeit]" (NG 349, NH 113), a critique that Adorno establishes by turning to Benjamin's account of Baroque allegory.

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 146.



## Part Two:

### Sites of Ruins, Ruination of Time: The *Stimmungen* of Natural History

Klage [ist] der Urlaut der Kreatur  
 [Lament [is] the primal sound of creatures]  
 – Benjamin, “Hugo von Hofmannsthals ‘Turm’”

Das Denken der Tiere / Ihre Angst  
 [The thinking of animals / Their fear]  
 – Benjamin (“Notes on Kafka”)

Drawing on the early phase of phenomenology, Adorno’s 1932 lecture “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” aims at the formulation of a theoretical stance from which the dismantlement of the subject-object divide in modern epistemology could be mediated. “Natural history” – better glossed as “history of nature” – offers an optics of displacement: nature and history, which might be thought to be in binary opposition, are each subsumed back into their opposite in a state of continuous flux. This indistinctness, significantly, also characterises the aesthetic mode identified by Hegel as “symbolic” (we recall, the aesthetic phase most pertinent to architecture): the failed identity of the idea of art with itself. In this state of affairs, “the *foreignness* of the Idea [die *Fremdheit* der Idee] to the phenomena of nature [Naturerscheinungen]” is rendered as an extreme abstraction. At this stage, according to Hegel, “[abstraction] seeks, through distraction, [versucht, durch Zerstreuung]” – distraction occasioned by the preliminary sublimity of the symbolic – to elevate the phenomenon in which nature is encountered as self-alienated spirit, into an Idea, into its highest truth (VÄ I:108, LA I:76, translation modified). Seen from this perspective, Adorno’s meditations on the idea of natural history grapple with Hegel’s *logic* of phenomena (“Phänomeno” and “logie”), the logic according to which contingent appearances are absolved by a totality of “absolute knowing”, as stated in the final passage of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. This logic, in Adorno’s reading, is incorporated into the historical and cultural phenomena of *Schein*, the all-pervasive phantasmagoria of late capitalism.<sup>1</sup> According to Adorno, it is “the character of the mythical itself”, a character to be understood in terms of an exposure or opening to otherness (cognate,

---

<sup>1</sup> Beatrice Hanssen comments that Adorno wrote his lecture at the time when Benjamin was formulating his entries for convolute N of the *Passagen-Werk*. See Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History, Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 22.

that is, to the repression of corporeal-material nature worked through architecture at the origin of art, as shown by Hegel) that returns in phenomena of “Schein” (NG 365, NH 124).

Spirit, however, as unfolded in Hegel’s *Vorstellung*, is natural historical: in intuiting itself outside of itself, encountering its limit, spirit relinquishes itself as “substance”,<sup>2</sup> and as such – appears spatialised. This arrest which marks spirit’s own limit, necessitates, according to Hegel, a “sacrifice” (“Aufopferung”): “Spirit exhibits its coming-to-be spirit in the form of a free contingent event, and it intuits outside of itself its pure self *as time*.”<sup>3</sup> In entitling his lecture “Die *Idee* der Naturgeschichte” (my italics), Adorno reasserts the schism of the Idea between spirit and world in the Hegelian account. He argues that it is precisely the idealist “disintegration [Auseinanderfallen] of the world into being as nature and as spirit, or better, nature and history [Natur- und Geistsein oder Natur- und Geschichtesein]”, that must be overcome (NG 354, NH 116, translation modified). Adorno demonstrates the idea of the manifestation of history as natural history by drawing on Benjamin’s *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (completed in 1925, published in 1928). In the dramatic composition of the German Baroque *Trauerspiele*, Benjamin detected an opening to a profane and spatialised time, to the extent that these plays’ historical conception of redemption resides “in the depths [in der Tiefe] of these vicissitudes [Verhängnisse]” (GS I:260, O 68).

The idea of history, as presented by the *Trauerspiel*, is a sphere of significance yielded by immediate ‘first nature’, to use Adorno’s term, nature that signifies fate and creaturely life. In Hegel, what is dialectically sacrificed, and for that reason – preserved, is spirit’s “persistence of being” (“das Bestehen des Daseins”).<sup>4</sup> For, “the other aspect of spirit’s coming-to-be, *history*, is that *knowing self-mediating* coming-to-be – the spirit relinquished into time.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the presentation (both spatial and temporal) of spirit’s accumulated experiences between nature and history, is once more to be *aufgehoben*, at once annulled and elevated: spirit’s contingencies, together with their fixed organisation through the order of conceptual experience (“begriffnen Organisation”) – “the *science of knowing in the sphere of appearance*” (“die *Wissenschaft des erscheinenden Wissens*”) – are “begriffne Geschichte”. “Both”, Hegel writes, “form the recollection [*Erinnerung*, also connoting internalisation] and the Golgotha of absolute spirit [die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes].”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), p. 591. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 467.

<sup>3</sup> *Phänomenologie*, p. 590, *Phenomenology*, p. 466.

<sup>4</sup> *Phänomenologie*, p. 588, *Phenomenology*, p. 464.

<sup>5</sup> *Phänomenologie*, p. 590, *Phenomenology*, p. 466.

<sup>6</sup> *Phänomenologie*, p. 591, *Phenomenology*, p. 467.

As a constellation of tensions in the Benjaminian sense (*NG* 359, *NH* 120), “the idea of natural history” contends that signification cannot be brought to a halt. If nature and history are held dialectically within an opposition, the task, for Adorno, involves refraining from this very opposition in order to think each of these concepts independently, to the extent that each of them is now delivered as a *sign* of its counterpart:

As transience [Vergänglichkeit] ur-history [Urgeschichte] is absolutely present. It is present in the form of “signification” [“Bedeutung”]. “Signification” means that the elements [Momente] of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears [auftritt] as a sign [als Zeichen] for history and history, where it takes its most historical form [wo sie sich am geschichtlichsten gibt], appears as a sign for nature.

(*NG* 360, *NH* 121, translation modified)

With this chiasmic construction, any signification is to be regarded as both natural *and* historical, subsisting in the deformation of these aspects of existence into difference and negativity, their own non-identity. To retain the impossibility of thinking nature and history as mutually subsumed (‘nature’ as a sign for the lack of spirit; ‘history’ as the sign for its absolute presence, as set out by Hegel) would be, according to Adorno, to uncover the allegorical structure of *Naturgeschichte*. Benjamin, in his interpretation of the allegorical mode of perception, evokes the topos of the *Schädelstätte*. The “bleak confusion of Golgotha [die trostlose Verworrenheit der Schädelstätte]”, he comments, is to be read as the underlying scheme for Baroque allegory. According to Benjamin, it is the scene of the *Schädelstätte* that precisely reveals that “transience” – “Vergänglichkeit” – is not what is being displayed. It “is not simply a symbol [Sinnbild] of the wilderness of human existence [Menschenexistenz]”, but rather, “transience is not so much signified, allegorically presented, as – itself signifying – presented as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection [Auferstehung]” (*GS* I:405-406, *O* 254). “Confusion”, revealingly, alludes here to the Fall of language, correlative to Babel and to translation, and hence to the radical break between language and world, between semblance and being. With this intimation, therefore, the theological conception of Golgotha as the promise of reconciliation is projected into a fraught language- and image-scape in the Benjaminian sense, as we will see.

The project of presenting the paradoxical resistance to the opposition of nature and history, Adorno states, has to begin with the posing of the ontological question (“ontologische

Fragestellung”), for the latter pertains to “the natural”. The task that concerns an “ontological redirection of the philosophy of history” is that of “retransformation [Rückverwandlung]”: the turning back of “concrete history” into “a dialectical nature [dialektische Natur]”. This, Adorno contends, is the “idea of natural history” (NG 355, NH 117). “Concrete history” conceivably refers either to “grasped history”, according to Hegel, or to the finite temporality in Heidegger’s analysis of the mere contingency (“Faktizität”) of human existence – *Dasein*. Yet, says Adorno, this concrete history cannot be modelled on grasping the indispensability of being as “possibility” (i.e., the transcendental subject as the condition of possibility of experience as formulated in the Kantian critique), it should be modelled on “the determinations [Bestimmungen] of real being itself” (NG 354, NH 116, translation modified).<sup>7</sup> As just indicated, Adorno’s uncovering of the mutual imbrication of nature and history appears to play out in a crossing between two figures of thought that he borrows, adapts, and eventually sets against each other. In Adorno’s presentation, transitoriness and decay are considered the allegorical expression of history, a history exposed by the German *Trauerspiele* to be founded on the trope of mourning as a form of signification. These motifs reverberate in Heidegger’s temporalisation of “being-there”, his account of human *Dasein* as “factual”, “natural” ruin.<sup>8</sup>

This part of this thesis’s inquiry starts from an intimation of an architectural figure of a wall that surfaces in the final passages of Adorno’s lecture. There he addresses the “promise [Versprechen] of reconciliation” that “is most perfectly given where at the same time the world is most densely walled up from/by all ‘sense’ [Welt von allem ‘Sinn’ am dichtesten vermauert ist]”. As Adorno explains, this walling up is the condition of “the element of reconciliation [das Moment der Versöhnung], which is there wherever the world constitutes itself as most pertaining to semblance [am scheinhaftesten]” (NG 365, NH 124, translation modified). The irreducible ambiguity underpinning Adorno’s figure of a “world densely walled up” unfolds the chiasmic exchange between history and nature, wherein one level of meaning is folded up and turned back towards its repressed other. The chiasmus turns on the ambiguity of ‘von’ here,

---

<sup>7</sup> This notion regarding the unattainability of totality by reason is also glossed in “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”. In formulating the impasse that phenomenology has arrived at, namely its attempt to overcome autonomous reason without, in fact, overcoming it, Adorno’s claim is that “only when the *ratio* perceives the reality that is in opposition to it as something foreign, reified and lost to it, that is, only when actual reality is no longer immediately accessible and reality and reason have no common meaning, only then can the question of the meaning of Being be posed” (NG 347, NH 112, translation modified). To be there always implies the uncanniness of human existence, amidst what Adorno terms elsewhere “damaged life”.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno contends that what Heidegger postulated as “the question of Being” is to be figured only, as he says in his 1931 inaugural lecture entitled “Die Aktualität der Philosophie” – “in traces and ruins”: “Only polemically does reason present itself to the knower as total reality, while only in traces and ruins is it prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality.” Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, trans. Bruce Mayo, *Telos* 31 (1977), 120-33 (p. 120).

as the senses of ‘from’ and ‘by’ are folded into each other. According to this scenography, there is a world that lies ‘there’, except, that it is already lost or displaced, precluded from (“von”) all sense-making – “Sinn”. The inaccessibility to any cognitive, abstract or conceptual formations resists any resolution or settling of the oppositions in play, elicits a ‘dialectical image’ in Benjamin’s terms. The world, “densely walled up”, is sealed off from sense, from being meaningful and knowable and as such does not avail itself of becoming the object for the subject. And yet, in retaining its thereness as a thing to be *sensed*, as sensuous presentation, the world, according to the same scenography, is thence “densely walled up” by (“von”) sense; it is present as a sheer negation of any signification – “‘Sinn’” (hence Adorno’s framing of the word *Sinn* in quotation marks). And precisely in the sense of this level of sensual or imagistic perception, the world/wall might be considered in terms of a perspectival, tactile nearness, as the “‘sense’” of the world/wall is rendered as at once conceptual and yet corporeal, spectral and yet actual, abstract and yet sensed.

The condensation of the “world” and its actualisation in the form of a fragment of a wall is a testimony to lost meaning and an allegory for memory. What is given in the form of an architectural remnant, is, in other words, an intimation of another possibility – and hence, of critique, which is ‘there’ yet in a form of deferral: a promised reconciliation, as Adorno puts it. Adorno here seems to adopt Benjamin’s procedure as he prescribes it in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book and in *Das Passagen-Werk*, namely, giving privilege to presentation over expression, to showing over saying.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Adorno’s emblematic *Denkbild* of a world “densely walled up” from/by all “‘sense’” precisely captures at one stroke, so it could be argued, both the Heideggerian “Seinsfrage” and Benjamin’s grounding of his theory of language on the clinch between the expressionless and sheer communicability. As Adorno’s lecture uncovers, both thinkers promote a form of knowledge underscored by the inescapability of the fusion between nature and history; their thought diverges, however, in relation to the question of historical time. Heidegger’s “Seinsfrage” – the question issuing from the oblivion of Being (“Seinsvergessenheit”, an articulation that already renders being as spectral and abstract), potentialises its completion within history,<sup>10</sup> and does so, as will be put into focus here, by what is explicated in *Sein und Zeit* as “the fundamental attunement

---

<sup>9</sup> For this point, see Andrew Benjamin, “Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present”, in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), pp.145-174 (p. 148).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Derrida’s contention regarding how the Heideggerian ontological difference fails to eliminate any opening of ‘différance’ or otherness. Derrida, “Différance”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 3-27.

[Grundbefindlichkeit] of anxiety [Angst]”.<sup>11</sup> In Benjamin’s thought, it is the exposure of empty time that opens up the purview of *Erfüllung*, which is negative in character. As Howard Caygill observes, “it is the distinction between fulfilment *in* historical time and the fulfilment *of* historical time which marks the difference between Heidegger and Benjamin.”<sup>12</sup>

The non-actuality of meaning, which is also the suspension of judgment and the constant (messianic) deferral of graspable signification are therefore set in a direct opposition to any preservation of meaning intimated by the question of Being. From this perspective, meaning, and by implication – history, is always already missed, never fulfilled: “Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment” (*GS* II:134, *SW* 1:55), as Benjamin notes in the fragment “Trauerspiel und Tragödie” of 1916.<sup>13</sup> Here, Benjamin postulates “messianic time” (the idea of fulfilled historical time that is prevalent in the bible, according to this fragment) against the idea of unfulfilled time. The conception of time unfolded in the *Trauerspiel* is “not fulfilled” and “yet finite” (*GS* II:136, *SW* 1:57); a perpetual deferment Benjamin famously uncovered through the allegorical mode of signification. Werner Hamacher, referring to Benjamin’s Second Thesis on history, comments: “there is historical time only in so far as there is an excess of the unactualized, the unfinished, failed, thwarted, which leaps beyond its particular Now and demands from another Now its settlement, correction and fulfilment.”<sup>14</sup> History, it follows from this dialectics of *Erfüllung*, could be seen to be worked through with the linguistic logic of the expressionless and the linguistic entity of the name as an epistemological structure of deferred fulfilment.

The first move in this part of the thesis aims to further peruse the close connection between the linguistic dimension and the communicative function of the sensation of the *Unzu Hause*. Suggestively, it is the sensation of strangeness or eeriness that Adorno invokes as the exemplary topoi out of which the optics of *Naturgeschichte* and hence – its *Idee* – emerges. Not only is the *Schädelstätte* the ur-form out of which allegory steps forth as the turmoil of

---

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1953), p. 184, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 178.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Caygill, “Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition”, in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 1–31 (p. 10).

<sup>13</sup> On Benjamin’s critical engagement, in his early texts (“Trauerspiel und Tragödie” and “Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie”) with Heidegger’s essay *Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft* of 1916 and on “their two different ways of viewing history”, as Benjamin writes to Gershom Scholem in November 1916, see Caygill, “Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition”. As Caygill concludes, Benjamin early writings, his “programmatic sketch for the *Trauerspiel* book, and indeed for his authorship as a whole thus emerges from a critique of Heidegger” (p. 4).

<sup>14</sup> Hamacher, “‘Now’: Walter Benjamin and Historical Time”, in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London, New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 38–68 (p. 41).

meaning(lessness); Adorno also points to subjective experiences that are underlined and prevailed over by the historical structure of compulsive repetition. It is the repetitive character of “having-been” tied to the persistence of its “thereness” – also the constitution of *Dasein* through “ecstatic temporality” according to Heidegger<sup>15</sup> – that innervates the critique of natural history and provides the setting for its graspability. This setting, as we will see, emphatically takes the shape of an architectural site of a ruin, one that is interlaced with the notion of temporality and decay as the main manifestation of the concept of life in a passage by Rainer Maria Rilke cited by Heidegger. To further explore this setting of a dialectical relation between the space of meaning of natural history and what Benjamin terms “creaturely life” I will subsequently turn to Franz Kafka’s short story “Der Bau” (written in 1923/4). The point of convergence here is the auditory enigma of Kafka’s fragment of a story: the creaturely soundscape of hissing and rustling that monstrously pervades the burrow. The site of the underground, as indicated in the previous part, evinces the sense of ambiguity in the Kafkan sense, as it has been drawn from Benjamin’s figuration of the shadow (a key emblem, as we have seen, for the scenography of the aura). In the argument developed in this part, “Der Bau” is congruent with Adorno’s thinking image of meaning and anxiety most figuratively (but also literally), setting forth the creature’s experience of “a world walled up from/by all ‘sense’”.

Another *topos* that will be considered here is that of the already mentioned *Schädelstätte*. This site of corporeal refuse, intimately linked to the programmatic Baroque architectural ruin, is at once a testimony to or a symbol of contingency and a sign to be critically read as the incompleteness of history. With this convergence of symbol and sign into the “allegorical intuition” in Benjamin’s terms, the final move of this part of the thesis takes its lead from the architectural motifs and imaginations that are mapped onto the analysis advanced by Benjamin in ending the *Trauerspiel* book. This analysis, as will be elaborated, traverses the paradoxes of fate, melancholia and the theory of sovereignty, among others. The primary focus here, however, will be upon the closing formulations of the book in which the political theology of creaturely life, drawn from natural history, is disclosed by mute architectural representations. To the extent that the dramatic form of the *Trauerspiel* consists of the manner in which body and language are at work within and as a *Schauplatz* – literally “the place of

---

<sup>15</sup> “The ecstatic unity of temporality – that is, the unity of the ‘outside itself’ in the raptures [Entrückungen] of the future, the having-been, and the present – is the condition of the possibility that there can be a being that exists as its ‘there’.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 350, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 334.

showing and looking”<sup>16</sup> – it is architecture that most properly divulges blocked language, prompting “the ear of lament” (*GS* II:140, *SW* 1:61) in Benjamin’s words.

One of the focal points here in the reading of the architectural projections, manifestations and ruinations evoked by Benjamin is Carl Linfert’s study of 1931, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”.<sup>17</sup> In his study, Linfert refers to Benjamin’s theory of allegory, as developed in the *Trauerspiel* book, in what can be taken to be one of the first academic references to Benjamin’s most complete study.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, in turn, reviewed Linfert’s work as part of his essay, “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen*” (1933). In a letter to Linfert, Benjamin regards the “truly methodical detour” as exemplified “by selecting architectural drawings.” This, has brought to light, “at one stroke”, Benjamin writes, “the close proximity between the essence or being [Wesen] of architecture [Baukunst] and the ingenuity of the Baroque.”<sup>19</sup> Although much focus has been invested in the figure of the ruin, as will also be discussed below, there is a particular projected, imaginary architectural element which has drawn less attention – a balcony – that vividly captures the space of thinking and sensing in the allegorical turn of the melancholy Baroque.

## I. The Ear Which Is Attuned to Lament

### 1) Profanation and Secularisation

The short unpublished essay “Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie” of 1916 adumbrates, in its demonstration of the cohesion of language and history, the significance of Benjamin’s linguistic theory for his study of the Baroque. As a linguistic category or order, as Benjamin understands it, history is concomitant with “meaning in the language of man [Bedeutung in der Menschengesprache]” (*GS* II:139, *SW* 1:60, translation modified). The drawing

---

<sup>16</sup> On the notion of Benjamin’s conceptualisation of the *Schauplatz* as a space of alterity and allegorical “speaking otherwise” see Andrew J. Webber, *Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Linfert, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung: Mit einem Versuch über französische Architekturzeichnungen des 18. Jahrhunderts”, *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* I, ed. Otto Pächt (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1931), 133-246.

<sup>18</sup> Fredric Schwartz has pointed out that when the *Trauerspiel* book entered into academic circulation, it was in the context of an art-historical dissertation, “one specifically on architectural drawings,” and not in the context of literature. See *Blind Spots*, p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* vol. IV, eds. Christoph Göttsche and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), p. 42. All renderings in English from the letters between Benjamin and Linfert and from Linfert’s “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung” are based on a translation made by Polly Dickson.



into proximity of history and language issues from the primal scene of the Fall of language, its degradation towards “bourgeois language” as it is defined in the essay on language. When language falls outside its original, Edenic purposefulness of immediate knowledge via name giving, it subsequently lapses into semiotic, instrumental and objective functioning.<sup>20</sup> According to Benjamin, the concept of history has originated as it were in this transformation from a non-mediating, non-abstract language of names into the making mediate of language – its “Mittelbarmachung” (*GS* II:154). And yet, bound up with this primal divagation of language from the linguistic order that does not mean but only points to sounding and hearing as such, ‘history’, we might say, resides in a dialectical tension of ‘untransmissibility’. Invariably, this material and sensuous dimension of language is associated with a perceptual web characterised by Benjamin as melancholic or mournful. This feeling or mood – *Stimmung* – entailed by nature’s “great sadness” – which, as we will see, inaugurates meaning as human history proper – is therefore the ‘primal history’ of language, what Benjamin calls the “Urgeschichte des Bedeutens” (*GS* I:342), as also relayed by Adorno (*NG* 359, *NH* 119).

The theory of human cognition developed by Benjamin in the essay on language is grounded not on the first but on the second version of the story of Creation in Genesis, in which, it is reported, man was made from earth. The creation of man, Benjamin notes, is a mediated one, enacted upon a primal matter:

In this second story of the Creation, the making of man did not take place through the word: God spoke – and there was. But this man, who is not created from the word, is now invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature.

(*GS* II:147-148, *SW* 1:67-68)

And it was nature, as Benjamin stresses, that was thus left forsaken in a state of speechlessness, and for that reason – mourns: “Weil sie stumm ist, trauert die Natur” (*GS* II:155, *SW* 1:73). According to this *other* original scene, man – now, significantly, not created at one stroke with woman, via a divine creative word – is set apart from the order of creation, and becomes a name giver: a creator devoid of the power of material creation (which might be read as a variation of

---

<sup>20</sup> “The name... is the innermost nature of language as such” (*SW* 1:65 translation modified). In the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin draws on the pre-eminence of Adam, arguing that “in philosophical contemplation the idea as word – as the word that claims anew its naming rights – is released from the innermost reality. In the end this stance is not Plato’s but Adam’s, the father of humankind regarded as father of philosophy” (*GS* I:217, *O* 13-14).

the rejection of the feminine).<sup>21</sup> In a distanced act of creation, as if nothing in what is human is to be *touched* by the divine sphere, or even pronounced in a divine word, man's creaturely life was elevated from the gravity of earth.<sup>22</sup>

At the core of Benjamin's conception of language lies the triad of nature, the human and the divine, and notably, the *non*-contiguous relationship between them. We can draw attention here to an important distinction clarified by Giorgio Agamben between the meanings of secularisation and profanation. In sacrifice, profane objects can pass into the sphere of the sacred and an object during the rite can also pass over from the sphere of the divine to that of the profane, a transition enacted through contact, practices of use and touch.<sup>23</sup> Profanation, therefore, retains the idea of separation from the sacred; it "neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use." In secularisation, this separation is repressed, "Thus the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact." Secularisation and profanation, Agamben writes, "are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized."<sup>24</sup>

When Benjamin writes in the "Theologisch-Politisches Fragment" that "the order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness" (*GS* II:203, *SW* 3:305, translation modified), he not only maintains that the order of the profane is that which has been released from the hold of the sacred, whose meaning always lies beyond its material or manifested appearances. Rather, it is on the disintegration of perceptual forms that the idea of happiness, of "Glück", also seems to be hinged. To the extent that the profane is to be erected – "hat sich aufzurichten" – on the idea of happiness, it is in "happiness" that the lived body finds its

---

<sup>21</sup> This rejection is also recorded in Benjamin's early meditations collected in "Metaphysik der Jugend" and in his reflections on the figure of the genius there. See Weigel, "Eros and Language, Benjamin's Kraus Essay", trans. Georgina Paul, in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 278-295 (pp. 280-284).

<sup>22</sup> The cohesion between the two stories of creation lies in the chiasmus of image and speech. The first story is based on a relation of likeness: "And God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them." Genesis 1:27, Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, p. 5. The second story consists not of an image, nor language, but rather formless matter and inarticulate sound: "then the LORD God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature." Genesis 2:7, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation", in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 73-92 (p. 74). The meaning of the Messianic is rooted in a ritual of touch, through which the act of elevation of what is profane and unholy to the order of the sacred is performed. The word *messiah* is derived from the semiotic root *masach*, meaning to apply or spread oil: "the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil". Numbers, 35:25.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation", p. 77.

downfall, its “Untergang”, in the sense of ‘going down into’, which is the exact spatial polarity to the more ‘upright’ establishment of the profane. And this relation, which, is, in its totality, “transient” in both “temporal and spatial” senses, Benjamin denotes as “messianic”. Although the messianic, says Benjamin, has nothing to do with historical processes in which – to draw here on Agamben’s aforementioned observations – secularisation and profanation are inevitably dialectically in play, it is for this reason that “the relation of this order to the messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history” (*GS* II:203, *SW* 2:305).

The significance of the Baroque for this account of the philosophy of history resides in that era’s repressed entanglements of the profane and the sacred. On the turning (“Wendung”) of history to nature that underlies the allegorical tendency of the *Trauerspiele* Benjamin comments that “Even the story of the life of Christ lent itself to that turning of history into nature that is fundamental to the allegorical” (*GS* I:358, *O* 194).<sup>25</sup> Benjamin notes how the Baroque conception of nature did not truly indicate the flight from the annihilating effect of time, as the antithesis of nature and history would suggest. Weigel, reflecting on this “not very readily accessible interpretation of the Baroque”, notes that this “unusual reference to ‘the secularization of the historical’, which runs counter to conventional notions of secularization as a process of transformation which goes from the sacred or the theological to the historical and not *vice versa*, already introduces a complex dialectic into secularization”. She suggests that the concept of secularization holds the position of a counter-concept to messianism: if “the *messianic* aims at redemption through the fulfilment of history, *secularization* here means the withdrawal of sacred significance within history, the transformation of existence back into the creaturely state or of history back into nature.”<sup>26</sup>

To the extent that Benjamin’s analysis retains the theological ideas of guilt and redemption,<sup>27</sup> conceptualised through their “secularisation in space”, it is with the aid of the device of allegory that these ideas are dialectically treated; and this brings us back to Benjamin’s approach to language. Not only has the faculty of naming – “the mental being of man” (*GS* II:144, *SW* 1:65) – emerged out of the caesural act of profanation, in Agamben’s terms, i.e., the strict withdrawal of the divine from what is human (a view also held by the Kabbalistic metaphysics of *Tsimsum*). Rather, Adamitic *Namesprache*, the “gift” (“*Gabe*”) of

<sup>25</sup> Gillian Rose notes that “while the protestant ethic leads to the *withering of the interest in salvation without loss of the anxiety of salvation*, the Baroque ethics evinces a *created and creaturely world with the aspiration but without the promise of redemption*”. “Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of the Modern Judaism”, in *Judaism and Modernity Philosophical Essays* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2017), pp. 175-210 (p. 181).

<sup>26</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> A theme already explored in Benjamin’s early essay “Kapitalismus als Religion” (1921) by employing the double meaning of the German word *Schuld* as both (moral) guilt and (financial) debt.

language, prior to original sin and to the subsequent expulsion from Paradise, has emerged out of God's inarticulacy.

As Benjamin emphasises, the creation of the human is inscribed in an acoustical act of divine breathing as transfusing/transmitting the power of speech, which is "at once life and mind [or spirit: *und Geist*] and language" (*GS* II:147, *SW* 1:67). And once language as creation is released from its "divine actuality" it became "cognition" ("Erkenntnis"): "Man is the knower [der Erkennende] in the same language in which God is the creator" (*GS* II:149, *SW* 1:68). "Whereas creation wished only to pour forth in purity", Benjamin comments in "Die Bedeutung der Sprache in *Trauerspiel* und Tragödie", "it was man who bore its crown. This is the significance of the king in the mourning play" (*GS* II:138-139, *SW* 1:60); a significance that is marked by a repressed profanation of political theology. In the section of the *Trauerspiel* entitled "Souverän als Kreatur", Benjamin states that the "Schöpfungsstand" is "the plane [Ebene]" and the "terrain" – "Boden" (also translated also as "soil"), which seems to resonate the formless plasticity of mere created life or being – on which the "*Trauerspiel* unfolds" (*GS* I:263-264, *O* 72). The *Trauerspiel*, in other words, is constituted on the ur-history of the state of creation and of language, where spirit and language are still tied to the concept of 'life' in its pure form.

## 2) The Presentiment of Mourning

According to Benjamin's essay on language, it is for the reason of the deficiency of divine language that "this man, who is not created from the word, is now invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature", nature that was left in a state of speechlessness and mourning. With this, the dialectics of *Naturgeschichte* as the interplay between timelessness and transitoriness is also set forth. Things, whose "proper name [is] in God" pertain to (mute) existence; and yet "to be completely known" by the divine (that which is "Unerkennbar[en]") and, importantly, "To be named – even when the namer is godlike and blissful – perhaps always remains an intimation [presentiment, *Ahnung*] of mourning" (*GS* II:155, *SW* 1:73). Derrida, in respect to Benjamin's conception of naming, comments:

Whoever receives a name feels mortal or dying precisely because the name seeks to save him, to call him and thus assure his survival. Being called, hearing oneself being

named, receiving a name for the first time, involves something like the knowledge of being mortal and even the feeling that one is dying.<sup>28</sup>

Through being named, a radical expression of mourning was released by nature. Nature, after the Fall, so Benjamin writes, profoundly changed its appearance (“Ansehen”), an appearance which is, nonetheless, acoustically receptive. (We might recall the “Kunstwerk” essay’s statement regarding how there is different “nature that speaks” to the camera than to the eye.) “Now begins [nature’s] other muteness, which is what we mean by the ‘deep sadness of nature’ [‘das große Leid der Natur’]”. Nature’s “other muteness” here adheres to history as “meaning in the language of man”, an idea that, figured through the scheme of *Naturgeschichte*, is a sign to be read in and as “nature”. This is expressed in Benjamin’s following observation: “it is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament [zu klagen begänne] if it were endowed [verliehen] with language (though ‘to endow with language’ is more than ‘to make able to speak’)” (*GS* II:155, *SW* 1:72).<sup>29</sup> Benjamin attempts to clarify “a double meaning” intrinsic to this statement, enacting, to be sure, the very logic of the nexus between meaning and history: the passage of language from its ur-history of “Eindeutigkeit” to that of “Zweideutigkeit”.<sup>30</sup> Benjamin links the latter to “overnaming” (“Überbenennung”) (*GS* II:155, *SW* 1:73) and hence, to demonic ambiguity, to allegory, and to melancholy. As Benjamin explains the duality inscribed in this lament, firstly, nature would lament about (“über”) language itself: “sie würde über die Sprache selbst klagen”. Nature’s lament is infused by language itself. Secondly, nature, simply, “would lament”, regardless, that is, any object of loss.<sup>31</sup>

Inconspicuously given to perception (in the same degree as *weak* messianic power), nature’s lament, the ‘weak’ linguistic sensuous sign of history’s “continuum with nature”,<sup>32</sup> is

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, “The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), 369-418 (p. 389).

<sup>29</sup> In a short entry in his diary entitled “Die Trauer der Natur”, Scholem refers this trope to Schelling, who writes, in a passage transcribed by Scholem, about the mourning of nature in the light of man’s voluntary renunciation of his central status (“Zentralstellung”) in nature enacted through the Fall. Scholem, *Tagebücher* vol. 2 (1917-1923), (Frankfurt a.M: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), p. 615.

<sup>30</sup> For an explication of the “law of ambiguity” in Benjamin see for example Sigrid Weigel’s “Eros and Language: Benjamin’s Kraus Essay”, pp. 282-283.

<sup>31</sup> Language, in Benjamin’s wording, would be lent – “verliehen” – to nature; it is from the beginning not nature’s to have, for, conversely, as it is stated in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel*, “Knowledge [Erkenntnis] is a having” (*GS* I:209, *O* 4). In respect to this difficult passage, Rebecca Comay invokes Benjamin’s view that “modernity’s curse and privilege is to repeat, to intensify, and (this is Benjamin’s gamble) even to redeem a catastrophe that was from the outset always already underway”. Comay, “Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet”, in *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives*, eds. Ilit Ferber, Paula Schwebel (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 257-276 (p. 261).

<sup>32</sup> This phrasing is borrowed from Antonia Birnbaum, “Variations of Fate”, in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, eds. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 91-108 (p. 93).

thereby “the least differentiated, powerless expression of language”. Lament is the sign of nature that is sensuous and so perceptible by way of almost only containing a “breath” (“Hauch”), to the extent that “even where there is only a rustling of plants, lament also resounds with it” (*GS* II:155, *SW* 1:73). In an argument also reproduced in the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin writes: “in all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more [unendlich viel mehr] than the inability or disinclination to communicate [or share oneself – *zur Mitteilung*]” (*GS* II:155, *SW* 1:73). For what language solely shares, is “the corresponding mental essence to it [das ihr entsprechende geistige Wesen]” (*GS* II:142, *SW* 1:63) and this is enacted through language’s essence as language and not through its capacity of communicating something other than itself. Cognitive capacity is necessarily linguistic, for language, in Benjamin’s sense, is to be accounted as a spiritual essence which is nevertheless transmitted in language as medium: “*in der Sprache...und nicht durch die Sprache*” (*GS* II:141). This is why “Sprachlosigkeit” is the essence of language proper, corresponding dialectically to the fact of its “Fall” into “the abyss of the mediacy of all communication [den Abgrund der Mittelbarkeit aller Mitteilung]” (*GS* II:154, *SW* 1:72, translation modified). Therefore, it is sorrowfulness, the feeling transmitted in and through lament, that is a sign to be read: the transition from nature to history. But this also means that the relation between these realms of human significance is transpositional, interchangeable – allegorical. As Benjamin states in the *Trauerspiel* book, the foreshadowing sensation of mourning, in corresponding to the degradation of language, was intensified in the allegorical mode: “But how much more so to be not named but only read, to be read uncertainly by the allegorist, and to have become highly significant only through him.” “On the other hand”, Benjamin adds, “the more that nature and antiquity were felt to be guilt-laden [schuldbeladen]” – guilty that is, in their endurance *in* history, an everlastingness he associates with ‘creaturely life’ – “the more obligatory became their allegorical interpretation, understood as their only conceivable salvation” (*GS* I:398, *O* 244-245).

The aspect of language’s fundamental trait of “Unmittelbarkeit” – that is, its immediacy, in relation to the negative sense of mediation – can be discerned in the constitution of finite human existence – *Dasein*, the condition of being-there in Heidegger’s terms. History, cognate to “meaning in human language”, is irrevocably the mark of earthly temporal existence. For, whereas the verbal contents of language are marked by finitude, the mode of language which does not share external content but rather concerns the transmission of its own “spiritual essence”, what Benjamin terms the magic character of language, points to language’s

own border (“Grenze”) – its infiniteness (*GS* II:143, *SW* 1:64).<sup>33</sup> The registration of language as the sphere in which being is constituted, and not as a conceptual structure, informs the “idea of natural history”, now referred to by Adorno as a “constellation of ideas” – namely, “the idea of transience, of significance, and the idea of nature and the idea of history”. As Adorno explains: “According to Benjamin, nature, as creation, carries the mark of transience. Nature itself is transitory. Thus, it includes the element of history. Whenever an historical element appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away with it” (*NG* 359, *NH* 120). Intelligible sense, in other words, always subsists in laying bare the sensible dimension that passes away in its manifestation as meaning or history.

Benjamin’s interpretation of the specifications of language as informing the aesthetic form of the *Trauerspiel* is also grounded on the distinction between natural and tragic guilt (*GS* I:310-311, *O* 130-132) and on this distinction’s link to the concept of fate. This distinction is borne out in the following definition: “Fate rolls toward death. Death is not punishment but expiation, an expression of the subjection of guilty life to the law of natural life” (*GS* I:310, *O* 130). When death enters the symbolic order of punishment and or expiation, it becomes an expression – “Ausdruck” – of creaturely life. “Baroque fate”, Antonia Birnbaum observes,

deals with a history deprived of divine meaning that arises from an infinite course. The task of the Baroque work will thus be that of dramatizing this privation, of arranging its dynamics and coordinates. Of producing its scene and fulfillment – in a word, of presenting a piece of history become nature. The issue is consequently in fact to render fate perceptible, to represent it.<sup>34</sup>

For Benjamin, history becomes nature as the harbinger of the dialectics of fate in a process likewise inscribed in the world of things (*GS* I:311, *O* 132). In the “Setting” or *Schauplatz*, the place of showing and looking, the paradigmatic object that presented the fading away of life, as fate rolls towards death, towards that which is expressionless – was the ruin. We can recall here Benjamin’s argument regarding the mythical character of “the house” from the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay. The deprivation of fate and its transmutation into the realm of the creature was mirrored to men and women in the seeming life that flows out of the inanimate

---

<sup>33</sup> On the role of prefix ‘bar’ in Benjamin’s theory of language see Werner Hamacher’s comment that “Here, *bar* is not only the word for truth or revealability, but also for freedom (it constitutes one of the centers of the essay on the translator) and for purity – especially that of ‘pure language’, of the mere, of that free from all imparting [Mitteilung]”. Hamacher, “Intensive Languages”, trans. Ira Allen with Steven Tester, *MLN* 127.3 (2012), 485-541 (p. 527, footnote 32).

<sup>34</sup> Birnbaum, “Variations of Fate”, p. 93.

world to which they subjected themselves. For the Baroque, this was the ground on which the feeling of mourning and melancholy originated.

According to “Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie”, the rejection of language as a means of communication underscores the distinction between the linguistic aspects of the German *Trauerspiel* and the ancient Greek genre of *Tragödie*, and therefore, between *Trauer* and the tragic. Sorrow deviates from the tragic by dint of its being a feeling: “[Trauer] ist ein Gefühl”, a feeling invoked by a *play* of sorrow.<sup>35</sup> The divergence between sorrow, which is “untragic”, and the tragic, according to the fragment, lies in the association of the tragic with a “ruling power”, the “indissoluble and inescapable law” (*GS* II:137, *SW* 1:59). The tragic is modelled on “demonic fate”, a pagan remnant which has not been overcome but rather “breached” (“durchbrochen”) in tragedy (*SW* I:288, *O* 104), and thereby settling as it were in the post-tragic form of the German *Trauerspiel*.<sup>36</sup> The *Trauerspiele* enacted a diversion that moves from fated history – a history that is fulfilled in the tragic hero’s death as the expression of her or his guilt<sup>37</sup> – to “the historical idea of repetition”. It is an idea that the *Trauerspiel* “artistically exhausts [erschöpft]”, as Benjamin notes in “Trauerspiel und Tragödie” (*GS* II:136, *SW* 1:57). And aesthetic forms, according to Benjamin, prevail over moral or religious contents: “It was not in law but in tragedy that the head of genius lifted itself for the first time from the mist of guilt” (*GS* I:288, *O* 104). Yet this elevation did not result in the reconciliation of man or woman with their gods but rather entailed a cognition deprived of language, leaving the tragic hero “dumb” and arrested in silence, which is the properly tragic dimension.<sup>38</sup> Benjamin associates this state of affairs with the sublime: “The paradox of the birth of genius in moral speechlessness [Sprachlosigkeit], moral infantility, is the sublimity of tragedy.” The moral man is the one who is “still speechless”, “noch unmündig”, in the

<sup>35</sup> To recall, play indicates a relation between form and content which is not mimetic but rather repetitive. By this diversion, the idea of art is deformed on the level of the relation of the artwork to finitude: the artwork’s link to infinity takes the form of eternal return.

<sup>36</sup> For an account of the *Trauerspiel* as a post-tragic form, see Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Creature Caliban Revisited: Shakespeare, Benjamin, and Post-Tragic Form”, a talk given in the conference *Walter Benjamin and Shakespeare*, London, November 2018.

<sup>37</sup> This death is diametrically posited in relation to messianic time, for “in tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time” (*SW* 1:56), as Benjamin notes in “Trauerspiel und Tragödie”.

<sup>38</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death, The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), pp. 88-89. Along these lines, Adorno formulates the dialectics of myth: “the mythology that underlies tragedy is in every instance dialectical because it includes the subjugation of the guilty man to connection with nature [Verfallensein des schuldigen Menschen an den Naturzusammenhang] at the same time that it develops out of itself the reconciliation of this fate: man raises himself up out of his fate as man [der Mensch aus dem Schicksal als Mensch sich erhebt]. The dialectical element here is that the tragic myths contain at one and the same time subjection [Verfallenheit] to guilt and nature and the element of reconciliation that transcends the connective realm of nature [Naturzusammenhang]” (*NG* 363, *NH* 123, translation modified).



condition of a minor – a mode of consciousness (“Erkenntnis”) that “without declaring itself [Ohne sich zu bekennen]”, still secretly – “heimlich” – “seeks to gather its forces [ihre Gewalt zu sammeln]” (GS I:288-289, O 104).

The *Trauerspiel* reflects back upon the paradox of moral silence by acoustically intensifying the very exposure left in abeyance in tragedy. In the *Trauerspiel*, “guilt and greatness” make a claim (“beanspruchen”) not for “overdeterminedness” but for a “greater expansion” (GS II:136, SW 1:57). They enact, that is, a demand for space, a space for (mourning-)play in which the link between fate, guilt and history is recalled as incomplete, “as to repeat the same game, albeit on a grander scale, in another world. It is this repetition on which the law of the mourning play is founded. Its events are allegorical schemata, symbolic mirror-images [sinnbildliche Spiegelbilder] of a different game”. And this was expressed acoustically. The “interplay between sound and meaning” remains for the *Trauerspiel* a “terrifying phantom [Geisterhaftes, Fürchterliches]” (GS II:139, SW 1:60). In the section of the book entitled “Sprachzerstüdtelung” (“Dismemberment of Language”), Benjamin observes that “For the Baroque, sounding [Lautlich[es]] is and remained something purely sensuous; meaning is at home in the script(ure) [die Bedeutung ist in der Schrift zu Hause]” (GS I:383, O 226, translation modified). And yet, as it is stated elsewhere (in the section “Die Ruine”), “When, with the *Trauerspiel*, history enters the scene, it does so as script. ‘History’ stands written on nature’s countenance in the sign-script of transience” (GS I:353, O 188).

The antithesis of sound and meaning, of sensuousness and meaning that is abstracted from the material form that provokes it, is the idea on which the *Trauerspiel* is grounded: “And the vocalized word is only visited with meaning, as though with an ineluctable illness; it breaks off in the midst of being uttered, and a damming up of the feeling about to pour forth awakens mourning.” It is in the form of the sounded word, brought also into close proximity to the more corporeal “sense of taste”, as Benjamin comments in this context, that an interrupted lodging of word and meaning transpires as if visited or haunted in the home – “heimgesucht ...wird” – by meaning. “The ground [*Grund*, also reason] of sorrow” (GS I:383, O 226), according to this passage, is the groundlessness of meaning or of language, and thus it brings to mind another phrasing by Benjamin, that of “the abyss of bottomless profundity” (GS I:404, O 252).<sup>39</sup> This

<sup>39</sup> “Abgrund des bodenlosen Tiefsinns”, a formulation that draws also on the idea of the expressionless, could be thought through the Kabbalistic trope of “(ten) sefirot blima/bli ma” (“ten *sefirot* [countings] of nothingness”). “blima”, evokes the figure of an empty space (“tohu”) (see Job 26:1). In its other form of writing, that of “bli ma”, the phrase means literally “without (*bli*) what (*ma*)”, an empty form, that which is therefore expressionless. See *Sefer Yezirah* (*The Book of Creation*), Chapter 1:1-9, in Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yezirah, English & Hebrew* (York Beach, Me.: S. Weiser, 1991), pp. 32-71.

opening of a space was enacted in the form of repetition (recall here also the “fort/da” game): “meaning is encountered here – and will continue to be encountered” (*GS* I:383, *O* 226).

In ending his lecture, Adorno, in what seems to be a reference to the German *Trauerspiel* notes: “It is worth remembering that emotion always accompanies the lesser, not the greatest art works” (*NG* 365, *NH* 124). Prefiguring a “lesser form of art”, the *Trauerspiel*, as Benjamin writes in the section of his study entitled “*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*”, is a degenerate site at which, nonetheless, a “form” comes forth. This is possible only in, and precisely because of, “the frail body of the feeble work, as its skeleton, so to speak” (*GS* I:238, *O* 41). With the figural idea of the above-mentioned “skeleton of the word” (“*Wortskelett*”), a figure that also reverberates with the intimation of the allegorical language-scape of the *Schädelstätte*, Benjamin exhibits the function of “weakening of the symbolic and communicative force”. The *Trauerspiel*, according to “*Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie*”, is involved in the evocation of feeling – “*Gefühl*” – which is, within the realm of the aesthetic, an attestation to a particular “linguistic relation”. Benjamin asks:

What metaphysical relation does this feeling have to words, to the act of speech? That is the riddle of the *Trauerspiel*. What inner relation at the heart of sorrow [*Trauer*] releases it from the existence of pure feelings [*Dasein der reinen Gefühle*] and lets it enter the order of art?

(*GS* II:138, *SW* 1:59, translation modified)

The release from the “existence of pure feelings” here indicates language’s inescapable subsiding into the order of the symbolic, which is also “the order of art”, of aesthetics, and also – of history.

Benjamin’s meditation on the very nature or *physis* of the linguistic order of lament portrays language that is ‘fulfilled’, and hence present, ‘there’, in the ‘now-time’ of its reception. But still, it is in the course of the “play of sorrow” that “the site of the real conception of words [*Worte*] and speech [*Rede*] in art” is constituted to the extent that the “the faculties of language [*Sprache*] and hearing [*Gehör*] still stand equal in the scales”. This chronotopical figure of the scales, a figure of antecedence – to decision, to judgment and to abstraction – discloses that for the *Trauerspiel* “ultimately everything comes down to the ear of lament” [*ja endlich kommt alles auf das Ohr der Klage an*] (*GS* II:140, *SW* 1:61, translation modified). Attentiveness to lament, like the mute, albeit audible lament of nature enacted through the

breath and rustling of plants, hence figures the disavowal of language as a double negation of *Sinn*, of both the orders of the corporeal sensorium and the symbolic.

In as much as “history emerges together with meaning in human language”, “this language is immobilized in meaning”, as it is realised in the language of tragedy: “Das Wort nach seiner reinen tragenden Bedeutung wirkend wird tragisch”. The word becomes tragic when its meaning is borne, when it is communicated, fulfilled, subduing any trait of the *unheimlich*. And whereas “the tragic threatens”, now “man, the crown of creation, is salvaged for feeling only by becoming king”. Benjamin’s account (drawn from Carl Schmitt’s theory of the theological conception of the political), shows that it is the sovereign that eventually succumbs to the bare state of creation: “the nature of the *Trauerspiel* remains a torso in this sublime symbol [the king]; sorrow fills the sensuous world in which nature and language meet” (*GS* II:139, *SW* 1:60). And for that reason, the German *Trauerspiel* managed to cast “the world of meaning, the world of historical time” into an aesthetic representation which is, uncannily, “emotionless” (“gefühllos[en]”). Language, proffered to acoustical perception, in divulging or betraying (“verraten”) nature’s blocked sorrow, a sorrow that could never be realised nor transposed into a mediating language, in effect translates – “übersetzt” (puts over) or “überträgt” (carries over) – this obstruction itself into feeling. “The word as pure bearer [reiner Träger] of its meaning is the pure word. But alongside this”, Benjamin writes, “we find a word of another kind that is subject to change, as it moves from its source [Ursprung] towards a different point, its estuary [Mündung]. Language in the process of change [Verwandlung] is the linguistic principle of the *Trauerspiel*” (*GS* II:138, *SW* 1:60). This other word that rolls over from its spatio-temporal distant origin, the source from which it springs, and hence renounces the speech of otherness, is, then, the inscription of language as such, staged in the restitution of the paradisiacal language of the name. For language’s corporeal dimension, its vocal manifestation, is, interestingly, captured here in the figure of the “Mündung”. The mouth – or perhaps mouthing – of the river is the site at which the opening and gathering of the lips could be imagined as a crack, a *Sprung*; their rendition, that is, of ex-pression but also, the drawing nearer of the lips to the expression of silence.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin’s *Denkbild* brings to mind the manifold etymologies of the Hebrew word for language, *safá*, which is also the word for ‘lip’, and their link to the meanings of the finite, and to destruction, extinction, gathering, convergence, and by implication, to silence. See also the translators’ introduction to the translation of Heidegger’s *Die Sprache* into Hebrew. Martin Heidegger, *Die Sprache*, trans. Michael Friedman and Danit Dottan (Haifa: Pardes, 2016), pp. xv-xvi.

## II. *Stimmung, Stimme*

Hegel's *Phänomenologie* climaxes with the comprehension of history as the new, now purely logical appearance, the dissolving of corporeal sensations that gives rise to meaningful totality, the "Golgotha of absolute spirit", or "[the world's] becoming-world in a new sense", as Jean Luc Nancy commented.<sup>41</sup> Negatively upholding Hegel, Adorno's line of criticism figures "'the new', the dialectically produced", as that which "actually presents itself in history as the archaic". "History is 'most mythical where it is most historical [Die Geschichte ist 'dort am mythischsten, wo sie am geschichtlichsten ist']", or as Adorno puts it slightly differently in his seminar on Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book (delivered in the summer semester of 1932), significantly substituting "world" for "history": "Die Welt ist da am mythischsten, wo sie am geschichtlichsten ist".<sup>42</sup> It is the stubborn presence of "having-been" in what is subjectively construed as "the world", not nature; for the latter is always already historicised, complying with post-Fall language, as shown by Benjamin. The structure of this language, its "Urgeschichte", could only be divulged in "feeling": the intensified sensation of sorrow and mourning vis-à-vis figural liquefaction of meaning, as it is captured in Benjamin's thinking image of the *Mündung*. This image, also by its indication of the categories of minority and maturity, of *Mündigkeit*, brings to mind the melancholic stance and its cognitive power dominating Benjamin's analysis of the *Trauerspiel* (to which we turn in what follows) as well as his work as a whole.

We can trace in the dialectical, thinking image of the *Mündung* the close proximity that Agamben teased out between mood – *Stimmung*, a term which calls to be glossed at once as mood and as attunement or pitching of voice, and voice – *Stimme*,<sup>43</sup> as the proximity that also

<sup>41</sup> Jean Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> "Adornos Seminar von Sommersemester 1932 über Benjamins *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*", *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, vol. IV (Adorno Archiv. Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), 52-77 (p. 56).

<sup>43</sup> The untranslatability of *Stimmung*, a term that could be glossed in English as 'mood', 'attunement', 'atmosphere' or 'ambience', was accounted by Leo Spitzer. *Stimmung* means "the unity of the feelings experienced by man face to face with his environment (a landscape, nature, one's fellow man), and would comprehend and weld together the objective (factual) and the subjective (psychological) into one harmonious unity". Spitzer, cited in Agamben, "Vocation and Voice", in *Qui Parle* 10.2 (1997), 89-100 (p. 89). For the philosophical and aesthetic complexity of meanings of the German term, see also David Wellbery, "Stimmung", trans. Rebecca Pohl, *New Formations* 93 (2017), 6-45. Alois Riegl designated "mood" ("Stimmung") as the "content of modern art." In Riegl's analysis of landscape paintings, the subjective-objective state of "mood" is underlined by the orders of distancing and spatiality in the act of viewing. "Mood" is achieved under the perceptual conditions of tranquility and far-sightedness or far-seeing. However, according to Riegl, it is the dialectical relations between the aesthetic experience based on distance and the sensed movements of organic or non-organic life ("Lebensregung"), out of which "mood" emerges. Describing a personal experience of contemplating a landscape, Riegl notes how a movement of natural life, acoustically perceived in the more "tactile" "near view", interrupted his contemplative mode, throwing him into a mood of anxiety, into "a struggle

structures lament and melancholy for Benjamin. This is the *Stimmung* that inheres in the voice, never independent from the acoustical, the material expression of language: the sediment of what Benjamin calls speechlessness or expressionlessness that is dialectically unleashed by the mute sorrowfulness of nature. *Stimme*, according to Agamben's explorations of the place of negativity in Hegel and Heidegger in his lectures on *Language and Death*, is a trace, a present lack of significance; an empty sign disclosing "the place of language". Drawing on Hegel, Agamben contends that the theme of the voice indicates absolute negativity; it is consigned to temporality and associated with the death of the animal, of the living thing. Voice is the not yet meaningful speech of the conscious subject, and thus it refers to what Hegel terms "natural existence" ("natürliche Dasein"). For the conscious subject, as Agamben reflects, the preservation of the experience of death "does not take place in a *Stimme*, in a voice, but in a *Stimmung*, the anguish and fear in the face of death."<sup>44</sup> In the realm of human language, the voice is, according to the Hegelian logic, an "immediately vanishing trace",<sup>45</sup> and thus it is negatively or dialectically absolved in that very domain.

In Heidegger's conception, *Dasein* denotes the construction of the human whose elemental classification is that of always already having a world, "in-der-Welt-sein". In this construction, the *Stimme*, the pure voice devoid of meaning that belongs to that which is just living and exists without having experienced the opening of a "there", "world" or "time" – is pre-emptively excluded. "The living being" says Heidegger, "is probably the most difficult for us to conceive."<sup>46</sup> The analysis of *Dasein*, Agamben argues, is constituted on the abyss between the living being and its voice and man with language.<sup>47</sup> "Being *Da*, man is the place of language without having a voice."<sup>48</sup> *Dasein* is therefore grounded on an inextinguishable link between history and nature in which it is "impossible to isolate something like a bare life" in Agambenian terms;<sup>49</sup> nor is this definition of the human determined by "real being", in Adorno's words (*NG* 354, *NH* 116). As Agamben points out, it is in "the radical separation of language from voice, from *Stimme*" that "we must look to the full emergence of Heidegger's thought of the theme of the *Stimmung*". To render this break in Benjamin's terminology would mean its consignment to the chasm between language as meaning in human history and

---

for existence". Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst", *Graphische Künste* 22 (1899), 47-56 (p. 48).

<sup>44</sup> *Language and Death*, p. 35

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Agamben, *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>49</sup> See "Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life", in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-160 (p. 126).

(nature's) lament – or between history and nature, in Adorno's gloss – renouncing their mutual interpenetration.

The cohesiveness of the Heideggerian structure of “in-der-Welt-sein”, however, is a connectiveness attained by the existential state of *Stimmung*. In as much as “*Dasein* is never free of mood”, its relation to the world thus lacks intentionality or representation. This structure and its semiotic representation seem to have some resonance with Benjamin's semiotic figure of the “Wortskelett”. And indeed, the constellation of language, spatiality and the “factual being” of *Dasein* brings us back – through Heidegger this time – to the structure of experience marked by *Das Unheimliche*. In arguing for the inseparability of *Dasein* and world, of being and its temporality, Heidegger sought to arrive at the elimination of the metaphysics of the subject, and this, by constituting its state of being-in-the-world upon “the fundamental existential mode of *Stimmung*”, a disposition which in its essence thwarts any distinction between interiority and world. *Stimmung*, as Heidegger stresses, “comes neither from ‘without’ nor from ‘within’ but arises from ‘being-in-the-world’ itself”.<sup>50</sup> Cutting between the subject and the object, moods, affects or feelings form most intensely the limit or border between them, in such a way that *Dasein*'s attunements cannot be located either in the subject or outside in the world. *Stimmung*, as Agamben notes, is antecedent to “all conscious knowledge and equally to all sense perception, to all *Wissen* and to all *Wahrnehmung*”.<sup>51</sup> *Dasein* means having an environment, or “around-world” – “Umwelt” – that is neither primarily there, nor antecedent to any familiarity or object-relation, to any form of experiencing the world. *Dasein* is substantially and spatially *there*, “in-der-Welt-sein”, as long as it is originally attuned (“stimmt”), directed towards its ‘there’ as such (the double meaning of the preposition ‘um’ – encompassing the sense of being about and around). The structure of *Stimmung*, as Ilit Farber comments, “conveys the challenge Heidegger poses to Husserlian intentionality; namely, that the subject, contrary to constituting his world by objectifying it, now aims to do so by opening it up, subsequent to realizing that his being is always-already within the world.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the constitution of *Dasein* by “moods” figures the dispossession for the world of any meaningful structure imposed on it by a subject.

“Precisely because *Dasein* is opened to the world in such a way that he is never master of his opening, this opening to the world has the character of uncanniness”, as Agamben

---

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 138, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 134.

<sup>51</sup> Agamben, “Vocation and Voice”, p. 91

<sup>52</sup> Farber, “Stimmung, Heidegger and Benjamin”, in *Sparks Will Fly*, pp. 67-94 (p. 74).

comments.<sup>53</sup> In Heidegger's words, "Being-in is the mode of the un-home" ("In-sein kommt in den existenzialen 'Modus' des Unzuhauses").<sup>54</sup> "Being in the world", as David Farrell Krell comments, "is marked by the uncanny discovery that we are *not* at home."<sup>55</sup> It is the fundamental mood of anxiety, according to Heidegger, that renders the encounter of *Dasein* with the world as nothingness, "[the world] collapses into itself", completely devoid of meaning (in "Unbedeutsamkeit").<sup>56</sup> And this groundlessness of meaning is the experience not of falling into silence, not of the "having-been of voice" as Agamben says, "since what is revealed here is that between language and voice there is no link, not even a negative one." The experiencing of the "nonplace of language" in Agamben's gloss, namely the negation of the voice which is not dialectical in character, therefore occurs: "language is not the voice of *Dasein*, and *Dasein*, thrown in *Da*, experiences the taking place of language as nonplace."<sup>57</sup> In arriving at the theme of the voice as nonplace, *Stimmung*, which always refers *Dasein* to the fact of "selfsameness" ("Selbigkeit"),<sup>58</sup> the fictive dimension of its 'there', to its being 'not-at-home', ineluctably foreshadows the negative manifestation of the voice, of *Stimme*: "man is in the place of language without having a voice,"<sup>59</sup> says Agamben. And just as "Being-in-the-world" in the mood of anxiety collapses everything familiar, and in as much as the empty dwelling place has resonance with the dispossession of the world from any meaningful structure, what is negatively designated by Agamben, and certainly from the Benjaminian perspective on language, is that the (non-) *materialisation* of *Stimme* is inexorably relinquished in *Stimmung*; a sheer acoustical sensation which, for that reason, testifies to the unproductiveness of meaning or sense.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> "Vocation and Voice", p. 93.

<sup>54</sup> *Sein und Zeit*, p. 189, *Being and Time*, p. 183, translation modified.

<sup>55</sup> Farrell Krell, "Das Unheimliche: Architectural Sections of Heidegger and Freud", p. 44. We can here note that whereas uncanniness for Heidegger would be a fulfilled history of "being-in", for Benjamin, as it is the line of argument here, this historicity is to be dialectically reversed: *Unheimlichkeit* is at once origin and a goal. ("Ursprung ist das Ziel" is a phrase from Karl Kraus that serves as a motto for the Fourteenth Thesis on the concept of history.)

<sup>56</sup> *Sein und Zeit*, p. 186, *Being and Time*, p. 180.

<sup>57</sup> *Language and Death*, p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> *Sein und Zeit*, p. 188, *Being and Time*, p. 182.

<sup>59</sup> *Language and Death*, p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of Benjamin's aphorism of "Überzeugen ist unfruchtbar" – "to convince is unfruitful" (in *Einbahnstraße*, published 1928), see Weigel's "Eros and Language, Benjamin's Kraus Essay", pp. 279-280.

### III. Architectural Sections of Bare Life

In the past, great architectural inventions constituted their  
essential destructability, even their fragility, as a resistance  
to destruction or as a monumentalisation of the ruin itself  
(the Baroque according to Benjamin, right?)  
– Derrida, “A Letter to Peter Eisenman”

#### 1) Rilke's Wall and Baroque Allegory

Adorno's view regarding the entanglements of life, language and *Sinn* and *Dasein*'s discovery of itself in the empty place – the *Unzuhause* – of language, as identified by Agamben, appear to confront each other in an architectural scenography of modernity evoked by Heidegger in his 1927 lecture course *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*. Here Heidegger notes, after citing in length a passage from Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* from 1910, that the language of poetry and literature (“Dichtung”) “is nothing but the elementary emergence into words [Zum-Wort-kommen], the becoming-uncovered [Entdecktweden], of existence as being-in-the-world”.<sup>61</sup> In this long passage, Rilke's narrator is struck with terror by the haunting imagery of a bare interior wall of a demolished house that he encounters in modern Paris. The wall is a material object on the verge of nonbeing: “It was, so to speak, not the first wall of the existing house (as you would have supposed), but the last of the ones that were no longer there.” This wall is fused with the organic and non-organic residuum of bodily life, to the extent that, as Rilke's passage reveals, inanimate creaturely life relapses into the creaturely life of things: “[life] was still there; it clung to the nails that were left, stood on the narrow remnant of flooring, crouched under the corner beams where a bit of interior still remained.”<sup>62</sup>

Rilke's passage depicts negative existence as impressed on the surface of an architectural remnant of a wall. Imprints and traces of building features and facilities such as ceilings, floors, partitions, pipes and interior furnishing are present as an afterlife outliving its own pre-history of production. The wall accordingly steps forth as an after-image of its origin of creation – an architectural drawing. And this architectural section uncannily comes to life as

---

<sup>61</sup> Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 172.

<sup>62</sup> Rilke, cited in Heidegger, *ibid.*



a result of human suffering and material ruination. This wall, an allegory for the impossibility of dwelling, is a post-architectural object that also conjures up the more imagistic and photographic attributes of stillness and silence:<sup>63</sup> “And from these walls, once blue, green, and yellow, and now framed by the broken tracks of the demolished partitions, the air of these lives issued, the stubborn, sluggish, musty air which no wind had yet scattered.”<sup>64</sup> The affinity to the medium of photography becomes further evident through the temporal mode in which the wall is perceived by Malte. The wall is recorded as an image worked through the logic of what Benjamin would call the “optical unconscious”, an image aligned with the conviction from the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book, according to which “truth” is not a matter of possession and intention. The passage from Rilke continues:

You would think I had stood looking at it for a long time; but I swear that I began to run as soon as I recognized this wall. For that’s what is horrible – that I did recognize it [Denn das ist das Schreckliche, daß ich sie erkannt habe]. I recognize everything here, and that’s why it passes right into me; it is at home in me [es ist zu Hause in mir].<sup>65</sup>

Here truth is cognate to “the death of the intention”, which is also the theoretical framework of Benjamin’s “dialektisches Bild”. Intentionless recognition is “distant from all phenomenality” (GSI:216, O 13), to use Benjamin’s phrasing from the *Trauerspiel* book, beyond representation or image. In it, what takes ‘possession’ in the form of (traumatic) repetition is the sinister transmutation of the auratic trace, the “appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be” – to recall Benjamin’s dialectics discussed in the previous part – into the experience of being seized – “bemächtigt” – by that very apparition. Rilke’s wall complies with a procedure in which a demolished human space is tantamount to the withdrawal of space as such, i.e., the oscillatory movement between presentation and representation, history and memory, and also – the tactile and the optical. The wall is an image that is already a trace, a ruin, the distance that opens up in what is apparently most close. These fluctuations are enacted within a space of contraction: what was once a sheltering house, is now a bare wall

---

<sup>63</sup> Eric L. Santner, commenting on the proximity of Malte’s experience to the medium of photography, writes: “Malte’s sensorium becomes such a photographic plate not so much for what is there to behold – as Heidegger suggested, ‘pure beholding, even if it penetrated into the innermost core of the being of something objectively present, would never be able to discover anything like what is threatening’ – but for the traces of past lives and lost possibilities.” *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, p. 52.

<sup>64</sup> Rilke, cited in Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 173.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

in which pastness as such is sensed as meaningless loss. The latter can gain meaning only as a photographic-like, spectral image that emerges out of the dissolution of the object which is always already set *opposite* (qua *Gegen-stand*) the subject who experiences it, or houses it, as its complete absorption and disappearance: “es ist zu Hause in mir”.

The wall, in Benjamin’s terms, would amount to the allegorical encounter with the “death’s head” of history or to the uncannily returned gaze without eyes of the skull (recall also the figure of the eye sockets in Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*). In Benjamin’s analysis, according to Adorno, allegory intimates nothing but “historical relationship”. To the extent that allegory is not constituted on the abstractness of the symbol nor on the arbitrariness of the sign and “the theme of the allegorical is, simply, history” (NG 358, NH 119) as noted by Adorno, allegory is therefore not structured according to human meaning in its postlapsarian state. Under the allegorical gaze, history resorts to the natural instance that passes away with it. “Whereas in the symbol, with the sublimation of downfall, the transfigured countenance of nature reveals itself fleetingly in the light of salvation, in allegory there lies before the eyes of the observer the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified primal landscape.” Allegory displaces and deforms any “‘symbolic’ freedom of expression” and consequently “all classical harmony of form” that inheres in that freedom. In allegory, “History, in everything untimely, sorrowful, and miscarried that belongs to it from the beginning, is inscribed in a face – no, in a death’s head” (GS I:343, O 174). The melancholic gaze and the abstracting functioning of language (“– nein”, “– no”) are capable of reading in a “face” or countenance – “Antlitz” – the retraction of nature, portraying the face in question as “*facies hippocratica*”, just as, in a somehow inverse fashion, in being readable, the dialectical image becomes available to sensory perception.

For the observer of allegory, history gains meaning only when the latter is stirred by nature and death. “This is the core of the allegorical vision, of the Baroque profane exposition of history as the Passion of the world – meaningful only in the stations of its decline.” Allegorical meaning constantly gives itself to death, “for at the deepest level death incises the jagged line of demarcation between physis and meaning” (GS I:343, O 174), an incision, a cut, a section – the completion or consummation of bare life, which is not only an indication for the uninhabitable space of the ruin, but is also in itself architectural, and so – tactile, in kind. Against the depths of mythical and symbolic expression, allegory is facial and depthless; it is bound to the experience of the surface and presupposes the positioning of the beholder at an aporetic distance of ‘touching’ and yet devoid of its ability to endure, hence allegory’s yearning for infinity. Of particular pertinence here is an image of architectural creation, interlaced into the section “Die Ruine” in the *Trauerspiel* book. It describes a construction of the master-

builder (in the Spanish Golden Age plays of Calderón) which erupts only in the form of the walled-up wall of a building whose plaster has begun to crumble” (GS I:355, O 190) as “history is secularized in the setting” (GS I:271, O 82).

In Heidegger’s interpretation, Rilke’s *Dichtung* of the bare wall is a documentation of *Dasein*’s completion: the complete internalisation of the externalised inner wall as tantamount to the uncanniness of being-in-the-world. And yet in the passing of mortal life, “what Rilke calls life”, into what Benjamin would call the *Schauplatz*, and the manner in which this form of life “leaps toward us from things” (“aus den Dingen uns entgegenspringt”), the world as such, as in the mood of anxiety – comes to pass, in the form of radical self-absorption. Life resides in this wall, says Heidegger, and the way in which it “leaps forward” is not “imagined [by the poet] into the wall [nicht in die Mauer hineingedichtet]”, for, what “actually is” in the depiction of the wall, is the “leap” (“Sprung”, also demanding to be read as “crack”) that arises out of “our natural relationship” to it (the wall). What is exposed here in mood or affect, according to Heidegger, is the world in its originality – “ursprüngliche Welt” – produced by means of a “non-theoretical” composition,<sup>66</sup> exhibiting, that is, the sheer collapse that unfolds in *Stimmung* between inside and outside, subject and world.

In his 1934-1935 lectures on Friedrich Hölderlin, Heidegger accounts for the etymology of the word *Dichtung*, from the Latin *dictare*. He stresses both *Dichtung*’s communicative essence as “composing something in language”, a meaning which has later merged into the semantics of the poetic and poetry, and its belonging to the same root as the Greek *deiknumi* (mediated via the word *tithôn*), meaning “to show, to make something visible, to make it manifest – not just in general, but by way of a specific pointing.”<sup>67</sup> In highlighting the relation of *Dichtung* to deixis, to showing or exposing the truth, Heidegger, however, does not address these pertinences dialectically, nor their negative undertones. Close to *erdichten*, “dichten also means to invent in order to delude, or to imagine in order to deceive.”<sup>68</sup> We might also note here the proximity of *Dichtung* with *dicht* (that which is dense or sealed off) – the proximity already alluded to by Adorno – which is to be considered “not the result of purely accidental homophony.”<sup>69</sup> *Dasein*’s state of being always already immersed in the activity of making sense of/sensing a “world” is a scenography close to that of the “world densely walled up

<sup>66</sup> Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 173. In this context of his argument, Heidegger evokes Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of *Lebensphilosophie*.

<sup>67</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “the Rhine”*, trans. William McNeill, Julia Ireland (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 28-29.

<sup>68</sup> See Barbara Cassin, et al. ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables, A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 216.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

by/from ‘sense’”. Yet this scenography aptly corresponds to the semantic field of spectrality, as this suffuses Adorno’s argument (“Scheinwelt”, “bloße[n] Bildlichkeit”, are among his terms); “the mythical character itself returns in the historical phenomenon of semblance” (*NG* 364, *NH* 124), he writes. The spectral ambiguity of sensible forms (and therefore – also their demonic character) structures Benjamin’s polemic of the dialectical image, as we will see shortly.<sup>70</sup>

It is through *Dichte*, the denseness or sealing off of the phantasmagorical, but also the phantasmagorical feature of materiality, as divulged by Rilke’s wall, that the subject is *attuned* to the facticity of this very historical setting. This attunement, however, from the perspective of natural history, could not be fathomed as “natural”, as Heidegger’s ontological analysis of “being-in-the-world” articulates it, but rather only as “natural historical”. Furthermore, the uncanniness that underlies Rilke’s statement “it is at home in me” is notably ‘tactile’, in Benjamin’s terms. The architectural fragment of the wall is “more originally” at home, we might say, for Malte has known it all along. Being *too close*, too at home, to the extent that the outside ‘there’ is enwrapped in the ‘here’ of the “there-being” and that the wall/world is (already, destined to be) swallowed by dint of the horror it provokes – this is naturalised according to Heidegger.

## 2) Kafka’s *Der Bau*

According to Benjamin, for allegorical immersion, natural history is not an ideal symbol for human, factual existence, but rather functions as allegory’s dialectical limit (“Grenze”). It is the boundary from which “the allegorical way of seeing” arcs, turns backwards, enacting “turnabout into holy salvation” (“Umschwung in das Heil der Rettung”) (*GS* I:405, *O* 254). From the perspective of Benjamin’s conception of time, the limit unfolded here would be the line of demarcation between empty time, on the one hand, and messianically fulfilled time on the other. In the light of Benjamin’s conception of life, what is framed here is creaturely life in as far as it cannot be separated from its “state of creation”. As Benjamin also notes in the section of his study entitled “Schauplatz”, “the creature is the mirror within whose frame alone the moral world was revealed to the Baroque. A concave mirror; for this was not possible without distortions [Verzerrungen]” (*GS* I:270, *O* 80). Or, to follow Benjamin’s account of fate

---

<sup>70</sup> On the demonic ambiguity of the image in Benjamin’s work see for example Alison Ross, *Walter Benjamin’s Concept of the Image*, p. 63.

(“Concept of Fate in the Drama of Fate”), it is a concept that is “meaning-full” – “sinnerfüllt” – “only as a natural-historical [naturgeschichtliche] category in the spirit of the restoration theology of the counter-reformation”. Nature, history and fate are intertwined since “the state of Creation still reflects the sun of grace [Gnadensonne]. Mirrored, however, in the slough of adamic guilt” (GS I:308, O 128). The slough or the swamp is the place – *Stelle* – of displacement and distortion (of *Entstellung*) wherein theological grace is deformed, yet also turned towards messianic *Erlösung*.<sup>71</sup>

Let us, however, still linger on the figure of the bare wall and the concept of mere, natural life it encloses. The complete internalisation, the reversed inhabitation of the demolished wall, an act of walling in or walling up in resistance to self-dispersal, finds a point of comparison in Kafka’s narrative fragment “Der Bau”. Rilke’s unification of a fragment of a wall and life is mirrored in Kafka’s *Dichtung*: the manifestation of a complete coalescence of life into the process of building. Benjamin’s interpretation of the uncanniness underscoring Kafka’s animal stories closely corresponds to the manner in which Rilke’s wall is startlingly creeping in. In his essay on Kafka (““Franz Kafka, Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages”, published in the *Jüdische Rundschau* in 1934), Benjamin contends:

You can read Kafka’s animal stories for quite a while without realizing that they are not about human beings at all. When you finally come upon the name of the creature – monkey, dog, mole – you look up in fright and realize that you are already far away from the continent of man.

(GS II:419-420, SW 2:802)

And this removal from the continent of man is marked not least by the architectural and the optical-tactile relation of the subject to it – witness the requirement of the narrative in voice in *Die Verwandlung* to identify the room in which Gregor Samsa awakes as creature, with its four “wohlbekannten” [familiar] walls, as “Menschenzimmer” or “human room”,<sup>72</sup> as though the category of room has been removed from its implicit place with human being. Kafka’s “Bau” (structure, building, burrow, hole) instantiates such a logic of architectural displacement of the human: the demarcation of a dwelling space against an outside creaturely world and the activity of erecting walls and partitions draw the creaturely world most closely to home.

<sup>71</sup> Weigel comments: “If distortion in Freud is a translation without an original, from which the attempt is derived to paraphrase this original through association, in Benjamin distortion also means the remoteness from a lost and unreachable place towards which it turns in the figure of reversal.” *Body- and image- Space*, p. 155.

<sup>72</sup> Franz Kafka, “Die Verwandlung”, in *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1996), pp. 96-161 (p. 96).

The point of convergence with the theme of the *Stimme/Stimmung* is, however, the auditory enigma of Kafka's fragment of a story: the creaturely soundscape of hissing and rustling that pervades the monstrous construction of the burrow. Within the underground space constructed by the creature, the story gives voice to the latter's ceaseless thoughts and meditations on possible scenarios of the burrow's destruction or invasion by an invisible threat, unfolded as he wanders through its endless passageways and plazas. These meditations are interrupted and fed by the soundscape of hissing and rustling. Hunted and distracted by these sounds, the narrator-mole is unable to determine whether they are real or imagined, threatening from within the structure or outside of it, whether they belong to some invisible animals, are just the rushing sounds of the soil, or perhaps, the sound he is making himself. Here the 'home' is literally constructed in and through the inability to set apart the inside from the outside, despite the creature's incessant activity of shaping walls and passages within the soil of the earth. For the nameless creature the act of constructing walls is not meant to divide, nor to lend a distanced perspective: "it would not be at all necessary to make clear to myself through contemplations what the *Bau* means to me. I and the *Bau* belong together".<sup>73</sup>

While the auditory dimension of perception is emphasised, any evocation of the burrow's visibility from the outside is concerned with scenarios of its destruction and loss. The creature states in the story's first sentence "I have constructed my *Bau* and it seems to be successful",<sup>74</sup> but we soon realise that the mole dwells in a ruin, or better, a construction site, and that his desired shelter in which he could "hear the sound of silence" is never to be accomplished. Whereas the *Bau* is set against an unbuilt outside 'nature', it is by its auditory enigma that the story advances the collapse of extreme interiority into extreme exteriority, and vice versa. The creature concludes that there must be another creature whose existence is also determined by its uncertainty as to the existence of another creature, and so on, ad infinitum. As Mladen Dolar has observed, "the burrow is spatialized paranoia, entirely shaped by the scenario of the Other".<sup>75</sup> Kafka's constructed soundscape touches upon the structure of fantasy. The creature's total way of existence, marked by the perplexity of natural history, of being already and not yet a ruin, is thus determined by an inside-out other. Kafka, as Benjamin maintains, was "never tired of hearing about the forgotten [das Vergessene abzulauschen] from animals. They are not the goal, to be sure, but one cannot do without them". As Benjamin also

---

<sup>73</sup> Kafka, "The Burrow", in *Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. 325-359 (p. 354, translation modified, with *Bau* left as a marker of estrangement).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325, translation modified.

<sup>75</sup> Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 114.

notes: “This much is certain: of all of Kafka’s creatures, the animals have the greatest opportunity for reflection [Nachdenken]. What corruption is in the law, anxiety is in their thinking” (GS II:430-431, SW 2:810). In exposing the threshold between the mythical sway over life by law and *Stimm(e)-ung*, Kafka’s animals incite an attunement to natural history.

In the last passages of his lecture, Adorno points to a particular scene wherein an unintentional sensation of the uncanny is felt. He portrays how the sensuousness of fear, of “Angst”, is triggered by an evidently modern scenography, that of “certain dwellings [Wohnungen]”. “Das Moment der Bedrohlichkeit” means that within the manifestations of modern second nature, a “dwelling place” in the archaic and mythical sense is being recognised: “An archaic fear transpires everywhere that the illusory world [Scheinwelt] of convention appears in front of us. The element of threat is also always an aspect of this semblance [Schein]”; it subsists in “drawing everything into itself as into a funnel [alles wie in einen Trichter in sich hineinzuziehen]”. This working of the funnel, which is the “mythical element [Moment]” of semblance (NG 364, NH 124, translation modified),<sup>76</sup> as Adorno contends, recalls Malte’s complete self-absorption of the house in the account given by Heidegger. Adorno portrays a double movement in which the world transpires, revealing itself in the course of its own annihilation, its withdrawal into a vortex. It is as if the world keeps dividing back upon itself, thus disclosing its mythical or natural and historical poles.<sup>77</sup> The “world” is “there”, yet only by imagining an original loss incorporated into the registers of semblance and phantasmagoria.<sup>78</sup> “Second nature”, this will be Adorno’s final conviction, “is

---

<sup>76</sup> Harsdörffer’s *Poetischer Trichter* (1650) is one of the Baroque sources comprised in the range of citations for the *Trauerspiel* book; it might also be the source for Adorno’s use of this figure. In the next part of the thesis the figure of the funnel will be taken up again, in the context of the chapter “Der Mond” in *Berliner Kindheit*. There, Benjamin’s dream image exhibits an uncanny *Denkbild* in which a swallowing funnel [Trichter] is “imagined” by the moon. Harsdörffer’s figure of the funnel and his poetic principle of the Baroque, which he derived from the Kabbalistic idea of combinatory letters as the power of creation, also brings to mind the Kabbalistic idea of *temurah*, glossed as ‘transposition’ or ‘conversion’ but also signifying fixed value. Connected to the latter meaning is the notion of the conceptual inverse, as well as the pertinence of material or moral value to their opposite meanings. From this point of view, the implication of the figure of the *Trichter* as allegorical conversion captures Benjamin’s trope of “eternal transience”. See *Sefer Yezirah*, Chapter 4:3, in Kaplan, *Sefer Yezirah, English & Hebrew*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>77</sup> This predicament of digestion and self-consuming brings to mind the myth of Kronos (the god that will later be associated with the Roman deity Saturn, and therefore with melancholy) as evoked by Adorno (as also by Benjamin), through which temporal ambivalence is set forth: “The myth of Kronos is just such a myth in which the most extreme godly power of creation is coupled with the fact that he is the god who annihilates his creations, his children” (NH 123).

<sup>78</sup> The term phantasmagoria is traced back to Paris of the end of the eighteenth century. It signified the new public shows of the magic lantern, a spectacle that took place in a dark space presenting visual sequences of ghostly human figures that appeared to be floating in space. The phantasmagoria was a sensory dialectical device, expressing a body/mind tension between truth and illusion, subjectivity and objectivity, deception and deliverance, life and death. It invoked the relation of rational mind to illusion and semblance, that is, the entanglement of *Schein* as a simultaneity of recognition – the spectator’s knowing of the real, and of anxiety –

in truth, first nature”: “Es ist in Wahrheit die zweite Natur die erste” (NG 365, NH 124), with the syntactical flexibility of the German leaving the identity of subject and object, and so the priority of first over second, suspended in indeterminacy. By drawing these two ‘natures’ into close proximity, Adorno demonstrates how it is precisely the touching point between the modern and the mythical or the primordial, between historicity and guilty creaturely life, that subsists in the “problem” of natural history.

#### IV. Melancholic Immersion and the Sense of the Deep

Tiefsinn eignet vor allem dem Traurigen  
[Depth of thinking is above all apt for the melancholic]  
– The *Trauerspiel* book

According to Adorno, the chiasmus of history and myth is borne by a correlation between “Schein” and “zweite Natur” (NG 364, NH 123), the two stances constituting the Hegelian final subsumption of “the science of sensation or feeling” under “conceptualised [begriffne] history”. Adorno cites György Lukács’s definition of “second nature”, a nature which “is not mute, corporeal and foreign to the senses like first nature [Diese Natur ist nicht stumm, sinnfällig und sinnesfremd, wie die erste]: it is a complex of senses – which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority”. Forestalled and arrested prior to absolute knowing (Hegel), what is at play here is the uncanny, spectral rendering of the “Golgotha of long-dead interiorities [Schädelstätte vermoderter Innerlichkeiten]” in Lukács’s terms (NG 357, NH 118). It is prior to “reconciliation”, in Adorno’s words, or to history as the possibility or promise of reconciliation. “Reconciliation”, Adorno stresses, also “inheres in semblance” (NG 365, NH 124). And as he further cites Lukács: “This second nature could only be brought back to life, if ever, by a metaphysical act of reawakening the spiritual element that created or maintained it in its earlier or ideal existence, but could never be experienced by another interiority” (NG 357, NH 118, translation modified).

---

the spatio-temporal experience of what could possibly be real. The phantasmagoria evoked the “uncanny” as we know it from Freud, awakened when something is experienced as “intellectual uncertainty”. See Tom Gunning, “Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Specters”, *Media Art History*. <http://www.mediaarthistory.org/Programmatic%20key%20texts/pdfs/Gunning.pdf> (2004)



Lukács's definition of nature's "Sinneskomplex" accords with Benjamin's approach to language and his understanding of allegorical meaning. The manifestation of inarticulacy, the ineluctable registration of loss of any signifying articulation, of inoperative signs, alludes to "nature's other muteness" in Benjamin's sense, and as such invokes lament and melancholy in relation to meaning *in* history. Whilst the *Trauerspiele* presented historical events as the content and meaning of secularised history, it was the presence of mythical nature – of what Adorno defines as "fatefully [schicksalhaft] predetermined [vorgegebenes] being underlies history and appears in history" (NG 346, NH 111), namely the presence of mythical nature in it – that inescapably pointed to the forces of fragmentation and decay. Therefore, it was Benjamin, according to Adorno, who introduced "a decisive turning point with respect to the problem of *Naturgeschichte*". Framed with a Benjaminian vocabulary of the allegorical physiology of perception, Adorno notes that "the re-awakening [Wiedererweckung] of second nature" was brought "out of infinite distance [unendlichen Ferne] into infinite closeness [unendliche Nähe]", as is the case with the coalescence of "allegory and the allegorically meant" (NG 357, NH 119).

The etymological derivation of allegory from the Greek seems to be of significance here, split as it is into its etymological parts of *allos* – other, and *agoreuein* – to speak publicly. It is another speech that is imparted to the open space, the marketplace of the agora, the site of collectivity and assembly. Compared to this scenography, the *Schädelstätte*, the site for gathering together of the remains of the dead, could be staged as a reversed image, that of a mortified convocation or collectivity. There is another *topos* that comes to mind with the word *Schädelstätte*. It is Golgotha, the hill outside Jerusalem, derived from the Aramaic *gulgulta*, meaning "the place of skulls". Kathrin Pahl highlights the "confusion" of this place (the "confusion" of the *Schädelstätte* was highlighted by Benjamin, to recall) by noting that,

*Schädelstätte* has the very profane meaning of mass grave: a place where a large number of skulls come to lie either at once (due to war) or as accumulated over time. Golgotha was Jerusalem's place for executions; it is a site of serial killings. Jesus died on a heap of bones; he simply added one to the numberless skulls that were already amassed there. He was one among many. Similarly dies "absolute knowledge."<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Kathrin Pahl, *Tropes of Transport: Hegel and Emotion* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2012), pp. 87-88.

Rebecca Comay, defining Hegel's decision to end the tale of the phenomenology of the spirit as "under the sign of Saturn", comments: "could such an undecidable figure – the very figure of indecision – serve as the final figure of the dialectic? Walter Benjamin thought so."<sup>80</sup>

Let us return, however, to Adorno's indication of a new historical meaning of infinite closeness, as Benjamin uncovered it, through the prism of the finite and ephemeral category of *das Taktische*, whose characteristic disposition is also drawn from "the realm of affectivity [Affektivität]" and marked by the subjective intentionlessness (and therefore by the "truth") that the melancholic, brooding contemplation incites, according to Benjamin. "For whereas, in the realm of affectivity, attraction [Anziehung] does not seldom alternate with estrangement in the relation of an intention to its object, mourning is capable of particular heightening, continuous deepening [kontinuierlichen Vertiefung], of its intention" (GS I:318, O 142). In the state of melancholy, a particular case of intentionality, but also its deformation, is in play. Melancholy, according to Benjamin, was a reaction to the vestige in Baroque time of a "dark belief" in the subjection of man to fate, his "Schicksalsverfallenheit" (GS I:317, O 141). As Andrew Benjamin notes, "this connection [that] ties melancholia and fate together" indicates "that central to that relation is a conception of subjectification that incorporates humanity in its totality. There is therefore a generalized subject for whom the world is dead".<sup>81</sup> The relation to transcendence has been disrupted, yet still, the subjection of man to fate prevails in consonance with the deprivation of human action of "all value": "Something new came into being: an empty world" (GS I:317, O 141). This emptiness has conjured up a relation marked by a desire of attachment to dead objects, to the phantasmatic creaturely life in them. Under the melancholic gaze, lifeless objects present themselves to the mourner through the fading away of life in them.

"In contrast to a word like e-motion", Rainer Nägele comments, "'affect' does not suggest an expressive motion from an assumed interior to the outside, but puts the accent on an impact that might leave traces, traits and perhaps wounds; reminders of something to be read."<sup>82</sup> The melancholic disclosure of the world, borne by the dialectic tension between distanciated contemplation and irresistible drawing nearer and immersion, is that of an image-reading. A (dialectical) image, in other words, a figure wherein not only time is transformed into something pictorial – "bildlich", as stated in the *Passagen-Werk* – but the imagistic as such

---

<sup>80</sup> Comay, "Hegel's Last Words", in *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing*, eds. Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2018), pp. 65-86 (p. 69).

<sup>81</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "Benjamin and the Baroque: Posing the Question of Historical Time", in *Rethinking the Baroque*, ed. Helen Hills (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), pp.161-182 (p. 171).

<sup>82</sup> Nägele, "The Laughing Tear: Constructions of Allegory in Modernism", in *New Directions in Emblem Studies*, ed. Amy Wygant (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblems Studies, 1999), pp. 77-91 (p. 77).

is nothing more than a sign to be read, as the later formulations of the dialectical image betray. In the state of melancholy, the “feelings” responding to the “objective structure of the world [gegenständlichen Aufbau der Welt]” are defined as “motorial reaction” (recall here also the “shattering experience” underlining “play” as “habit” and also “second nature”). Benjamin considers melancholia through a dialectics of deepened sense (“Tiefsinn”) of an object and a tenacity (“Beharrlichkeit”) of intention (GS I:318, O 141). It is a constellation that subsists in the extremes of an unattainable object together with the sensation of yearning for or desiring it.

As accentuated by Benjamin, “mourning is capable of particular heightening, continuous deepening [Vertiefung] of its intention”; attuned to its object, the melancholic subject penetrates, but thereby also dissipates it (an idea in itself performed and staged by Benjamin’s own use of language): “On the road to the object – no: on the path in the object itself” (GS I:318, O 142). Not only does the object, in dissipating, become allegorical, with its wreckages or splinters reassembled in a constellation; the object is also thought of as a container, *Hülle*, for something like a temporal progression which belongs, as Benjamin’s ensuing thinking image betrays, to the political order: “this intention progresses as slowly and ceremoniously as do the processions of those in power” (GS I:318, O 142). This thinking image aptly intimates the role of the prince in the *Trauerspiele* as the paradigmatic melancholic figure. “Mournful melancholy dwells for the most part in palaces”, as Benjamin quotes (GS I:322, O 146).

Worked through his or her state of “immersion in the life of creaturely things”, “the wisdom of the melancholic”, Benjamin writes, submissively “hearkens to the deep”. However, nothing of “the voice [Laut] of revelation [Offenbarung] reaches” this form of cognition. As he also adds, “Everything to do with Saturn points into the depths of the earth” (GS I:330, O 157). We might trace here the negativity of the voice that Agamben exposed as the nonplace of language in the Being-there of *Dasein*, yet Benjamin’s formulation is borne by a dual negation. Melancholy, with its acoustical disposition of the bare voice of revelation, not only manifests the experience of language as the limit between speech and the living being, but also – portrays revelation to be an empty sign.<sup>83</sup> Instructing interpretation and meaning, melancholy is the exposure to the nothing of expression. Seeking fulfilment or “satisfaction” (“Genüge[n]”)

---

<sup>83</sup> The issue of the “nothing of revelation” (“das Nichts der Offenbarung”) stands at the core of the debate between Scholem and Benjamin on Kafka’s work. On Scholem’s epistolary exchange with Benjamin on the topic of Kafka and divine justice, see Vivian Liska, “Kafka’s Other Job”, In: *The Book of Job. Aesthetics, Ethics, Hermeneutics*, eds. Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014), pp. 123-145.

in the emptied-out world (*GS* I:318, *O* 141), mediated by the experience of nothingness, melancholy bears on a broken relation of the earthly, profane order to revelation.

It is the ambivalence of melancholy, issuing out of the spatial disposition of the figure of Melancholia in Albrecht Dürer's engraving (*Melancholia I*, 1514), that Benjamin stresses, namely the interplay of nearness and distance in terms of the immersion ("Versunkenheit") of the melancholic figure in its immediate surroundings – "Umkreis". Within this image- and body space, also deprived of the mechanisation of habit, "active life lies unused on the ground around the figure, as objects of brooding [Grübeln]. This engraving anticipates the Baroque in many respects" (*GS* I:319, *O* 143). Melancholia, in the accounts given by Benjamin, initiates a manifold interplay of madness and creativity, of mythical powers and the intimation of salvation ("a reflection of a distant light coming from the depth of immersion" [*GS* I:334, *O* 163]), of negative sickness (more associated with the feminine), of falling prey to bad dreams and madness (expressed by the emblem of the sleeping hound) and artistic (masculine) genius. It is a dialectical tension, however, between creaturely fate and the deadly sin of *acedia* (*GS* I:332, *O* 160) that is chiefly instantiated in Dürer's engraving. This is expressed in Melancholia's apathetic relation to the unused tools lying to the side, her alienation from the activity of construction labour (the tools are, for the most part, an indication for the activity of creating and building). Lacking any sense of purposiveness, and of touch, these objects conjure up the excess of meaning:

Insofar as this symptom of depersonalization was grasped as an advanced stage of mourning, an incomparably fruitful context was established for the concept of this pathological condition – this state in which the most inconspicuous of things [jedes unscheinbarste Ding], because the natural and creative relation to it is lacking, appears as cipher of an enigmatic wisdom.

(*GS* I:319, *O* 143)

Benjamin's construction of the melancholic as a particular form of knowledge and relation to the world in which an intentional relationship to objects is rendered unfulfilled and unattainable is intimated in terms of visibility and perception by the emblem of the stone. With this emblem, whose significance has been overlooked by interpreters, says Benjamin (*GS* I:331, *O* 159), the emotional attachment to objects as the "sense of the deep", between the optical and the tactile, distinctly unfolds. Drawn to the ground and yet turning away from it, Melancholia's gaze, charged with intentionality, is directed elsewhere, looking at, as it also

reaches beyond, an unpenetrated mass of matter, a tactile surface of a well-shaped stone. The stone, symbolising the heaviness in the feeling of *acedia* and sloth, is a stony blockage of feelings; it represents the fullness (“Fülle”) of an object that is intimately bound (also, it seems, by a kind of assonance) to feelings (“Fühlen”) (*GS* I:318, *O* 142).

## V. The Secularisation of History in Space in The Dialectical Image

For “radical natural historical thought”, Adorno writes, “every being [Seiende] is transformed into rubble and fragments, into [...] a charnel-house [Schädelstätte] where signification is discovered, in which nature and history interweave and the philosophy of history is assigned the task of their intentional interpretation” (*NG* 360, *NH* 121). As “Ur-history of signification”, experiencing a presence of something that we conceive of as timeless fixity, at that extreme point full of ‘natural’ significance, ‘naturalness’ conjures nature’s other meaning – that of temporal disintegration, of falling apart. This can also be thought of in a reverse way. History, and with it, temporal progression, appears under the destructive sign of repetition. We might evoke here again the spatio-temporal constellation of the fort/da game in which time is summoned by space, and space, or presence, is spectrally summoned by (repetitive) linguistic expression, bound to a repressed, and therefore, mythical, other. This is the archaic, symbol world of unchangeable nature.<sup>84</sup> Not only is that a spatial dimension – *da* – pertaining to ‘being’ or ‘presence’ temporalised; history, oriented to time, is acoustically naturalised/spatialised as ‘there’ by dint of the mournful pronouncement “fort”, “gone”, a pronouncement whose essence is, therefore, the perpetual incompleteness of “what has been” in Benjamin’s sense. What is staged by the child by means of a hand touching/releasing an allegorical object (the reel as stand-in for the absent mother) is disappearance as such, recalling history’s “Zeichenschrift der Vergängnis” (*GS* I:353). It is the “first act”, that of the departure, as Freud notes, which *is* what is staged as an endless game of returns.<sup>85</sup> Comparable to the child’s articulation in Adorno’s view of natural history is “transitoriness” (“Vergänglichkeit”), which is “the deepest point [tiefste Punkt] where history and nature converge” (*NG* 357-358,

---

<sup>84</sup> “In the interior, archaic images unfold: the image of the flower as that of organic life; the image of the orient as specifically the homeland of yearning; the image of the sea as that of eternity itself. For the semblance to which the historical hour condemns things is eternal.” Adorno, *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*, cited by Benjamin in the *Passagen-Werk* (*GS* V:575-576, *AP* 220).

<sup>85</sup> Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, p 16. For the idea of the fort/da game as a dramatic play see also Comay, “Mourning, Work, Play”, *Research in Phenomenology* 23.1 (1993), 105-130 (p. 110).

NH 119), recalling the point conceived of by Benjamin as the “abyss of bottomless profundity” (GS I:404, O 252).

The melancholic perception of the world as populated by empty signifiers might be read in congruence with Benjamin’s insistence on a structural loss of *Schein*. “Any adequate veiling of content is missing in the typical works of the Baroque” (GS I:356, O 192). The German *Trauerspiele*, with their allegorically constructed *Schauplätze*, advanced towards what Benjamin terms “*Scheinlosigkeit*” – the state of lacking radiance/semblance. Comay remarks that “for Benjamin, the Baroque inaugurated the age of the world picture (so to speak) and as such the ultimate return of a repressed or banished *opsis*”.<sup>86</sup> But in its resistance to transitoriness, the optical dimension is profoundly attached to the tactile which it seems to deny. In a comment that might be considered as dialectically drawing on what is ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ Benjamin observes that “In the true work of art, delight [Lust] knows how to make itself fleeting, how to live in the moment, disappear, become new [sich flüchtig zu machen, im Augenblick zu leben, hinzuschwinden, neuzuwerden]”. By contrast, “The Baroque work of art wants nothing more than to endure, and so clings with all its organs to the eternal” (GS I:356, O 192); that is, with the complete sensorium, apprehended through the persistent tactility or *hapsis* of clinging.

Allegory has transformed into “the key figure of a new philosophy of history in Benjamin’s later writings: the dialectical image”,<sup>87</sup> the key theoretical figure underlying his historico-philosophical entries in convolute *N* of the unfinished *Passagen-Werk*. Among these fragments, deliberating on a dialectical method of redeeming (the term is ‘*erlösen*’, with its implication of release) images from the past, there are two rare references to Heidegger. In one of them, Benjamin seems to bind the temporal structure of *Dasein* to the underlying trope of his *Trauerspiel* book, namely, the secularisation of history or time in space. As Benjamin notes, it is against the backdrop of the “*Säkularisierung der Geschichte bei Heidegger*” that his former description of the allegorical outlook is to be viewed:

Pursue the question of whether a connection exists between the secularisation of time in space [*Säkularisation der Zeit im Raume*] and the allegorical mode of perception [*allegorischen Anschauung*]. The former, at any rate (as becomes clear in Blanqui’s

<sup>86</sup> Comay, “Mourning, Work and Play”, p. 124.

<sup>87</sup> Nägele, “The Laughing Tear: Construction of Allegory in Modernism”, p. 77.

writing), is hidden [versteckt] in the “worldview of the natural sciences” of the second half of the century. (Secularization of history in Heidegger). [N8a,4]

(GS V:590, AP 472)<sup>88</sup>

The other entry in which a reference to Heidegger appears reads:

What distinguishes images from the “essences” of phenomenology is their historical index (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly [abstrakt], through “historicity” [Geschichtlichkeit]). These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the “human science”, from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to readability [Lesbarkeit] only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding “to readability” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability [jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit]. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion [Zerspringen], and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) it is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been [das Gewesene] comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation [worin das Gewesene mit dem Jetzt blitzhaft zu einer Konstellation zusammentritt]. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [bildlich(er) Natur]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now if its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. ([N3,1]

(GS V:577-8, AP 462-463)

In the mute realm of material artefacts, like the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, the “refuse of history” as Benjamin defined it, muteness and visibility are inextricable. When the

---

<sup>88</sup> The background to this remark is probably Heidegger’s text of 1916 “The Concept of Time in the Science of History” in which he reflects upon the function of time in modern sciences as grounding his concept of historical time. See Heidegger, “Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft”, *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Philosophische Kritik*, 161 (1916), 173-88.

critic's language desists, the non-human, inanimate world is expressed, and the image (conceptualised as "dialectical") – becomes readable. Imagistic thinking thus becomes a *method* – or better – a medium, precisely on account of the fact that the image can unfold a linguistic essence. That is, as Benjamin emphasises, what constitutes its readability, its *Lesbarkeit*. Significantly, as he stresses, "dialectical images" are dialectically formed by the relation they establish with "archaic images", and it is "in language" that one encounters them in their genuine fashion, *without* the archaic trait that nevertheless informs them: "Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language." [N2a,3] (*GS* V:577, *AP* 462). Not only do archaic images hinder the (dialectical) image from its pretence to standstill; they are the index for the abstraction that Benjamin ascribes to Heidegger. In arguing that "historicity", the phenomenological essence of human *Dasein* as earthly existence, "in-der-Welt-sein", is informed by a non-phenomenal, "abstract" dimension, Heidegger's vain attempt to "rescue" "history for phenomenology" is laid bare. Heidegger, as Benjamin implies, reveals history as exposed to the danger of being missed; it "flashes up at a moment of danger" (to use Benjamin's words from the Sixth Thesis on history) – and hence the need for rescuing that is involved.<sup>89</sup>

The theoretical constructions of the "dialectical image" as "a theory of knowledge" aim at the textual presentation of a spatio-temporal montage wherein "what-has-been" comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. "What-has-been", held dialectically in the "image", is also what ignites the very mechanical reproduction of the image ("in a flash" of light, in time), but also its effacement: the image always already slides into the sphere of language between reading and recognition. Yet all the same, in its "now", the image is propelled towards the "death of the intention", from which it has also originated, in the act of explosion, of "Zerspringen". To the extent that these formulations emphatically register the more visual and imagistic modes of experience, in Benjamin's terms, the idea of "truth" they deploy can only be attained by dialectically consigning the concept of the 'image' to that of 'language' or 'readability'. The crossing of borders between image and language transpires in one of Benjamin's best-known dictums: "Method of this project: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show." (*GS* V:574, *AP* 460). Benjamin's method, we might say, is dominated by a disfigurement – *Entstellung* – of *Dichtung* that is missed in the account given

---

<sup>89</sup> "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch" (Hölderlin) is a phrase that holds significance for Benjamin, Heidegger and Adorno alike. On the notion of rescue in Benjamin and Adorno, see Gerhard Richter, "Can Anything Be Rescued by Defending It?", in *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press: 2010), pp. 72-87.



by Heidegger. In Benjamin's "literary montage", history, what has been, eludes the realm of language and of saying in order to enter into a different order of representation, that of "showing": "Nur zu zeigen". With this, history, the realm of human structures of signification, underscored, that is, by both the ambiguity of the sign and the abstractedness of the symbol – dissolves into nature. And this allegorical mode of perception, says Benjamin, "is kept hidden" ("versteckt") in abstract, 'empty, homogeneous time'; allegory is veiled by it and as such, also tenable within it.

## VI. A Baroque Balcony and the Allegorical Disclosing of an Empty Space

### 1) Baroque Body- and Image-Space

Benjamin's uncovering of the "Antinomies of the Allegoresis" (GS I:350, O 184) is close to his conception of the theories of the name and language (meaning that "all language communicates itself *in itself*"), when he states:

In the very fall of man emerges the unity of guilt and signifying before the tree of "knowledge" as abstraction. The allegorical lives in abstractions; as abstraction, as a capacity of the spirit of language [Sprachgeist[es]] itself, it is at home in the Fall [ist es im Sündenfall zu Hause]. For good and evil, being unnameable as they are nameless [Namenlose], stand outside the language of names, the language in which paradisiacal man named things and which in the abyss opened by this question, he forsakes. The names is, for languages, only a round in which the concrete elements are rooted. The abstract elements of language, however, are rooted in the judging word, in judgment.

(GS I:407, O 256)

Allegory, emerges, just like human language, from the myth of the Fall which befalls both, as a submission *to* myth, in the form of abstraction. In the case of allegory, evil is expressed in its inexhaustible double infidelity, signifying "something other than it is" (GS I:406, O 255). In the case of human language, it is its deformation and displacement into a moral-legal order, the pronunciation of good and evil, the conceptual entities that were originally barred from the paradisiacal "Namensprache". The concrete language of paradise lacks ambiguity and judgment (good and evil), whereas in fallen language, knowledge of evil pertains to having no concrete

object. This dialectic is set out by Benjamin in another section in the *Trauerspiel* book entitled “Honor”. “Honor”, and Benjamin is citing here from Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, is “the absolutely violable” (*GS* I:265, *O* 74). “And the name”, so Benjamin comments in regard to Hegel’s observation,

which in its own inviolability would attest to the seemingly abstract inviolability of the person, is nevertheless, in the context of creaturely life (otherwise than in the context of religion), nothing in and for itself, merely the shield destined to cover the vulnerable physis of the human being.

(*GS* I:265-266, *O* 75)

With the passing of the language of names into the language of judgment the name gains tactile essence; it covers the vulnerable physis of the human body, and as such, it is also capable of ab-stracting the concrete body, laying it bare. Nameless, “the person without honor is outside the law [vogelfrei]” (*GS* I:266, *O* 75) The functioning of the name as cover is congruous with Benjamin’s rejection of beauty, and *Schein* as body and architectural ruin converge on the idea of being imageless. *Bildlos* also describes the figure of the ruin stripped of its original grandeur, “allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (*GS* I:354, *O* 188).

The ruin, the ultimate manifestation of the *Unzuhause*, is the figure subsisting in the melancholic imagination of history, a manmade creation through which the particular temporality of “eternal transience” is translated into a feeling, a mood or attunement (*Stimmung*). Natural history is the actualised profanation of catastrophic or tragic fate, perpetually captured “as process of incessant decline” in the form of the ruin. “In the ruin, history has passed perceptibly [sinnlich] into the setting” (*GS* I:353, *O* 188).<sup>90</sup> Ruins are natural historical entities crucial to the Baroque since they reveal the manner in which history is at once a monument and a ruin, a ruined monument which is nonetheless identifiable as a dwelling place:

Dwelling in their monuments (the ruins), as Agrippa von Nettesheim put it, are Saturn’s animals [Saturntiere]. With decay, and with it alone, historical occurrence shrinks and withdraws into [schrumpft [...]] und geht ein in] the setting. The quintessence

---

<sup>90</sup> “What lies broken in pieces, the highly significant fragment, the scrap: this is the noblest material of Baroque creation” (*GS* I:354, *O* 189). For the conceptualisation of “fate as ruin” see Birnbaum’s “Variations of Fate”.

[Inbegriff] of those decaying things is the extreme opposite of the concept [Begriff] of transfigured nature held in the early Renaissance.

(GS I:355, O 190-191)

Conveying yet another ambiguity of *Scheinlosigkeit*, Benjamin notes that “as it is manifested in the word, so too is the allegorical manifest in the figural and the scenic” (GS I:367, O 204). In a line of thought that resonates with the meditation on the “word-skeleton”, Benjamin indicates how allegory’s linguistic essence is intertwined with a repressed visuality and opticality. In the *Trauerspiel* book’s section on the “Origin of Modern Allegory” (dated to the sixteenth century), Benjamin draws on the development of Baroque allegory out of the symbolism and the arbitrariness of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. He notes that “the Baroque goes back, in a mystical and natural-historical sense, to antiquity. It is the Egyptian antiquity, but soon also the Greek”. This was incorporated into the *Trauerspiel*’s stage: “What prevails is the rigid countenance of signifying nature, and history is to remain once and for all shut up [verschlossen] in the stage property”. Benjamin further reflects upon this spatial scenography of concealed spirit or history (a scenography resembling world or history that are “walled-up” in Adorno’s gloss) when he cites Karl Borinski’s interpretation regarding the true meaning of the word ‘grotesque’ according to which its origins is to be

traced back not to grotta in the literal sense but to the sense of “the hidden”, “the hollowed out”, which the cavern and grotto express.... For this, the eighteenth century still had ... the expression of what has crept into hiding [des Verkrochenen]. Thus the “enigmatic” was at work here from the beginning.

(GS I:347-348, O 180)

This enigmatic effect is akin to an uncanny-spectral sensuousness, that of a space that has been carved out, as it has been preserved in the mysterious character of the “balcony painter” in a story by E. T. A. Hoffmann, as Borinski notes, in a passage also cited by Benjamin. Notably, in this description of spatial negativity in relation to the architectural element of a balcony it also possible to trace a sort of presentiment of a Baroque balcony in Bamberg (“ein[es] Bamberg[er] Altan[s]”), an optical-architectural conjuration that profoundly informs the final section of the *Trauerspiel* study.

According to the logic of the setting or *Schauplatz* developed in the *Trauerspiel* book, courtly interior spaces provided an allegorical “image” – “Bild” – as the “key for historical

understanding” (*GS* I:271, *O* 82). The image of the palace, the *Schauplatz* of the *Trauerspiel*, is a constellation whose idea is that of the (un-)home-like, produced by the subjective view of melancholy: it is the dwelling place of the sovereign, symbolising political power, but a dwelling place also suffused with the mourning of the creature. “The absolute vices, as instanced in tyrants and intriguers, are allegories”, abstractions extracted by the sense of the deep gaze of melancholy, which only refers to their own inability to look: “they signify only its blindness” (*GS* I:406, *O* 255). The meaning of the tactile, as has been discussed, also lies in its destructive relation to the integrity of the optical. This resonates, in turn, with Benjamin’s meditations on the inexpressively acoustical dimension of language, so that the dialectical relation between vision and touch is triangulated with (nature’s) inarticulate sound. The final thinking image of the Baroque study is another architectural one: the figure of a ruined palatial construction that bears upon the disclosure of fallen and mute nature as the allegorical expression of history. This scenography allows a dimension to unfold in which a certain attentiveness to the destruction of the image is commensurate with the acoustical category of lament, of *Klage* as *Stimmung*, the form of expression that inescapably divests language of its symbolic dimension.

In the fragment “Phantasie” (dated 1920-1921), a form of dissolution which “does not destroy” (“zerstört”), but “only deforms” – “entstaltet” (*SG* VI:115, *SW* 1:280), takes the guise of acoustical, but also – of tactile quality. Suggestively, here we find an implicit yet passing definition of the tactile. According to this fragment (to which we will return in more detail in the final part of this thesis), non-human nature lends itself to meaning only when comprehended as intertwined with human history, when it transpires, that is, as being in decline: a messianic interminable downfall. Tactility here flows out of the paradoxical melancholic enactment of extreme *Nähe* while appealing to remoteness and inapproachability. According to the fragment, alongside the realm of light (“Lichtwelt”), in which transfusions of light and colour within painting amount to expressions of becoming as passing away, “de-formation” – “Entstaltung” – also comes about in the domains of the acoustic (“im Akustischen”) and the tactile (“im Taktischen”). In its auditory form, “sounds recede as they withdraw into the ground of night’s single great humming”, and “in tactility”, clouds dissolve into blue colour or rain: “die Wolken im Blau oder im Regen sich auflösen” (*GS* VI:116, *SW* 1:281). Tactile perception, as reflected in this thinking image, is “pure” by dint of a deformative power which is involved in a contradictory double gesture of concentration and disappearance. The untouchable bare materiality of the clouds is transformed either into the more touchable materiality of rain or the most attenuated, unclouded materiality – the almost pure colour without substrate – of the blue

sky. Renouncing the realm of the image,<sup>91</sup> these perceptual instantiations nevertheless engender a tactile surface, a veil, devoid of any object or meaning.<sup>92</sup>

## 2) “No Pictorial Detour”: The Borderline Case of Architecture

The intersection of corporeal immediacy and figural images, to the extent that the pictorial quality of the latter dissolves and deforms into the former, is an idea that is framed within architectural theory and history in Carl Linfert’s “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”. Linfert’s study of the “borderline case” (“Grenzfall”) of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architectural drawings was published in the first volume of the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* (1931). Reviewing the latter in his “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft”, Benjamin accounts for the peculiarity of these architectural figures. Benjamin reflects that these architectural representation are experienced as surrounding space (“Umraum”) without sensing the distancing effect of the frame of pictorial space (*GS* III:368, *SW* 2:670), the two cases in point that inform his distinction between the optical and the tactile.<sup>93</sup> Benjamin’s review takes account of what Levin calls “the detail, the marginal phenomenon, the work as a cultural cipher”.<sup>94</sup> Linfert’s “material content” (“Sachgehalt”), namely the traces of architectural descriptions within painting and painterly techniques within architectural representations, deals with the more “accidental” aspect of these works. Instigating a certain “focus on materiality”, “material content”, lacking abstractness and meaning that has become severed from it, thus closely bears on “meaning-content (“Bedeutungsgehalt”)” (*GS* III:372, *SW* 2:668, 669). This idea is intimately close to Benjamin’s indication, in the framework of his discussion of the figure of the ruin, of “historical occurrence [das historische Geschehen]” that “shrinks and withdraws into the setting” (*GS* I:355, *O* 190). Elsewhere, Benjamin further explains against the backdrop of his work on Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*, that “shrinkage [Schrumpfung] should be defined as the entrance of truth-content into material content” (*SW* 2:415-416).<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> In “Die Ferne und die Bilder”, one of the *Denkbilder* in “Kurze Schatten II”, physical distance, at which manifestations of natural deformations (of clouds, of water) could not be sensed, assents to the beholder’s “surrender to the images [Bildern sich zu überlassen].” (*GS* IV:427, *SW* 2:701).

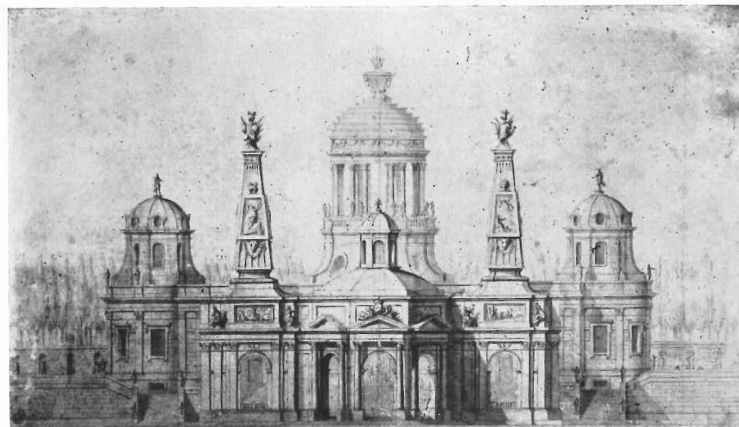
<sup>92</sup> Werner Hamacher, in unfolding the logic of distorted similarity taking shape between words and clouds in Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood* wrote: “The word-cloud-is the becoming imageless and wordless of the word”. Hamacher, “The Word Wolke – If It Is One”, trans. Peter Fenves, *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 11.1 (1986), 113-163 (p. 161).

<sup>93</sup> On the possible influence of Linfert’s account of the visual mode of architecture on Benjamin’s “Kunstwerk” essay see Schwartz, *Blind spots*, p. 65.

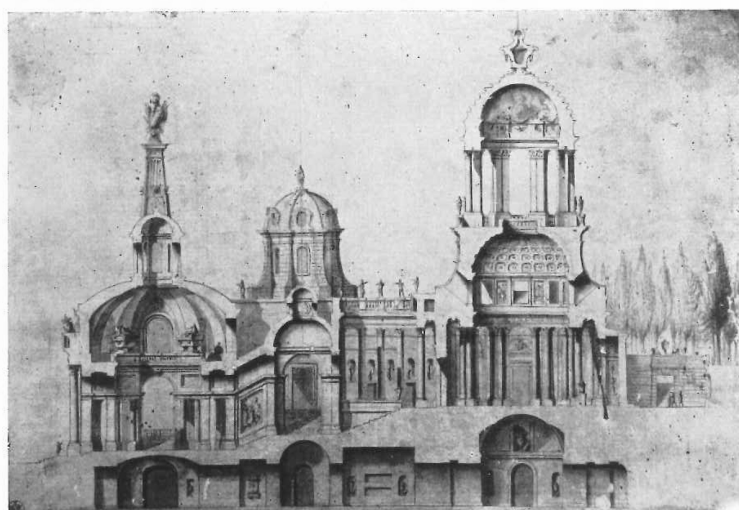
<sup>94</sup> Thomas Y. Levin, “Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History”, *October* 47 (1988), 77-83 (p. 80).

<sup>95</sup> See also the translator’s note in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, p. 258.

TAFEL 24



a) Juvara, Kirchenentwurf. Berlin, Kunstbibliothek



b) Juvara, Kirchenentwurf. Berlin, Kunstbibliothek



c) Juvara (?), Prospekt. Berlin, Kunstbibliothek

Figure 1

For Linfert, the qualities of architectural drawings emerge concretely on the basis of the unavailability of the “view”, conflicted as it were with the demand of “looking” (“Hinblicken[s]”), which applies to the “fortune of any image”.<sup>96</sup> The “language of expression” of architectural drawings is that of objectivity, attesting to the ascendancy of “the constructive [bauenden] eye” over its counterpart – “the picturing [bildenden] eye.”<sup>97</sup> Such architecture is not primarily “seen” but rather is experienced, in Linfert’s words, as a “sensing- or tracing-through of structures [Durchspüren von Strukturen].” Suggestively, the negative medial effect of this imagistic form is that architectural drawings “know no pictorial detour [Bildumweg]”; what is permanent in them is a “visual rotation around the building”.<sup>98</sup> Their technique of description, amounting to the very absence of a (perspectival, optical) “view”, is thus transferred into an intensification of bodily presence (fig. 1).

Confounding image and thinking of the conditions of representation, Benjamin foregrounds the foreclosure of any signifying relation set forth by these figures: “As for the images themselves, one cannot say that these architectures [Architekturen] represent [wiedergeben]. They are present in the first place. [Sie geben sie allererst.]” (*GS* III:373, *SW* 2:669). As Linfert has shown, the “last displacement” of the architectural drawing, instigated by the aesthetic domain of the Baroque, finally resulted in the “objectification of the architectural imagination per se”. Under the new logic of “Gesamtordnung” (see also Benjamin’s comment in the *Trauerspiel* book regarding the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the ideal of the *Trauerspiel*, *GS* I:356, *O* 192), the architectural mode of non-pictorial representation has been disintegrated into its own technicization (“Technisierung”).<sup>99</sup> In this part of his study Linfert alludes to Benjamin’s analysis of the dominance of the allegorical expression in the *Trauerspiel* book. In a letter to Linfert of 18 July 1931, Benjamin describes the impact that the visual world of the study had on him:

The subject you have chosen [architectural drawings] – despite having been foreign to me up until now – has taken an extraordinary hold on me. Even before I turned to the text, I was met by a faintest and stirring air emerging from the plates. I decided then,

---

<sup>96</sup> “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”, p. 135.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135, cited in Benjamin (*SW* 2:670).

<sup>99</sup> “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”, p. 154. In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin quotes Sigfried Giedion’s remark regarding the blending of architecture with the plastic arts, established in the baroque, as architecture’s “disaster”. It is followed by Benjamin’s note: “This indicates that architecture was historically the earliest to outgrow the concepts of art, or, better, that it was least able to endure being contemplated as ‘art’” (*AP* 155).

postponing my current scribblings, to turn my whole attentiveness to your work. You will believe me when I say that it is full of meaningful insights for me.<sup>100</sup>

More attuned to the “faintest and stirring air” emerging out of these images of the human built environment, Benjamin is gripped not by the represented objects or figures, but rather, by their *Stimmung* or mood, bound up with the state of mourning he had explored in the *Trauerspiel* book (fig. 2).

In bypassing representation, architectural drawings bear upon the decisive moment of “the antinomies of the allegorical, the dialectical treatment of which cannot be avoided if the image of the *Trauerspiel* is in fact to be evoked”. This touches upon the freedom of the sign:

To become aware of the lack of freedom, the imperfection and brokenness of the sensuous of the beautiful physis [Gebrochenheit der sinnlichen, der schönen Physis], was something forbidden to classicism by its very nature. But this is precisely what Baroque allegory, beneath its mad pomp, proclaims with unprecedented insistence.

(GS I:352, O 190-186)

As Benjamin reflects, the Baroque indicates the expulsion of the “false appearance [falsche Schein] of totality”, the breaking away from classicism’s separation between form and content, between material object and transcendent meaning – and hence – their ultimate (auratic) cohesion. As Linfert notes, the relay between the “fundamental spiritual habitus” (“geistige[n] Grundhabitus”) of the Baroque and “the objectivism of architectonic fantasy per se” lies in the separation of architectural construction “from the immediate realisation of organic, physical beauty in art”.<sup>101</sup> As Benjamin had shown, the allegorical mode of perception brings artistic constructions (plastic and rhetorical) into completion yet in the form of an inexorable process of decay and disappearance. Consequently, it was this turnaround of the philosophy of history that has urged “uninhibited, sinister imagination [Phantasie] to be felt” in the domain of architectural aesthetics,<sup>102</sup> according to Linfert.

Reflecting upon the traceable “Verfallsprozeß” captured by Linfert, Benjamin’s epistemological question concerning the dialectical potential of a vanishing material content to cast itself (‘in tactility’, we might say, but also acoustically, through lament) into an “image”

<sup>100</sup> Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* vol. IV, p. 43.

<sup>101</sup> Linfert, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung“, p. 156, footnote 1.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.



– is laid out:

But how does this “process of decay” become transparent here? The architectural prospects open up in order to take into their core allegories, stage designs, and monuments! And each of these forms in turn points to unrecognized circumstances which appear to the researcher Linfert in their full concreteness: Renaissance hieroglyphics, Piranesi’s visionary phantasies of ruins, the temples of the Illuminati, such as we know them from the “Magic Flute”.

(GS III:373, SW 2:670)

TAFEL 30



a) Juvara, „Prospettiva ideale“ Bl. 18.  
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett



b) Juvara, „Prospettiva ideale“ Bl. 19.  
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett



c) Juvara, „Prospettiva ideale“ Bl. 31.  
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett



d) Juvara, „Prospettiva ideale“ Bl. 39.  
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett

Figure 2

In his letter, Benjamin accounts for this focus on irreparable decay. Using a “figural expression” which is also one of his most cited *Denkbilder*, for Benjamin, “unlike the great mass of historians who polish the past over and over again” and turn it into “a threadbare top hat [fadenscheinigen Zylinder]”, Linfert has “brushed history against the grain”. Now “every aspect (oeuvre)” – namely, “the essence of architecture and the ingenuity of the Baroque” – “stands out in its singularity” to the extent that “the viewer [der Betrachtende] may peer between these singular elements, into the common grounds from which they have arisen.”<sup>103</sup> This gives us cause to look more closely at the inescapably interspersed disposition of architecture, and hence of tactility, and the ingenuity of the Baroque, as exemplified by allegory according to Benjamin.

### 3) Baroque *Schauplatz* and the Being of Architecture

Where, in the final scene of the *Trauerspiel* book, “allegory goes away empty-handed [leer aus geht die Allegorie]”, emptily leaving the scene, allegory’s own border is made manifest: what exists in signification is “to be sure”, “precisely the nonbeing of that which it represents” (GS I:406, O 255). This technique, Benjamin notes, evades even the “contrast between semblance and being [der Gegensatz von Schein und Sein]” (GS I:405, O 253). Allegory holds on to its sensorial forms only in, and in the form of, fading away, as they are “secularised in space”. If “the allegorist awakes in God’s world” (GS I:406, O 254), it is so since encountering the Baroque death-images, “intention finally does not faithfully [nicht treu] abide in sight of bones, but faithlessly [treulos] leaps across to resurrection” (GS I:406, O 255), as opticality is taken over – but also intensified – by and in a tactile leap. Thus, Allegory’s “greatest arc” always loops its gaze back, in order “to redeem”. “With this *one* turnaround” – “mit jenem *einen* Umschwung” – “allegorical immersion has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective” (GS I: 406, O 232, translation modified), an idea connected by Linfert to the “objectification of the architectural imagination per se”.<sup>104</sup> This idea dominates the last passage of the *Trauerspiel* book. Here, by dint of the coalescence of an architectural setting, of the *Schauplatz*, with the acoustical expression of lament, the final, vanishing “Umschwung” of allegory could be thought. The “final phantasmagoria of the objective” is foreshadowed by a

<sup>103</sup> *Gesammelte Briefe* vol. IV, p. 42. Compare one of Benjamin’s comments from the early sketches to the *Passagen-Werk*: “All true insight forms an eddy. To swim in time against the direction of the swirling stream. Just as in art, the decisive thing is: to brush nature against the grain” (GS V:1011, AP 843).

<sup>104</sup> “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung”, p. 156.

scenography around which the closing passage is hinged, a balcony that remains empty as scene of enactment or of viewing.

As Linfert's reference to Benjamin's study indicates, the final absorption of the architectural representation into circumscribed spatial distance had collapsed into allegorical, illusory immersion. Benjamin's account of the inexhaustible double infidelity of allegory, its demonic "non-being of what it represents", is captured in an empty space which the final sequences of the *Trauerspiel* study strive to unearth. This spectacle is shaped by the peculiarity of Baroque architecture, what Linfert termed "part constructive, part a question of optical form".<sup>105</sup> Such construction is fleetingly evoked in the last pages of the *Trauerspiel* book:

In the worldview of allegory, then, the subjective perspective is incorporated without remainder [restlos] into the economy of the whole. Thus the columns of a Baroque balcony in Bamberg are designed to present in reality exactly the appearance they would have if seen from below in a regular construction.

Benjamin goes on to argue by citing Borinski's study of the grotesque and the Baroque from 1914:

It is the Aristotelian idea of the *thaumaston* [θαυμάζειν], the artistic expression of wonder (the biblical *semeia* [sign]), that, since the Counter-Reformation and especially since the Council of Trent, has dominated [architecture and sculpture as well].... What is to be awoken is the impression of supernatural forces at work in powerfully projecting and ostensibly self-supporting structures precisely in the upper regions, structures interpreted and accentuated by the perilously soaring angels of the sculptural decoration.... Solely in order to reinforce this impression, the reality of these laws is recalled in an exaggerated manner from the other side – in the lower regions. Why the constant references to the power of these sustaining and heavily laden forces, these immense pedestals, the doubly and triply augmented projecting columns and pilasters, the measures taken to reinforce and secure their cohesion, all in order to support – a balcony – why, if not to make vivid the wonder suspended above by illuminating the difficulties involved in supporting it below? The *ponderación misteriosa*, the intervention of God in the work of art, is presumed possible.

(GS I:407-408, O 257-258)

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

Borinski's description of the balcony conveys how opticality is violently at work to master the very scene of observation, forcefully directing the gaze to sense its way through projected heights, towards an image of open confinement or confined openness. Significantly, opticality, with all its references to the "phantasmagoria of the objective", as this passage conveys, could only divulge its 'material content' as clasped to its 'meaning content' when the concealment of the acoustical is acknowledged. This is put into play in this long quotation reproduced by Benjamin when the dialectical relation between vision and touch is also triangulated with inarticulate sound. This is intimated with the two theological concepts, the "Aristotelian idea of wonder" and the "biblical sign" which is an acoustical phenomenon (the Greek "sēmeia" seems to resonate the Hebrew root *shama*, 'to hear'). This fundamental difference in terms of the optical and the acoustical functions of knowledge and experience, between the image and vocal sound, was pointed out by Agamben. "Thaumszein, astonishment or wonder", are, "according to a very old and constant tradition, the arche of philosophy". As Agamben further explains: "for the Greeks, the originary opening belonged to the optical sphere – thaumszein is theasthai, to look – whereas for Heidegger and, in general for us moderns, it is located in the acoustic sphere (*Stimmung* from *Stimme*)."<sup>106</sup>

Among Linfert's collection of architectural drawings, it is an architectural projection of a ceiling painting that might have caught Benjamin's attention as an instance of the "ingenuity of the Baroque" (fig. 3).<sup>107</sup> The "tectonic-unpictorial character" of the architectural outlook,<sup>108</sup> in Linfert's terms, overlaid with the more pictorial view, lays bare the "borderline-case" of architectural drawings, and, of the German *Trauerspiel*. The opening up of space and so the sensuous withdrawal of history into the setting, is precipitated by a constriction of space; the non-realisation (in architectural terms) of the "Bamberger Altan" precisely imparts that this space is designed to be tactile in character. For, to recall here the "Kunstwerk" essay's division of the perceptual realm between the two extremes of the optical and the tactile, habit, *Gewohnheit*, cannot be taken up by opticality and contemplation. The semantic field of *Wohnung*, of habitancy, in its proximity to *Gewohnheit*, discloses that this optical-tactile space cannot be occupied as such. As Nina Zimmnik has pointed out, "no actor enters it; no sovereign takes hold of this space to observe theatrical performance from above."<sup>109</sup> The balcony as site

<sup>106</sup> "Vocation and Voice", pp. 93-94.

<sup>107</sup> This drawing brings to mind a Baroque *trompe-l'œil*, a balcony projected into the ceiling painting of the imperial hall of the *Neue Residenz* in Bamberg, perhaps the Bamberg balcony Benjamin had in mind with his reference in the *Trauerspiel* book.

<sup>108</sup> "Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung", p. 144.

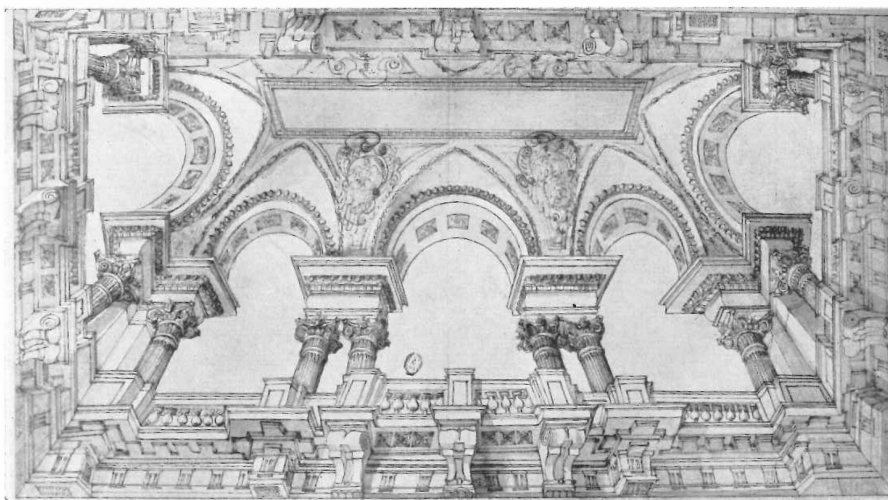
<sup>109</sup> Nina Zimmnik, "Allegorie und Subjektivität in Walter Benjamins Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels", *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 72.4 (1997), 285-302 (p. 297).

for acts of viewing and being seen, for acts of taking hold and being held, and of listening and of making yourself heard, is left empty and unembodied, as allegory leaves the stage.

TAFEL 23



a) Italienisch, 17. Jh. Topographische Aufnahme. Wien, Albertina



b) Italienisch (?), 17. Jh. Entwurf einer Deckenmalerei. Paris, Cabinet des Estampes

**Figure 3**

It is in stressing the incessant, *incomplete* form of an ultimate optical, subjective immersion that the German *Trauerspiele* were never able to bring about (by comparison with contemporaneous Spanish drama) that Benjamin's study ends (*GS* I:408, *O* 258). In the *Schauplatz* of the German Baroque mourning play, this empty, *non-space*, the allegorical lack of the gaze, or the hold, or the speech of the sovereign, is taken over by the character of the intriguer, whose domain is that of "intellect and will" (*GS* I:274, *O* 85). "But whereas in the Spanish drama the primary characteristic of the court was the splendour of royal power, the German *Trauerspiel* is dominated by the gloomy [düster] tone of the intriguer" (*GS* I:276, *O* 87). And this acoustical tone or mood of voice, of vocation (the *Stimmung* drawn from the *Stimme*) also permeates the final architectural *Denkbild* of Benjamin's study:

Because the idea [die Idee] of the building plan speaks [spricht] more impressively [eindrucksvoller] from of the rubble [Trümmern] of grand buildings than from even the best-preserved of lesser structures, the German Trauerspiel of the Baroque has a claim [Anspruch] to interpretation. In the spirit of allegory, it is conceived from the outset as a ruin [Trümmer], a fragment [Bruchstück]. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form holds fast to the image of beauty to the very last.

(*GS* I:409, *O* 258, translation modified)

This thinking image superimposes two distinct layers of architectural "Daseinsformen".<sup>110</sup> The one is the graphic character of the architectural line, and the other is its effacement by its own after-image of real ruination and disintegration. Whereas the "Bauplan" pertains to the interiorizing of space, where sound as such can be contained, it is through the permeable brokenness and dissolution of a previously enclosed building that a different effect of voicing emerges. Significantly, what is *seen* within this image is *audibly* mediated, yet carried by the unity of meaningful sound, of speech, *Eindruck* collapses in a dialectical reversal into *Ausdruck*, and thence into *das Ausdruckslose*. It is what the essay on Goethe precisely posits as the countervailing ruinous force to beautiful semblance: "only the expressionless completes the work by shattering it into a thing of shards [Stückwerk], into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol" (*GS* I:181, *SW* 1:340). The art of building, directed against the demise of life, is equivalent, according to the dense paragraph closing Benjamin's study, to the preservation of beauty and of truth, and therefore – is pertinent to the 'object in its veil'. Nevertheless, as cast in a veil or a cover, it is poriferous. By contrast to the well preserved, or

---

<sup>110</sup> "Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung", p. 151.

the not yet realised building, which is always set to succumb to ruin, “this form” (that is, the ruined monument, the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*, the shattered symbol) is that in which the vanishing of semblance itself is held fast.

At this point, it seems, we are once more confronting Adorno’s scenography of a world “densely walled-up by/from ‘Sinn’”. Having started with the walled-up logic of Adorno’s chiasmic architectural figure, this part of the thesis has thus opened out at its end onto another kind of space on the side of the *Unzuhause*: the empty or *trompe-l’oeil* balcony, tangible and yet untouchable, as the expression(less) image of the Baroque foldedness of a wall.<sup>111</sup> The next part sets out to further expound on the incorporation of tactility in the structure of language in Benjamin’s writings, with the view that the more ‘tactile’ his thinking images are, the more expressionless they become.

---

<sup>111</sup> This intimation regarding the foldedness in the Baroque thus opens up into the monadological structure, a scheme evoked by Benjamin: “The idea is a monad – this means, *in nuce*: each idea contains the image of the world. For the task of its presentation nothing less is required than to inscribe, in its abbreviation, this image of the world” (*O* 27-28). For the role of Leibniz’s monad in Benjamin’s thought see Andrew Benjamin, “Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present”, pp. 158-165.

### Part Three:

#### The Crypt, the Funnel and the Presentiments of Myth in *Berliner Kindheit*

In her discussion of the “disappearing of the ‘Other’ in [allegory’s] ‘other speech’”, Weigel suggests “that the ‘other’ in the sense given to it in psychoanalysis becomes dominant in the *allegorical writing of modernity*”. While “*pre-modern* allegorical techniques – such as indirect speech, pictorial representation, personification, allegorical schemata and narrative structures – go into this writing”, she continues, these are “transformed in such a way that the ‘other speech’ becomes the ‘Speech of the Other’”. In this transformation, she notes:

The pictorial representations metamorphose into a figurative language of the unconscious or into read images, embodiments (*Verkörperungen*) become semiotic bodies (*semiotische Körper*), body- and image-spaces for the imaginings (*Imaginationen*) of the subject, while metaphorical (literally transferred) representation becomes distorted representation, or translation without an original.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin’s task at hand, we might say in respect to these observations, is the making manifest of what Weigel calls the “disappearing of the ‘other’” in the “other of speech”, which is the imperative underlying Benjamin’s messianic approach to modernity and the latter’s theorisation in relation to myth. Adorno’s “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”, as we have seen, also corresponds to the structures of the unconscious, to the logic of compulsive repetition, in which sensuous uncanny phenomena arise by the presence of “having been” conjoined with a disturbing quality of its “thereness”. These are to be found, as Adorno glosses, in Freud’s account of primal words (“Urworte”) (NG 363, NH 123), in which contradiction dissolves,<sup>2</sup> and also, in the phenomenon of *déjà vu*. The experience of *déjà vu*, marked by a conjuration of ambiguous existence in time and space devoid of intention, judgment or subjective memory, proves pertinent to the polemic of natural history. According to Adorno, the idea of natural history bears on a proximity to the elaboration of the question regarding the return of “the mythical character itself” in “the historical phenomenon of semblance”. A threatening element, that of “Bedrohlichkeit”, is also an aspect of this semblance, one of whose “mythical elements is to have the character of drawing everything into itself as into a funnel [alles wie in einen Trichter in sich hineinzuziehen]” (NG 364, NH 124). With this perturbing topographic figure

<sup>1</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Über den Gegensinn der Urworte” (1910).



of deformation, the disappearing of what is hidden, secret and uncanny is liberated in another form of otherness, a form Benjamin would call ‘messianic’: an inconspicuous trait susceptible to an absolute Other. *Naturgeschichte*, and its idea, in this respect, should be set as a counterposition to the category and idea of myth. It foreshadows, precisely, the history of nature as history divested of mythic forms of experience; yet both forms converge in the “downfall of the earthly”. The section “Der Mond” from *Berliner Kindheit* is constituted upon this position regarding the “reconciliation of myth”,<sup>3</sup> as will be shown in the last section of this part of the thesis.

## I. The Echo from the Crypt

The autobiographical writings of *Berliner Kindheit*, which Benjamin composed between 1932 and 1934 and revised in 1938, unfold a topographical map of mythic spaces extracted from bourgeois constructions of habitation. In two of its chapters, the figure of the funnel makes an appearance. In the first version of “Der Mond”, an allegorical device of a funnel generates a climactic scene of ruination. While in “Die Siegestsäule”, a dark geological crater is imagined to be a site of suffering in hell, the exact opposite “to the sphere of grace that encircled the radiant victory overhead” (*GS* IV:242, *SW* 3:349). Thus, the figure also has an iterative character, inhabiting both the domestic interior and the public monument as an uncanny form of vortex-space, a foundation of ruin. In “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” Adorno contends that along with the phenomenon of the uncanny, as already discussed, it is “the phenomenon of *déjà vu*, of re-recognition [Wiedererkennen] [that] is to be analyzed at this point” (*NG* 364, *NH* 124, translation modified), and this is certainly also the case for Benjamin’s natural historical constructions of architecture, both public and private.

In a fragment written in 1929, Benjamin alludes to the phenomenon of *déjà vu* in relation to childhood experiences based on reiteration such as “images and rhyme”:

Is the intensity with which we, as children, absorb the world, but also images, rhyme, etcetera, not mixed together with some kind of presentiment? So that many of the things

---

<sup>3</sup> “The reconciliation [Versöhnung] of myth is the theme of Benjamin’s philosophy”. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin”, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shirley Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 227-241 (p. 234). For an account of the concept of myth in Benjamin’s work see Joseph Mali, “The Reconciliation of Myth: Benjamin’s Homage to Bachofen”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60.1 (1999), 165-187.

of which we are reminded in later life do not just remind us of actual situations, but also of presentiments.

(GS VI:204)<sup>4</sup>

The intertwinement of intensity (“Intensität”) with presentiment (“Vorahnung”) pertains to the act of recollection which is nonetheless directed towards a future. Ernst Bloch, in an essay of 1929, “Images of *Déjà Vu*” (which features a reference to Benjamin), captures this uncanny sense of similarity pervading both space and time through the notion of prophecy.<sup>5</sup> “In *déjà vu*”, Bloch comments, “one has the impression of knowing exactly what will happen in the next instant (but never beyond that): the event that is expected – indeed awaited with positive certainty – appears ineluctably to emerge, thus heightening the shock effect.”<sup>6</sup> The manifestation of a past that is in effect not available as mnemonic act constitutes a leap forward or *Sprung* – that is at the same time a crack – pointing to an element of repetition that is enfolded in what has yet to happen. In the *Passagen-Werk*, referring to this idea with regard to a collective dreaming and awaking, Benjamin states that there is “not-yet conscious knowledge of what has been” whose structure is that of “awakening”, as is set out in a statement of programmatic importance (GS V:572, AP 458).<sup>7</sup>

A short meditation on a domestic scene of *déjà vu* that appears in the section entitled “Todesnachricht” in *Berliner Kindheit* sheds light on this peculiar short-circuit of amnesia and its redeeming character in the form of the “now of recognizability”. This childhood memory reports how Benjamin’s father enters his room while the five-year-old Walter lies in his bed before falling asleep, in order to inform him about a death of a cousin. This memory is preceded by Benjamin’s pondering over the possible inversion of the definition of *déjà vu*, and of the ecstatic experience of “Entrückung”, of “the rapture with which a moment entered our conscious as already lived”:

---

<sup>4</sup> Translated by Tom Vandeputte for the workshop “Intensität in Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy”, Hannover, April 2018.

<sup>5</sup> “Benjamin has observed that children often wish a certain time of day could be prolonged, even wanting time to stand still at the exact hour of some scene portrayed in their picture-books, when the leg of a chair is casting a certain shadow”. Bloch, “Images of *Déjà Vu*”, in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 200-209 (p. 202).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>7</sup> This phrasing, Benjamin notes, is borrowed from Ernst Bloch. “The Not-Yet-Conscious is thus solely the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the New. And it keeps itself preconscious above all because in fact there is within it a content of consciousness which has not yet become wholly manifest, and is still dawning from the future. Possibly even content that is only just objectively emerging in the world; as in all productive states which are giving birth to what has never been there. The forward dream is disposed towards this, and Not-Yet-Conscious, as the mode of consciousness of something coming closer, is charged with it; here the subject scents no musty cellar, but morning air.” Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 116.

It is a word, a rustling or knocking, that is endowed with the power [Gewalt] to call us, when we are unprepared, into the cool crypt of the once [die kühle Gruft des Einst], from whose vault the present seems to resound only as an echo. Strange that no one has yet inquired into the counterpart of this transport – namely, the shock with which a word makes us pull up short, like a forgotten muff in our room. Just as the latter points us to a strange woman who was there, so there are words or pauses [Worte oder Pausen] pointing us to that inconspicuous [unsichtbar[e]] stranger – the future – which left them in our place.

(GS IV:251-252, SW 3:389-390, translation modified)

The memory experience of the double or of repetition, the subjugation to the power of what has been – and will have been again, which for Benjamin relates to the experience of the merely acoustical, of sounds that lack significance, is transformed into the experience of a “shock”. Now it is a word or its acoustic absence, a pause – that is: mediation and difference, the very attributes of bourgeois, fallen language – that initiates a particular case of the trace, a ghostly simultaneous presence of both origin and future. However, it is by the evocation of the feminine which is related to an actual event and to real presence and indicated by a physical trace that the future’s aporetic act of laying down linguistic traces is made available to re-recognition, to *déjà vu*. The muff as a trace (and also a kind of étui – the kind of cover in which traces of having been there may be impressed or otherwise left) amounts to a sheer correspondence between a sign and the passing presence it designates. And this mode of representation echoes and is intensified in the sphere of language in the second part of Benjamin’s comparison (“so there are words or pauses”).

According to an early version of the *exposé* for *Passagen-Werk*, the dream images of the epoch are images in which the future and the past are intermingled (Benjamin alludes here to the ancient world, to prehistorical or primitive cultures), and that which is primal to the life of a society, its primordial history, is associated with “classless society”. These images are regarded as stored in a case – “Depot” – which is the “unconscious of the collective” whose content, the experiences (“Erfahrungen”) of classless society, “take up elements of natural history into their movement [nehmen Elemente der Naturgeschichte in ihre Bewegung]”. This movement “produces, in combination with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions” (GS V:1226, AP

893, translation modified). Here too, what is timeless – that is, utopian – appears as a trace which is also a figure of desire.

In Benjamin's autobiographical writings, what draws the subject into the experience of shock is the encounter with that which is already a missed encounter. The familiar room is displaced into an origin taking the guise of a "cool crypt". From this interior cavity's vault "news of death" only later on in life will echo back speechlessly, in non-articulation and non-actualisation. In the final version of the piece, Benjamin notes:

I was already well into adulthood when I learned that the cause of the cousin's death had been syphilis. My father had come by in order not to be alone. He had sought out my room, however, and not me. The two of them could have wanted no confidant.

(GS VII:411, SW 3:368)

The spatiality of that which is expressionless and the expressionless character of space are hinted at here by way of the deformation, or indeed encryption, of the room into a crypt (the father, too, is a crypt, in that he silenced the cause of the death and kept it for himself). In the longer, earlier version of the piece, Benjamin concludes: "I did not absorb much of what he [his father] said". It was another form of knowledge or experience: the compulsion to imprint that evening, the room and his bed, in his memory,

just as a person pays closer attention to a place when he has a presentiment [ahnt] that, one day, he will have to retrieve from it something forgotten. Only after many years did I learn what that something was. In this room, my father had kept from me part of the news.

(GS IV:252, SW 3:390)

It is the functioning of language that is the true content of this memory. Read against the designation of the "dream image" in the *Passagen-Werk* (where it is conflated at times with the "dialectical image"), Benjamin's 'images', with their tactile quality of non-referentiality, thus belong to the realm of "language as such".

In *Das Unheimliche* Freud ties the *heimlich* maternal body, the primal dwelling place always beyond the reach of one's experience – to the experience of *déjà vu*. He refers to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he explains that "occurrences of *déjà vu* in dreams have a special meaning". In dreams, "landscapes and other localities" eliciting "a convinced feeling

of having been there once before” are places that are invariably “the genitals of the [dreamer’s] mother; of no other place can it be asserted with such certainty that one has been here before.”<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on this passage, Elissa Marder comments that “Freud here seems to suggest that when the experience of ‘*déjà vu*’ occurs in dreams, (as opposed to ‘lived life’) it does not function like a dream image at all”, that is, it does not correspond to “the recollection of an unconscious phantasy”, as Freud maintains in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. In Marder’s account, the experience of *déjà vu* that occurs in dreams is “the *mechanical reproduction* of an impossible image (the image of our birth) that was seen (but not by any subjective presence) without having been seen.” As such, the “the reproduction of the image through the dream resembles something like a ‘photographic reproduction’ of an unphotographable event.”<sup>9</sup>

To return to Benjamin’s childhood bedroom, this room is a space of interiority in which a violent scenography is yet to take place – in “Der Mond” – the last but one section of the first version of *Berliner Kindheit*. Here, an uncanny construction of domesticity sets forth a shocking violence that is enacted by the allegorical device of a funnel. The funnel generates a spatial deformation that transpires upon a – characteristically ambiguous – temporal threshold (“childhood was almost already behind me”). The narrator and his family members are placed on a spatial threshold, the balcony between the domestic space and the city (the agora). They observe “the moon ... in the sky of a dream”, yet they are themselves already an antecedent image, or better, an old photograph, “like those figures in a daguerreotype”. In an abrupt immediate violence, their bodies [Leiber] then disintegrate: “The funnel [Trichter] which the moon formed in approaching, sucked everything in. Nothing could hope to pass through it unchanged” (*GS* IV:302, *SW* 3:406, translation modified).<sup>10</sup> The room, which has been imprinted in the subject for uncanny returns, is the scenographic apparatus of the spectral character of the future made present by a particular structure of violence. This enactment of

<sup>8</sup> Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5 (1900-1901), ed. James Strachey et al., (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 399.

<sup>9</sup> Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Reproducibility: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> This violent scenography that resembles a voracious, open mouth also brings to mind the first poem in Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*, as translated by Benjamin, the text to which the essay on translation served as an introduction. One of the stanzas of “Au Lecteur” (“To the Reader”), which deals with what could be termed the *Stimmung* of boredom, reads, in Benjamin’s translation (*GS* IV:68):

Bleibt ein gemeinstes ärgstes zu erwähnen!  
Wenn es auch nicht auf Lärm und Mimik hält  
Wünscht es den Erdball sich als Trümmerfeld  
Und gern verschläng es eine Welt im Gähnen

“Gewalt” (a word that can signify ‘power’, ‘violence’ or ‘authority’), as indicated by Benjamin in “Todesnachricht”, is engaged in a certain logic of language and its signifying function.

Moreover, the absent, the forgotten, the trace inside the room in the form of a tactile feminine cover, recalls the sense of touch that “more originally” and in an (un-)home-like manner dwells within the architecture, as well as the vanishing of Eros enacted by the trace. Tellingly, Benjamin thinks messianic time through sexual difference, death and Eros.<sup>11</sup> As already indicated, the echoing sounds from the crypt bear upon a particular form of linguistic architectonics. The crypt, it can be argued, belongs to the conceptual realm of the “Wortskelett”, Benjamin’s semiotic form of writing as instanced in “– Turm –”. And the allusion to the Babelian scene, in turn, invites a close reading of “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”, Benjamin’s preface to his own task of translating Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens* (translated and written in 1921 and published in 1923). Of particular significance here are the anticipatory and the auditory motifs that permeate the “Translator” essay as well as Benjamin’s childhood memories. In the last section of this part, the figure of the funnel will be taken up once more, when the fundamental scene of natural-historical deformation enacted by the moon will be underscored by reference to a further prism: Benjamin’s essay “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” (1921). We turn first, however to the task of the translator.

## II. The Architectonics of Original and Translation

### 1) On Some Tactile Motifs in the “Translator” Essay

Tantamount to a world “densely walled-up by/from ‘meaning’”, to evoke Adorno’s figure once more, Benjamin’s thinking images of translation are formed through a chiasmus of perception and language, adhering precisely to a dual self-manifestation (prior to the idealist division of the subject and the object) of what Benjamin would call “expressionlessness” – “das Ausdruckslose” – and, “inconspicuousness” – “das Unscheinbare”. Read allegorically, the productive groundlessness, the suspension over the abyss,<sup>12</sup> that is released here is the locus

<sup>11</sup> For this point see Elissa Marder’s comment: “Benjamin (following the language of Stendhal and Baudelaire) invokes happiness as the promise of (sexual) happiness in the phrase ‘women who could have given themselves to us’”, as stated in in the Second Thesis on history. As Marder stresses, “here, as elsewhere in Benjamin, elaborations of messianic time and the time of history are often linked to sexuality”. See her “Inhuman Beauty: Baudelaire’s Bad Sex”, *differences* 27.1 (2016), 1-24 (p. 22, footnote 7).

<sup>12</sup> For the idea of the philosophical task “to make suspension over the abyss possible and prevent a fall into the abyss” in Hermann Cohen’s neo-Kantianism and its influence on Benjamin’s thought see Astrid Deuber-

and source of all meaning, yet also the place where the “speech of the Other” (to adopt Weigel’s term once more), as that which is most densely or tightly walled-up, is always already inscribed: the wall of Babel.<sup>13</sup> In the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay it is said that in opposition to groundless abyss and infinite distance, it is through an affective encounter with the ground that true cognition is formed therein: “den Grund, wo die wahre Erkenntnis sich bildet” (*GS* I:127, *SW* 1:299). Emphasising the revelatory dimension of representation, while underscoring also the problem of the law of language, but also that of the language of the law, that of sovereign power/violence, the “Translator” preface is suffused with auditory and tactile motifs at the border of language.

Benjamin’s figurative language is saturated with such a tactile sense of closeness to a ground. His thinking images consistently have recourse to the convoluted semantic field of *Sinn*, exposing the threshold between the corporeal/sensory and the significative, between the natural, almost biological affinity between languages and any content they seek to reproduce in translation, their activity of “Sinnwiedergabe”. In the essay on language, this threshold is characterised through a figure of “density”:

languages relate to one another as do media of varying degrees of density [Dichte], and with this the translatability of languages into one another is established. Translation is the leading over [Überführung] from one language into another through a continuum of transformations [Verwandlungen]. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract precincts of identity and similarity.

(*GS* II:151, *SW* 1:70, translation modified)

What is revealed in this act of removal, the “leading over” from one language to another, is compared in the “Translator” essay to the act of peeling the skin of a fruit. Notwithstanding this act of de-layering, whose motivation is a fidelity to the transmitted content of the work, a fidelity corresponding to the communicability of the work, there is still a remainder, a trace of non-communicability. This expressionless component is “quite close and yet infinitely remote, concealed or distinguishable, fragmented or powerful”; amounting to “the nucleus [Kern] of

---

Mankowsky, “Hanging Over the Abyss”, in *Hermann Cohen’s Critical Idealism*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2005), pp. 161-190.

<sup>13</sup> Gillian Rose suggests reading the tower of Babel as “a wall that has been made continuous, completed as a circle and then elevated. This idea of the perfected and the elevated wall by contrast to the linearity of a wall which stands as a barrier, implies that the centre has been appropriated and become radial – the former barrier or limit transgressed by being denied as a limit”. Rose, “Architecture to Philosophy – the Post-Modern Complicity”, in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 225-240 (p. 229).

pure language itself” (*GS* IV:19, *SW* 1:261). The fundamental character of expressionless figures is the “entering and disappearing” into truth, “in sie Eingehen und Verschwinden”, and this most appropriate bearing in relation to truth contrasts with “thinking/meaning in recognising [Meinen im Erkennen]”, as is stated in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book (*GS* I:216, *O* 12). Translation reveals, by its acts of concealment, the effacement of the original that keeps echoing back in this task; it exposes an ‘object in its veil’ that is predominantly founded on the Babelian logic. For the task of the translator, consisting in bringing the seed of pure language into ripening, is all the same its unavoidable “renunciation”, its “Auf-gabe”, and by implication, the refusal of the *gift* (“*Gabe*”) of language, as Benjamin seeks to demonstrate.<sup>14</sup>

The auditory motif surfaces in Benjamin’s polemic of translation. “The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which awakes [erweckt] in that language the echo of the original” (*GS* IV:16, *SW* 1:258, translation modified). Intentionality in translation consists in acoustical procedure, the awakening of the “echo of the original” in the translated language. The relation of translations to their originals is a relation underscored by a dialectical movement between fidelity and freedom (“Treue und Freiheit”). It is the liberty from the constraints of translation, the withdrawal of the original within a translated work, that not only makes the transmission of its meaning possible but also brings into proximity a possible revelation of “pure language” or “language as such”. “Pure language”, which does not intend nor express, is the “powerful and indeed the only” (“gewaltige und einzige”) capacity of translation, manifesting itself as “expressionless and creative [schöpferisch(es)] word”. In this “pure language”, that which is communicated can be so only in processes or procedures of concealment and vanishing. Therefore, in it, “all meaning [Sinn] and all intention” (the Babelian intention to build a tower and a city might be evoked) eventually dissolves, “destined to be extinguished [zu erlöschen bestimmt sind]” in – (a ‘tactile’) layer or stratum – “Schicht” (*GS* IV:19, *SW* 1:261). Tactility, in itself encrypted within the echo-space of architecture, is what draws this thinking image focused upon “erlöschen” into close proximity with *erlösen*, audibly imbuing, echoing, earthly disappearance and extinction with messianic meanings of redemption.

---

<sup>14</sup> To follow Derrida: “The translator is indebted, he appears to himself as translator in a situation of debt; and his task is to *render*, to render that which must have been given. Among the words that correspond to Benjamin’s title (*Aufgabe*, duty, mission, task, problem, that which is assigned, given to be done, given to be rendered), there are, from the beginning, *Wiedergabe*, *Sinnwiedergabe*, restitution, restitution of meaning. How is such a restitution, or even such an acquitting, to be understood? And what about meaning? As for *aufgeben*, it is to give, to dispatch (emission, mission) and to abandon”. “Des Tours de Babel”, p. 200.



The materiality of language in pure sound (this is indicated in the first instance in the untranslatability of the proper name of Babel, a name in itself in accord with the Hebrew word for ‘confusion’), is the particular mode of representation (“Darstellungsmodus”) inherent to translation. In the opening passage of the “Translator” essay, Benjamin states that works of art are not concerned with their receivers’ attention (“Aufmerksamkeit”). Even if aesthetic forms assume the nature (“Wesen”) of the human as both physical and spiritual existence, they do not pertain to the logic of an attentive subject postulating its object. It is rather, by implication, *Zerstreuung* – associated, as we have seen, with more “tactile reception” according to the “Kunstwerk” essay – that better defines the relation between works of art and their addressees. And so is translation conditioned by distraction in relation to its original. The law of translation is that its “form” (“Form”) cannot be grasped unless one “goes back” to the original (*GS* IV: 9, *SW* 1:254). This logic of return or turning back bears on the meaning of the more (temporal) circularity of a maelstrom (a figure resonating the *Trichter*), and thus invokes the formulation of origin stated in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book, the “whirlpool in the stream of becoming” which also takes in any originary materiality:

Origin, although a thoroughly historical category, nevertheless has nothing in common with genesis [Entstehung]. By “origin” is meant not the coming-to-be of what has originated but rather what originates in the becoming and passing away. The origin stands as eddy [Strudel] in the stream of becoming and vigorously draws [hinreißen] the emerging material [Entstehungsmaterial] into its rhythm. In the naked, manifest existence of the factual, the original never allows itself to be recognized; its rhythm stands open only to a dual insight. On one hand, it demands to be recognized as restoration, restitution, and on the other hand – and precisely on account of this – as something incomplete and unclosed. Determining itself in every origin-phenomenon is the formation in which, again and again, an idea confronts the historical world, until it lies there complete [vollendet] in the totality of its history. The origin, then, does not arise from the facts attested but concerns their fore- and after-history. The guidelines of philosophical contemplation are inscribed in the dialectic intrinsic to origin. It is by virtue of this dialectic that, in everything essential, singularity and repetition prove to be reciprocally determined. The category of origin is therefore not, as Cohen holds, purely logical, but rather historical.

(*GS* I:226, *O* 24-25)

Thinking the origin as a vortex spatially and temporally circumscribes it within the becoming of phenomena.<sup>15</sup> According to the dialectic of origin presented by Benjamin, that which is *a-priori* to any empirical knowledge, sensibility or subjective imagination, and so “pure” (in the sense of the Kantian *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, or “logical” in the sense that Herman Cohen interpreted it in his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*),<sup>16</sup> cannot be thought in discontinuity from what follows it, from its afterness.<sup>17</sup> Translation participates in the dispersal/distractedness of the original in order to bring into revelation “pure language”, in which an original kinship (“*Verwandtschaft*”) between languages resides (*GS* IV:12), notwithstanding the variable “*Dichte*” of the forms they present. The phenomenon of language, as revealed in translation, is always caught-up between its *Vorgeschichte* and what comes after – *nach*, that is, “bourgeois conception of language”, according to the essay on language (*GS* II:144, *SW* 1:65).

To think of translation as a form therefore requires temporality to be arrested ‘there’ – ‘da’ – between “*Fortleben*”, the continuation of the life of the translated works, their subject matter and what they intend to mean, apprehended by dint of this meaning’s intertwinement with the “‘survival’” – “‘*Überleben*’” – of the original. In enclosing the word *Überleben* in quotation marks Benjamin hints at the complexity of meanings of the concept (“*Begriff*”) of mortality underlying his discussion on translation, as at once “out-living”, “living-on”, and also – “over-living”. Translation blurs any distinction between life and death, to the extent that the origin lives on: “For in [the original’s] continuation of life [*Fortleben*] which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of the living thing [*des Lebendigen*] – the original changes itself” (*GS* IV:12, *SW* 1:256 translation modified). Accordingly, the original is, as in Benjamin’s definition of origin, not “purely logical, but rather historical”. Origin too, then, is to be viewed as participating in “*Fortleben*”, and this, as the above cited passage on origin betrays, by taking or giving its singular life away, *fort*. The original, like the origin, is a point of contact and of letting go, the point or drop at the origin of the swirling that all the same sucks everything in (as counterpart to the funnel). Whilst “*Fortleben*” implies the ongoing realisation of natural life, “*Aufleben*” dialectically indicates a higher form of life: its

---

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, in a short aphorism entitled “Vortexes”, referring to Benjamin’s famous comparison of the origin to a vortex, comments: “Insofar as the origin accompanies historical becoming, trying to understand the latter will not mean taking it back to an origin separated in time, but comparing and maintaining it with something that, like a vortex, is still present in it. *The Fire and the Tale*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> That is, thought as the production of experience, as in Kant, yet as unable to “safeguard the ‘givenness’ of experience”, see Deuber-Manikowsky, “Hanging Over the Abyss”, p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> As Deuber-Manikowsky also notes, it is the “historicity of thought which has been lost in Cohen’s logic of origin” according to Benjamin, that is, the very logic of *Naturgeschichte*, now understood as the history of the question regarding the essence of nature, of being and so, of experience. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

‘uplifting’ enacted through self-negation (repression, recollection). That is, it echoes with the double meaning of the Hegelian “Aufheben”, in itself an antithetical primal word.<sup>18</sup>

Translation, therefore, “embryonically or intensively” (“keimhaft oder intensive”) succumbs to the manifestation of an expression of life which is “rarely met within the sphere of non-linguistic life”. In the sphere outside language, such “anticipative” (“vorgreifende”) and “indicative” (“andeutende”) “realisation” cannot be found (*GS* IV:12, *SW* 1:256). Noting that this seemingly obvious relation between “life and purposefulness” (“Leben und Zweckmäßigkeit” *GS* IV:11, *SW* 1:255) does not participate in logical or intellectual cognition, Benjamin anchors the polemic on translation in his metaphysical view on language. It is not that the content, of things, of ideas, is imparted or conveyed *through* the language of translation, but rather a spiritual essence is expressed, mediated, and so sensed, *in* the very essence of language. Translation lays bare a temporal plane whereby “languages are *a priori* and apart from all historical relationships”, exposing the manner in which the affinity between languages converges on intentionality, “on what they want to say” (*GS* IV:12, *SW* 1:255, translation modified).<sup>19</sup> And yet, this point of convergence is an opening of an empty space, or non-space, like the heavens which the builders of Babel inescapably failed to reach. For precisely, their intention was determined, destined to have transpired but also to be redeemed. This idea seems to be worked through the resonance of a deformation yet without destruction, that of *erlösen* in “erlöschen”. Moreover, the whole Babelian scenario was already mounted by dint of a language and a name as a lost origin: “and all the earth was one language, one set of words.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For this point see Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash – the Other Side of Absolute Knowing*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Werner Hamacher considers “translatability” to be, in Benjamin’s analysis, the “transcendental of languages”: “With Benjamin, the Kantian subject-object relation was transformed into an interlinguistic and, moreover, an intralinguistic relation. If translation is the paradigmatic form in which languages find access to other languages and, thereby mediated, to their linguisticity, then in fact they do so just as the category of reality, in the transcendental consciousness, finds the material of perception as an intensive quantity in sensation. That is, just as the linguistic categories and hence transcendental language anticipate the *intensivum* of sensory material, so, too, does translatability anticipate a language and translation, concretely speaking, language as such”. See “Intensive Languages”, p. 507.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 11:1. Echo, duplication, repetition – all these are already instilled or placed in this very origin of the myth of translation according to the biblical story, from its very beginning. The one language possessed by the people of earth resounds in duplication of words according to the first sentence of the tale. Repetition also underscores intention: the sons of *shem* (meaning ‘name’ in Hebrew) endeavoured, in the act of building a tower, to make themselves “a name”/ “shem”, the untranslatable name they already had as a *proper* name. “The theory of proper names”, Benjamin notes in the essay on language, “is the theory of the frontier between finite and infinite language. Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name” (*SW* 1:69).

## 2) Translation as *Schauplatz*

Benjamin's view on translation enables him to postulate a concept of life in relation to the chiasmus of nature and history, the elasticity of meaning connoted by the idea of *Naturgeschichte*. He uses the term *Schauplatz* in order to articulate this, or better, to make it perceptible. To recall, "the place of showing and looking" was presented in the German *Trauerspiele* as a space of alterity, the place for the allegorical "speaking otherwise", in which, and for that reason, semblance, *Schein*, dissolves therein. In the "Translator" essay it is noted that the concept of life "comes to its own right only when everything that has a history and is not merely the setting [*Schauplatz*] for history is endowed with life [*Leben zuerkannt wird*]". Now, significantly, it is "the task of the philosopher", says Benjamin, to understand "all natural life [*alles natürliche Leben*] through the more encompassing life of history" (*GS IV:11, SW 1:255* translation modified). According to Hegel, "the development of history falls into time" ("fällt die Entwicklung der Geschichte in die Zeit", a citation which would also appear in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, in the section at which Adorno's critique in "Der Idee der *Naturgeschichte*" seems to be aimed).<sup>21</sup> In the account given by Benjamin, the stream of becoming enacted by translation destructively grows towards (or goes down into – as in a state of 'Untergang') – the "messianic end" of "the history of languages" (*GS IV:13, SW 1:257*). If language falls *into* history, translation exposes its *Naturgeschichte* in laying bare a "suprahistorical kinship between languages [*überhistorische Verwandtschaft der Sprachen*]" (*GS IV:13, SW 1:257*). Therefore, it is the original, Benjamin tells us, echoing the Babelian scenography, that in translation "rises up into a higher and purer, an airy region of language [*Luftkreis der Sprache*] as it were".<sup>22</sup> Translation, although it does not bring into realisation the "realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages" (*GS IV:14-15, SW 1:257*, translation modified) participates in the anticipation of this realm. This is made perceptible in that which does not enter translation, in the residues of *untranslatability*, as in the case of a proper name.<sup>23</sup>

And there is a more 'tactile' relation that is constitutive of a spatio-temporal constellation of proximity/distance and intelligibility, establishing the relation between translation and revelation:

---

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 406. Adorno comments extensively on Heidegger's turn to Hegel (*NG* 353, *NH* 116)

<sup>22</sup> Unlike the essay on language, the "Translator" essay does not name the story of Babel, yet Benjamin's rhetoric of genealogy, of kinship and of transmission of family seed – all allude to the biblical text.

<sup>23</sup> See Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel", p. 191.

If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the continued life [Fortleben] of the works and the infinite renewed life of languages [Aufleben der Sprachen]. For it is translation that keeps putting the holy growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation [Offenbarung]? How close can [this revelation] actually be brought by the knowledge [Wissen] of this remoteness [Entfernung]?"

(GS IV:14, SW 1:257, translation modified)

What is at stake is a logic defined by a "remoteness from creation", a phenomenology of nearness and distance that can be signaled as a constant motif in the "Translator" essay and in Benjamin's writings.<sup>24</sup> This logic is worked through in the analysis of translation as the form of human linguistic activity in which the distance from "pure language", a distance enacted by the Babelian scene of the multiplicity of languages, amounts to the former's revelatory manifestation, like a "*weak* messianic force" instantaneously becoming conspicuous. For in the original, "language and revelation" are merged "without tension" (GS IV:21, SW 1:262-263).

In a key thinking image, Benjamin alludes to the Kabbalistic image of the broken vessel, an object in which the funnel functions as a pivotal point of transformation and mediation between the two parts of the amphora. In evoking this image, he conceives of translation as a complementarity without resemblance, the production of meaning, bereft of abstraction. Benjamin uses the Jewish mystical figure of the broken vessel in order to explain the abstruse origin of the demand for literalness ("Wörtlichkeit") inscribed by translation, often distorted in the practice of translation into incomprehensibility:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.

(GS IV:18, SW 1:260)

---

<sup>24</sup> Weigel comments: "Benjamin's thinking about secularization is elaborated topographically, via historical constellations which appear in the form of thought-images and scenes into which history has passed. One of these images, and one which is at the very core of his theory of history, is the *remoteness from Creation*. It is a figure to be understood as literally the foundation and central thought-image of his historico-theoretical reflections". See Weigel, "Between Creation and Last Judgement, the Creaturely and the Holy. Benjamin and Secularization", trans. Georgina Paul, *Paragraph* 32.3 (2009), 359-381 (p. 374).

According to this phenomenology of translation, languages amount to the fragments of a vessel. Its cracks (the *Sprünge*, we might say, that intervene with regard to *Ursprung*), where languages at once touch and are detached, figure a veil or cover that nevertheless comes to be seen through. It is an implement of fragments for carrying over or mediation which intimates the original pure language which is at the same time yet to come and yet uncannily already ‘there’, perceived in its negative process of becoming, recalling the motif of language’s decay into a tactile layer. The disjointed tactile surface of the vessel is superimposed with another interrupted surface, which is architectural in kind:

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade [*Arkade*, closer to the architectural element of the colonnade].

(GS IV:18, SW 1:260)

Translation, according to this architectural thinking image, is worked through procedures of ‘walling-up’ of/by meaning or sense. This is also auditorily portrayed. In Benjamin’s gallery of translation thinking-images, the figure that sensually captures the tension of remoteness from revelation inherent in translation – and with it, the possibility of this phenomenology of closeness and farness to transform itself into a cognition or knowledge – is that of the rendition of the echoing space of translation as “Bergwald” (GS IV:16). The compound of the “mountain” and the “forest/wood” is in itself a precursory echo of the scenographic features of the aura. Translation, whose task is to awaken the “echo of the original”, lingers on the verge of the “forest of language” in which the language of literary works dwells, bound to remain opposite (“gegenüber”) the “mountain-forest of language” (“Bergwald der Sprache”), outside, that is, the referential structures of language.<sup>25</sup> It is through the *acoustical* dimension of this scenography that an essential inaccessibility to the original is set forth. The auditory motif is

---

<sup>25</sup> For this point see Rodolphe Gasché, “Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Language”, *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 11.1 (1986), 69-90 (p. 77). As Gasché also points out, “Bergwald der Sprache” resonates with Benjamin’s image of the “wooded interior” of the symbol in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* and is a possible reference to Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences”, in which “des forêts de symbols” is phrased.

enhanced by the rendition of the “mountain forest of language”.<sup>26</sup> Unable to cross the forest’s border, the translation calls (“ruft”) the original to enter inside, as far as that singular place (“einzigen Orte”) where “the echo, in its own language, is able to render the resonance [Widerhall] of a work in the foreign language” (*GS* IV:16, *SW* 1:258-259, translation modified).

The vacuum acoustically generates repetition and similarities by the fact that sounds encounter, ‘touch’, the surrounding, natural world. The echo of translation can neither prevent the original from disappearing, nor admit its return; it belongs to a future that left it behind:

If there is such a thing as a language of truth, a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives, then this language of truth is – the true language. And this very language, in whose presentiment [Ahnung] and description lies the only perfection [Vollkommenheit] for which a philosopher can hope, is concealed in intensive fashion in translations.

(*GS* IV:16, *SW* 1:259 translation modified)

Another dialectical figure of concealment by translation is set out in another, double *Denkbild* incorporated in the essay:

Whereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds [wie ein Königmantel in weiten Falten]. For it [the language of translation] signifies a language which is higher than itself, and therefore, remains unsuitable, forceful and foreign [unangemessen, gewaltig und fremd] to its content. This brokenness [Gebrochenheit] prevents transference [Übertragung] and at the same time makes it superfluous.

(*GS* IV:15, *SW* 1:258, translation modified)

In Benjamin’s exposure, pure language, inexpressible and inconspicuous, resides in an extraterritorial space between the folds or the fractures of its dispersal/distraction in translation. The “royal robe of translation” figures an empty space for a dual body: neither a ‘flesh’ to be covered and sheltered nor the body touching the robe from the inside are there. By contrast, in the original, meaning lives on, unfolded in the very form of revelation, the peeling of the skin.

---

<sup>26</sup> The acoustical meaning is elided in the English translation which omits the significant physical element of the mountains.

This form of life, which is also that of historically exposed nature as mere and bare natural life, is thus doubled and so absorbed into another empty locus. Natural, mortal life finds its ‘afterlife’ in a historical *Schauplatz*, the space of appearance for the sovereign.

At issue here is the close proximity of the structural dynamics of translation to the structure constitutive of sovereignty, a topic already glossed in the discussion on Benjamin’s description of the world of the Baroque and the articulation of sovereignty there. What is disclosed in the figure of the “royal robe of translation” is the impasse opened up in considering the relation between translation and the content of the original. For, it is by means of the very contrast between the natural and the more worldly, fleshly figure of the naked body lacking all semblance and covered by a *royal* robe, that the law of translation, in excluding the imparting of content, touches upon the fundamental, paradoxical structure of the law. Translation, like the royal robe, *represents* the power of language.<sup>27</sup> As Hamacher reflects upon the matter, “translatability is the high law, the trans-law [Über-Gesetz], so to speak, of language as such”.<sup>28</sup> What is indicated, in other words, is the possible “state of exception”, the power on the part of the sovereign to suspend the law, in the name of the law, to make it “forceful” and “foreign”, external to the rule of law.<sup>29</sup> This is the “breakdown” that precisely thwarts the act of carrying over or “transference” (“Übertragung” – significantly, not merely “translation”, as in the English translation of the essay) and at the same time prefigures its excess, namely, “language as such”. It is an excess that is figuratively captured in the untouchable, inconspicuous and so expressionless folds of the royal robe. These folds, we might say, pertain to a figuration that is seen, heard and felt as an indistinguishability of cover and interior. Just like the crypt, the fold might be said to contain “words or pauses” that, we recall, point us to “that inconspicuous stranger” that is the future and therefore belong to the order of the invisible trace that was left “bei uns”, “with us”, in the sense of in “our place”, the space that we inhabit.

The “Translator” essay associates these folds with literary works (works of “Dichtung”, where the “dicht” of material density is arguably operative), in which “pure language” resides in concealment, awaiting its messianic redemption. Its architectural counter-image from the end of the essay is on the side of the most densely (‘am dichtesten’) walled-up, in the “Urbild”

---

<sup>27</sup> The royal robe might be considered as this point equivalent to the intimation of the figure of sovereignty evoked in the last sentence of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”: “Divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution, may be called sovereign [waltende] violence” (GS II:203, *SW* 1:252).

<sup>28</sup> Hamacher, “Intensive Languages”, p. 493.

<sup>29</sup> See Benjamin’s chapter “Theory of Sovereignty” in the *Trauerspiel* book, and Giorgio Agamben, “The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin”, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, pp. 160-176.



or original image of Hölderlin's translations. These are translations in which "dwells" ("wohnt") the "original danger" ("ursprüngliche Gefahr") that the "gates" of a language thus extended or worked through ("durchwaltet[en]") would fall to and lock (enclose or exclude) the translator in silence or expressionlessness (*GS* IV:21, *SW* 1:262, translation modified). It seems that the Hölderlin Tower (in which the poet was enclosed in his benighted last years) has an implicit imagistic presence here, as a kind of outpost of the Tower of Babel.<sup>30</sup> Language, however, is let go in this extreme case of sheer translatability; its meaning ("Sinn") plunges "from abyss to abyss" ("von Abgrund zu Abgrund").<sup>31</sup> There is a "stop" – "es gibt ein Halten" – to this whirl that takes all meaning in, a handle or a grip to be found solely in the holy scriptures. Benjamin's contention that translatability is limited is based on a figuration of the scriptures to be a language-scape worked through practices of interlinear scripting. In this graphic form, the translation, cast as a poriferous veil over the original, is laid bare as a fragment of language. Devoid of meaning and governed by literariness, the interlinear translation thus stands in close proximity to "truth" and to "Lehre", textual objects that are "translatable par excellence" and hence, are the origin of all translations and of all languages. With this form, the tensionless ("spannunglos") relation between original and translation finds its ideal expression. Meaning is no longer considered a "watershed" differentiating between the two streams of language (recall here the figure of the "estuary" and lament): the stream of language and the stream of revelation (*GS* IV:21, *SW* 1:262-263). In the *Schauplatz* of translation, both comes to light as meaning-less and expressionless. And this leads once more to the dialectic of image and language.

### III. "Phantasie" between Expressionlessness and Inconspicuousness

Phantasie ist im letzten Welttag und im ersten.

– Benjamin, "Phantasie"

<sup>30</sup> I thank Andrew J. Webber for pointing out this allusion to Hölderlin's tower.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida traces in this final passage of Benjamin's essay a negative movement of descending of the ascendant Babel, a counter-movement that is inscribed not only in the Babelian situation but in the Babelian text itself, a text that "lays down the law it speaks about, and from abyss to abyss it deconstructs the tower, and every turn, twists and turns of every sort, in a rhythm". Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel", p. 224.

### 1) On the Power of Deformation in the “Phantasie” Fragment

Can the image that informs the set of Benjaminian imagistic figures – namely, the thinking image, the memory image, the dream image or the dialectical image – overcome its own negation, traverse its own threshold, be disentangled from illusion and semblance? How does the deficient and limited method of the image succumb to philosophical truth? Benjamin’s childhood memories, involved in a dialectic of remembering what was never subjectively experienced as origin yet to be revealed, are stored in what he describes as abandoned sites. Contemplating the dwelling places of animals in the zoological garden in the section “Der Fischotter”, the child’s gaze is hindered by a “prophetischer Winkel”. From this corner or angle, what is revealed is that

just as there are plants that are said to confer the power to see into the future, so there are places that possess such a virtue. For the most part, they are deserted places – treetops that lean against walls, blind alleys or front gardens where no one ever stops. In such places, it seems as if all that lies in store for us has become the past.

(GS VII: 407, SW 3:365)

What is prophetically sensed is the life to come already subordinated to demonically fateful existence or to the temporality of mythic eternal return. In the fragment on “Phantasie” Benjamin draws a distinction between “prophetic vision” (“Sehertum”) which is “the ability to perceive the forms of the future [der Blick für werdende Gestaltung]”, and “imagination” or *Phantasie*, defined as “the awareness [or sense] of the de-formations of the future [“Sinn für werdende Entstellung”] (GS VI:117, SW 1:282). *Phantasie* has to do with “Sinn”, the sensing of that which is to be separated from – as marked by the prefix ‘Ent’ – what is prophetically perceived as a sealed form. Viewed in terms of the “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” essay, imagination, defined as “pure” (“Reine Phantasie”), bears a close affinity to Benjamin’s idea regarding a godly or divine violence (“göttliche Gewalt”), the power or force that annihilates mythic, created formations, thus counteracting what is humanly formed: “pure imagination, therefore, is not an inventive power [erfindende Kraft]” (GS VI:117, SW 1:282).<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> In this regard see Sami Khatib’s interpretation of Benjamin’s messianic thought in relation to the language of theology, through the “radical Entstellung, deformation and displacement, that Benjamin’s (de)figuration of the messianic figured.” “The Messianic Without Messianism”, *Anthropology & Materialism* [Online], 1 (2013).

In the difficult and dense fragment, Benjamin draws the subtle yet crucial distinction between a dimension of human imagination defined as “Phantasie” and the realm of the fantastic - *das Phantastische*, and this by staging a pivotal crossing between the perceptual realm, designated as the optical, tactile and acoustical de-formations or disfigurements, and language. Both converge on a messianic natural historical plane marked by “eternal ephemerality”. Tellingly, the fragment opens with a linguistic deficiency: “The German language does not possess a proper word for the forms [Gestalten] of the imagination [Phantasie]. Only the word ‘manifestation’ [Erscheinung] may in one specific sense be regarded as such” (*GS* VI:116, *SW* 1:280, translation modified). Eli Friedlander observes that “Benjamin uses the term *Phantasie* instead of the more philosophically common term *Einbildungskraft*, to highlight the manifestations of the imagination he wants to investigate.” In attempting “to put aside, as it were, the productive (or reproductive) character of the imagination”, for Benjamin, “Fantasy would be imagination that is purely receptive – that is, would involve no activity of imagining, no formative deployment of an active capacity.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Benjamin, what is intrinsic to *Phantasie*, is that it “moves around its forms in a game of dissolution [um die Gestalten ein auflösendes Spiel treibt]”.<sup>34</sup> While it takes its manifestations or appearances – “Erscheinungen” – from its forms, those manifestations are to be conceived of as the “de-formation” – “Entstaltung” (a coined term alluding at once to *Entstellung* and *Gestaltung*) – of what has been formed. *Phantasie* is associated with a negative force of dissolution bereft of ruination. To the extent that its “prime law” is that it “de-forms” (“entstaltet”), never destroys (“zerstört”), it is close in its nature to Benjamin’s definition in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” of non-mythic violence. Despite its destructive force, *Phantasie* leaves the imaginable forms that are subjugated to it intact. De-formation, therefore, is tantamount to preservation in the form of the disappearance of otherness, and hence, of desire and of guilt. De-formation underlines translation in which meaning is carried over, as if funnelled, conveying a disappearing trace of lost Babel. Michal Ben-Naftali observes that Babel is the establishment of desire by “turning the tower to a textual signifier only, without a referent, without accomplishment”. This is why, she writes, “it is a disappearing figure, coming and

<sup>33</sup> Friedlander, “Learning from the Colors of Fantasy”, *Boundary 2* 45.2 (2018), 111-137 (p. 118).

<sup>34</sup> And we might evoke here the form of consciousness performed by the collective in regard to architectural forms, as it is stated in the “Kunstwerk” essay: “Dagegen versenkt die zerstreute Masse ihrerseits das Kunstwerk in sich; sie umspielt es mit ihrem Wellenschlag, sie umfängt es in ihrer Flut” (*GS* I:465).

going, superfluous, concealed, like God and like the mother.”<sup>35</sup> And this observation brings to mind Benjamin’s conceptualisation of origin as swallowing its own emerging material.

Julia Reinhard Lupton notes that “in English emergency is defined by the state of emerging, a condition in which forms are no longer fixed, when new – potentially dangerous, revolutionary, or counterrevolutionary – forms of political life can arise.” The different etymology of the German word “*Ausnahmezustand*”, as she also points out, “is ruled by the idea of exception. The *Ausnahmezustand* is that condition in which what is outside the law – the exception to the rule – comes to define the very essence of the law through the cut of the sovereign’s de-cision.”<sup>36</sup> In Benjamin’s analysis in the *Trauerspiel* book, to recall, the sovereign succumbs to being a creature too. Creaturely here is not to be located merely in earthly vulnerability, always on the verge of being de-nuded, as the thinking image of the figure of wrapping and the tower of Babel of translation portray. Rather, it is out of the brokenness of transference/translation, imagined as the deformations taking shape upon the surface of the royal robe, that the sense (in the allegorical, twofold gloss of the word) of creaturely life emerges. As this thinking image betrays, translation’s ‘state of emergency/exception’ is the exposure to a “higher language”. In as much as “all higher language is a translation of lower ones” (*GS* II:157, *SW* 1:74), as Benjamin says in the essay on language, the Fall of language from its origin of the name is bound up with a violent other.

The emergence of a form and its exception as that which has been disfigured, displaced or de-formed that is assigned by Benjamin to the faculty of “Phantasie” is rendered by a crossing between two subjective positionings. The one, defined as “spontaneity”, is where the constructive elements of fantastic formations (“phantastischen Gebilden”) are linguistically pronounced from the side of the subject – “vom Subjekt aus gesprochen”. The other proclaims a particular, subjective point of view – “vom Subjekt aus gesehen”, which is “un-constructive”, “purely de-formative” and “purely negative” (*GS* VI:116, *SW* 1:280).<sup>37</sup> What is associated here with the optical sphere is a purely negative, what Benjamin calls elsewhere a “bare gaze” (“bloßer Blick” [*GS* II:610]), a phrasing to which we will return), which is therefore devoid of the distance of Eros – or better, attests to the effacement of this distance – and therefore, is tactile in nature. As Benjamin states in his essay on language, the language of things passes

<sup>35</sup> Michal Ben-Naftali, preface to the translation of Derrida’s “Des Tour de Babel” into Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2002), pp. 7-33 (p. 10).

<sup>36</sup> Reinhard Lupton, “Creature Caliban”, pp. 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> The English translation of the fragment omits this significant distinction between the subject’s speech and the subject’s point of view, which bears not only on “Weltanschauung” but also implies the more sensuous dimension of experience.

into names when man contemplates (“anschauen”) them, this is what is dubbed “primal hearing” in the Foreword to the *Trauerspiel* book, associated with the power of the name. Naming is a power given to man as language; in it, a separation, a cut, is inscribed: “It is this being [the name] that determines the givenness of ideas” (GS I:216, O 13). Significantly, in the essay on language, it is said that “conception and spontaneity together [Empfängnis und Spontaneität zugleich]” is a uniqueness to be found only in the linguistic realm, for which “language *does possess a proper word*”. It is “translation” in the sense of the “translation of the language of things into that of man”, where “a word applies also to that conception [Empfängnis] of the nameless [Namenlos[en]] in the name” (GS II:150, SW:1 69, my emphasis). Being nameless also means the state of being expressionless, a state which is at once the “for-and after-history” of the Fall of “Ursprache”. And this state was established in the architectural episode of Babel.

Being nameless in the face of the language of man also comes to grips with the existential state of anxiety in the face of dispersal, the tearing apart of family kinships, that has incited the imagination and the desire of the people of Babel. This anxiety initiated the two intertwined projects: the one is the inventive architectural formation of a tower reaching up to the heavens, through which this people sought to give itself a name,<sup>38</sup> to translate in their own language the fear in the face of that which is untouchable, expressionless and nameless; the second is the establishment of a collective existence in the form of a city. Recall here the collective “Rezeption in der Zerstreuung” enacted by architecture according to the “Kunstwerk” essay and the designation of the “instructive laws” of this reception. Here, precisely, the form of recognition inhering in the name corresponds to the anxiety of being nameless, of non-being, that gives rise to the emergence of a new form at the border of the real and the symbolic, hence “the conception [Empfängnis] of the nameless [Namenlos[en]] in the name”, as noted above.

De-formation, Benjamin emphasises in “Phantasie”, is to be distinguished from the “destructive decay of the empirical by two features”. The decay – “Verfall” – in question concerns the body with its twofold aspects of corporeal and experiencing body, of *Körper* and *Leib*, as reflected in Benjamin’s terminology of birth, pain, and death. Evoking his idea of eternal ephemerality or passing away as the rhythm of the messianic, the fragment thus conflates intellectual and corporeal/reproductive conception (“Konzeption”/“Empfängnis”).

---

<sup>38</sup> See the genealogical lists recorded before and after the tale of Babel in Genesis Chapter 10 and the rest of Chapter 11.

This conflation is in play in relating dissolution and decay, associated with de-formation, to an element which is “without compulsion” (“zwanglos”), “free” and “painless [schmerzlos]” and to a “painless birth”. With the “Untergang des Scheins”, akin to the separation from myth (to recall Benjamin’s interpretation of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*) and with the allusion to *Scheinlosigkeit* – the lack of radiance/semblance that marked the *Trauerspiel*’s setting – the historical experiencing body is that which is discharged. And yet, aporetically, this natural historical body, painless, lacking desire and disassociated from birth – is all the same discharged from corporeality.

In a thinking image that exactly captures ‘tactility’ as it is worked in the idea of natural history, “de-formation”, it is said, “is like the sun setting over the abandoned theatre set of the world [Schauplatz der Welt] with its deciphered ruins. It is the unending dissolution of the purified beautiful semblance [schöne[n] Schein], freed from all seduction.” “The setting of the sun” is a natural phenomenon merging into an archaeological image of history in ruins, an image which is a zone of convergence between nature and history, as pointed out by Adorno:

in the language of the Baroque, the fall of a tyrant is equivalent to the setting of the sun. This allegorical relationship already encompasses the *presentiment* [die Ahnung] of a procedure that could succeed in interpreting concrete history as nature and to make nature dialectical under the aspect of history.

(NG 360, NH 121, my emphasis)

The dissolution of beauty that is coupled, according to this image, with a semiotic imperative in the form of the “deciphered ruins”, is further developed in “Phantasie” through two evocations of “pure appearances” rendered by painting. The idea of an infinite dissolution of the purified beautiful semblance is issued through the painterly description of phenomena of light and colour. Significantly, the painterly materialisation of colour through light and shadows, as Benjamin notes in one of his other early fragments on colour, sets out an infinite, spiritual concept of space.<sup>39</sup> In paintings, by way of the surface, things develop not through their extension in space but through their being disposed *toward* space or a room, their “Dasein zum Raume” (GS VII:563). The paintings Benjamin fleetingly evokes in “Phantasie” render visible transcendental moments and their medium-specific receptivity to these subjects lies in their materialisation of coloured light effects. One concerns “the radiance [Glanz] that lies over

---

<sup>39</sup> In “Der Regenbogen oder die Kunst des Paradieses” (GS VII: 562).

things in Paradise” (Benjamin is thinking here of the German Romantic painter Philippe Otto Runge [1777-1810]); the other is the “gray Elysium” in the paintings of Hans von Marées (1837-1887). With the former, the gloss of “the mute magic of nature, [from which] the word of God shines forth”, as it is said in the essay on language, is recalled. This mute nature, as is set out in this programmatic essay, although receptive and yet un-creative (“nicht schaffend”) still begets conception (“Empfängnis”) (*GS* II:150, *SW* 1:69). For precisely what emerges is that mute nature gives birth to recognition, to “Konzeption” grounded on the translation of the creative divine language into the language of names. What stems from the second example of a “world of pure appearance” and has become perceptible in the third example, is therefore, precisely, language’s after-ness of deformation and mergence, or indeed e-mergence, into human language, and henceforth into history. Thus, the interplay between speech and sight established in “Phantasie” through pictoriality, is revealed through the evocation of the mournful aspect of the “expressionless” – that which is “diminished”, “extinguished” “or subdued”. The expressionless, the mark of pure semblance, of “Schein” as “rein”, enters the field of vision through colour – “the gray Elysium we see in pictures by Marées”. These pictures, “*show* this”, Benjamin succinctly writes (*GS* VI:115-116, *SW* 1:281, translation modified, my emphasis).<sup>40</sup> In gesturing, by “pure semblance”, towards “pure language”, namely the language beyond utilisation and symbolic function, another form of purity, that of “pure means” and “pure violence” is incorporated here as well, as we will see.<sup>41</sup>

## 2) The Eye That Lays Bare

“For only language is able, in the most fortunate case [im glücklichsten Falle], to keep the de-forming powers under control [die entstaltenden Mächte in ihrer Gewalt behalten]”, says Benjamin; and Shakespeare, in his comedies, is the master of this (*GS* VI:116, *SW* 1:282). In a fragment whose subject is Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (“Shakespeare: Wie es euch gefällt”,

---

<sup>40</sup> In another related note from the fragment “Sokrates” Benjamin writes: “Möglichkeit der elysischen Farbe bei Marées durch die Umkehrung des Verhältnisses: die Farbe entsteht aus dem Grau, nicht das Grau aus der Farbe” (*GS* VI:120). “Pure imagination” becomes perceptible through that which is expressionless when the (colour) grey does not emerge from the paint (“Farbe”) but the paint, which has no expression, only its material manifestation in space, emerges out of its colour, which belongs according to this note to the realm of *Schein*. Significantly, an analogous allusion to glowing light in painting is made in another early text, referring to the famous altarpiece of Matthias Grünewald. As Benjamin fleetingly remarks there, stressing the moment at which what comes forth in glory is in fact dispersed, the radiance of the saintly gloriole or aura surfacing out of the “greenest of blacks”, “is true only where it is refracted in the nocturnal; only there it is great, only there it is expressionless, only there it is asexual and yet of supramundane sexuality” (*GS* II:130, *SW* 1:52-53).

<sup>41</sup> On the notion of purity in Benjamin and its link to the Kantian tradition, see Carlo Salzani “Purity (Benjamin with Kant)”, *History of European Ideas* 36.4 (2010), 438-447.

dated to 1918), Benjamin comments that Shakespeare's comedies are to be regarded as "the dissolution of the cosmos into the infinite", and for this reason Shakespeare is the "most sensuous and the most immediate" of writers. The most 'tactile', we might say. This is made evident in Benjamin's use here of the figure of the dissolving clouds, the figure that informs, to recall, his definition of "tactility", of "im Taktischen", from the "Phantasie" fragment. It is the sense of touch, as this rare and fleeting definition of the tactile denotes, that allows fulfilment in earthly transience, in passing away.<sup>42</sup> Shakespeare is the poet, says Benjamin, "of the bare gaze made of [aus] an eye that lays bare". This is the gaze upon pure, self-dissolving semblance. Just as "in tactility", "clouds dissolve into the blue", the naked gaze is the gaze that loses itself in the infinite blue: "So wie der geistig erhobene Blick auf das unendliche Blau des Himmels trifft und frei schweifend sich in ihm verliert." Benjamin's commentary (in which the later definition of the aura is glimpsed) continues:

This piece [*As You Like It*], according to Shakespeare, should be viewed as one looks at summer-clouds when they dissolve into the blue to the extent that all dissolution into the infinite behind their symbolic forms, represents, at the same time, that which is the most profound, the most delightful.

"This piece", Benjamin adds, "should be taken into consideration together with the *Tempest*, to which it can be viewed as a prologue [Vorspiel], as it were". Alluding to the epilogue of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, it is there, Benjamin says, that the "infinity of existence [or being, Dasein] has got close [nahe gekommen]". This is the moment when the audience 'blows the wind', through their clapping hands and breath is expended ("daß dem Menschen der Atem ausgeht"), when "Prospero lays down the magic wand out of his hand" (GS II:610-611, my translation). Shakespeare's laying bare gaze conjures up the staring gaze of the angel of history as detailed in the Ninth Thesis of history. Into this thesis's image-space,

---

<sup>42</sup> The cloud specifically functions, in iconographic or scenographic terms, as veil (between luminescence and opacity) for the breaking out of glorious light. The figure of cloud formations or deformations bears a particular significance in Benjamin's thought, and incorporations of "weather-like" epistemology into his *Denkbilder* can be found in his *Passagen-Werk* and in his autobiographical thought-images in *Berliner Kindheit* among other places, as in the entry in convolute N of the *Passagen-Werk*: "in the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows. [N1,1]". In "Der Regenbogen" (1915), a character of a painter explains that it is "through color [that] the clouds are so near the imagination". And the figure of the clouds sets out an ambiguous notion of secularization: "In the end, religion transposes its sacred realm into the clouds and its blessed realm into paradise"/ "Endlich versetzt die Religion ihr heiliges Reich in die Wolken und ihr seliges in das Paradies" (GS VII:25). Weigel, stressing that secularization, as Benjamin maintains on several occasions, is essentially spatial, points out that the ambiguity of this *Denkbild* lies in the fact that the meaning ensuing from it is "neither theological nor secular". Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, p. 12.



as we have seen, the disintegrated tower of Babel also seems to emerge in the form of refuse, before which the angel is cast, and his wings are blown ever open by the wind. In “Shakespeare: Wie es euch gefällt”, Benjamin thus concludes: “The tempest no longer blows as you like it, or, because it did this once more: you may hear nothing more” (*GS* II:610-611).<sup>43</sup> Such soundless dissolution is also in play with the “breathing the aura”, its “shattering” that in Benjamin’s semantics is intimately close to a collective “Sammlung”, like the audience in the theatre. It is through mimetic actions and relations – between breathing and blowing, combined with the tactile gesture (and tactility, to recall, primarily counteracts opticality) – that semblance and likeness dissolve, it is de-formed and thus freed from semblance in pure *Phantasie*: “[Shakespeare’s] creation [Schaffen] dies of immortality” (*GS* II:610-611).

#### IV. The Presentiments of Natural History

De-auraticisation is identified by Benjamin as at work in Shakespeare’s dislocation of the beholders into the setting in tactility. The dissolving (summer) clouds as (tactile) dissolution into the infinite leads back to the memories of *Berliner Kindheit*, this time to the “work of the Mummerehlen”. This distorted expression (of “Muhme Rehlen”) derived from a children’s rhyme, provides the title of – that is, names – the section “Die Mummerehlen”. Here Benjamin lays down the contours of what he perceives as the clouds of language, or of words. Here the “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” is transposed into an image of a cloud.<sup>44</sup> As Benjamin recalls: “Beizeiten lernte ich es, in die Worte, die eigentlich Wolken waren, mich zu mummen”. Signifying nothing, “Mummerehlen” makes it possible to mask oneself, “zu mummen”, which means to become the word itself by inhabiting it. In this “constellation of figurative tableaux”, Gerhard Richter observes, “Benjamin’s corporeal self disappears into language itself”.<sup>45</sup> The body cloaked in words amounts to an inexorable ‘tactile’ movement of dissolving and fading away from view. Although constructed as images, the scenographies of disappearing bodies (as both *Leib* and *Körper*) that pervade *Berliner Kindheit* cannot be fixed into a (photographic)

<sup>43</sup> The link between *The Tempest* and the Ninth Thesis was suggested in a talk by Freddie Rokem entitled “‘But a storm is blowing from Paradise’/ ‘Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her’: Walter Benjamin and The Tempest”, in the conference *Walter Benjamin and Shakespeare*, London, November 2018. In this event Benjamin’s Shakespeare fragment was also discussed by Julia Ng in a talk entitled “As You Like It: Benjamin’s Comic Infinite”.

<sup>44</sup> See Hamacher’s “The Word Wolke – If It Is One” for this point and for his discussion of the sensuous similarity “as *Worte* steps into *Wolke*” that predicates Benjamin’s childhood memories.

<sup>45</sup> Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, p. 202.

image;<sup>46</sup> the demise they enact is “allegorical”, as Adorno observes.<sup>47</sup> The representation of the body as simultaneously constructed by memory and shattered or dissolved by it forms and deforms the short sections of *Berliner Kindheit*. This logic is predicated on the recognisable belated ‘nonsensuous’ relation of likeness between words, i.e. language as instrument of cognition, and the realisation that when rendered sensuous, words are in truth formless, untouchable clouds.

Viewed from the predicament of the body dissolving into language, the texts comprising Benjamin’s autobiographical work map public and private spaces as well as objects whose dark depths and interiorities are the instigations and also the settings for the child’s mimetic activity. Naming a spirit (“Geist”) of creation, a creature (“Geschöpf”) released from the nursery rhyme (“Die Muhme Rehlen”), the mispronounced “Mummerehlen”, originating in linguistic non-referentiality and auditory confusion, has positively “displaced the world” for Benjamin the child: “Das Mißverstehen verstellte mir die Welt”. *Worte/Wolke* make it possible to become an image, to mimetically be displaced into “dwelling places [Wohnungen], furniture, clothes” (*GS* VII:417, *SW* 3:391). This was possible, once more, through figures of clouds. In producing similarities, in painting, as it is said in the section “Die Farben”, “what happened with my watercolors, [is] when things would take me to their womb [Schoß] as soon as I overcame them in a moist cloud” (*GS* VII:424, *SW* 3:380). Or in the first version of “Die Mummerehlen”, the child is “disguised by them [i.e., colors, Vermummten sie mich selber]”, even before applying them to the drawing, “when wet, they flowed together on the palette, I would take them warily onto my brush. As though they were clouds about to dissipate” (*GS* IV:262, *SW* 3:393).

Following this remark, Benjamin names the Chinese colourful porcelains (stressing the fact that they were only “cheap export articles”) as his preferred objects of mimesis. They captured the presentiment of likeness. “The gift [die Gabe] of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words”, as he notes earlier in this section (reproducing, that is, the tropes from the essays “Über das mimetische Vermögen” and “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” of 1933). This compulsion, acted through words, drew closer the “work of Mummerehlen”, a word, that just as in the reflections on the inverted *déjà vu*, is germane to the recollection of that which has not yet happened. The passage continues by

---

<sup>46</sup> This applied, as Benjamin confers, to his own image. “Never to my own image, though. And that explains why I was at such a loss when someone demanded of me similarity to myself” (*SW* 3:391).

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Richter, *The Corpus of Autobiography*, p. 202.

retelling the story of the Chinese painter who was swallowed into a narrow opening, the little door located in his picture of a landscape. Funnelled into the work of representation, the old painter's vanishing body effaces any traces of opticality and of distance, and so – of the auratic. What is left as a trace is a wall, a veil wrapped around this very mortification and the walling up of the subject in the porcelain container through displacement into the cloud: "In the same way, I too, when occupied with my paintpots and brushes, would be suddenly displaced into the picture. I would resemble the porcelain which I had entered in a cloud of colors" (*GS* IV:262, *SW* 3:393).

The section "Der Mond" with its startling scenography of a geological funnel created by the moon can be regarded as a scenographical intensification of the child's coloured and clouded entry – "mit einer Farbenwolke" – into or onto the porcelain. Or, alternatively, it can be posed as its obverse: in the room's child, subjugated to the light of the moon, acoustical and visual similarities, uncannily, like an echo – do not dissolve, but reverberate. In the closing lines of its final, shorter version (from which the deformation of the scene by the moon through a funnel has been omitted) Benjamin records his "own existence" as a disappearing figure. This form of being designates that "nothing was left except the residuum [Bodensatz] of its abandonment [Verlassenheit]" (*SW* 3:383, *GS* VII:428, translation modified). The first version's final sentence reads:

For this awakening set no limit to the dream, as others did, disclosed no goal, but instead revealed to me that its goal had escaped the dream, and that the sovereignty of the moon [das Regiment des Mondes] – which I had to come to know as a child – had failed for another world time [für eine weitere Weltzeit gescheitert war].

(*GS* IV:302, *SW* 3:407, translation modified)

The moon names the object of this textual vignette and is at the same time the entity that names the apparatus by which the conditions of visibility and therefore – of perception and cognition, are deployed:

The light, that streams down from the moon, has no part in the scene-setting [Schauplatz] of our daily existence. The region it equivocally illuminates seems to belong to some opposite or near earth. This is not the earth to which the moon is subjected as satellite, for it itself transformed into a satellite of the moon. Its broad bosom, whose breath was time, stirs no longer; the creation [Schöpfung] was finally

back home and may once more put on the widow's veil, which the day had torn off. The pale beam [blasse Strahl] that stole into my room through the blinds gave me this understanding [gab mir das zu verstehen].

(GS IV:300, SW 3:405, translation modified)

The rhetoric of melancholy and the rhetoric of photography with its arrested temporality are initiated from the “pale beam” that penetrates the room, displacing it into a pre-photographic device, a camera obscura.<sup>48</sup> The image produced by the room and the different effects of light, those of the moon but also of the sun, are constituted as a constellation of relations between the photographic image and the production of meaning, meaning ‘photographically’ developed in silence *outside* language, as it were. Between the two governments, the day and the night, stretches that which is familiar and natural. Cast by the moonlight, lost origin and a mournful return to it are subject to Benjamin's concept of the “optical unconscious”. Worked dialectically through the room as a photographic construction, when it is not mediated by the pale beam that has stolen into the room/camera and thus visible to the naked eye, the “widow's veil of creation” is exposed to a blinding daylight capable of annihilation.<sup>49</sup> Tearing the veil, which is now also inductive of the auratic, alludes to nature in its state of otherness, in ‘speaking’ differently to the camera (as mediated by the moon and the room) than to the eye (the sober light of day).

Having been awoken, bodily presence is removed and the child's room appears to be

---

<sup>48</sup> For the rhetoric of the photographic media in *Berliner Kindheit* see Michael Jennings, “The Mausoleum of Youth: Between Experience and Nihilism in Benjamin's Berlin Childhood”, *Paragraph* 32.3 (2009), 313-330, and Chapter Four of Richter's *The Corpus of Autobiography*.

<sup>49</sup> “Widow's veil” is also the manner in which Benjamin (in following Proust) figures the unknown woman that “mysteriously and mutely borne along by the crowd” crosses the poet's field of vision in the sonnet “A une passante” in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”. The passing woman, which for Baudelaire figures an erotic figure of unfulfilled desire, is transformed in Benjamin's act of casting the veil. As Elissa Marder comments, Benjamin “suggests that the erotic loss narrated in the poem was already figured in the widow's prior loss of her husband. The figure of ‘the lost husband’ would thus stand as a synecdoche for the specifically *erotic* nature of the loss (as distinct from the loss of the non-eroticized object”. See Marder, *Dead Time, Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001), p. 75. In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, the veil serves as a figure capturing the invisible crowd that nevertheless is prominently present in Baudelaire's poem according to Benjamin. “Only when this veil tears”, will an “undistorted view of the big city” be revealed to the flâneur. And in another phrasing that constellates crowd, veil, city, room and (mythic) phantasmagoria, Benjamin notes: “The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria – now a landscape, now a room.” The uncovering of the phantasmagoria as the work of the mythical is worked through the overcoming of Eros by sexuality and death: “the delight of the urban poet is love – not at first sight, but at last sight. It is an eternal farewell, which coincides in the poem [A une passante] with the moment of enchantment. Thus the sonnet deploys the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe. But the nature of the poet's emotions has been affected as well. What makes his body contract in a tremor [...] is not the rapture of a man whose every fibre is suffused with Eros; it is, rather, like the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man. [These verses] reveal the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love” (SW 4:324).

occupied by what now seems to be a physical realisation of the moon: “When [the moon] was there in the room and I awoke, I was unhoused, for my room seemed willing to accommodate no one besides the moon” (*GS* IV:300, *SW* 3:405, translation modified). Occupied by the sovereign authority of the moon, a spectral “mythical character of semblance” (to evoke Adorno’s phrasing) suffuses the room. It now violently manifests itself in acts of resemblance and repetition, both tactile, borne out by allusions to feminine body parts, clothes and their sartorial details,<sup>50</sup> and acoustical:

The first things that attracted my gaze were the two cream-colored basins on the washstand. By day it never occurred to me to dwell on them. In the moonlight, however, the band of blue that ran around the upper part of the basins was a source of irritation. It pretended to be a woven band encircling a skirt-hem. And in effect, the brim of each basin was pleated like a ruffle. Between the two basins stood pot-bellied jugs, made of the same porcelain with the same floral pattern.

And mythical semblance exerts a power over physical existence and life:

When I climbed out of bed, they clinked, and this clinking was reproduced [pflanzte sich ... fort] over the washstand’s marble surface and to its basins and bowls. As happy as I was to receive from the nocturnal surroundings a sign of life [ein Lebenszeichen] – be it only the echo of my own – it was nonetheless an unreliable sign, and was waiting like a false friend to dupe me at the moment I least expected it. It happened when I had lifted the carafe with my hand to pour some water into a glass. The gurgling of the water, the sound with which I put down first the carafe and then the glass – all struck my ear as repetition. For every spot on this alternate earth to which I was transported appeared wholly occupied by what had once been. As such, every sound and moment approached me as a double of itself. When I had endured this for a while, I would draw near my bed gripped by the fear of finding myself already stretched out upon it.

(*GS* IV:300-301, *SW* 3:405-406, translation modified)

The acoustical intensification ruled by the law of repetition constitutes the nocturnal scenography. This law might be interpreted in terms of the manifestation of the fall of language and the violence accompanying it. For the production of false signs inevitably coalesces into self-negation: the impossible encounter with one’s corpse, the experienceable horror of being

---

<sup>50</sup> Motifs of sewing suffuse *Berliner Kindheit*, for example the section “Der Nähkasten” (“The Sewing Box”).

at once *Leib* and *Körper*. This doubleness is all the same the disturbance or dissolution of their constitutive relation. To that “strangeness which the moon had brought” in manifesting the horror of mere natural life at the border of death and non-being, might be, however, “another side”, Benjamin suggests. The domestic setting in “Der Mond”, laid open to the flickering light of the moon, evaporates into language that nonetheless escapes any linguistic designation; it is an image-space in which awakening, as stated in the last passage of its first version, set “no goal” to a dream (*GS* IV:302, *SW* 3:407).

The nocturnal occurrences in the room continue in a repetitive movement between the room that lay in darkness, after the fear (“Angst”) subsides, and the dark room of photography, wherein images loom as out of a photographic plate. These images record an anticipatory, unavoidable vicious falling prey (“anheimzufallen”) to the net of the dream. In another performance of semblance, underscored by military tropes, “the hand” is the first to “bravely dive over [Über ... zu tauchen] the trench [Grabenrand] of sleep”, where it previously found a “cover [Deckung] from the dream”. Yet this rescuing is dominated by a fateful *Untergang*, as the next image makes clear: “just as sometimes, after the end of a battle an unexploded bomb [Blindgänger] catches up”, so the hand, on its way (“unterweg[s]”), “remained in expectation for its belatedly falling prey to a dream”. And the *Denkbild* continues:

When the nightlight, flickering, then brought peace to my hand and me, it appeared that nothing more remained of the world than a single, stubborn question. It may be that this question nested in the folds of the door-curtain that shielded me from noise. It may be that it was nothing but a residue of many past nights. Or, finally, it may be that it was the other side of the feeling of strangeness which the moon had brought on. The question was: Why is there anything at all in the world, why the world? With amazement, I realized that nothing in it could compel me to think the world. Its nonbeing would have struck me as not a whit more problematic than its being, which seemed to wink at nonbeing. The moon had an easy time with this being [Der Mond hatte ein leichtes Spiel mit diesem Sein].

The indecisiveness and ambiguity, oscillating between *Schein* and *Sein*, inflicted by the sovereign power of the moon, lead to a subjective articulation of the ontological question of being. “This world”, as Benjamin writes, “can only present itself” – be “vorhanden” – in the form of a recurrent, pronounced, yet unanswerable question (*GS* IV:301, *SW* 3:406, translation modified). The sensuous de-formations of the hand, its feeling through (‘in-’) ‘tactility’,

alongside the realms of the optical and the acoustical (as the triangulation comprising the pure deformations in the realm of pure *Schein* outlined in “Phantasie” has it) – sets the scene for the moon’s final violent act.<sup>51</sup>

## V. “Der Mond” as a Critique of Violence

The manner of Benjamin’s textual construction in “Der Mond” and its advancement through ‘architectonic’ decomposition could be seen to be predicated on another ambiguous logic of similarity or likeness, manifested in the relay between two modalities of nature: mythical, fateful nature and pure liberatory or messianic nature. The ‘material content’ of the text culminates with its own mortification by the work or the medium of the moon/dream, like the eye that lays bare, like the “ear of lament”. In the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, it is stated that “truth is not in itself visible” (*SW* 1:351), a statement that is echoed in an assertion made in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”. The “expiatory power of violence”, it is said there, cannot “lie open [nicht zutage liegt]”, be visible to men, as the concluding passage of the essay affirms (*GS* II:203, *SW* 1:252, translation modified). Let us observe the final scene of “Der Mond” as it is unfolded in the first, more detailed version. The scene takes place on a dual temporal threshold. The one is biographical: “Die Kindheit lag schon beinahe hinter mir”. The other is the twilight time between the day and the night, a threshold bearing not only on the impaired conditions of visibility; it is a borderline about to be transgressed by the moon:

the moon seemed willing to assert its claim [Anspruch] to the earth by daylight, a claim which previously it had made only at night. High above the horizon – large but pale – it stood, in the sky of a dream, looking down on the streets of Berlin. It was still light outside.

(*GS* IV:301-302, *SW* 3:406)

In terms of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”, the power or violence implemented by the moon is “lawmaking” (“rechtsetzende Gewalt”). The moon “demands sacrifice” in the form of “mere life for its own sake”, the exertion of power Benjamin names mythic; the moon will finally

---

<sup>51</sup> See in this context Agamben’s comment: “To the eternal question ‘why is there something, rather than nothing,’ culture responds by exploring the mystery that Benjamin once called ‘that object, to which in the last instance the veil is essential’ [the quotation is from the essay on Goethe, *SW* I:351]; culture transports us to a region where ‘nothing’ and ‘something,’ ‘life’ and ‘death,’ ‘creation’ and ‘negation’ reveal themselves as inextricably bound, bringing us to the very limits of language’s possibilities.” Agamben, “On the Limits of Violence”, trans. Elisabeth Fay, *Diacritics* 39.4 (2009), 103-111 (p. 109).

take the guise of “pure power over all life”, it will “take in” sacrifice “for the sake of the living” in its complete disappearance, into language, as we will see, as the “dissolution of legal violence” – in terms of the essay on violence (*GS* II:199, *SW* 1:250).

The transgression of the moon is immediately followed in “Der Mond” by an allusion to the other facet of mythic violence, namely the “law-preserving” violence/power (“rechtserhaltende Gewalt”), and this through the text’s evocation of the daguerreotype: “Gathered around me were the members of my family, a little rigid like the figures in a daguerreotype.” With this pre-technology of photography to which Benjamin ascribed elsewhere a trait of a deadly, inhuman likeness,<sup>52</sup> both features of the mythic law thereby coincide. The moment that is photographed, although reproduced, is all the same unique and nonreproducible, like the one-off initiation and imposition of the law. The daguerreotype image and the successive scene of ruination and disappearance into the encompassing movement of the funnel both accords, therefore, with Benjamin’s enigmatic critique of violence. That is, the re-evaluation of the essence of the political (according to Schmitt): the capability of the sovereign to exert “Gewalt” – meaning at the same time violence, force, power, or authority.

“Der Mond” continues:

Gathered around me were the members of my family, a little rigid like the figures in a daguerreotype. Only my sister was missing. “Where is Dora?” I heard my mother exclaim. Suddenly, the full moon up in the sky began ever more rapidly to expand. Coming nearer and nearer it tore the planet asunder. The railing of the iron balcony, on which we all had taken our places overlooking the street, disintegrated into pieces, and the bodies [Leiber] which had been there flew apart in all directions. The funnel [Trichter] which the moon formed [bildete] in approaching, sucked everything in. Nothing could hope to pass through it unchanged [Nichts konnte hoffen, unverwandelt durch ihn hindurchzugehen].

(*GS* IV:302, *SW* 3:406, translation modified)

This horrific scene is, suggestively, a *mise en abyme* of the sections in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” where Benjamin presents the distinction between mythic violence (whose origin is Greek), and divine violence (whose origin is Jewish and monotheist). Divine violence does not shed blood according to Benjamin, it is “bloodless” since it is separated from expiation, it is “entsühnend”

---

<sup>52</sup> “What was inevitably felt to be inhuman – one might even say deadly – in daguerreotype was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze” (*SW* 4:338), as Benjamin writes in “On some Motifs in Baudelaire”.



[GS II:199, *SW* 1:250). The divine names that which expels the two mythic forms of the law and is associated with the Jewish tradition, “God’s sphere that opposes myth”, as Benjamin comments. The principle of “all divine endmaking [Zwecksetzung]” is justice, “power [Macht] is the principle of all mythic lawmaking” (GS II:198, *SW* 1:248).

Mythic violence is exemplified by the story of Niobe; divine violence – by the story of Korah. The final scene of “Der Mond” seems to superimpose the two scenes of horror that respectively correspond to these two references of violence: the myth of Niobe who was punished by the gods and turned into a weeping stone after witnessing the instant killing of her children; and the Biblical story of Korah and his company, according to which “[T]he ground beneath them split; the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their homes.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, as the analogy to “Der Mond” reveals, the two stories are in fact rigorously knitted together. In keeping with the performativity of the echo that also features in “Der Mond”, as we have seen, the paragraph in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” that seemingly sets out to establish the opposition between the two orders of violence and their references to bare life, could be read, instead, as a dialectic at a standstill.<sup>54</sup> In the difficult passage Benjamin writes:

If mythical violence is lawmaking [or law-positing, *rechtsetzend*], divine violence is law-destroying [*rechtsvernichtend*]; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.

(GS II:199, *SW*:1 249-250)

The eternally lamenting Niobe stands in close proximity to the logic of violence underwriting the daguerreotype image in “Der Mond”. The violence that was inflicted on her, notes Benjamin, is more concerned with the imposing power of the law than it is a punishment for the breaking of an existing law. The dual disposition of petrified bodies and the stories to which these bodies testify bear some resonance in their details concerning a catastrophic event, maternal love, rescuing, guilt and the manifestation of fate. Both are the “mythic manifestation of immediate violence [unmittelbare[n] Gewalt]” to which “divine violence” serves as “an

---

<sup>53</sup> Numbers 16:32.

<sup>54</sup> Attentive to the visual in Benjamin’s evocation of these scenes of horror, Ariella Azoulay proposes a photographic reading of them, as scenes watched by their spectators, showing how the similarities between the stories prevent them from illustrating a real opposition between mythic and divine violence. As she concludes, both Niobe and Korah are rebels and belong to what Benjamin defines as “the tradition of the oppressed”. Azoulay, “The Tradition of the Oppressed”, *Qui Parle* 16.2 (2007), 73-96.

antithesis in all respects” (*GS* II:199, *SW* 1:249).

Both Niobe and the daguerreotype image are set in relation to a counter-violence associated with divine violence, that which strikes also immediately, yet “without warning and without threat”, a pure violence or force that is not a means to an end, and as such closer to Benjamin’s definition of justice. This is what is characteristic of the sudden taking place of the expansion of the moon and the effacement of the very scene of memory and dream it brings about, as the domestic room, at first opens up to the city, only to be annihilated completely in public. Niobe, in contrast, does not disappear, but she does merge into the earth. She is arrested, materialised, as an afterimage of the striking bloody violence: “violence therefore bursts upon Niobe from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate. It is not actually destructive [Sie ist nicht eigentlich zerstörend]”. This violence that “brings a cruel death to Niobe’s children”, still “stops short of claiming the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between man and gods” (*GS* II:197, *SW* 1:248). Niobe is eternally entangled with fate as a manifestation of mere, natural life without dissolution, without expiation, secularised in space.

In contrast to this, it is the annihilating character of violence that “Der Mond”, the moon, ultimately ascribes to the dream image. The sheer destructiveness that bursts asunder the daguerreotype view of the family standing on the balcony is self-negated by the dissoluble functioning of the funnel, as the ground becomes groundless and expressionless. For, as Werner Hamacher observed, “[T]he moon, which makes everything stop speechless, [has] been transformed into a voracious mouth – ein Mund”.<sup>55</sup> Striking without a threat, speechlessness reveals itself as irreducible, a medium without a purpose or a goal. For everything is mediated, channelled, yet in a reversed, destructive manner; it is spatially there, yet in an act of dissolving withdrawal. To the extent that everything is *sprachlos*, *bildlos*, *blutlos* – “nothing could hope to pass through unchanged”. The funnel, in making the world disappear, sucks “everything” – “alles” – in, and yet, in this complete annihilation, the manifesting, authoritative law is nevertheless preserved in the form of an echo or a trace: in as much as “*Nothing* could hope to pass through it unchanged”, everything *is* changed – “verwandelt [ist]” (*GS* IV:302, *SW* 3:406).

The balcony – the place of viewing the city, the open space or the agora, has thereby turned into a *Schauplatz*, which is not only the place of being viewed and photographed, but also – the place of awaiting judgment and redemption, subject to the “easy”, or light “play”

---

<sup>55</sup> Hamacher, “The Word Wolke – If It Is One”, p. 155.

(“leichte[s] Spiel”) of the moon, a phrasing that seems to signal the dialectics of justice and law. Encrypted into an allegorical figure of death and ruin is the second nature architecture of the house and its inhabitants, the bourgeois family; the “everything” which is transformable, allegorical. It is as if this intensification of the functioning of bourgeois language eventually irrupts as what could be put in terms of the essay on violence as the “ungeheuren Fällen”, the terrible cases in which fatal divine violence and its law come about.<sup>56</sup>

In the very last lines of “Der Mond”, the functioning of language is in play in its relation to the predicaments of violence under the rule of the moon:

“If there is pain now, then there’s no God,” I heard myself conclude, and, at the same time, I collected what I wanted to take across. I put it all in a verse. It was my farewell. “O star and flower, spirit and dress, love, grief, time, and eternity!” But even as I hastened to entrust myself to these words, I was already awake. And only now did the horror [das Grauen] which the moon had just inspired seem to grip me for all time, without any hope of reprieve. For this awakening set no goal to the dream as others did, but instead betrayed to me that it had evaded the dream, and that the rule of the moon [das Regiment des Mondes], which I experienced as a child, had failed for another world time [für eine weitere Weltzeit gescheitert war].

(GS IV:301, SW 3:406, translation modified)

To the extent that the rubble is swallowed by the total, transformative moment (which touches at the same time on the logic of eternal return), this complete reversal might be seen as a reference to pure revolutionary violence. This is the violence that is eventually glossed in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” in historical terms, as “ein neue[s] geschichtliche[s] Zeitalter”, and is the violence that informs Benjamin’s evaluation of the general proletarian strike (GS II:202, SW 1:252). The last line of “Der Mond” indicates an inaugurated new historical age which nevertheless immediately collapses. Presentiment of such downfall is implied in Benjamin’s famous formulation from the *Passagen-Werk*:

---

<sup>56</sup> On Benjamin’s use of the phrase in the context of his argument in regard to a conscious decision to not follow or disregard the commandment not to kill, see Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, pp. 59-78. According to Weigel, the phrasing “in monstrous cases” has to be construed separately from Schmitt’s concept of “state of exception”, a link established among other reasons by the English translation: “in exceptional cases”. As Weigel reflects, Benjamin’s line of argumentation is drawn back to the question of the sacredness of life, to the bond established between the human and the in-human on the basis of the biblical “likeness of God” and with it, the elevation of the human from the creaturely state. Ibid., p. 72.

Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, pushes towards awakening [träumend drängt sie auf das Erwachen hin]. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already noticed – by cunning. With the destabilizing of the commodity economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.

(*GS V:59, AP 13*)

“Der Mond”, too, ends with an ambiguous dialectics at a standstill: a particular kind of image that nevertheless prefigures the flight from the mythic dimensions of the dream, carried out by the logic of “Entsetzung”: the disestablishment of what has been set, posited, formed, to the extent that, in terms of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”, “a new historical epoch is founded” (*SW 1:252, GS II:202*).

This dialectic is inscribed in the rule of the moon and the oscillation inflicted by it, between being and non-being, between mere life, the outcome of the challenging of fate and mythic violence, where life takes the form of a sacrifice, and Benjamin’s other reference to violence: divine law and justice. It is with the latter, as the essay on violence has it, that “man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life [...] including even the uniqueness of his bodily person” (*SW 1:251, GS II:201*). The residue of a failure that the final enactment of the moon left echoing back, although pointing to a manifestation of mythic *Schein*, is also eclipsed by another dimension, that of the imageless and the expressionless. These are the traits in Benjamin’s writings that are inescapably bound to what this thesis has aimed to propound: the idiosyncratic semantics of ‘tactility’ or the sense of touch, and with it, Benjamin’s concepts of life and creaturely, distorted existence. Furthermore, the melancholic tone of the last sentence of “Der Mond” seems to be drawn from Benjamin’s photographic logic, according to which, although what is presented is always already in the past, we ought to search the picture for the “inconspicuous spot” that coincides with “the tiny spark of contingency” (“das winzige Fünkchen Zufall”), as the essay on photography has it (*GS II:371, SW 2:510*). In Benjamin’s looking backwards, he seeks the image of that which is un-photographable: utopia and the radical dark room of the crypt.

In a fragment on Baudelaire written in 1921, Benjamin, postulating a variation of this naked, tactile, gaze, designates a mental capacity, ascribed solely to Baudelaire, as presentiment, as “Ahnung”. Indicating that “earthly time” cannot be reproduced in a hypothetical state of its pertinence to a photographer dispossessed of the means to develop his photographic plates, it is said that it is only Baudelaire that “is able to extract from the negatives

of essence a presentiment of its real picture. And from this presentiment speaks the negative of essence in all his poems” (*GS* VI:133, *SW* 1:361). With this postulation of “the negative of essence”, the threads that compose the concept of tactility might come into relief. The tactile, as a borderline concept within the aesthetics and the realm of the beautiful, as we have asserted here, in particular through the discussion of architecture, operates, as Benjamin’s idiosyncratic construal of the tactile has it, as the negative impulse in the order of things. Exposed bare to the eye as a photographic negative, in a state of creaturely *Untergang*, “earthly time” is thus inscribed in the anti-figural logic of the tactile, an imageless and expressionless more than origin, nature before and after history.

## Tactility and the More than Origin of the Law (Benjamin With Kafka)

### (Conclusion)

That the idea or the medium of architecture are indicative of an art form impervious to myth and to *Schein* could be gleaned from Benjamin's remark on Kafka already cited in the introduction to this thesis: "No human art appears as deeply compromised as the art of building [Baukunst] in Kafka. None is more vital [lebenswichtiger], and none makes perplexity [Ratlosigkeit] more perceptible [vernehmbarer, also more audible] (*GS* II:1219, my translation). From this reflection, the strands suffusing Benjamin's writings, as they were postulated and explored in the different parts of this thesis, could be extrapolated: the moods of anxiety and uncanniness inextricable to architecture as well as the dialectics of distraction and attentiveness assigned to this medium. The chiasmus of "natural history" and the linguistic episode of Babel also form part of the scenographic apparatus that is at stake here. As has been suggested (in Part One) with reference to Kafka's "Vor dem Gesetz", the thinking image of "Die taktische Dominante" dwelling "in der Architektur", where it is more originally "zu Hause", calls to mind a characteristic Kafkan "cloudy spot" (*GS* II:420, *SW* 2:802). Both figures of concealment, marked by anti-opticality, and therefore, by the precept of the imageless and its grounding on the double-sidedness of the sensing/substantial body, give contour to Benjamin's stance concerning the antinomies of the image and of the law (as shown in Part Three).

By way of resumption of the central arguments of the thesis, drawn together at its end, the following remarks conduct a brief, final, return to Kafka. With this move, what this thesis sought to stake out as the workings of tactility in Benjamin's body of work, also with reference to Kafka's "Der Bau", will be framed with a set of other architectural imaginaries as projected by Kafka. It will be suggested in conclusion that tactility – mediated here once more through ideas of architecture – bears witness to Benjamin's theologico-political outlook of the law as it is constructed and performed in Kafka.<sup>1</sup>

The arguments in the preceding pages have emanated, for the most part, from two principal conjectures and figurations of the tactile. The first, to recall, is "Die taktische

---

<sup>1</sup> In a letter of October 1934 to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin indicates that in his Kafka writings he is "confronted with two ends at once, the political and the mystical". *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (New York: Schocken books, 1989), p. 143. In a letter of July 1934 to Scholem, objecting to the theological interpretations of Kafka's work, as exercised by Max Brod and others, Benjamin reflects on the "broad theological side [breite theologische Seite]" that governs his own response to Kafka, yet this side, he notes, is "admittedly overshadowed" ("freilich beschattet[e]"). Ibid., p. 128 (translation modified).

Dominante”, which, through its uncanny residency in architecture, connotes the remoteness of that which is comparatively “more original”. The second, “im Taktischem”, is an aesthetic phenomenon characterised as dissolution into the infinite, predominantly associated with the faculty of touch, which instigates, through “de-formation”, the expressionless, the mark of pure semblance, that of “Schein” as “rein” (as detailed in Part Three). The first of these conjectural definitions, unearthed from the first version of the “Kunstwerk” essay (in the line that was omitted in the following two versions of the essay), is predominantly spatial and impregnated with a mythic trait of time as repetition. The second one, as registered in the fleeting evocation of the trope “im Taktischem” in the cryptic fragment “Phantasie”, is fused with a characteristic messianic nature, worked through eternal downfall. (The fragment on Shakespeare is resolved around this sensation of tactile dissolution.)

“In tactility”, in architectural sites of sensing-through (also the architectonics of translation, as we have seen in Part Three), the crossing of image and the philosophical “presentation of truth” (*GS* I:208, *O* 2) uncovers the realms of creaturely life and of natural history that abides in these forms. With this exposure (and the abundant procedures of unveiling indicate its ‘tactile’ impulse), the condition of remoteness from Creation and from the intervention of the Fall of language enters into a relation with (re)presentational forms. This aporetic stance flows from the about-face of the allegorical. Ultimately laid bare as secularised and sensed as overwhelming concretised history, the foldedness of the “spirit of the allegorical” proves itself not to be an arbitrary sign but rather, an historical one. Benjamin’s analysis betrays the opening distance or abyss of abstraction as becoming readable by dint of the death of the intention that lies buried in any act of signification or judgment. For meaning, the communicative element of language that is nevertheless external and foreign to it according to the account given by Benjamin, cannot be set apart from the sensing body nor from the relation it forms with the immeasurable imagelessness of its corporeality, its being also a *Körper*. If the having of a body *is* essentially an image-being (“bildliche[s] Sein”), it is thus also communicative and semiotic; and yet, projected into “one of the highest realms of language” (*GS* VI:67), as Benjamin says in the fragment “Wahrnehmung und Leib”, the body always gestures towards its authoritative functioning as a *topos* of unrepresentability.

In “Franz Kafka, Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages” (an essay published in the *Jüdische Rundschau* in 1934), Benjamin contends that Kafka’s attempt to “lead over literature into doctrine or teaching” (“Dichtung in die Lehre zu überführen”), was nothing but a failure – “Gescheitert”. This failed attempt is due to the fact that, as Benjamin asserts, “No other writer has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so

faithfully” (*GS* II:427-28, *SW* 2:808). For Benjamin, it was with Kafka, with all his undertakings to represent the evasiveness of the law, that the *bildlos* has been translated into the highest law. And this predicament of translation is architecturally projected in Kafka’s writings, according to Benjamin. It is the imperative of translation, and with it, the supposition that translation is set to be always simultaneously before and after “pure language”, as Benjamin shows, that is in play in Kafka’s numerous revisions of the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel. Among them, the fragments of a parable such as “Der Turm zu Babel” (“The Tower of Babel”) and “Der Schacht von Babel” (“The Pit of Babel”)<sup>2</sup> reflect the groundless foundation of the extended narrative of “Der Bau”. This is conveyed by the portrayals of topographical motion in these parables, which are led by the antithetical yet related processes of digging and building, of ascending and descending.<sup>3</sup> As “Der Bau” envisions, building and dwelling, these dialectically enmeshed practices or conditions of being, are bound to be a failure [“Mißlingen”]; and in Kafka’s writings, architecture *is* a failure – the Tower will never be built, the castle cannot be visited, the door to the law will never be entered; it is left suspended, about to be shut. Nonetheless, it is under the sign of failure, a term that pervades Benjamin’s writings on Kafka, that “purity and beauty” could be most evidently ascribed to the writer and to his work, according to Benjamin.<sup>4</sup>

In one of Benjamin’s numerous preparatory notes to his essays on Kafka, he relates what he frequently detects as this typical and peculiar trait of failure to the creaturely world that Kafka depicts in his stories: “the residuum [Bodensatze] of the lower stratum [Schicht] of the creature [Kreatur]”. It is “among the rats, dung-beetles and moles” that “the new constitution of humanity prepares itself, the new ear for new laws [das neue Ohr für die neuen Gesetze] and the new look [Blick] for new relations” (*GS* II:1196, my translation). In the last sentence of Kafka’s “Vor dem Gesetz”, it is the “failing hearing” (“vergehendes Gehör”) of the man from the country that prompts the doorkeeper to divulge the secret of the law and of

<sup>2</sup> “If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel, without ascending it, the work would have been permitted”; “What are you Building? — I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high. We are digging the pit of Babel.” Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> See Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), pp. 142-143.

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Scholem of 12 June, 1938. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, p. 226. In his essay on Kafka, Kafka’s beauty of a failure is put forward in a pair of intertwined ‘tactile’ thinking images which he extracts out of the double meaning of the word “unfolding” (“Entfaltung”): “The word ‘unfolding’ has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of “unfolding” is really appropriate to parable; the reader takes pleasure in smoothing it out so that he has the meaning in the palm of his hand. Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect is literary” (*GS* II:420, *SW* 2:802-803).



the door.<sup>5</sup> With this, what emphatically reverberates with Benjamin's comment is also his abovementioned characterisation of "perplexity" in Kafka's texts. The "Ratlosigkeit", the difficulty or despair that they invoke in their readers, carries the mark of the allegorical site of "confusion", of the *Schädelstätte*, and with it, "the ear of lament" that was provoked by the dramatic form of the *Trauerspiel*. What emerged out of this intensification of the auditory is the blocked transmissions of language, exemplified by the paradoxical susceptibility of mute nature to lament. In Kafka, this sense of perplexity and confusion, says Benjamin, communicates itself in the most corporeal fashion through the art of building, the form of human art, that, in being the "most vital", is the form in which the close connection of history to nature, of life to death, inheres, as in a Baroque ruin. Mediated through architectural figures, the German baroque was ultimately capable, by the faculty of 'sensing-through' (the key trope adopted here from Carl Linfert), of establishing a degenerated view of political theology (as shown in Part Two).

For Hegel, to recall, architecture signals the original site of human activity of representation and engagement with nature; herein lies, unsettled, the archaic freedom of spirit. The convolution of natural history and the transmission of this intricacy could be discerned in one of Kafka's singular phrasings from the fragment "Der Schacht von Babel": "we are digging the pit of Babel". In this parable, which is shaped as a conversation between two builders, the verb "bauen" keeps resonating in a state of difference with "graben", as the latter word in the answer replaces the former in the question. The parable is what Ziarek calls an "emblem of translation".<sup>6</sup> The confusion of hearing echoes the confusion of speech, the "Sprachverwirrung", that, although yet to come, as inferred from the activity of the building of Babel, uncannily transpires as an event that had already happened. Here, the pure auditory order of language coalesces as it were into the matter of architecture, and with it, a subjection to a powerful ('gewaltig') call from what is yet to come but also already encased or encrypted, to recall the formative sensation that underscores *Berliner Kindheit* (as sensed-through in Part Three). Kafka's fragment of a parable is marked by an uncanny return, the phenomenon which, together with that of *déjà vu*, as indicated by Adorno, galvanizes the philosophical investigation of *Naturgeschichte* (as discussed in Parts Two and Three). Furthermore, the confusion of hearing and of speaking embodies a voice and an echo of the scene portrayed by Benjamin in the essay on language as the "turning away from things". This "enslavement" (*GS* II:154, *SW*

---

<sup>5</sup> *Parables and Paradoxes*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure*, p. 142.

1:72), to echo Benjamin's word, could also be put in terms of the coercion of building and of dwelling, i.e., the task of walling up against nature that is entailed by being outside the walls of Eden.

As some of Kafka's commentators have observed, his configuration of the law does not convey what kind of law is at issue – whether it is a moral, a political or a natural law, a law of state or Jewish law – only that is built around a paradox of power and impotence. As Vivian Liska notes, “Kafka's narrative writings confirm the plight of the human condition of being ruled by an unattainable and powerful sovereign who is the author of the law.”<sup>7</sup> But the unattainability of the sovereign as site of authorship also constantly undercuts its projections of power, for which the city, in Kafka's writings, is a primal site.<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Scholem, raising the question of how one is to conceive, in the Kafkaian sense, of the “projection of the Last judgement into world history”, Benjamin reflects: “is it [die Projektion] devoted to raising the Law up high [Hebung], or to burying it [Verscharren]? Kafka, so I contend, had no answers to these questions.”<sup>9</sup> The perplexity of the law is thus arrested in abeyance between building and digging, between “bauen” and “graben”, the tower and the pit. The connective tissue between these extremities of building and burying, the sign of the chiasmus they form, might be ascribed to the programmatic, topographic setup of the *Trichter*. Allied with divine violence, and hence, with the highest performance of language (and of the law), the funnel, projected into and projecting the memory piece “Der Mond”, is also evocative of the twisted, descending movement down Babel. Its violent movement figures a reverberance of the law of translation and of language, the law that is grafted into the architectures it ruins.

It might be plausible, then, that when Benjamin comments in the “Kunstwerk” essay on the reception of architecture that comes about through a distracted collectivity, and that the laws (“Gesetze”) of such reception are “most instructive [sind die lehrreichsten]” – it is his interpretation of Kafka that is being echoed. It is precisely intransmissibility becoming a law (“Gesetz”) and a doctrine (“Lehre”), as meaning is let go, that Kafka's stories and parables transmit most succinctly. This intransmissibility testifies to their fulfilment of historical time as earthly, natural historical time. And more specifically: the commentary on the adherence of the reception of the tactile and by implication, of the medium of architecture, to that which is only ever comparatively ‘more original’, and therefore never reaches identity with itself, could

---

<sup>7</sup> Liska, “Benjamin and Agamben on Kafka, Judaism and the Law”, in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, pp. 201-214 (p. 201).

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew J. Webber, “The City”, in *Franz Kafka in Context*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 233-240.

<sup>9</sup> *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, p. 128.

be traced back to Kafka's parable "Vor dem Gesetz".<sup>10</sup> The point of convergence would be the limitless and boundless *Körper*, the mode of existence that differs and thus leaves its imprints on the *Leib*, the body that is marked by its delimitation within the social, historical order.

The law too, as conveyed by Kafka's enigma of a parable, is spatially dispersed, unbounded and unlimited; it is literally too, located more originally in architecture, in "Der Architektur zuhause", and yet the law could never be encountered as housed, nor as 'being there'. The law, as projected and imagined in the "Vor dem Gesetz" parable, is sequestered and enclosed in the architectonics of endless successive halls; and the last one, it is said, is the locus of law. That the law looms as "Die taktische Dominante", not least due to the connotations of violence that this figure bears, might be inferred from a closer look at the architecture that Kafka's narrative features. The idea that the law is an excess of origin is accomplished through the law's manifestation as a kind of sensing-through a continuum of halls ("Von Saal zu Saal"), each hall with its doorkeeper. To be "before the law", Derrida has observed, means that "man is a subject of the law in appearing before it. This is obvious, but since he is before it because he cannot enter it, he is also outside the law (an outlaw)."<sup>11</sup> Time itself, as the parable unfolds it, is spatialized. And although this amounts to secularised history, precisely because of that, it entails and thus demands to be deformed into a redemptive anticipation mixed with presentiment as prescribed by Benjamin's postulation of the allegorical. Messianic historical perpetuation, as some interpretations of the parable suggest,<sup>12</sup> flips over into nature which is historical, messianic in its downfall, as nature and history play off against each other. The ghostly dimension of the dwelling place of the law looms large as what Benjamin calls the "final phantasmagoria of the objective" (*GS* I: 406, *O* 232) since in fact, the whole setting is susceptible to immateriality. The *Schauplatz* in the parable consists of an open door; nothing, in effect is, or ever will be, 'walled up', and yet this architectural openness perplexingly stands for a block. The textual construction of the parable is predicated upon an architectural element, an open-and-closed door that uncannily endures in pointing to the no-place of the law. That is, it gestures in the same direction as does the open-and-closed balcony in the last section of the *Trauerspiel* book.

---

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin probably read the story around 1915. In the letter to Scholem from July 1925, he writes that he had read the "short story 'Before the Law'" ten years ago. See Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* vol. I, p. 397.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, "Before the Law", p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Derrida, "Before the Law" and Giorgio Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign", in *Potentialities*, pp. 172-174. For Agamben, the parable "is an allegory of the state of law in the messianic age, that is, the age of its being in force without significance" (p. 172).

Thinking in images, and with it, the thinking of the image, serve Benjamin to give evidence of that which cannot be said or conceptualised as nevertheless inhabiting language. The tactile clings to the imagistic and yearns for it, and Benjamin's thinking images are always haunted by its insistence. Tactility, as a key trait of Benjamin's writing in and of images, in and of the powers and failures of language, bears on a kinship to that which cannot be seen or heard. This is what Benjamin is sensing-through in the scenographic working of his ideas of architecture: the refuse of history, the distortions of life, and the chiasmic cross-binding of the two in the conditions of natural history. It is "life as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the castle is built".<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin in a letter to Scholem, August 11, 1934, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, p. 135.

## Bibliography

### Works cited

#### Primary Literature

- Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols I-VII, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989)
- *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019)
- *Selected Writings*, vols 1-4, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996)
- *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999)
- “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” [First Version], trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room* 39 (2010), 11-38
- Adorno, Theodor W., “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”, in *Philosophische Frühschriften, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 345-365
- “The Idea of Natural History”, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (1984), 111-124
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vols I-II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)
- *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vols I-III, in Hegel, *Werke* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1970)

#### Secondary Literature

- Adorno, T. W., “Adornos Seminar von Sommersemester 1932 über Benjamins *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*”, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, vol. IV (Adorno Archiv. Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), 52-77
- *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)
- “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin”, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shirley Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 227-241
- “The Actuality of Philosophy”, trans. Bruce Mayo, *Telos* 31 (1977), 120-33
- Agamben, Giorgio, “Form-of-life”, in *Means Without End, Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 3-12
- “Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life”, in *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-160
- “In Praise of Profanation”, in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 73-92
- *Language and Death, The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999)

- “On the Limits of Violence”, trans. Elisabeth Fay, *Diacritics* 39.4 (2009), 103-111
- *The Fire and the Tale*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017)
- “The Messiah and the Sovereign”, in *Potentialities, Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 172-174
- “Vocation and Voice”, trans. Jeff Fort, in *Qui Parle* 10.2 (1997), 89-100
- “Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption”, in *Potentialities, Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 138-159
- Alter, Robert, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York, NY: Norton, 1996)
- Azoulay, Ariella, “The Tradition of the Oppressed”, *Qui Parle* 16.2 (2007), 73-96
- Benjamin, Andrew, “Benjamin and the Baroque: Posing the Question of Historical Time”, in *Rethinking the Baroque*, ed. Helen Hills (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), pp.161-182
- “Framing Pictures, Transcending Marks: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Paintings, or Signs and Marks’”, in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: Re:press books, 2009), pp. 129-142
- “Passing Through Deconstruction: Architecture and the Project of Autonomy” in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell, et. al., (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 40-47
- “Porosity at the Edge: Working Through Walter Benjamin’s ‘Naples’”, in *Walter Benjamin and Architecture*, ed. Gevork Hartoonian (London: Rutledge, 2010), pp. 39-50
- *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance, Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2006)
- “Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present”, in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), pp.145-174
- and Rice, Charles, “Walter Benjamin and Architecture”, *Journal of Architecture*, 12.5 (2007), 471-475
- Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Briefe* vol. I and vol. IV, eds. Christoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995)
- Benjamin, Walter and Scholem, Gershom, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (New York: Schocken books, 1989)
- Ben-Naftali, Michal, Preface to the Translation of Jacques Derrida’s “Des Tour de Babel” into Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2002), pp. 7-33
- Birnbaum, Antonia, “Variations of Fate”, trans. Carlo Salzani and Brendan Moran, in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, eds. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 91-108
- Bloch, Ernst, “Images of *Déjà Vu*”, in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 200-209
- *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995)
- Bratu Hansen, Miriam, “Benjamin’s Aura”, *Critical Inquiry* 34.2 (2008), 336-75

- Cassin, Barbara, et al. ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)
- Caygill, Howard, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition", in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 1-31
- *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998)
- Cohen, Hermann, *Religion of Reason, Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Frederick Ungar: New York, 1972)
- Comay, Rebecca, "Defaced Statues: Idealism and Iconoclasm in Hegel's Aesthetics", *October* 149 (2014), 123–42
- "Hegel's Last Words", in *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing*, eds. Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2018), pp. 65-86
- "Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot*", in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 32-5
- "Mourning, Work, Play", *Research in Phenomenology* 23.1 (1993), 105-130
- "Paradoxes of Lament: Benjamin and Hamlet", in *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives*, eds. Ilit Ferber, Paula Schwebel (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 257-276
- Comay, Rebecca, and Frank Ruda, *The Dash – the Other Side of Absolute Knowing: The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018)
- Cunningham, David, "Architecture and the Politics of Aesthetics: Autonomy, Heteronomy, and the Philosophy of Art", in *The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture*, ed. Nadir Lahiji (London, New York: Bloomsbury 2014), pp. 35-54
- Derrida, Jacques, "A Letter to Peter Eisenman", trans. Hilary P. Hanel, *Assemblage* 12 (1990), 7-13
- "Before the Law", trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 181-220
- "Des Tours de Babel", trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. I, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 191-225
- "Différance", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 3-27
- "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), 369-418
- *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)
- *On touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press., 2005)
- "Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from Being and Time", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 29-67
- "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 69-108
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London, Continuum, 2007)

- Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid, "Hanging Over the Abyss", in *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2005), pp. 161-90
- Dolar, Mladen, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006)
- Farrell Krell, David, "Das Unheimliche: Architectural Sections of Heidegger and Freud", *Research in Phenomenology* 22.1 (1992), 43-61
- Farber, Ilit, "Stimmung, Heidegger and Benjamin", in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), pp. 67-94
- Freud, Sigmund, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18 (1920-1922), ed. James Strachey et al., (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 7-64
- "Das Unheimliche", in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 12 (London: Imago, 1947)
- "The Interpretation of Dreams", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5 (1900-1901), ed. James Strachey et al., (London: Hogarth Press, 1955)
- "The Uncanny", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (1917-1919), ed. James Strachey et al., (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 217-256
- Friedlander, Eli, "Learning from the Colors of Fantasy", *Boundary 2* 45.2 (2018), 111-37
- Friedman, Michael and Danit Dottan, "Introduction" to the translation of Heidegger's *Die Sprache* into Hebrew, in Martin Heidegger, *Die Sprache*, trans. Michael and Danit Dottan (Haifa: Pardes, 2016), pp. ix-xxiv
- Gasché, Rodolphe, "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language", *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 11.1 (1986), 69-90
- Geyer-Ryan, Helga, "Effects of Abjection in the Texts of Walter Benjamin", *MLN* 107.3 (1992), 499-520
- Gilloch, Graeme, *Myth and metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997)
- Gölz, Sabine, "Geistesgegenwart als Lichtung im Ähnlichen: Bachmanns 'Heute' oder Benjamins 'Jetztzeit'?", in *Re-Acting to Ingeborg Bachmann*, eds. Caitriona Leahy and Bernadette Cronin (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), pp. 97-109
- Gunning, Tom, "Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Specters", *Media Art History*. <http://www.mediaarthistory.org/Programmatic%20key%20texts/pdfs/Gunning.pdf> (2004)
- Hadot, Pierre, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002)
- Hamacher, Werner, "Intensive Languages", trans. Ira Allen with Steven Tester, *MLN* 127.3 (2012), 485-541
- "'Now': Walter Benjamin and Historical Time", in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London, New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 38-68
- "The Word Wolke –If It Is One", trans. Peter Fenves, *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 11.1 (1986), 113-163



- *Pleroma: Reading in Hegel: The Genesis and Structure of a Dialectical Hermeneutics in Hegel*, trans. Nicholas Walker and Simon Jarvis (London: Athlone, 1998)
- Hanssen, Beatrice, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1998)
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse, Dritter Teil, Die Philosophie des Geistes*, in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 10 (Frankfurt a.M: Schurkamp Verlag, 1970)
- *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970)
- *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, 2018)
- *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991)
- Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996)
- “Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft”, *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Philosophische Kritik* 161 (1916), 173-88
- *Hölderlin's Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine”*, trans. William McNeill, Julia Ireland (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014)
- *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982)
- *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1953)
- Heynen, Hilde, “A Critical Position for Architecture?” in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell, et al., (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 48-56
- Iversen, Margaret, and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago, Ill., Bristol: University of Chicago Press, 2010)
- Jacoby Volk, Carmella and Messing Marcus, Anat, “Haptic Diagrams: From Cinematography to Architectural Performance”, *Journal of Architectural Education* 62.3 (2008), 71-76
- Jennings, Michael W., “The Mausoleum of Youth: Between Experience and Nihilism in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*”, *Paragraph* 32.3 (2009), 313-30
- Jennings, Michael W. and Wilke, Tobias, “Editors' Introduction Walter Benjamin's Media Tactics: Optics, Perception, and the Work of Art”, *Grey Room* 39 (2010), 6-9
- Kafka, Franz, “Die Verwandlung”, in *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1996), pp. 96-161
- “The Burrow”, in *Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1983), pp. 325-359
- *Parables and Paradoxes, in German and English*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1975)
- Kaplan, Aryeh, *Sefer Yeẓirah, English & Hebrew* (York Beach, Me.: S. Weiser, 1991)
- Keiller, Patrick, “Film as Spatial Critique”, in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell et al., (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 115-123
- Kemp, Wolfgang, “Fernbilder: Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft”, in *'Links hatte sich noch alles zu enträtseln ...' Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt a.M: Syndikat, 1978), pp. 224-228
- Khatib, Sami, “The Messianic Without Messianism”, *Anthropology & Materialism* [Online], 1 (2013)

- Klages, Ludwig, *Cosmogonic Reflections*, trans. Joseph D. Pryce (London: Arktos, 2015)  
 — *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1963)
- Koch, Gertrud, “Image Politics: The Monotheistic Prohibition of Images and Its Afterlife in Political Aesthetics”, *Critical Horizons* 14.3 (2013), 341-54
- Lacour, Claudia Brodsky, “From the Pyramids to Romantic Poetry: Housing the Spirit in Hegel”, in *Rereading Romanticism*, ed. Martha B. Helfer (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 327-366  
 — *In the Place of Language: Literature and the Architecture of the Referent* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009)
- Levin, Thomas Y., “Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History”, *October* 47 (1988), 77-83
- Linfert, Carl, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung: Mit einem Versuch über granzösische Architekturzeichnungen des 18. Jahrhunderts”, *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* I, ed. Otto Pächt (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1931), 133-246
- Liska, Vivian, “Benjamin and Agamben on Kafka, Judaism and the Law”, in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, pp. 201-214  
 — “Kafka’s Other Job”, In: *The Book of Job. Aesthetics, Ethics, Hermeneutics*, eds. Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014), pp. 123-145  
 — “Walter Benjamin’s Dialectics of Attentiveness”, *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 65.1(2011), 16-24
- Löwy, Michael, “Revolution Against ‘Progress’: Walter Benjamin’s Romantic Anarchism”, *New Left Review* 152 (1985), 42-59
- Lupton, Julia Reinhard, “Creature Caliban”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (2000), 1-23  
 — “Creature Caliban Revisited: Shakespeare, Benjamin, and Post-Tragic Form”, a talk given in the conference *Walter Benjamin and Shakespeare*, London, November 2018.
- Malabou, Catherine, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (New York: Routledge, 2005)
- Mali, Joseph, “The Reconciliation of Myth: Benjamin’s Homage to Bachofen”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60.1 (1999), 165-87
- Marder, Elissa, *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001)  
 — “Inhuman Beauty: Baudelaire’s Bad Sex”, *Differences* 27.1 (2016), 1-24
- Menninghaus, Winfried, “Walter Benjamin’s Variations of Imagelessness”, *Critical Horizons* 14.3 (2013), 407-428
- Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000)
- Messing Marcus, Anat, “‘Im Taktischen’: Figures of Touch in the Work of Walter Benjamin”, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 93.3 (2018), 298-316
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)  
 — *The Sense of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)
- Pahl, Katrin, *Tropes of Transport: Hegel and Emotion* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2012)

- Rainer Nägele, "The Laughing Tear: Constructions of Allegory in Modernism", in *New Directions in Emblem Studies*, ed. Amy Wygant (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblems Studies, 1999), pp. 77-91
- Rice, Charles, "Critical Post-Critical Problems of Effect, Experience and Immersion", in *Critical Architecture*, eds. Jane Rendell et.al., (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 261-268
- Richter, Gerhard, "Adorno and the Excessive Politics of the Aura", in *Benjamin's Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura*, ed. Lise Patt (Los Angeles, Calif.: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2001), pp. 25-36
- "Can Anything Be Rescued by Defending It?", in *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (Colombia University Press: 2010), pp. 72-87
- *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002)
- Riegl, Alois, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1985)
- *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie nach den funden in Österreich-Ungarn* (Wien: K. K. Hof- und staats-druckerei, 1901)
- Rokem, Freddie, "'But a storm is blowing from Paradise'/'Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her': Walter Benjamin and The Tempest", a talk given in the conference *Walter Benjamin and Shakespeare*, London, November 2018
- "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst", *Graphische Künste* 22 (1899), 47-56
- Rose, Gillian, "Architecture to Philosophy – the Post-Modern Complicity", in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 225-240
- "Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of the Modern Judaism", in *Judaism and Modernity Philosophical Essays* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2017), pp. 175-210
- Ross, Alison, *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (London: Routledge, 2014)
- Salzani, Carlo, "Purity (Benjamin with Kant)", *History of European Ideas* 36.4 (2010), 438-447
- Santner, Eric L., *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006)
- Scholem, Gershom, *Tagebücher* vol. 2 (1917-1923), (Frankfurt a.M: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995)
- "The Tzelem", in *The Fundamentals of the Kabbalah and its Symbols* (in Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1975), pp. 358-380
- Schwartz, Frederic J., *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005)
- Sperling, Harry, and Maurice Simon, eds., *The Zohar* (London: The Soncino Press, 1931)
- Steiner, Uwe, "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political", *New German Critique* 83 (2001), 43-88
- Tobias, Rochelle, "Irreconcilable: Ethics and Aesthetics for Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin", *MLN* 127.3 (2012), 665-80
- Vatter, Miguel, "Married Life, Gay Life as a Work of Art, and Eternal Life", *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44.4 (2011), 309-335
- Vidler, Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999)
- *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT, 2002)

- Wahlfarth, Irvin, "Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros. A Tentative Reading of Zum Planetarium", in *Perception and Experience in Modernity, Benjamin Studien*, ed. Helga Geyger-Ryan (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 65-110
- Webber, Andrew J., *Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- "The City", in *Franz Kafka in Context*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 233-40
- *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)
- Weber, Samuel, *Freud-Legende, Expanded Edition* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000)
- Weigel, Sigrid, "Between Creation and Last Judgement, the Creaturely and the Holy: Benjamin and Secularization", trans. Georgina Paul, *Paragraph* 32.3 (2009), 359-81
- *Body- and Image- Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (London, New York: Routledge, 1996)
- "Eros", in *Benjamins Begriffe*, eds. Michael Opitz & Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), pp. 299-340
- "Eros and Language, Benjamin's Kraus Essay", trans. Georgina Paul, in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 278-295
- "Fidelity, Love, Eros: Benjamin's Bireferential Concept of Life as Developed in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities'", trans. Chadwick Smith, in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, eds. Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 75-92
- "The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History", trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith and Christine Kutschbach, *Critical Inquiry* 41.2 (2015), 344-66
- *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013)
- Wellbery, David, "Stimmung", trans. Rebecca Pohl, *New Formations* 93 (2017), 6-45
- Welton, Donn, "Introduction: Foundations of a Theory of the Body", in *The Body: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Donn Welton (Malden, Mass., Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 1-8
- Wilde, Tobias, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses", *Grey Room* 39 (2010), 39-55
- Ziarek, Ewa Płonowska, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)
- Zimnik, Nina, "Allegorie Und Subjektivität in Walter Benjamins *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*", *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 72.4 (1997), 285-302

### Other Sources

- Adorno, Theodor W., *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. R. Kullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)
- Alter, Robert, *Necessary Angels. Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and*

- Scholem* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991)
- Arendt, Hannah, "Introduction" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 1-55
- Benjamin, Walter, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso Books, 1998)
- Buck-Morss, Susan, *The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT press, 1991)
- Butler, Judith, "Beyond Seduction and morality: Benjamin's Early aesthetics" in *The Life and Death Images, Ethics and Aesthetics*, eds. Diarmuid Costello, Dominic Willsdon (London: Tate, 2008), pp. 63-81
- Deleuze, Gilles, *The Fold: Leibniz and the baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)
- Eiland, Howard, "Reception in Distraction", *Boundary 2* 30.1 (2003), 51-66
- Eiland, Howard and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014)
- Farrell Krell, David, *Archetecture: Ecstasies of Space, Time and the Human Body* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1997)
- Fenves, Peter, *Arresting Language. From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001)
- Ferber, Ilit, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013)
- Friedlander, Eli, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012)
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von., *Elective Affinities*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971)
- Hamacher, Werner, "Afformative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'", trans. Dana Hollander, in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy, Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 110-138
- Jacobson, Eric, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003)
- Martel, James R., *The One and Only Law: Walter Benjamin and the Second Commandment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014)
- North, Paul, *The Problem of Distraction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)
- Malabou, Catherine, "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'", *Parallax* 15 (2009), 41-52
- Pensky, Max, "Three Kinds of Ruins: Heidegger, Benjamin, Sebald", *Poligrafi* 16.61/62 (2011), 65-89
- Rosenzweig, Franz, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005)
- Santner, Eric L., "Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor" in *The Neighbor. Three Inquiries in Political Theology* eds. Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) pp. 76-133

Scholem, Gershom, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1996)

— *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981)

Vries, Hent de., *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005)

Weber, Samuel, *Benjamin's-abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008)