Textures of the Liminal Image at the Crossroads of Modern German Aesthetics, Art History and Contemporary Visual Cultures. A Comparative Study from Benjamin to Didi-Huberman.

by

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Abstract

Taking as its main reference the work of Walter Benjamin, this thesis examines the complex status of the image and its ambivalent positioning at the frontiers of thinking and seeing, pondering the way in which this construct offers an occasion to problematise the relation between the philosophical and the visual, while questioning the limits of what is thinkable, sayable, readable, intelligible. Drawing from a selection of literary and visual images, vis-à-vis philosophies of the limit that have conditioned the history of aesthetics and informed the development of visual cultures, this project also charts the resurgence of Benjamin's insights on the liminal efficacy of the image within Georges Didi-Huberman's contemporary image theory, arguing for the ongoing urgency to rethink the interstice between image and thought.

The thesis is structured as follows: pursuing the theoretical anchor of the 'border stone', as it cryptically appears in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the first chapter provides the contextual framework within which Benjamin's early diagnoses of image's liminality are first brought to the fore, vis-à-vis Kantian, Neo-Kantian (Panofsky and Saxl) and post-Kantian (Heidegger) revisitations of the limits between seeing and thinking. Chapter two then proceeds to investigate the liminal motifs of 'transversality' and 'simultaneity' as they appear in the context of Benjamin's reflections on the interlacing of the body and the picture plane. The chapter argues that these two paradigms form the matrix for a repurposing of the nexus of ethics and life, philosophy and art, the human and non-human, through the lens of perceptual relations to the picture plane.

Equipped with the interim results of the analysis, chapter three offers an original interpretation of three under-investigated liminal images in Benjamin's corpus - the 'tangram', the 'cloudy-spot' and the 'legendary painter', through the leitmotif and gesture of image-construction. This analysis, in turn, serves as an entry point to a confrontation between Benjamin's and Aby Warburg's interrelated methods of questioning limits via image, which reveals two variations of undoing - emphatic binding; imagistic insurgence - devised as different solutions responding to the same problem. Finally, chapter four situates the question on the liminal image within the contemporary setting of Didi-Huberman's own image theory. Tracing the afterlife of Benjamin's insights on the 'swelling' quality of the image - its ability to act as a point of simultaneous delimitation and un-limitation - the chapter addresses a significant gap in English-language scholarship, first by providing a critical scrutiny and an original reading of Didi-Huberman's own species of the liminal image, and second by demonstrating the contemporary significance of rethinking, via image, the very notion and function of the limit, at a time of relentless and unbounded proliferation of visual information.

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Note on translations - this thesis draws from primary sources and untranslated literature in German, French and Italian. Where reference to the translated edition of the original text is not given, translations are mine.

For references to illustrative content (images), please refer to the separate handout - 'Table of figures'.

List of abbreviations - the following abbreviations will be used throughout the thesis:

WB *Walter Benjamin* **DH** *Didi-Huberman* **WIA** *Warburg Institute Archive*

AP Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project,* trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP)

SW _____ 1966-1985. *Selected Writings,* ed. by Marcus Bullock and others, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP)

C _____ 1994. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 1910-1940, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press)

GS _____ 1977-1985. *Gesammelte Schriften,* ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp)

GB _____ 1978. *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, 2 vols. (Berlin: Suhrkamp)

BC _____ 2006. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP)

OGT _____ 2019. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel,* trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP)

OWS _____ 2021. *One Way Street and other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, 5th ed. (New York: Verso)

BW Heidegger, Martin. 1993. *Basic Writings. From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964),* ed. by David Farrell Krell, 2nd ed. (NY: Harper Collins)

TB Scholem, Gershom. 1995-200. *Tagebücher: nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923,* ed. by Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag)

CPJ Kant, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP)

RPA Warburg, Aby. 1999. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance,* trans. by David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities)

WGB _____ 2011. *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde,* critical edition by Susanne Müller (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale)

WGS _____ 1932. *Gesammelte Schriften: die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike, kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der Europäischen Renaissance,* 2 vols. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner)

Introduction - Liminal Images, Images of the Limit, Limits of the Image

0.1 Picturing Philosophy's Limits

> Look when a painter would surpass the life,
> In limning out a well-proportion'd steed,
> His art with nature's workmanship at strife,
> As if the dead the living should exceed:
> So did this horse excel a common one,
> In shape, in courage, colour, pace and bone
> (Shakespeare 2021: 53)[1].

'*Illuminare*' - to illuminate - was what in Latin referred to the act of decorating medieval manuscripts by means of *marginalia*, or ornaments at the borders of the text. The term translated in English with the caption 'limn' which, since the early 15th century, also retained the additional meanings of 'portraying' in drawing or in words - to describe, to outline. In the lines of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis,* one reads about the limning gesture of the artist when painting: the alluring motion of a brush traces the outline of a 'well-proportioned steed' and, by demarcating the limit of form, the artist's gesture simultaneously exceeds the living, it 'surpasses' life. It is not coincidental that the act of 'limning out' resonates with the word 'limit' by virtue of an affinity traceable in the prefix 'lim'. Shakespeare's allusion to the limning gesture at the heart of artistic creation brightly captures the tactility of an exceeding at the heart of limitation. The verb 'limning', while holding word and image together in a semantic interstice, irritates conventional interpretations of the 'outline' as a mere act of containment and harbours the potential to unveil, with a delicate motion, the shadow of a certain 'exceeding', only perceptible at the bordering of - not beyond - the limiting line, which the artist's image, since time immemorial, invites us to attend to.

In the beginning, there was the outline. This is the genesis of painting, according to the mythological image traceable in the lines written by Pliny the Elder: 'The question as to the origin of the art of painting is uncertain […] but all [Greeks and Egyptians] agree that it began with tracing an outline round a man's shadow' (1961: 271). In his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian also reiterates the myth: 'there would be no painting

[1] References to Shakespeare's work are to this edition: Shakespeare, William. 2021. 'Venus and Adonis', in *The Arden Shakespeare Third Series Complete Works,* ed. by Richard Proudfoot and others (London: Arden Shakespeare), pp. 49-63, p. 53. Hereafter abbreviated to *The Arden Shakespeare.*

but that of tracing the outlines of the shadow which bodies cast in the sunshine' (2016: 133)[2]. The origin of painting shares with the biblical image of the Genesis the metaphysical interplay of light and darkness, formlessness and delimitation. In the beginning, darkness enveloped the formless and empty earth until the notable *dictum* 'let there be light', which was nothing other than a pronouncement of delimitation, separation. Separation of light and dark reflected the origin of day and night, while the majestic vault that God named as 'sky' sprung forth from the delimiting gesture that separated 'the waters which *were* under the firmament from the waters which *were* above the firmament' (Genesis I,7). Both the cosmogony of the Genesis and the Plinyan myth of origin take the tracing of the line as the birth of creation. The creative, delimiting line is cast against the dark, formless earth, on the one hand, and the dark shadow of a body, on the other hand.

At its dawnings in the cultural milieu of late 18th century Germany, philosophical aesthetics has maintained the primacy of the delimiting line - one could think of Winckelmann's appreciation for the 'noble contour', Kant's privileging of the 'drawing line' and Schiller's remarks on '*Umriss*' (outline).[3] In the historical unravelling of this tradition, the relation between the limiting outline and its own exceeding has been the object of a long-standing debate, which culminates in the opposition model of form-content, or *hylē-morphē* that has shaped the history of aesthetics. Yet what Shakespeare had so vividly captured in the 'limning' gesture offers something more than mere opposition or separation between the limit of the outline and its own un-limitation: co-existence, enabled by the artist's gesture as it touches and, in this touch, generates the painterly picture. Retrieving the nuanced semantics of the 'limning' gesture - a limit(ing) which holds within itself its own un-limiting - would redeem neither the shadow nor the outline, neither form nor the formless

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[2] See Rosenblum, Robert. 1957. 'The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism', *The Art Bulletin* 39(4): 279-290. Rosenblum shows how the mythology of the linear shadow-tracing resurfaces in the Renaissance tradition through the words of Leonardo: '*La prima pittura fu sol di una linea, la quale circondava l'ombra dell'uomo fatta dal sole ne' muri*' ['the first painting was made of only one line, which circumscribed man's shadow, which the sun cast on walls'] (Leonardo 1890: 58, §126); Leon Battista Alberti, who quotes Quintilian, 'Quintilian said that the ancient painters used to circumscribe shadows cast by the sun, and then, in this way, art grew from there' (Alberti 1980: 42); Vasari, in his *Vite*, quotes Pliny: 'But, according to what Pliny writes, this art [painting] came in Egypt from Gyges of Lydia, who […], with a charcoal in his hand, circumscribed himself on the wall' (1986: 121). Rosenblum notes that 'Pliny mentions Gyges of Lydia not in relation to the invention of painting, but to the invention of ball-throwing as a sport' (Rosenblum 1957: 279), thus unmasking an error in Vasari's citation. While Pliny, Quintilian, Leonardo and Alberti share the same image of shadow-tracing as the origin of painting, none of them assign a specific identity to the subject who is tracing the outline.

[3] See Winckelmann, Johan Joachim. 1985. 'Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and the Art of Sculpture' in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe,* ed. by Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 29-55, p. 39 'But however much the artist may gain from the imitation of nature, it can never teach him that precision of contour […] the noblest contour unites or circumscribes every component of natural and ideal beauty in the figures of the Greeks'; see Kant, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) (hereafter abbreviated CPJ) p.110: 'In painting and in sculpture, indeed in all the pictorial arts, in architecture and horticulture insofar as they are fine arts, the drawing is what is essential […] the colours that illuminate the outline belong to charm; they can of course enliven the object in itself for sensation, but they cannot make it worthy of being intuited and beautiful'; see Schiller, Friedrich (1800-1803) *Gedichte*, Leipzig, II, p. 47 '*Die schöne Bildkraft ward in eurem Busen wach. Zu edel schon, nicht müssig zu empfangen, Schuft ihr im Sand - im Thon den holden Schatten nach, Im Umriss ward sein Dasein aufgefangen*], quoted in Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting', p. 285.

but the shadow with the outline, the form with its potential for formlessness: an ungraspable juncture which bypasses the rigidness of oppositional logics without giving in to sublation[4] or reconciliation.

What is the shape and rhythm of an excess *qua* withdrawal[5] that is not reducible to the closure of a transcendental beyond? How does it become palpable, available to the senses? The contention to be advanced hereafter stems from the hypothesis, to be verified and tested throughout the thesis, that this exceeding at the core of limitation, which does not give up the sensuousness finitude of the limit for the sake of an unlimited beyond, engenders the shape of an image, more precisely a liminal image: an image not subservient to the abstractedness of the concept or the unlimitedness of the idea and, equally, an image unhinged from the fixing of limitations of mere signification, information. It would be actually more appropriate to speak about liminal images, emphasising therefore the plural, heterodox nature of the 'object' in question: by liminal images and limning gestures I refer to images that resist any attempt at one-directional interpretation, classification - in this sense, it would be futile to trace clear-cut limits between visual or literary images, for example. Liminal images distinguish themselves from mere images of the limit inasmuch as the formers resist clarity and transparency: they resist the clarity of light - of reason, and of Being - that has fortified the bond between vision and intelligibility, for a long part of the Western philosophic-aesthetic tradition; they also resist the transparency of the virtual, all-encompassing luminosity that is so peculiar to our current time, and which reduces images to mere vehicles of information. What enables a resistance to the clarity of reason and Being

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[4] See Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1993. 'The Sublime Offering', in *Of the Sublime. Presence in Question,* ed. by Jean-François Courtine and others (Albany: State of University New York Press), pp. 25-55. In this pivotal text Nancy defines the difference between (Hegelian) sublation and the sub-limit: 'There is one type of thought that reabsorbs art and another that thinks its destination. The latter is the thought of the sublime. The former thought, that of Hegel - philosophy as such - does not in fact think art as destiny or as destination but rather the reverse, the *end* of art, its goal, reason, and accomplishment. It puts an end to what it thinks: it thus does not think it at all, but only its end' (1993: 28).

[5] The form of withdrawal to which the 'limning gesture' points is not to be understood as a matter of 'inadequacy' of presentation or as withdrawal beyond representation. Nor is it a compete annihilation of the image in favour of an idealistic, transcendent content. Rather, the modality of withdrawal at stake here expands on the Kantian motif of '*abgezogene Darstellungsart*' (abstract presentation) in the context of the sublime. There, the withdrawal of presentation is a matter of '*Entgrenzung*' (undoing of limitation) which does not presuppose a phenomenal appearance beyond the limit and yet 'something' takes place. In the context of the Kantian sublime, the withdrawal of presentation takes place within representation and not, as Hegel will have it, in one 'absolute substance explicitly apart [from the positive immanence of phenomena]' (Hegel 1975 : 364, quoted in Alloa 2015: 387). This means that when Kant pronounces the Judaic indictment on the prohibition of images [*Bilderverbot* - 'Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image'] as the 'most sublime' (CPJ: 156), he is not pointing towards a mere annihilation of presentation nor to an ethical choice before the image. In his article 'The Most Sublime of All Laws: The Strange Resurgence of a Kantian Motif in Contemporary Image Politics' (2015), Emmanuel Alloa underlines that 'presentation does not give in to unrepresentability' (2015: 384), but, in the experience of sublimity, it is the conditions of presentability that are transformed from positive to negative. A negative presentation is not mere invisibility nor impossibility of presentation but a 'presentation (exhibitio) in which the rules of presentation themselves come to the fore' (2015: 385). Thus, the sublime is the most radical experience 'of the threshold' and not 'beyond the threshold' (2015: 384). But while Alloa's reading of the Kantian sublime remains tied to a concept of inadequacy of presentation that resonates with Husserl's perceptive *Inadäquatheit* - 'Beyond Kant, one could probably argue that the inadequacy invoked here for the experience of the sublime is hardly restricted to the sublime but that it concerns any given sensible representation' (Alloa 2015: 385) - Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation goes a step further in pronouncing the quality of sublimity not as 'a matter of the adequation of presentation. It is also not a matter of its inadequation. Nor is it a matter of pure presentation, whether this presentation be that of adequation or of inadequation […] it is a matter of something else, which takes place, happens, or occurs in presentation itself and in sum *through* it but which is not presentation: this motion through which, incessantly, the unlimited raises and razes itself, unlimited itself, along the limit that delimits and presents itself' (1993: 37). It is towards this 'overflowing', an exceeding which can only takes place on the edges of the limiting gesture, that the motion of 'limning' points.

can be preliminarily defined as an opaqueness, which draws a limit to our ability of comprehension, and which is crucially not reducible to mere inscrutability; equally, what enables a resistance to the transparency of information is its demand on the senses, on the material consistency of a body which does not only contemplate or absorb from distance but becomes an integral part of the liminal kinesis at stake, is touched by it, and subsequently transformed and transfigured by the image's potency. The space-time configuration of liminal images is neither completely on one side nor on the other but always caught up in a structural lack of grasp, constantly moving, relentlessly drawing the contours of a limit-undoing.

0.2 Etymo-philosophical Premise: '*imago*', '*flex*', *'limus'*, *'limen'*, *'limes'*, *'tensio'*

Before proceeding to define the contours of the argument to be advanced, and before introducing the research questions which animate the present project, there is a specific choice of wording that needs to be justified: why liminal images, and not dialectical? Far from attempting to offer yet another interpretation of what Walter Benjamin might or might have not meant by the often-quoted references on the dialectical image throughout his writings[6], this thesis will not limit the scope of the analysis to those images which would corroborate Benjamin's definition of the dialectical; quite differently, the conceptual framework within which the analysis is to be developed hinges on a broader logic of limit which, despite implicating and encompassing the Benjaminian understanding of the dialectic, is nevertheless not uniquely reducible to it. The object of the investigation throughout the different chapters of this project is the image's multifaceted ability to irritate the limits and the secure grasp of conceptual appropriation, intelligibility and representability. Rather than focusing on the way in which our thinking may delimit and restrain the imaginative potential of certain images, attention will be given to the image's liminal efficacy, namely its capacity to act upon - and to endlessly question - our presumption to classify, interpret, define and conceptualise.

Liminal images always entail, cause and instil movement, kinesis: a departure from fixed coordinates and certitudes, an abandoning that eschews the bounds of conceptual appropriation and demands to be sensed. It

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[6] Substantial scholarly work has also been done to trace links between Benjamin's usages of 'Bild' in his early writings and later theories of the dialectical image. In his article 'Ur-Ability. Force and Image from Kant to Benjamin' (2011), Kevin McLaughlin convincingly argues that interpenetration (*Durchdringung)* is the theoretical linchpin for establishing a parallel between Benjamin's uses of the image in the early writings and the later formulation of dialectical image in the context of the *Arcades Project.* Kevin McLaughlin's philological analysis of the 1914 essay 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin' reveals that Benjamin's use of the concept of image gestures toward a 'force' that originates within time and that is 'interpenetrated by space' (McLaughlin 2011: 215). Expanding on Kant's account of the dynamic sublime, such concept of force entails the capacity for time to become plastic, according to McLaughlin's reading. This plasticity, in turn, calls for confrontation with the figurability (*Bildlichkeit*) of the dialectical image. Both the plasticity ('Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin*')* and the figurability (Arcades Project) of the image point to a spatialisation of time that challenges ideas of linear and logical temporal progression. Along similar lines, Samuel Weber claims, in his *Benjamin's Abilities* (2008) that the dialectical image is 'both disjunctive and medial in its structure – which is to say, as both actual and virtual at the same time' (Weber 2008 :49). The possibility, for the dialectical image, to be both actual and virtual is a direct consequence of the spatialisation of time that is inherent in its manifestation. Another valuable essay on the relation between Benjamin's '*Bild*' in the context of the early writings and the dialectical image is Rainer Nägele's 2002 contribution to *Benjamin's Ghosts*. Nägele's argument moves from the claim that, in Benjamin's early writings, the word *Bild* does not coincide with a picture in the sense of a material object but denotes a liminal position between the realms of the conceptual and the sensuous. See Nägele, Rainer. 2002. 'Thinking Images' in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory,* ed. by Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press) pp. 23-40.

is from the standpoint of etymological analysis and philosophical discourse that the point of distinction and connection between liminal images and images of the limit can be preliminary sketched. *Limen*, the Latin for threshold, bears a close figurative relation with the architecture of passages, and it originally denoted a crossbar, the transversal stone (lintel) lying obliquely at the top of a door or window[7], connecting two sides and therefore gesturing at the dynamics of crossing-over and cutting-across which, as we will see throughout the research, form the matrix for a radical reconfiguration of the coordinates that have fuelled form-content, subject-object oppositional logics. The lintel is the horizontal structural element which, by connecting the two vertical sides of a frame, brings to completion the figuring of the door and, while withstanding overarching pressures, it discharges the tensions of the overall weight across the side jambs. In his notable treatise on architecture, Vitruvius remarks the vital function of the lintel in the constructing process: '*Limina enim et trabes structuris cum sent oneratae*'[8] (1990: 289). In the economy of the building, *limina* - literally the 'thresholds'- and *trabes structuris*, or the 'lintels', offer a vital supporting function which enables the standing-together of a construction and prevents collapses. It is only by adding the horizontal element that the opening breach of a door or window comes forth as a constructed figure. The beam, by crossing over two limits, enables the tracing of an opening - the door, a window - by ways of delimitation. The lintel enacts the tracing of a boundary which simultaneously forms an opening, exceeding and preventing any kind of completion *strictu sensu*. The *limen* - the threshold-like quality of doors, arches, windows - thus enables the figuring of the opening only by virtue of the simultaneous co-existence of limitation and un-limitation. Lack and excess, opening and delimitation, crossing over and the cutting out, are entangled in the double movement of delimitation and opening allowed for by the transversal construction via lintel-*limen.* A limit is traced, while a liminal space of passage is opened.

This picture complicates the orthodox image offered by the 16th century Renaissance writings on the origin of architecture as yet another 'separating act' - this time between the stone cutter (Alberti's 'carpenter') and the profession of the architect. Such a divide replicates a further separation between the 'practical' - the handwork, the act of construction - and the epistemological space where the thinking of construction originates, embodied by the figure of the architect. It was *disegno* [drawing] that should have retained the function of 'bridging' the worker and the architect, or practice and knowledge. However, from the theory of architecture forged in Renaissance and shaped in the lines written by Alberti in his *De re Aedificatoria,* it is clear that the liminal juncture between hand and instrument does not bear the potentiality of a threshold-like locus where the image-production is engendered by a non-hierarchical interrelation between gesture and epistemological space. Conversely, drawing sets itself as a 'third' space of idealistic removal, independent

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[7] See de Vaan, Michiel. 2008. *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages* (Leiden: Brill; Biggleswade: Extenza Turpin [distributor]) p. 342.

[8] 'Because the thresholds and the lintels uphold the weight of superior parts' (Vitruvius 1990: 289).

from both the hand of the carpenter and the architect's agency[9]. Indeed, it was in the conceptual realm of the work's ideation that the creative act was to be found, not in architectural construction itself. To undo this mythology of separation-acts through the spatiotemporal, sensuous construction enabled by the hybrid, heterodox dynamics of crossing-over and cutting-across vouched for by the lintel-*limen* construct means to re-evaluate the potential embedded in the delimiting gesture - the 'handwork' of the carpenter, the painter of the 'well-proportioned steed' - with a different gaze. A gaze deprived of Cartesian optimism, a gaze which no longer separates the thinking act from the artist's or carpenter's gestures, in order to perceive how the image shows itself and exhibits itself at the limits of (and not within the bounds of) the 'thinking act'.

As a gesture of exclusion, limitation always entails the negative connotation of a lack: to be limited is to be inadequate, to be 'missing' something. However, the 'lack' inscribed in the concept of limitation and in this image of the limit is not pure emptiness but the locus of a positive potentiality. To push to the limit: to acknowledge one's own limits and to better oneself, to improve, to adopt a positive stance in the acknowledgment of a lack. The limit is dynamical, as Andrea Gentile notes in his investigation of the concepts of limits and confines[10], and in its dynamism and kinetic potential resides the positive potentiality of incompletion and excess, the distinctive trait of liminal images. The limit exposes a structural affinity with the construct of the image: structural, to the extent that the oblique possibility of the limit, its potential for cutting-across, is not only reflected in the association between *limes* (boundary) and *limus* - 'oblique' - but it is also embedded in the semantics of the image: *imago*, from the latin 'reflection', which is in turn a cognate of 'flex' - to bend, pointing towards obliqueness[11].

When we consider the word 'limit', despite an immediate affiliation with operations of enclosure and delimitation, we are faced with a constitutive hermeneutical ambivalence for which ideas of finitude and limitation are entangled with alluring gestures of touching, crossing, passage, mediation and excess. The limit presents us with a double opportunity which does not have to be understood as an either/or: wherever there is tracing of boundaries, and therefore wherever the possibility for removal and letting out arises - *limes,* or boundary, unlike the *limen*, indicates precisely the somewhat negative semantics of removal and exclusion - there is also a *limen*-possibility, generated by the limning gesture, an oblique potential for cutting across all clear-cut delimitations: in other words, when we consider the word 'limit', despite an immediate affiliation with operations of enclosure and delimitation (*limes*, boundary - boundary, a derivation of either *lim(o)-it-* 'going transverse' or, more plausibly, the adjective *limus* 'oblique'), we are also faced with a constitutive hermeneutical ambivalence for which ideas of completion and limitation are entangled with alluring gestures

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[9] See Ng, Julia. 2009. 'Descartes' Instrument: Geometrischer Raum un die Verschmitztheit militärischer Architekturdarstellungen' in *Goof History. Fehler machen Geschichte* (Koln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag GmbH & Cie) pp. 181-202, where she draws an insightful parallel between the mathematical, a-historical space of drawing, dissociated from both architect and stone-cutter, and the paradox of '*der 'karterische' raum*' ('Cartesian' space), or the locus of a '*geometrisch intelligibel*' (intelligibly geometrical) which, despite its ideational cipher, cannot let go of the fundamental concern with the practical, namely '*die Konstruierbarkeit einer geometrischen Figur*' - constructability of a geometric figure (2009: 191). In other words, with the constructive act embedded in representation and denied by the cartesian, mathematical space of drawing.

[10] See Gentile, Andrea. 2008. 'Limiti e Confini della Ragione', *Archivio di Filosofia,* 76: 179-187.

[11] See Nail, Thomas. 2019. *Theory of the Image* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 10-11.

of touching, crossing, passage, mediation, excess. The completion that encompasses an excess beyond completion.

Traces of the ambivalence and ambiguity inherently tied to the thought of the limit permeate the history of philosophy since Plato's *Parmenides* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* where the thinking of the limit entails both seemingly contrasting meanings of beginning and end: 'beginning and end are limits of each thing' (1997: 17) asserts Plato, while Aristotle points out that the limit is 'the extreme point of a particular, the first point outside which no part of the thing can be found and inside which all parts of the thing can be found' (1998: 326), thus suggesting the interrelation of beginning and end in the idea of finitude and totality. The Greek word for limit is *Πέρας - Péras-* which, Aristotle writes, entails the meaning of 'principle' or 'beginning' [*arkhē*][12]. For Kant, to begin with the limit was to establish the possibility of critique. *Grenzen*[13] - from the latin '*terminus'*, 'boundary-post', he writes, 'always presuppose a space existing outside a certain definite place and inclosing it' (2004: 86). The limit which both separates and connects is the *Grenzlinie* of the 'permitted' use of reason where the exercise of pure reason meets immanent and empirical reality. Yet they can only meet at the limit: 'both can subsist together, but only at the boundary line [*Grenzlinie*] of all permitted use of reason. For this boundary belongs to the field of experience as well as to that of the beings of thought' (2004: 90). As is well-known, Kant's *Grenze-Schranke* distinction was rooted in the positive and relational potential that the word *Grenze* (boundary) retains in opposition to the mere negative connotation of *Schranke* (limit). The Latin *terminus* indicates primarily a 'boundary-post', the end of a territory, whereby 'end' retains both connotation of 'end-point' and, significantly, of 'end' in the sense of goal, in line with the Greek *péras* [limit] and its close kinship with 'principle' [*arkhē*] and goal [*telos*][14]. In the context of Kant's discussion in the *Prolegomena*, what distinguishes the *Grenze* from the mere *Schranke* is precisely a potential for relationality[15], or the anticipation of something 'other' which comes to touch the demarcation point - the *'lim'*, or the edge.

Vigorous gestures of enclosure and containment haunted by the spectre of excess: as Hegel notably asserts in his *Science of Logic* (1812), the limit marks an ambivalent duplicity between what *is*, namely being, and its 'other', or non-being. Delimitation and beginning are embedded into the conceptual kernel of the limit which is portrayed, at the end of the subchapter devoted to 'Determination', as the catalyst of being:

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[12] The passage from *The Metaphysics* reads as follows: 'there are as many accounts of limit as there are of principle, or indeed more, since the principle is a sort of limit whereas not every limit is a principle' (Aristotle 1998: 327). Anthony Preus, in the *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Greek Philosophy*, translates the passage as "end (as limit) has as many senses as *arkhē* (beginning)' (Preus 2015: 291)

[13] For a discussion on the difference between Kant's uses of the words *Grenze* and *Schranke* see Caygill, Howard. 1995. *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell) p. 279; see Bennington, Geoffrey. 2017. *Kant on the Frontier. Philosophy, Politics and the Ends of Earth* (New York: Fordham University Press), see especially '*Appendix: On Transcendental Fiction (Grenze and Schranke)*' pp. 205-225.

[14] See Gentile, 'Limiti e Confini', p. 186; See also Feloj, Serena. 2011. 'Metaphor and Boundary: H.S. Reimarus' *Vernunftlehre* as Kant's Source', *Lebenswelt*, 1: 31-46.

[15] On the significance of *Verknüpfung* (relation) for Kant's positive depiction of the *Grenze-terminus* against the *Schranke-limes* see Howard, Stephen. 2021. 'Kant on Limits, Boundaries, and the Positive Function of Ideas', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 29: 1–15.

'something has existence only in limit [*Grenze*]' (Hegel 2010: 99)[16]. Hegel's validation of the limit-function as engendering in nature gestures at the paradoxical principle by which limitation posits the existence of 'something' which 'is' only in its limit and which therefore 'points beyond itself to its non-being and declares it to be its being, and so passes over into it' (2010: 100), according to Hegelian *Aufhebung* - sublation. Hegel, as is well-known, sublimates the tensional moment of co-existence between limit and un-limitation by positing the Absolute as an ultimate goal. From a different perspective, Heidegger addresses the ambiguous relation between the rigorous demand of limitation and the coterminous possibility of excess, writing that 'The limit means that whereby something is gathered into its ownness, in order to appear from out of this in its fullness, to come forth into presence' [*die Grenze*[17] *meint jenes, wodurch etwas in sein Eigenes versammelt ist, um daraus in seiner Fülle zu erscheinen, in die Anwesenheit hervorzukommen*] (Heidegger 1983: 13-14 quoted and translated in Mitchell 2010: 64)[18].

In a suggestive passage which begins with the French caption *Rites de Passage*, Walter Benjamin distinguished between the frontier [*Grenze*] and the threshold [*Schwelle*] by means of a fleeting, kinetic and transformative potential:

> The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the frontier [*Grenze*]. A *Schwelle* 'threshold' is a zone. Change [*Wandel*], transition [*Übergang*], wave action [*Fluten*] are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses.' (AP: 495, O2a1, mod. FM)

What appears to differentiate the *Schwelle* from the *Grenze* is the kinetic potential exemplified by the succession of *Wandel, Übergang* and *Fluten*. Given Benjamin's appeal to etymological accuracy, the translators of the *Arcades Project* point out that the German *Schwelle* is actually 'etymologically unrelated to *schwellen*' (AP: 991, f.n. 4). The German *Schwelle* relates to the old English 'syll', which was a cognate of the Latin *limina* previously mentioned with reference to Vitruvius's *De architectura*, and which is in fact a declension of the noun *limen* - 'threshold', 'crossbar'. To stick with the context of architectural construction, while the *limit*-demarcation signalled by the *limen*-beam (*Schwelle*) entails mutability, by contrast, the *limit*-demarcation which the *Grenze-terminus* entails is, especially in the context of the Roman empire, a boundary-fortification, thus implying the very opposite of 'change', 'transition', 'wave action'. While Kant sought to endlessly and

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[16] Hegel, in his *Science of Logic*, rejected the Kantian distinction between *Grenze* (boundary) and *Schranke* (limit) for being too abstract. See Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, pp. 279-280.

[17] In Heidegger the word *Grenze* seems to retain both connotations of 'limit' and 'boundary/border'.

[18] See this passage translated in Mitchell, Andrew J. 2010. *Heidegger Among the Sculptors. Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling* (Stanford: Stanford University Press): 'limit means that whereby something is gathered into its owness, in order to appear from out of this in its fullness, to come forth into presence' (2010: 64).

definitely distinguish between *Grenze* and *Schranke*[19] - '*Limes (Schranke) ist unterschieden von terminus (Grenze)*'[20] (Kant 1968: 644) -, Benjamin seems to shift attention towards an altogether different distinction: between the mutability and liminality elicited by the *Schwelle*-potential - a sensuous potential inherent in the materiality of threshold-spaces and liminal kinesis[21] - and the fixity implied in the fortification-gestures which are semantically attached to the *Grenze-terminous*. Unlike Kant's distinction, however, Benjamin's invitation to distinguish between liminality and fixity does not give rise to yet another separating act between two types of the limit - a positive one and a negative one, which, as Geoffrey Bennington remarks, was already problematic in itself and not devoid of paradoxes[22] - but exacerbates the tension inherent in the act of *Grenzsetzung*, inscribing therefore a structural incompletability and mutability within the most assertive of gestures, which bears the potential to undo any secure attempt at 'fortification'. The word tension has its roots in the Latin '*tensio*', which comes from the verb '*tendere*' - to 'stretch'. Amongst the derivatives of '*tensio*' are the words '*contendere*' 'to contrast, contend' and '*ostendere*', 'to show', 'to exhibit'. What shows itself by means of stretching relates to *intensio*, a noun which indicates a striving-for, an increase of degree, a perceptible build-up of concentration. The exhibition-quality inherent in the semantics of tension enables us to trace a tentative parallel, or to identify a certain affinity, between the *schwellen*-dynamics of threshold spaces and the construct of the image: *imago* relates to flex, curvature, bending, which in turn finds a resonance with the stretching implied in the 'showing' or manifestation of tension, which in turn bears striking affinity with the action of *schwellen* and *Anschwellung* - a swelling-up that complicates clear-cut demarcations. Benjamin's appeal to distinguish and to separate - '*scheiden*' - the *Schwelle* from the *Grenze* is grounded on the recognition that '*Schwelle*' is a complex which, in its swelling-action, problematises the possibility of a clear-cut demarcation act. According to this picture, both the *Schwelle* and the *schwellen*-dynamics of *Wandel*, *Übergang* and *Fluten* are not simply the opposite of (negative) delimitation, but the very undoing of self-sufficiency and self-containment by means of dispossession, de-shaping and displacement.

The limit-boundary, paradoxically, allows the exceeding of something beyond itself, its own boundary-character. It introduces the possibility of excess right at the heart of delimitation. Yet, as Jacques Derrida famously argued in his excursus on the margin, 'a discourse that has called itself philosophy […] has always insisted upon assuring itself mastery over the limit (*peras*, *limes*, *Grenze*)' (1982: x). In the masterly efforts to

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[19] Hegel, most notably, in his *Science of Logic* rejected the Kantian distinction between *Grenze* (boundary) and *Schranke* (limit) for being too abstract. See Caygill, *A Kant dictionary*, pp. 279-280.

[20] Kant, Immanuel. 1968. 'Vorlesungen über Metaphysik und Rationaltheologie' in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 28, hrsg. von der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Berlin-Leipzig: De Gruyter) p. 644.

[21] For a study on the liminal character of Benjamin's literary criticism in relation to language, myth, art and critique, see Menninghaus, Winfried. 1986. *Schwellenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag).

[22] Bennington has convincingly demonstrated how such an enterprise is doomed by the impossibility - and therefore failure - to secure a fixed demarcation between *Grenze* and *Schranke*, while also outlining a physiognomy of the frontier through the non-binary grammar of a tensive, indeterminate and infinite crossing-over: 'So one judges the domain beyond the frontier neither according to the domain this side of the frontier nor according to its beyond but according to the join between the two. This pure judgment, which must then be neither one side of the frontier nor the other, will bear solely on the relation between the two sides, on what crosses the frontier insofar as it is crossing and not insofar as it will cross or has crossed. The *Grenze* is thus determined as the pure suspense of a frontier in the pure event of its never-accomplished tracing' (2017: 218).

dominate the limit, philosophy has significantly 'transgressed' the boundary of logos, constantly touching upon its 'other', a 'place of exteriority or alterity' (1982: xii), to the point of incorporating this 'other' into its own grammar. In an effort to rescue the 'otherness' of the limit, the question posed by Derrida gestures towards another possibility, different from sublation: 'Can one then pass this singular limit, which no more separates the inside from the outside than it assures their permeable and transparent continuity? What form could this play of limit/passage have, this logos which posits and negates itself in permitting its own voice to well up?' (1982: xvi). In other words, can philosophy confront its own limit without re-inscribing its lack of grasp within the coordinates of sublation, determination and domination? What would be, then, the form of a *limes-limen* interplay at the margins of philosophy? Rather than a logic of mere delimitation, the logic of the *limes-limen* ('limit/passage') is, as Jean-Luc Nancy convincingly puts it in the wake of Derrida, a logic of excess: 'to touch is to pass it, to pass it is never to touch the other border. The limit un-limits the passage to the limit. A thought of the limit is a thought of excess' (2008: 40). Derrida's powerful incipit in *The Margins of Philosophy*, marked by the dictum the 'being at the limit' [*L'être à la limite*], resonates with Nancy's radical enterprise to cultivate a 'philosophy of confines' which embraces the world 'on its confines and as a network of confines' (2008: 40) and which is thus able to surpass the dualist inside-outside logic that has characterised the core attitude of modern logos and modern aesthetics. A 'philosophy of confines', for Nancy, must account for the intangibility of the external border while constantly moving across, beyond and throughout the passage. Nancy's words speak to the lines written a few years earlier by Michel Foucault: 'we have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers […] The point in brief is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression' (1984: 45). Derrida's, Nancy's and Foucault's appeals bring us back to the doubling of gesture inherent in the etymological derivatives of the *limen*: the exclusion, the 'cutting out', as well as the exceeding, 'the crossing over'. What philosophical discourse shares with the construct of the image is precisely a timeless dialogue between being and its 'other', between the presence of 'something' and the non-being with which it confines. Like the paradox of the limit, the paradox of the image is that of an 'object' which appears, at a first glance, to be confined within the physical limits of its delimited surface and yet its presence cannot be reduced neither to mere contingency nor to something exclusively exceeding it, such as a conceptual order. This paradox is inherent in the structure of (re)presentation - of logos and of the image. What we define as image can be cast as the limit of logos, its non-being and, by the same token, logos presents itself as the non-being - the limit - of the image. Image is what appears and exists at the frontiers of presence and absence, as a phenomenological object of perception which, in its appearing, complicates the relation to the object of our seeing.

Structurally designed to inhabit a boundary-zone - a *Schwelle* in the Benjaminian sense - between seeing and thinking, the image cannot but respond to the logic of the limit. But if, as Derrida has claimed, philosophy has always been concerned with its alterity in the regulating modes of appropriation, recognition, declination and positing - to the point that it has encapsulated its own limit, its exceeding, into the grammar of logos - then, his pledge to relate philosophy to 'an other which is no longer *its other*' (Derrida 1982: xiv)

acquires renewed significance at a time when the relation between the philosophical and the visual, between image and thought, is problematised by an unprecedented proliferation of visual information which compromises our ability to actually see, glimpse and recognise those images which have the potential to challenge our mode of seeing the world, touching upon the limits of our thinking and therefore demanding us to start thinking the world anew.

To postulate the image as an instance of philosophy's limit-passage to the 'other' means therefore first and foremost a visionary shift: from the pretentious enterprise to formulate paradigms aimed at encapsulating the image's non-graspability within the bounds of logos to the recognition of the unsettling, liminal kinesis that, moving from that place of otherness at the limits of philosophy, irritates and problematises its own parameters. That is, from the formulation of critical paradigms which encapsulate the 'otherness' of image into the grammar of logos to the unsettling gesture of that 'other' which is able to bring philosophical logos to a halt, a non-philosophical *limen*-like place 'from which one might still treat *of philosophy*' (Derrida 1982: xxi). To 'limn out' philosophy's other from the standpoint of its blind spot*:* long since detached from the auratic dominion of art and inevitably tied to the all-encompassing logic of digital information, the image now appears to be a non-philosophical place par excellence. It is no understatement to say that we live in a moment of history when the experience of the world is the experience of the image. As Heidegger had already foregrounded almost a century ago, when we ask about our world we are asking about a world-picture, a *Weltbild*[23]*,* namely a world that has become the image of its own real consistency and finds in this image the emblem of its concrete essence. The screen, or the digital window, has replaced and infinitely extended the possibilities of breaching and opening that were once to be found only in the threshold of doorframes or by posing our gaze at windows. The new mode of social being is ontologically entangled with the kernel of the image: this being looks, acts and is acted upon through an infinite multitude of visual encounters. Yet, by virtue of its structural affinity with a *limen*-like quality, the image could nevertheless prove to be an invaluable standpoint from which one can perhaps still treat of philosophy.

0.3 Research questions and aims of the project

The following interrelated questions animate the present thesis: can we recast the relation between the philosophical and the visual, thinking and seeing, thought and image, by postulating the image as the *limen*-form, or the liminal non-graspable point, of philosophy's other 'other'? What does it mean, to think *via* image and not merely to think *the* image, or to think through the image's non-graspability and irreducibility to the order of thought and knowledge, on the one hand, and to think through its liminal engendering potential? Such a questioning would entail a significant shift from the plane of the *limes*-form, or the mere opposition between limitation and beyond, to the plane of the *limen*-form, or the dynamics of passage, transition and transformation at the site of the limit which Benjamin so vividly captured in the short sketch entitled *Rites de*

[23] Heidegger exposed his reflections on the world-picture in the context of a lecture given in Freiburg (1938). The lecture was the last of a series organised by the scientific association *Kunstwissenschaftliche, Naturforschende und Medizinische Gesellschaft*. The lecture was later published as an essay titled 'Die Zeit des Weltbildes' in the 1950 volume titled *Holzwege*.

passage. This project will outline a trajectory at the crossroads of modern aesthetics, art history and contemporary visual cultures aimed at answering the aforementioned questions. By examining a selection of liminal images - literary and visual - emerging from Benjamin's corpus of writings, vis-à-vis images of the limit that have conditioned the history of aesthetics, this thesis presents itself as a case study on what it means to think through and to write about the potential to upset, via image, the limits of what is thinkable, sayable, readable, intelligible. In doing so, the purpose of this thesis is to clarify 1) whether and how the kinetic potential for cutting through and cutting across, inherent in the liminal image(s) evinced from Benjamin's corpus, problematised the relation between seeing and thinking, eliciting new modes of envisioning the world, against the backdrop of twentieth-century German aesthetics 2) whether and how such a potential can still be relevant today, in order to make sense of the image's ability to defy the confident grasps of conceptualisation and signification, at a time of relentless proliferation of visual information. Benjamin's variations on the liminal efficacy of the image will be situated in fruitful dialogue with a range of philosophical, art-historic, scientific and literary sources - Kant, Cassirer, Minkowski, Warburg and the Hamburg circle, Rilke, Nancy, Blanchot, Derrida. In the final part of the thesis, Benjamin's insights will be confronted with selected writings of contemporary philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman who, more than anyone else and as early as 1990, has underscored the potential of Benjamin's mode of working with images for re-imagining practices and methods in the context of art-history and image theory, and whose own version of the liminal image deserves - and still largely lacks, in the context of Anglo-American scholarship - critical scrutiny.

This thesis will not merely offer a comparative reading of selected species of the liminal image, and it will also deliberately refrain from indulging in overcrowded areas of scholarship - such as the widespread tendency to look at Benjamin's 'images' uniquely through the prism of his late sketches on the dialectical image or only through the lens of Marxist theory. Rather, by engaging with relatively under-investigated liminal motifs in his corpus, vis-à-vis comparable images of the limit emerging in the context of Kantian, Neo-Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetics, this thesis will argue that a critical engagement with Benjamin's method of working with images, and its resurgence within Didi-Huberman's contemporary writings, presents the potential to open new avenues for rethinking the relation and interstice between the image and the gaze, image and critique, seeing and thinking. By examining how the *Schwelle*-potential first diagnosed by Benjamin infiltrates and permeates through Didi-Huberman's writings, proving its enduring relevance, this project will address at least two gaps in scholarship: I) it will bring to the fore relatively under-investigated images within Benjamin's corpus (the Tangram, the 'Chinese curious' vignette, 'The Moon' vignette, the legendary painter, the image of the stone in his reading of *Melencolia*); II) it will add a substantial contribution to the slender scholarship on Didi-Huberman available to the English reader, extending the debate beyond a purely exegetic level, to the broader implications that Didi-Huberman's own diagnosis of the image's - and the gaze's - liminal potential bear upon current philosophical concerns on what it means to look at and to write about images in an increasingly image-dominated world. Ultimately, the most important task of this thesis, and its original contribution to existing scholarship, is to demonstrate that engaging with the liminal efficacy of images via Benjamin and through to Didi-Huberman, and feeling at home in the interstitial, non-masterable,

spacing opened up by its swelling kinesis, can serve as fruitful critical-philosophical tool to re-imagine and re-think our relation with images, at a time when our capacity to not merely see but to imagine, literally to put into vision, is being radically and relentlessly eroded.

0.4 From disappointment in Munich to 'feeling at home' in marginal territories: Benjamin's pathway to the liminal image

Within the milieu of Neo-Kantian aesthetics and post-Kantian image theories in the early Twentieth century, the mapping out of the relation between image and critique, in the context of aesthetics and art-history, took several different trajectories. Whilst Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer grounded a knowledge of images within the limits of reason and reiterated the Kantian affiliation between image and concept, prominent members of the Vienna School of Art History questioned the presuppositions of Kantian aesthetics through a sustained revision of philological and philosophical methods, opening the disciplinary realm of art-history to a wider and heterodox semantic field. In the winter of 1915 Walter Benjamin attended Heinrich Wölfflin's lectures in Munich and, as he wrote to Fritz Radt in December, 'the first delusions followed, of a particularly unpleasant kind, from Strich and Wölfflin' (GB 1: 296). Benjamin expressed his disappointment with a theory of art that, in his words, 'did not touch the essential [*das Wesentiliche*]' and for which 'exaltation, moral sense of obligation is the only access to the artwork' (GB 1: 297). More than ten years later, he reiterates once again his distance from Wölfflin's formalist method, in his review of Oskar Walzel's *Wortkunstwerk* (1926), as Wolfgang Kemp reports in his philological excavation of Benjamin's relation with two generations of the *Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*[24] (which remains untranslated in English). It is the 'synthetic behaviour' of a form of art criticism guided by a totalising gaze or, in Kemp's words, 'a universalising type of contemplation, convinced of its ability to easily penetrate into the nature of its own object' (1982: 219) - which is at the heart of Benjamin's disappointment. Opposing 'Wölfflin's more abstract and more dubious schematism' (GS 3: 50), Benjamin cites approvingly of Alois Riegl's *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (1901). In Riegl's method of analysis Benjamin finds a unique principle for which 'the profound insight into the material will of an epoch is expressed conceptually by the material will itself, as the analysis of its formal canon' (GS 3: 50). In a significant shift of agency from the subject's intellective insight - abstract schematism - to the materiality of the image, Benjamin emphasises that the prompt for historical observation and critical analysis is given by the sensuous materiality of the image, which elicits - instead of being subsumed by - philosophical-theoretical questioning. Crucially, whatever theory of the image arises from this method is issued from - and not applied to - the image itself.

Two years before reading Riegl's seminal work, Benjamin was confronted with the research output of the second generation of the *Wiener Schule,* published in the first volume of the *Kunstwissenschaftlichte Forschungen*

[24] See Kemp, Wolfgang. 1982. 'Walter Benjamin e la scienza estetica I: i rapporti fra Benjamin e la scuola Viennese' and 'Walter Benjamin e la scienza estetica II: Walter Benjamin e Aby Warburg', *Aut Aut*, 189-190: 216-233; 234-262. These texts were originally published in *Kritische Berichte* 3 (1973): 30-50; and *Kritische Berichte* 1 (1975): 5-25.

that he received from Carl Linfert in 1931. It is now well-known that Benjamin's first review (1932) of the volume was rejected by the '*Frankfurter Zeitung*' while a second one was published in July 1933 as *Strenge Kunstwissenshaft*, which he integrated with Linfert's suggestions[25]. The first volume of the *Forschungen* consisted of three monographic studies from G. A. Andreades, Otto Pächt and Carl Linfert with an introductory essay by Hans Sedlmayr[26]. In pointing out the limit of a method - championed by Wölfflin - of working with images grounded on an 'understanding of art history as a universal history' (GS 3: 364; SW 2: 666), Benjamin finds, in this generation of art-historians, an effective countermove to such a tendency, guided by a preoccupation for the 'insignificant', or the 'inconspicuous aspect' (SW 2: 668) of the material, whose recognition affords access to the 'essential' character of the work.

This last point is quite remarkable for the argument here pursued: against the backdrop of an established abstract formalism, much diffused in the academic landscape of early twentieth-century German aesthetics, which was concerned with extrapolating *qua* ascribing abstract meaning from and to the image's material, Benjamin identifies a much more promising trajectory in the gesture of gazing towards 'that' which eschews the limits of universal signification: an experience of the senses, rather than of meaning or understanding, which emanates from the singular, insignificant, non-meaningful detail. Enclosed in these lines is an invitation to direct one's gaze towards the liminal image: Benjamin defines the 'insignificant' detail as a liminal point, or '*Durchbruch*' (GS 3: 371), namely the locus of a penetration or perforation, an heterodox threshold-space of multiple exchanges at the margins of the seeing and thinking, in other words a lively zone of mutability and 'change', 'transition' and 'wave-action', to recall the *Schwelle* passage. Interestingly, Benjamin identifies the source from which such a kinetic space emanates as the image itself: the architectural drawings which are the object of Linfert's study do not 're-produce architecture' but 'produce it in the first place, a production which less often benefits the reality of architectural planning than it does dreams' (SW 2: 669). What we understand here by the 'production of architecture' ascribed to the drawings in question is a 'place' beyond the principle of mimesis, beyond representational structures and therefore beyond signification: what is produced by these images is an efficacy or a potential to elicit a nonrepresentational imagery - a 'world of images' (SW 2: 670) - which, significantly, undoes the hierarchical primacy of the visual-intellectual bond inasmuch as this space is not 'primarily seen' but 'sensed', that is, 'apprehended' (SW 2: 670) as an experience of bodily envelopment which equally involves all senses. The liminal space in question, opened up by these images, does not merely contour our being as if it were the static, appropriable backdrop of existence, but cuts through our body and inevitably transfigures, displaces, dispossesses. Abandoning the presumption to conceptually grasp this space, Linfert's method of working with images, seen through Benjamin's eyes, sketches the profile of a new type of researcher whose essential trait is not to take hold of the space opened up by the image but to 'feel at home in marginal regions' - [*in Grenzbezirken sich daheim zu fühlen*] (GS 3: 374). That is: to feel at home within, to not overlook, the image's swelling-potential, or

[25] see GS 3, p. 652

[26] '*Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft*'

its ability to elicit a non-graspable yet sensible space that is able to transform - cutting through - our experience of - and our gaze towards - the world.

0.5 The resurgence of the liminal image in contemporary visual cultures: Georges Didi-Huberman's method

The type of researcher sketched by Benjamin, and foregrounded by the work of scholars such as Pächt, Linfert, Riegl, Warburg and the Hamburg circle - and Benjamin himself - who feel at home in liminal, interstitial regions, can be considered, nearly a century after the publication of *Strenge Kunstwissenschaft*, the founding bedrock of a discipline that knows no disciplinary or geographical boundaries, but only liminal zones of mutability and exchange: visual cultures. A growing body of scholarship, combining different disciplinary approaches, has taken the status of the image and its resistance to clear-cut conceptual determination as a liminal object of questioning par excellence[27]. The publication, in 2021, of *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies*, maps out the development of image studies from the birth of *Kunstwissenschaft* through the iconological turn, up to recent developments in theories of mobile and technical images, visual sociology and neuroaesthetics, while also revisiting key themes and concepts that have shaped theories of the image since Plato and Aristotle[28]. The common denominator which binds together disparate theories of the image and approaches to visual studies is the acknowledgment that 'image' is a complex, rather than a concept, which complicates and irreducibly problematises the very gesture of positing clear-cut boundaries, and to securely define or to solely conceptually grasp what is and what is not image. Benjamin's insights on the s*chwellen*-potential of the image's construct clearly foreground the attempt to study images in light of their non-graspable, liminal status.

Within this fast-growing and diverse body of literature, there is one scholar who believes in the possibility to retrieve the hope of the 'epistemological transformation' (DH 2003: 128) that Benjamin - and

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[27] For the reasons James Elkins spells out in is 'Introduction' to *What is an image?* (2011) it would be impossible to summarise the disparate theories of the image within the broad discipline of visual cultures - and this thesis is certainly not the place to do so - but I will limit myself to point this out: it is not coincidental that two of the most important contributions to visual cultures studies of the past decade (*Penser l'Image,* 2010; *What is an image?,* 2011) converged upon the repurposing of the image's ontological question - what is an image? - towards a certain limit-character. In the edited volume *Penser l'Image I*, Emmanuel Alloa identifies the image's paradox with the ambivalence inherent in a limited being [*être-limité*] whose physical presence nevertheless gestures towards an exceeding [*excédence*] irreducible to the order of knowledge. This insight echoes in Jean-Luc Nancy's revisitation of *'methexis'* as the limit-zone of mutual affection between image and thought, where an un-limitation of boundaries between thinking subject and visual object is at stake. See Elkins, James, and Maja Naef (eds.). 2011. *What is an image?,* 2 vols. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press); See Alloa, Emmanuel. 2019. 'Entre transparence et opacité - ce que l'image donne à penser' in *Penser l'image,* ed. by Emmanuel Alloa, 3rd ed. (Dijon: Les Presses du réel), pp. 7-26; See Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2019. 'L'image: mimesis and methexis' in *Penser l'image,* ed. by Emmanuel Alloa, 3rd ed. (Dijon: Les Presses du réel), pp. 69-94. The recognition of the image's potential for mutability right at the site of the limit also informs the work of scholars such as Federico Ferrari and Emanuele Coccia. According to Ferrari, 'we are, to be precise, neither outside nor inside, we are at the limit' (2013: 52). It is precisely by inhabiting a limit position that our being becomes entangled with the figuring of the world as image where the image 'is exactly that which opens the thing [*la cosa*] to its own being [*a se stessa*], namely it makes the thing visible in its essence' (2013: 27). In a similar fashion, Coccia, in his *Sensible Life,* identifies the figuring process of the image as medial place of *metaxy*: an in-between, a 'womb' that is 'able to generate images' (2016: 15) where the 'living being harvest the sensible' (2016: 15), namely where the living body encounters another type of body, one that is 'ever changing in relation to the different forms of sensate entities' (2016:15).

[28] See Purgar, Krešimir. 2021. *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

Warburg, together with the researchers of the Vienna school of art history at home in 'marginal domains' - initiated more than a century ago. Georges Didi-Huberman's long-standing engagement with Benjamin builds on the claim that their legacy with respect to the liminal potential of the image ought to be re-evaluated in view of the current loss of coherence that characterises our time, which is arguably still haunted by the spectre of the crisis of sense that gave rise to various nationalisms at the time of Benjamin's writing. Working at the intersections of philosophy and art history, Didi-Huberman takes as his mandate the accomplishment, in the context of art history and image theory, of the epistemological transformation of history initiated in the last century with Benjamin and Warburg. Such a transformation is propelled by the intuition that the image can act as a critical tool capable of questioning the presuppositions underpinning a certain understanding of history as guided by myths of provenance, progress and universality.

It is in our 'given moment' (DH 2003: 128) that, Didi-Huberman argues, we ought to recognise Benjamin's insights on the liminal efficacy of images as one of our own concerns[29]. The 2015 volume of collected essays *L'Histoire de l'Art depuis Walter Benjamin*, which he co-edited, reiterates the belief that Benjamin's insights on the image's ability to irritate and to question the limits of reason presents the potential to inform art-historical discourse and contribute to current debates on visual studies. Didi-Huberman is of course not alone in his attempt to underscore the relevance of Benjamin's insights on the image for critical practices and methods in the context of art history and image theory. Sigrid Weigel's study titled 'The Flash of Knowledge and the The Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History', builds on the work already initiated with her 2013 study *Walter Benjamin: images, the creaturely, and the holy,* and moves from the claim that Benjamin's largely overlooked engagement with visual images since the years of his early writings informs the theories of knowledge and history that constitute the core of his late work. According to Weigel's reading, Benjamin developed 'a specific language of thinking-in-images' that was 'elaborated as an epistemology' (2015: 347) in Benjamin's writings from the 1930s. Steffen Haug, more recently, has identified the limit of this tendency in scholarship - which has also informed the work of Susan Buck-Morss[30], for example - in the operation of looking at images only in function of the influence these exert on epistemological theories or philosophical arguments. Responding to this criticism, Haug's *Benjamins Bilder* (2019)[31] claims to shift attention from the way in which visual images informed, infiltrated and translated into Benjamin's literary production, or image-writing, to the way in which the visual and pictorial specificity of images actually resisted seamless translation or conversion into the text, pressing on the point of distinction between the literary and the visual consistence of images. A similar charge, albeit pursuing a different trajectory, has been raised by Eli Friedlander[32], who has questioned and

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[29] See Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2003. 'History and Image: Has the 'Epistemological Transformation' taken place?' in *Art Historian. National Traditions and Institutional Practices,* ed. by Michael F. Zimmerman, trans. Vivian Rehberg (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute), pp. 128-143, p. 128

[30] See Buck-Morss, Susan. 1991. *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press).

[31] See Haug, Steffen. 2019. *Benjamins Bilder* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, Brill Deutschland), pp. 20-22.

[32] See Friedlander, Eli. 2012. *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press), pp. 37-42.

challenged the tendency to ascribe an exclusively visual connotation to Benjamin's image-thinking and image-writing, underscoring the multifaceted ramifications of Benjamin's understanding of language, which includes, as Kia Lindroos[33] has emphasised in a similar fashion, the acoustic, smells, the literary and so forth.

With an even more radical skepticism towards the primacy of the visual, scholars like Winfried Menninghaus[34] have argued for the relevance of the trope of 'imagelessness' in Benjamin's writings on aesthetics, emphasising the non-perceptible and non-intuitive character of Benjamin's species of the image. Within this varied and ample body of scholarship, it is possible to observe a tendency to take sides between vindicating the image-like or visual consistency of Benjamin's writing, and, on the opposite end of the spectrum, to treat Benjamin's species of the image mainly through the lens of non-intuitive and non-perceptible philosophical-linguistic presentation. Removing itself from this binary picture, this thesis demonstrates that the experience of the liminal image, as Benjamin intuited in the *Schwelle*-passage, is beyond any clear-cut distinction between the pictorial and the literary, the philosophical and the perceptible, the visual and the haptic, inasmuch as it opens up and lends itself to an heterodox experience of sense and of the senses which does not reiterate the image-imageless, literary-visual, visible-invisible, oppositional logics.

Beyond the specific context of art history and visual cultures, scholarship has already positioned the liminal spacing of the image glimpsed by Benjamin as a promising philosophic-critical tool capable of challenging the presumptions of autonomy and self-sufficiency that have grounded the modern idea of the subject's place within the world as the master of its image. In his essay on Walter Benjamin's Paris, Samuel Weber[35] analyses the correlation between the images of Paris and Benjamin's understanding of the image's the threshold as it emerges from the *Rites des Passages* sketch. Underscoring the kinetic and dynamic connotation of the German '*schwellen*', Weber argues for the significance of such a paradigm in rethinking the notion of place beyond oppositional logics - beyond the inside/outside alternative: 'swelling indicates a crisis in the function of containment. The container no longer serves as a fixed place to define movement as change of place, but instead is itself caught up in a movement, a tension, but itself becoming over-extended' (2008: 233). On a similar note, Nancy has identified[36], in the context of Benjamin's confrontation with the limits of Kantian aesthetics, a potential - inherent in Benjamin's shift of attention from the problematic separation between the limit (beauty) and un-limitation (sublime) to a complex movement of liminal undoing right at the site of delimitation - to rethink the very notion of the limit without reinstating the Kantian inside/outside *qua* limitation-beyondness opposition. This thesis builds on and expands upon this theoretical trajectory by using the liminal images analysed in context of this research as critical tools to not only explore questions around the complex and polyhedric interstice between image, body, gaze and thought, but to also argue that

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[33] See Lindroos, Kia. 1998. *Now-time, Image-space: Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art* (Jyväskylä: SoPhi, University of Jyväskylä), p. 203.

[34] See Menninghaus, Winfried. 2013. 'Walter Benjamin's Variations of Imagelessness', *Critical Horizons*, 14(3): 407–428.

[35] See Weber, Samuel. 2003. ''Streets, Squares, Theaters': A City on the Move - Walter Benjamin's Paris', *Boundary 2* 30: 17–30.

[36] See Nancy, 'The Sublime Offering', pp. 211-245.

Benjamin's most valuable insights on the liminality of the image, as well as Didi-Huberman's, stem from the acknowledgement that images can act as springboards for philosophical and critical thinking only if 'speaking' from the point of philosophy's 'other' other, that is, only by retaining a certain distance and difference from epistemological rudiments, and from language itself. In the context of this project, rather than reiterating the critical posture which conceives the image as a philosophical object by means of appropriation, emphasis is given to the non-graspable character of the image, its incongruence with theoretical conceptualisation and signification. The missed opportunity, for the image, to become an object of conceptual exploitation is facilitated by recasting the relation image-thought through the 'swelling' kinesis diagnosed at the site of the limit, in the non-coincidental character of what is before and what is after the threshold, while still allowing for a reciprocal touching that alters, disrupts and de-shapes.

In light of this, Didi-Huberman's re-reading of Benjamin's liminal method of working with images deserves specific attention, inasmuch as it shifts attention to a sensuous praxis of the gaze - rather than a theory of the image per se - at the limits of language, and to a linguistic praxis of writing about images beyond the limits of the representation and signification. A scrutiny of the existing English translations of Didi-Huberman's work reveals that, while his work on specific images - on Warburg's *Mnemosyne*, the *Sonderkommando* photographs, Giacometti's sculptures, Fra Angelico's frescoes - has received widespread attention[37], far less editorial emphasis has been placed on those writings aimed at outlining something like a praxis of the gaze, rather than a theory of images[38]. Equally, when confronted with the existing secondary literature on Didi-Huberman, the overwhelming impression is an operation of introduction, divulgation and dissemination[39] which sometimes stops short of critically assessing the broader philosophical stakes of his arguments while also taking them further, with and beyond Didi-Huberman. Not only do the few chapters written in the context of collected volumes in visual theories and visual studies usually function as introductory entries[40], but also the one existing monograph in Anglo-American scholarship is declaredly conceived with the aim of providing, more or less comprehensively, an introductory overview of the main

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[37] The political dimension of Didi-Huberman's work has also received considerable attention. See for example Leśniak, Andrzej. 2017. 'Images Thinking the Political: On the Recent Works of Georges Didi-Huberman', *Oxford Art Journal*, 40.2: 305–18; Longford, Samuel. 2020. 'Putting Gestures to Work: Georges Didi-Huberman, Uprisings', *Kronos*, 46.1: 281–88.

[38] An exception is *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (2004), which was one of the first volumes to appear in English language scholarship fourteen years after its publication in French.

[39] See for example Zolkos, Magdalena (ed.). 2023. *The Didi-Huberman Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

[40] See for example Saint, Nigel. 2013. 'Georges Didi-Huberman. Image, critique and time' in *Modern French Visual Theory. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Nigel Saint and Andy Stafford (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press); Lésniak, Andrzej. 2021. 'Georges Didi-Huberman' in Purgar, *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies,* pp. 951-964.

themes of his work[41]. An exception to this tendency are two special issues published respectively in 2015 and 2018[42], which offer the reader a critical insight into - and a critical assessment of - untranslated works by Didi-Huberman, and where at least four contributions[43] take the question of method as an anchoring point.

Yet with exception of these instances, on those occasions when some criticism is levelled at Didi-Huberman's work, it is not necessarily centred on his proposed method to write about and look at images, but usually limits itself to the question of a more or less correct interpretation, or appropriation, of Warburg's and Benjamin's legacies[44]. By addressing these interrelated lacunae, and by bringing Benjamin's insights on the liminal image to bear upon current concerns of image's status, this thesis demonstrates the philosophical efficacy of the liminal potential of the image for Benjamin's attempt to overcome the limitations of Kantian, Neo-Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetics, while also showing its enduring relevance for envisioning new configurations of the relation between image, gaze, body, thought, writing and, more broadly, philosophy, art, ethics and life.

0.6 Chapter Outline and Methodology

The methodology adopted throughout this thesis considers the constellation of images analysed as springboards for constructing conceptual argumentation, adopting a praxis of thinking with and through images whereby the latter function as anchoring points eliciting philosophical reflections, rather than only serving the illustrative purpose of validating conceptual arguments a posteriori. The first section of the project (chapters 1-2) examines the way in which Benjamin's early variations on the liminal image offer an

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[41] Chari Larsson's monograph shows an attempt to go beyond the task of simple divulgation by trying to situate Didi-Huberman's work in dialogue with Gilles Deleuze, for example, drawing some insightful parallels. However, this is only attempted in the very final part of the book, and the majority of the monograph functions, instead, as a general overview of Didi-Huberman's most important texts - including most of the un-translated ones - without, however, necessarily subjecting Didi-Huberman's arguments to thorough critical scrutiny. See Larsson, Chari. 2020. *Didi-Huberman and the Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press). The other monograph on Didi-Huberman to appear in English-language scholarship focuses on his contributions to film theory and was published as follows: Smith, Alison. 2022. *Georges Didi-Huberman and Film: The Politics of the Image* (London: Bloomsbury).

[42] See the special issue 5/2015 published by the University of Bucharest (Center for Excellence in Image studies) in *Images, Imagini, Images. Journal of Visual Studies* (coordinated by Laura Marin), titled 'Georges Didi-Huberman. Déplier l'image'; see also the special issue 23/4 published by *Angelaki* in 2018 and titled 'Critical Image Configurations: the Work of Georges Didi-Huberman', edited by Stijn de Cauwer and Laura Katherine Smith.

[43] See Rancière, Jacques. 2018. 'Images Re-read: the method of Georges Didi-Huberman', *Angelaki*, 23(4): 11–18; Alloa, Emmanuel. 2018. 'Phasmid Thinking: on Georges Didi-Huberman's method', *Angelaki*, 23(4):103–112; Baert, Barbara. 2018. 'He or she who Glimpses, Desires, is Wounded. A a Dialogue in the Interspace (zwischenraum) between Aby Warburg and Georges Didi-huberman', *Angelaki*, 23(4): 47-79; Saint, Nigel. 2017. 'Georges Didi-Huberman: From Non-Savoir to the Atlas', *Images, Imagini, Images* 5/2015: 39–62.

[44] An example is Matthew Rampley's intervention at the Warburg Institute conference organised in 2014, titled 'Warburg, Benjamin and Kulturwissenschaft'. In a paper titled 'Benjamin's Warburg: On the Influence of Walter Benjamin on Aby Warburg' (2014), Rampley criticises Didi-Huberman's tendency to read the Benjamin-Warburg relation almost uniquely through the lens of an overwhelming similarity, quickly dismissing potential theoretical discrepancies between the two. Rampley's paper is available online in a podcast format at https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/podcasts/benjamins-warburg-influence-walter-benjamin-aby-warburg. In chapter 3, this research will also provide a critique of Didi-Huberman's comparative readings between Benjamin and Warburg, demonstrating the limit of a critical approach which is often culpable of privileging similarities while dismissing difference.

occasion to challenge and problematise philosophies of the limit, aesthetic theories and theories of the image forged in the context of Neo-Kantian and post-Kantian philosophies.

1) Chapter one has a twofold purpose: I) to outline the contextual framework for assessing Benjamin's early diagnosis of the image's liminality as a response to specific trends in early twentieth-century philosophical aesthetics in Germany, situating Benjamin's critique of the limitations of philosophy and aesthetics in fruitful dialogue with some of the key interlocutors of his academic formation; II) to preliminarily sketch, via the images here considered, a peculiar Benjaminian trajectory out of Kantian, Neo-Kantian (Panosfky and Saxl) and post-Kantian (Heidegger) images of the limit. With regard to Kant, evidence demonstrates that Benjamin's early variations on the liminal image already foreground a tension between the finite incompletability diagnosed at the site of the limit versus the transcendental closure aspired by Kant. With regard to the Neo-Kantian operation of encapsulating the image's liminal kinesis within the bounds of reason, Benjamin's response will be assessed via image, namely by looking at the one image that both binds and separates his gesture from that of the Neo-Kantian scholars of the *Warburgkreis*: Dürer's *Melencolia.* Benjamin's insights on *Melencolia,* in turn, call for parallels with another image of mourning - and another image of the limit -, on which Heidegger wrote a few remarks in 1967, and which affords entry to the final confrontation that the chapter stages, one between the philosophical implications of Benjamin's reading of the melancholic disposition via Dürer, and Heidegger's confrontation with the votive bas-relief *Pensive Athena*. Both images depict two thinking figures, a winged creature and a Greek goddess, caught in the act of contemplating the limits of finitude, and the world of things.

Arguably conceivable as allegories of brooding and visionary thinking, these two images present an opportunity to revisit Benjamin's and Heidegger's respective overcoming of Neo-Kantian limitations through the lens of their gazes towards the two thinking figures, offering more interpretative nuances on their different gestures by attending to an image-based link so far unexplored by scholarship. The leitmotif which runs through the whole chapter, and which further binds together the different comparative readings, is the liminal image of the border stone: from Kant's reference to the imperturbability of the border stones in the first - later rejected - draft of his *Introduction* to the third *Critique*, to Benjamin's reading of melancholy via the emblem of the stone, which is identified as a limit-like site of 'undoing' and 'irresolution' (OGT: 161), through to the border stone upon which Athena's gaze falls, which for Heidegger coincides with the un-concealment of (Being's) provenance, up to the ambiguous *Markstein*-position inhabited by Niobe once she is turned to stone - a liminal condition complicated by the enduring presence of tears, which Hamlet[45] also alludes to when comparing her grief to Gertrude's. The chapter will identify these liminal images as the site

[45] See Shakespeare, 'Hamlet' in *The Arden Shakespeare*, pp. 317-383, p. 323.

of a tensive knot between two gestures - boundary-fortification (*limes*) and boundary-upsetting (*limen*) - that can have different philosophical implications for the logic of the limit here subject to scrutiny.

2) Chapter two focuses on the liminal motifs of 'transversality' and 'simultaneity' as they cryptically appear in Benjamin's notes on painting and graphic (1917-18), as well as his reflections on the body's potential for 'shapeless limitation' within the framework of the psychophysical problem (1920-21), in order to outline a theory of receptive transversality which serves as a framework to challenge both Kant's and Cassirer's presuppositions underpinning the respective modes of repurposing the experience of the image to the services of moral (Kant) and spiritual (Cassirer) un-limitations. In doing so, I set out to achieve a twofold aim: a) to show how Benjamin's outline of a gestural, imagistic and aphoristic mode of relating to the picture plane contributes to recasting some of the key systematic questions (left open by the third *Critique*) on the relation between ethics and life; aesthetics and politics; the singular and the plural; the human and the non-human; and b) to demonstrate, with and beyond Benjamin, that the tensional traction between body and plane, image and world, gesture and space - or what I call Benjamin's theory of 'receptive transversality' - lends itself as a fruitful theoretical tool to suggest alternative modes of envisioning the world which abandon the pursuit of re-enchantment, or the re-purposing of the subject-object dialectic, in order to take the liminal interstice marked out by the connector 'with' as the only chief non-ontological paradigm.

Equipped with the insights of ch. 1 and ch. 2, the second part of the project (chapters 3 and 4) builds on and expands upon the interrelated motifs of gesture, picture plane and the kinesis of cutting across, bringing Benjamin's insights into fruitful dialogue with the work of Aby Warburg as well as with contemporary philosophies of the limit and of the image (Nancy, Derrida, Blanchot, Didi-Huberman).

3) Chapter three begins by considering two different 'gestures' of image-composition and image-construction, which can be metaphorically epitomised by the cyclic kinesis of kaleidoscopic imagery, on the one hand, and the tangram's potential for fragmentation and displacement, on the other hand. Taking as a starting point a lithograph featured in the *Passagenarbeit,* which depicts the contrast between two modes of relating to the picture plane staged by two different bodily postures, vertical and transversal, I offer an original account of the philosophical implications that these two different visual metaphors bear upon the limit-like spacing of gesture. The chapter argues that the material displacement and fragmentation inherent in the tangram's gestural potential for 'non-construction' calls for parallel with the ungraspable, distorted and non-cognitive '*gestus*' from which Kafka's writings 'emanate' (SW 2: 808), or the liminal image of the cloudy-spot, and that these two interrelated variations of liminality form the prototype of a 'praxis of gesture' which in turn calls for parallels with what Jean-Luc Nancy, more than fifty years after Benjamin, would define as the philosophic-political practice of 'undoing into nonselfsufficiency' (2008: 111). This analysis serves to prepare the ground for a comparative reading - and disambiguation - between two different languages of gesture: Benjamin's 'imagistic insurgence' and Warburg's 'emphatic binding'. Detaching from the one-sided tendency to concentrate on the linkage of Benjamin and Warburg through visual-theoretic common denominators, while also insisting on under-investigated visual-literary motifs which have so far received little attention in Benjamin scholarship, the chapter makes a significant contribution to existing literature on the Benjamin-

Warburg relation by bringing to the fore specific differences between Benjamin's mode of envisioning the world and the body-image nexus - grounded on the paradigms of imagistic insurgence, pathos of nearness and the swelling, transversal potential of the limit (*Schwelle, Anschwellung*) - and Warburg's own mode - grounded on principles of *Entfernung Distanzierung*, *Distanzgefühl,* emphatic binding and the dissociative potential of the limit (*Zwischenraum*).

4) Chapter four situates the research question on the liminal image in a contemporary setting. Charting the afterlife of Benjamin's insights in selected passages within Didi-Huberman's corpus, the chapter argues for the continuing relevance of reflecting upon the elusive interstice between image, thought, gaze and body, while also subjecting Didi-Huberman's own appropriation of Benjamin to critical scrutiny. The aim of the chapter is therefore to demonstrate why and how the method of working and thinking with images defined by the ungraspable kinesis of cutting-across and being-acted-upon, as it is evinced from Benjamin's variations of the liminal image, finds a resurgence in contemporary image theory, lending itself as a valuable pragmatical tool to rethink our contemporary relation with images, as well as philosophy's relation with the liminal image's un-graspability. By drawing on hitherto untranslated primary material, chapter four offers a substantial and original contribution to the English-language criticism on Didi-Huberman's image theory.

Finally, the conclusion offers reflections on the results obtained while also outlining a direct answer to the following questions: can we rethink the limit *qua* interstice between philosophy and art, between writing and image, between image and thought, by postulating the liminal image as the non-appropriable, non-masterable and ungraspable space of an 'other' from which thought begins again after touching the end - at philosophy's limit -, where to 'begin' is to certainly to question but do so only at the margins of meaning and of signification, and in spite of the saturating closure operated by the current proliferation of visual information, which seems today not only to revive but to dramatically exacerbate the logic of representation? The main goal will be therefore to demonstrate how the critical efficacy inherent in certain images can help us begin thinking the end - finitude, the senses, the body, the world - and its finite inconclusiveness not by ways of sublimation into an infinite beyond but through the kinetic, liminal potential for sensuous touching, crossing, passage, mediation, cutting across.

Chapter 1 - Upsetting the Border Stones

1. Premise

There are three limits to this chapter. The purpose of 1.1 and 1.2 is to present two textures of the limit amongst many others[46] that Benjamin engaged with since the early years of his aesthetic education (1913-14; 1918): the tensive coexistence of limitation and un-limitation in Kant's third *Critique*, on the one hand, and on the other hand Neo-Kantianism's proposition to resolve this tension through a revision of the limit's function, forged in the context of the Marburg and Baden schools. By giving priority to the Kantian and Neo-Kantian images of the limit, the chapter will not yet disclose how Benjamin's early variations on the liminal image contribute to recasting some of the key questions left open by the third *Critique* on the gap between life and ethics, nature and freedom, which the power of judgement was designed to bridge: this task will be achieved by chapter 2, which will regard Kantian aesthetics, seen through the lens of Benjamin's idiosyncratic insights on the bodily traction to the picture plane, as grounded on what he considered to be mythic conceptions of space and morality. The third limit of the present chapter is a confrontation between Benjamin and Panofsky and Saxl's reading with respect to Dürer's *Melancholia*, which however does not yet address Warburg. Warburg never fully ascribed to nor completely aligned with the Neo-Kantian framing adopted by his fellow investigators, and therefore his gesture *qua* method of working with images deserves to be treated and examined in its distance from Panofsky and Saxl and beyond the specific context of *Melencolia*. It will be the purpose of chapter 3 to assess the broader implications of Benjamin's and Warburg's respective methods of looking at nexus image-thought, outlining not only evident affinities but also, crucially, identifying the precise philosophical point at which their trajectories inevitably glance off one another.

1.1 1913: An Obligatory Rendezvous with Kant

According to Walter Benjamin's *Lebenslauf,* 1913 might be defined as the year of his rendezvous with Kant. A twenty-one-year-old student spending the summer semester in Freiburg, Benjamin was more

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[46] It goes without saying that Benjamin encountered many more textures of the limit during his aesthetic education. For reasons of space and relevance, priority will be given to Kantian and Neo-Kantian variations on the limits of philosophy and aesthetics. The thesis will not address Benjamin's critique of Romanticism, for example, as the focus will be placed not on what Benjamin thinks of art's critique or criticizability, but on teasing out the philosophical implications of Benjamin's remarks on the images considered throughout the project. Similarly, this thesis will not revisit the influence of the phenomenological school on Benjamin. Much work has been done to disentangle phenomenological influences on Benjamin from the Neo-Kantians. Most notably, Peter Fenves's meticulous excavation of the phenomenological grammar adopted by Benjamin to counteract the shortfalls of Neo-Kantian limit-concepts since the early writings, as well as Uwe Steiner's investigation on the phenomenological-anthropological grounding of Benjamin's theory of language, have already revealed that Benjamin's ambitious revision of Kant's transcendentalism entailed the repurposing of experience towards phenomenological methods of reduction - without the service of noetico-noematic correlations - an insight which both connects and separates Benjamin and Husserl. See Fenves, Peter. 2011. *The Messianic Reduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), see esp. ch.1 and 2; see also Steiner, Uwe. 2008. 'Phänomenologie der Moderne. Benjamin und Husserl' in *Benjamin-Studien 1,* ed. by Daniel Weidner (Paderborn, Germany: Wilhelm Fink), pp. 107-124.

concerned with 'philosophers' than 'philosophy', as he writes to Carla Seligson in June 1913. The first name to appear in the constellation of these philosophical figures is Kant: 'Well now I am studying philosophy - indeed nothing of philosophy (I read Kant, Schiller, Bergson for seminars) - but of philosophers' [*Hören Sie zum Schluß, da ich nun einmal Philosophie studiere - zwar nichts von Philosophie (ich lese Kant, Schiller, Bergson für Seminarien) - aber von Philosophen*] (GB 1: 108). The seminars in question were Heinrich Rickert's '*Philosophisches Seminar (Bergson)'* and Jonas Cohn's '*Philosophische Besprechungen* (*Kants und Schillers Begründung der Ästhetik*)'[47]. This detail might shed some light on Benjamin's somewhat obscure distinction between philosophy and philosophers. Given the intersections of theoretical philosophy with psychology (Bergson) and aesthetics (Kant and Schiller) suggested by the topics of the two seminars, Benjamin's announcement to Carla might be read in light of his intellectual engagement with philosophers who worked at the juncture of theoretical philosophy and the spheres of psychology and aesthetics. It is, indeed, within the framework of aesthetics that one of Benjamin's multiple rendezvous with Kant takes place in the spring of 1913: 'I admit that the introduction to the Critique of Judgment [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*] is on my agenda for this morning' [*Zwar steht die Einleitung zur 'Kritik der Urteilskraft' für diesen Morgen auf dem Programm*] (GB 1: 97; C: 22) he writes to Herbert Blumenthal in May 1913. Two months later, it will be the turn of the first *Critique*[48]. Considering the specific title of Cohn's seminar - not simply Kant's and Schiller's aesthetics but the justifications ('*Begründung*') for their aesthetics - it should not come as a surprise that one of Benjamin's earliest rendezvous with Kant begins with the introduction to the third *Critique.* A closer look at the publication history of Kant's last *Critique* reveals that only the 1914 edition of *Immanuel Kants Werke*, edited by Bruno Cassirer[49], contained the entire draft of the first *Einleitung* - the one rejected by Kant - while the main editions preceding 1914[50] only included excerpts of it (Erdmann's 1880 edition) or did not include them at all (Windelband's 1908 edition)[51]. It is therefore plausible to assume that when Benjamin cites the *Einleitung*, in his 1913 letter to Blumenthal, he is referring to

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[47] See *Ankündigung der Vorlesungen der Großherzoglich Badischen Albert-Ludwigs-Universität zu Freiburg im Breisgau* [WS 1910/11 - SS 1920] (*Sommersemester* 1913) p. 40, available online at http://dl.ub.uni-freiburg.de/diglit/vvuf_1913_ss/0001?sid=b7f8d8a4fa70fb3179fa11d85d0a311c.

[48] 'Do you know', he writes again to Blumenthal in July 1913, 'I will begin reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* with commentaries as soon as possible' (GB 1: 154; C: 46).

[49] See Kant, Immanuel. 1914. 'Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Erste Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilskraft. Kritik der Urteilskraft', in *Immanuel Kants Werke,* ed. by Bruno Cassirer, Vol. 5, Herasugegeben in Gemeinschaft mit Hermann Cohen, Artur Buchenau, Otto Buek, Albert Görland, B. Kellermann (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer).

[50] See Kant, Immanuel. 1880. *Immanuel Kant's Kritik der Urtheilskraft.* Herausgegeben von Benno Erdmann (Leipzig: Leopold Voss) and Kant, Immanuel. 1908. 'Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Kritik der Urtheilskraft' in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5, ed. by Wilhelm Windelband (Berlin: Reimer) pp. 513-542.

[51] See Guyer's editorial introduction to *CPJ*: 'Beck did then include excerpts from the manuscript in the second volume of his *Erlaüternder Auszug aus den critischen Schriften des Herrn Prof. Kant auf Anrathen desselben* (Explanatory excerpts from the critical writings of Professor Kant, with his advice). Beck entitled the material "Comments on the introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment," and did make it plain that what he had was an earlier version of the published introduction that Kant had rejected on account of its length. But this connection was lost during the course of the nineteenth century, and Beck's version appeared in such collections as the Rosenkranz-Schubert edition of Kant's works (1838) under the title "On Philosophy in General". The first person to recognize the original connection to the introduction of the Critique again was the great scholar Benno Erdmann, who included Beck's excerpts, under the proper title "Beck's excerpt from Kant's original version of the introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment," in his edition of the Critique in 1880' (CPJ: xlii).

the second published version, and not to Kant's rejected and heretofore unpublished or not completely published first draft, subsequently included in the 1914 edition of the *Werke*. This would align with the subject of Cohn's seminar, as the 'reasons' or 'justifications' for Kant's final and monumental *Critique* appear more vividly pronounced in the second published introduction than in the first draft.

While it is now acknowledged, thanks to Paul Guyer's methodical excavation of the circumstances which led to the publication of the two introductions[52], that Kant rejected the first version 'solely on account of its disproportionate extensiveness for the text' (Kant 1999: 446), and despite the structure and contents of the two versions do not differ in their overall scope, it is still possible to evince a palpable difference in the theoretical articulation of the justifications for a third *Critique* and the way in which they emerge in the two drafts. The prevailing hypothesis advanced in Kantian scholarship locates the writing of the first introduction shortly before May 1789, when Kant formulates the notion of reflective judgments, extending the theoretical significance of the inquiry from a critique of taste - which began with the discovery of taste as an a priori principle, according to this hypothetical trajectory - to the critique of the power of judgment[53]. Far from delving in a detailed comparative reading of the versions in question, it suffices here to focus the discussion on one of Kant's final remarks on the power of judgement and the critique of taste, which points to the ambiguity inherent in the justifications for the third *Critique*: the problematic co-existence of the demands of limitation, on the one hand, and a critical power which does not proceed along the coordinates of limit-concepts, allowing for a mediating possibility.

In the first introduction, the power of judgment - and, by implication, the reasons for a critique of the power of judgment - appears as that 'which mediates the connection' (CPJ: 8) between the understanding and reason within the system of philosophy. In the 'Encyclopedic Introduction of the Critique of the Power of Judgment into the System of the Critique of Pure Reason' (§xi), the mediating function of the power of judgement is emphasised again as that which 'serves only for connecting' [*nur zum Verknüpfen dient*][54] (CPJ: 46) the two parts of the 'revealed system' of philosophy, the theoretical and the practical, or the 'intelligible substratum' with the sensible. Only in taste, Kant explains, does the power of judgment reveal itself as a faculty with its own principle. A critique of taste, therefore, 'fills in [*ausfüllt*] a gap [*Lücke*]' (CPJ: 44) in the system, creating a connection between sensible and intelligible but 'without upsetting the border stones' [*ohne doch die Grenzsteine zu verrücken*] (CPJ: 44; trans. mod. FM). Shortly after this passage on the mediating nature of taste and the power of judgment, Kant refers to the idea of a 'systematic connection' underlying the unity of philosophy as a whole which, he suggests, will become clear only at the end of the *Critique*. The idea of a

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[52] See CPJ, pp. xxxix-xlvi.

[53] For a detailed exposition of this theoretical trajectory see Tonelli, Giorgio. 1954. 'La Formazione del testo della Kritik der Urteilskraft', *Revue internationale de philosophie* 30: 423-28. For a discussion of different theories on the archaeology of the third Critique see Zammito, John. 1992. *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), see especially pp. 3-7.

[54] The German edition consulted for translations from the original text of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is Kant, Immanuel. 1974. *Werkausgabe, Band 10: Kritik der Urteilskraft,* ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp).

systematic architectonic is the theoretical motif underpinning the first introduction from the outset, a glaring sign of Kant's hopeful expectations of a unification of the system of philosophy which the third *Critique* was meant to ultimately make evident. However, the possibility of systematic unification and final closure anticipated in the introduction, underpinned by the conviction that the different parts of philosophy are interconnected by virtue of their participation in an ultimate and supersensible goal, must be presupposed. The 'mediating' possibility realised by the faculty of judgment, or the idea that a transition between sensible and intelligible is possible, only emerges as a consequence of a prior assumption: that a synthetic unity of philosophy as a system is necessary and that such unity requires a movement of continuity, or crossing over, between the limited parts which articulate the whole of the system. At this theoretical juncture, Kant's position on the role that the limit entails within the system vacillates between the recognition of rigid limits between sensible and intelligible (the 'gap') and the declaration that a mediating possibility can nevertheless 'bridge the gulf' and to overcome such boundaries. This ambiguity defines the controversial action of filling a gap without upsetting the *Grenzsteine*: a gap is declared between the two parts of philosophy, the theoretical and the practical, however, for the sake of synthetic unity and systematic connection, it is 'as if' the gap was not palpable. The critique of taste can only appear in the mediating movement which abjures the the gap by saturating the boundless void. The significance of this remark becomes much more evident in the second introduction, where the motif of the transitional is as prominent as the idea of the systematic unity. While the first introduction hinges on ideas of systematic closure and synthetic completion, the second introduction emphasises the transitional moment that coincides with the ultimate purpose of the *Critique*: 'the power of judgment, provides the mediating [*vermittelnden*] concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible [*möglich macht*] the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical' (CPJ: 81-82). Here, it is necessary to note the subtle yet decisive shift from the reductive tone embedded in the expression 'serves only for', of the first Introduction, to the more active, 'enabling' gesture of *Möglichkeit* and *Übergang* which defines the ultimate purpose of (and reason for) a critique of the power of judgment with the image of the 'transitional', or what Kant will later describe as the operation of 'transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap' (CPJ: 228).

While the formulation adopted in the first Introduction presses on the limitation ('serves only for') that the power of judgment retains and the possibilities that are denied to its jurisdiction - '[the power of judgment] cannot provide any cognition of its own' [*kein Erkenntnis verschaffen*] (CPJ: 46) - the phrasing proposed in the second introduction - while firmly maintaining the impossibility, for *Urteilskraft*, to formulate determining theoretical or practical judgements - shifts the accent to the transitional possibility offered by the power of judgment. It is certainly possible, in the non-violent leaping which reveals the transitional purpose of *Urteilskraft*, to hear the resonance of that connective possibility pronounced in the first Introduction which, despite pronouncing an exceeding beyond the limits of the two faculties, did not irritate the 'border stones' [*Grenzsteine*]. However, in the published introduction Kant makes no explicit reference to the imperturbability of the *Grenzsteine*, as the focus shifts from reinforcing the rigidity of the limits inherent in the system to evidencing the degree of flexibility required at the site of the limit, in order to enact the

transitional possibility enabled by *Urteilskraft*. As it has been argued by Zammito in *The Genesis*[55], the second introduction exposes Kant's ethical turn, or his attempt to demonstrate the harmonious reconciliation of man's freedom with the laws of nature. Kant's ethical turn is famously grounded on the conviction that a transition from taste, teleology and the moral can be guaranteed by establishing a ground of unity which lies outside both man and nature, in the supersensible stratum in which all these realms converge. This reconciling necessity is the dominant motif of the second introduction, where the possibility of transition from the 'domain of the concepts of nature to the domain of the concept of freedom' (CPJ: 66) is much more prominent than the promises that teleological judgments could offer to cognition, which shaped the first introduction. While the first introduction addresses the problem of transition in order to justify the links between aesthetics and teleology, the second *Introduction* goes one step further inasmuch as it repurposes the link between the two in view of what is now the centre of attention: the ultimate 'leap' that the power of judgement enables, namely the transition between man's purpose in the natural order and the transcendental ground of his freedom.

The repurposing of the published introduction to the necessity of transition between the natural and the moral, inspired by the 'ethical turn', casts new light on the ambiguous function of the limit. In a nutshell, while Kant did not completely reject his earlier convictions on the composure of the 'limit' or border-post, the final version of the introduction nevertheless exposes itself to the enigmatic and intriguing nature of the limit by revealing, through the connection between - but not the overlapping of - aesthetics and teleology with morality, 'that' which the limit holds within its own positing, namely its possible mutability or reversibility. In other words, if one could sum up one of the key 'reasons' for Kant's third *Critique* in a sentence, it would be to demonstrate how the necessity of the limit is inevitably bound up with - and dependent upon - its opposite function, namely the possibility of *Übergang* which is at the heart of any delimiting gesture. How does this confession affect the very notion of the limit? What type of *Grenze*[56] divides [and connects] art, nature and the supersensensible stratum? Certainly not a *limes* - a cutting line which only pronounces separation or fortification of boundaries - but a *limen* (threshold) whose plasticity, while still holding the parts of the system categorically apart, nevertheless admits connection and transition. Kant is concerned with a type of *Grenze* which maintains the problematic unreconciled tension between positive and negative, and which nevertheless ultimately strives to mitigate the diagnosed incongruence at the site of the limit with the 'leaping' gesture. This tension becomes palpable in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, where the limits of imagination are, at the same time, the site of an 'impossible' touching from the standpoint of intuition, a negative presentation. This negativity entails a positive side, as Kant declares, if perceived from the standpoint of the supersensible

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[55] See especially chapter 13 'The Ethical Turn in Kant's Critique of Judgment' in Zammito, *The Genesis,* pp. 263-268.

[56] On the interplay of positive and negative in Kant's use of the *Grenze* and *Schranke* see this passage in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783): 'in all borders [*Grenzen*] there is something positive (e.g., a surface is the border of corporeal space, yet is nonetheless itself a space; a line is a space, which is the border of a surface; a point is the border of a line, yet is nonetheless a locus in space), whereas limits [*Schranken*] contain mere negations' (Kant 2004: 105, trans. Mod. FM). While *Shranken* allude to the restriction of objects of intuition, *Grenzen* refers to the demonstration of the limits of reason. *Grenze* translates from the latin *terminus* which entails a space of alterity beyond what it delimits. Conversely, *Schranke* derives from *limes*, meaning something purely negative, which signals the finite and unaccomplished character of a magnitude.

stratum lying beyond the boundary. Outside these bounds, only the idea of morality can illuminate - with an 'inscrutable', impossible yet palpable touch - the subject's own existence and infuse it with the idea of a limitless, unbounded freedom. This is, in a way, to pronounce and to deny, at the same time, the impossible at the heart of the possible[57]: to proclaim the essential 'exceeding' that the setting of the limit implies and to nevertheless preserve its rigid composure. One of the key questions opened by the third Critique concerns precisely the logic of the limit: how does the possibility of transition embedded in the structure of the delimiting gesture irritate the notion of limitation? We know that, for Kant, the movement of *Übergang* did not compromise the delimiting structures and innermost articulations of the system. On the contrary, the transitional possibility was only a consequence of the presupposed unity underlying the system of philosophy. Whether the third *Critique* is ultimately convincing in demonstrating the solemn composure and imperturbability of the limit while declaring its own trespassing and exceeding is a whole other issue, which has been since long debated in the far-ranging and voluminous tradition of Kantian scholarship.

What concerns us here for the purposes of the argument to be advanced is the fact that Kant, in the published introduction, failed to reiterate the point, outlined in the first draft, on how the motion of *Übergang* did 'not upset the border posts'. Perhaps this decision says something about the structural ambiguity inherent in the transitional possibility enabled by *Urteilskraft.* That the young Benjamin reading the second *Einleitung* in 1913 must have perceived how this ambiguity at the heart of the limit would have been a pivotal reference for any serious confrontation with the Kantian gesture is evident from the drafting of his early fragments from the summer of 1913 through the winter of 1914.

If the Kantian 'justifications' for the third *Critique*, as outlined in the second introduction, pointed to the necessity of a seamless transition, accomplished by the power of judgement, between different parts of the system, this motion naturally resembled a mobile composure or gradual transition which ultimately abjures the possibility of an 'upsetting' - in the disparate forms of overlapping, transfiguration, interruption. A passage from §58 of the third *Critique* reveals the type of movement which Kant envisaged in the image of the leap vis-à-vis gradual transition. In the context of the discussion on free formations in nature, Kant describes the passage from the fluid to the solid state in these terms: 'The formation in such a case takes place through precipitation, i.e., through a sudden solidification, not through a gradual transition from the fluid to the solid state, but as it were through a leap, which transition is also called crystallization' (CPJ: 222). What Kant seems to imply with the image of the leap is therefore different from a subtle, gradual transition and resembles, instead, the motion of a sudden 'precipitation'. That is why Kant, shortly after in §59, feels

[57] This is evident, above all, in the experience of sublimity as fundamentally 'moving', in motion. Samuel Weber puts it very well: 'the impossibility and yet inevitability of the limit […] the ineluctably problematic status of all delimitation' (2017: s161). Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy brilliantly captures the problematic co-existence and 'co-extension' of limitation and trespassing embedded in the movement of transition, from limitation to its own 'unlimitation', that is at stake in the sublime, arguing that Kant himself did not seem to be fully aware of the intimate bond between limitation (beauty) and un-limitation (sublimity): 'the sublime does not merely add itself to the beautiful but transforms or transfigures the beautiful' (1993: 34). According to Nancy, Kant did not clearly see how the movement of the un-limited in sublimity acts upon the limit itself: 'the movement of the unlimited, or more exactly, of the 'unlimitation' (die *Unbegrenztheit*) that takes place on the border of the limit, and thus on the border of presentation. The unlimited as such is that which sets itself off on the border of the limit, that which detaches itself and subtracts itself from limitation (and hence from beauty) by an unlimitation that is coextensive with the external border of limitation' (1993: 35).

compelled to qualify the kinesis and rhythm of the 'transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest' (CPJ: 228) with the image of a non-violent leap, therefore not a sudden precipitation ('crystallization') but a smooth transition deprived of violence and suddenness, an illusory sense of harmonious continuity and complicity between what is before and what is after the limit.

It is interesting to note that one of the earliest liminal images to appear within Benjamin's corpus in the same year in which he started to read Kant's introduction to the third *Critique* is an image of time - 'the interval' (SW 1: 11)[58] - that stands in direct contrast with the rhythm described by Kant with the motif of the seamless, non-violent leap. In the segment of the 'Metaphysik der Jugend' - which was drafted between the summer of 1913 and the beginning of winter 1914 - titled 'The Diary' (*das Tagebuch*), the gesture of writing enacts a process of spatialisation for which a temporal dynamic is staged within the spatial, finite yet inconclusive bounds of the book-diary. Opposing the 'murky inwardness of the self of lived-experience' ['*die trübe Innerlichkeit jenes Erlebenden*'] and the 'immortality of thoughts' (GS 2: 97; SW 1: 11; trans. mod.), the 'I' which is the subject of the diary writing is described through the kinesis of a 'trembling' - moving at the site of the limit - which constitutes the centre of time: 'myself: the ray of time' ['*ich doch selbst bin: Strahl der Zeit*'] (GS 2: 97; SW 1: 11). The other 'I'[59] of the diary is marked by a peculiar kind of temporality: it is defined by the 'interval', or the silent liminal juncture where the 'chain of experiences' (SW 1: 11) - that is, the progression of time - is paused, interrupted. This image of temporal interruption, enacted by the interval's counter-rhythmic action upon the progression of time, seemingly anticipates what, in Benjamin's late theory of history, will be depicted as a movement of sudden precipitation - 'a messianic cessation of happening' [*Geschehen*] (WB 1968: 262-3). In the context of the 1940 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', the violent leap ('crystallisation') is famously cast as the dynamic means through which history - an image of time - is constructed. If the gradual transition enabled by the Kantian version of the leap - a non-violent one - is designed to accomplish the transcendental closure of the system, then Benjamin's 'interval' carves out a non-foreseeable opening, or upsetting, within - not beyond - the finitude of time. In this picture, there is no possible reiteration of the opposition between a closed, empirical 'I' subject to the rule of time and an infinite, timeless self: the temporality marked by the interval[60] is not the immortality of the soul but the limiting line of death. From this, it follows that the liminal interval is not simply a demarcating line between the finite and the infinite, but is itself, quite differently, an inscription of a different, non-progressive rhythm within time, which does not call for confrontation with a presumed infinity. That 'the time of death is our own' (SW 1: 15) arguably means that the liminal spacing marked by the interval is not a transition beyond - a 'non-violent' leap - but a distance, an interruption, felt within the limits of time, and which is nevertheless

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[58] For a recent interpretation of the 'interval-distance' - *Abstand* - of 'The diary' as a suspension of time and of the 'I', examined in the context of Benjamin's image of China, see Ng, Julia. 2023. 'The Action of Non-Action: Walter Benjamin, *Wu Wei* and the Nature of Capitalism', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 40: 4-5 https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231169944.

[59] The otherness of this 'I', elicited by the very act of writing, is not simply another 'I', but it should be understood, as Ng points out, as 'the no one who has not consumed itself' (2023: III), a complex that can no longer be framed through the grammar of being.

simultaneously capable of upsetting the limits in question. It is here, at the point of difference between a limit that affords access to the unlimited and a limit that collapses on itself and, in such collapsing, draws its own excess, that one of Benjamin's earliest rendezvous with Kant takes place.

1.1.2 Neo-Kantian coordinates (1914,1918)

If 1913 can be considered the year of Benjamin's rendezvous with Kant, 1918 might be defined as the year of Benjamin's most intense confrontation with the Neo-Kantian revisitation of Kant's theory of experience. The 1918 essay 'Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie' - and the preparatory 1917 fragment 'Über die Wahrnehmung' - can be read as the culmination of Benjamin's reflections on the Neo-Kantian teachings which were personified, in the context of his academic formation, by the leading scholars Heinrich Rickert (Baden School) and Hermann Cohen (Marburg School), with whom he had studied in Freiburg and Berlin between 1912 and 1915. Building on the key assumption that the Kantian system and its trichotomy had to be preserved, while also moving beyond the shortcomings of German *Aufklärung* and its *Weltanschauung* - 'the only thing historically possible in Kant's day was to deny its [metaphysics'] claims' (SW 1: 102) - the 'Programm' essay famously flags out the shortfalls of the well-established tradition of Neo-Kantianism in the sublimation of the fundamental tension between 'intuition and intellect' (SW 1: 105), which was granted by postulating principles drawn from the sciences as secure coordinates for a repurposing of Kant's theory of experience. It is, indeed, an intensive reading of Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1871) that informs Benjamin's own alternative to the strictly logical methodology that assimilates the construction of experience with the process of mathematical and scientific validation[61]. As is well known, Benjamin's complaint against the Neo-Kantian (Cohenian) recasting of Kantian philosophy centres around Cohen's limitations of experience to a purely scientific-empirical knowledge[62] - a limitation of the contingent by ways of the unconditioned - dismissing, as such, the pivotal role played by sensible sensations for the subject's construction of experience, as it is evinced from the 'Anticipation of Perception' in the first *Critique*[63].

The reworking of Kantian philosophy along the coordinates of limit-concepts drawn from an understanding of experience purely as natural science and the ensuing questioning of the limits between

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[61] In the summer of 1918 Benjamin was joined by his friend Gershom Scholem in the village of Muri, Switzerland, where the two set out to read Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* together, in the fictional context of the '*Universität Muri'*. See Scholem, Gershom. 1975. *Walter Benjamin: die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp) pp. 68-76. For an in-depth analysis of Benjamin and Scholem's discussion of Cohen's *Kants Theorie* in the summer of 1918 see Ng, Julia. 2012. 'Kant's Theory of Experience at the End of the War: Scholem and Benjamin Read Cohen. A Commentary', *MLN*, 127: 462–484. See also Ng's transcription and translation of Scholem's notes, based on his confrontation with Benjamin on Cohen's theory of experience: see Ng, Julia. 2012. 'Gegen die metaphysische Erörterung des Raumes', *MLN*, 127: 447–455 and _____. 2012. 'Über Kant', *MLN,* 127: 440–442.

[62] See Tagliacozzo, Tamara. 2018. *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language, and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (London; Lanham, Maryland : Rowman & Littlefield International), pp. 2-6.

[63] See Homburg, Peter. 2017. 'Towards a Benjaminian Critique of Hermann Cohen's Logical Idealism', *Anthropology and Materialism*, 1.

intuition and intellect promoted, in different ways, by both Neo-Kantian schools, had saturated the German philosophical landscape by the end of the nineteenth century. While this is not the place to engage in a comprehensive examination of Benjamin's countermoves to this tendency - which scholarship has already attended to[64] -, it suffices to note, in light of the argument here pursued, that in the *Programm* essay Benjamin virtually confronts the Neo-Kantians on the very notion of the frontier (*Grenze*): 'the question naturally arises as to the borderline between philosophy and individual sciences' (SW 1: 109). Arguably, it is exactly the fragility and ambiguity of the frontier - its potential to gesture towards a non-appropriable other, or that which lies beyond the frontier - that the Neo-Kantians sought to eliminate by blurring the line, and therefore the difference, between the sciences and thought. The ramifications of this philosophical decision extend to the context of aesthetics, too, as Cohen's *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (1912) demonstrates. Art images, for Cohen, are to be seen and thought only through the guiding principles of his philosophical system, to the extent that images only serve the function of a visual verification or further validation of those principles, which philosophy projects on them[65].

Opposing the elimination of the fundamental tension *qua* frontier that animated the Kantian co-existence of noumena and phenomena, Benjamin reiterates the belief, already sketched in the 1913 'Erfahrung' essay, that experience contains - rather than sublimates - its own limit, or 'that' which upsets the possibility of a clear-cut determination of it, and that this limit is not an unreachable side beyond experience but is 'virtually included' (SW 1: 109) within experience. If the interpretation of Kant as advocated by the Neo-Kantians aimed to eliminate 'that' which the limit-concepts of the sciences could not circumscribe or encompass, then Benjamin's critique aims to emphasise a certain inapplicability of the scientific 'limit' to the determination of experience. In other words, the empirical principles of natural science cannot delimit experience - including the aesthetic - from an external, legislative standpoint but are, instead, internally encompassed in the broader system of philosophy - a system which exceeds their limitations.

During his university studies, Benjamin also attended Rickert's lectures in Freiburg, where he had the opportunity to familiarise with the Neo-Kantian teachings of the Southwest German School, or Baden School. In 1915 he also attended Ernst Cassirer's seminars in Berlin[66]. Around the same years of Benjamin's confrontation with Kant, Cassirer was absorbed in his endeavour to implement the Kantian legacy with a theory that aimed to sublimate the limits between intuition and contingency, in order to accomplish the assimilation of the two under the guise of a universal whole. By the time of Benjamin's 1916 essay 'Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen', the irreconcilable difference that separated

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[64] On Benjamin's responses to and critique of Cohen's Neo-Kantianism, see Tagliacozzo, *Experience and Infinite Task*, pp. 11-99.

[65] Andrea Poma, for example, has been particularly blunt and lucid on this point: 'Cohen finds in works of art the realization and exemplification of his own aesthetic principles, because he examines them in the light of these principles. He finds in works of art what he himself has put into them' (2005: 283-4). See Poma, Andrea. 2005. 'The Portrait in Hermann Cohen's Aesthetics' in *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism,* ed. by Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer), pp. 283-306.

[66] See the letter to Fritz Radt in GB 1, p. 266.

Benjamin's undertakings from the Neo-Kantian theory of language as it appears in Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (3 vols. composed between 1923-1929) was already evident. In the 'Über Sprache' essay, Benjamin exposes his critique of knowledge via a reflection on language as 'an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical' (SW 1: 67). Language is the underlying fabric of phenomena and, as the incipit of the essay asserts, every human gesture has a linguistic character. This essay anticipates Benjamin's alternative to the assimilation of experience with the scientific and prepares the ground for the bold conclusion of the 'Programm' essay, which reads as an admonition to the Neo-Kantians: 'all philosophical knowledge has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers […] it is ultimately because of this fact that the systematic supremacy of philosophy over all science as well as mathematics is to be asserted' (SW 1: 108). Notably, this essay also anticipates the importance of translation as a mediating force, able to grant the continuity of experience which the Neo-Kantians neglected and which was at heart of Benjamin's 'coming philosophy': 'Translation is the removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations' (SW 1: 70). However, - and this is crucial - translation, as the 1921 essay 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' will further explain, grants continuity only by simultaneously performing a removal - interruption, withdrawal, discontinuity[67]. It is the liminal movement of '*Überführung*' - crossing over - from one language into another that holds together in the same interstice two opposite and yet inseparable rhythms, the 'leap' of removal and the continuum of *Fortleben* - the renewal of life inherent in language and in the transformative process of its historical unfolding. This discontinuous, transversal fibrillation at the site of the limit has serious implications for both Benjamin's revisitation of Kant and his critique of Neo-Kantianism: contrasting the idea of continuity as associated with the seamless transition from one realm of philosophy to the other, by means of presupposed universality and communicability (Kant), and counteracting the Neo-Kantian solution of reducing the system of philosophy to the sciences, Benjamin's emphasis on incommunicability, discontinuity, mutability clearly starts to undermine the arguments on the unity, purity, completion and self-sufficiency of the system.

In sharp contrast with this picture, Cassirer's reworking of the limits of language points to the resolution of the tension between the finitude of contingency and the infinitude of universal system of signification. When one reads about the idea of a 'fluidity' inherent in the limits of language and of reality[68], one may be tempted to associate such mutability with the same operation of unsettling the presumed fixity of the limit which was at the heart of Benjamin's confrontation with Kantian and Neo-Kantian philosophies.

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[67] Werner Hamacher, in his 'Intensive Languages', draws an important parallel between Benjamin's reflections on language and translatability as an exceeding, intensive, structure which moves beyond the schematism of linear correspondence intuition-concept and Kant's concept of intensity as it appear in the first Critique, in relation to the principle of the anticipations of perception. Hamacher asserts that what language presents in the 'crossing-over' - *Überführung* - of translation is 'the intensity of its extinguishing' (2012: 539), drawing from Benjamin's own definition of translation as intensive in 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers'. Significantly, the image which Hamacher uses to exemplify the mediating and linguistic structure of reality as intensive is the limit: intensity is 'an outer limit that seeks to shoot out *beyond* its own superlative' (Hamacher 2012: 505 - emphasis mine). One could say it is once again a type of *Grenze* which opens up to the possibility of its *beyond-ness*. *Intensio,* as Hamacher notes, implies an increasing movement, like 'a whole that swells out beyond itself' (Hamacher 2012: 504). See Hamacher, Werner. 2012. 'Intensive Languages', *MLN*, 127(3): 485–541.

[68] See Cassirer, Ernst. 1955-57. *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* trans. by Ralph Manheim, 3 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) p. 121.

However, a closer engagement cannot but unmask the constitutive divergence of their critical ethos and philosophical treatment of the limit. The guiding motif of a universal 'whole' in which particular forms are contained is evident throughout Cassirer's opus magnum. The particularity of form is 'possible only as limitation of all-encompassing "unitary space" (1955-57: 251), he writes in the opening volume of the trilogy on symbolic forms, devoted to language. In line with this presupposition, language is understood as a constitutive unity, 'an organism in which, as the old Aristotelian definition put it, the whole is prior to its parts' (1955-57: 252). By the same token, the contingency of the world can be fully grasped only by virtue of its 'fully self-contained character' (1955-57: 32) which reduces the particular to the refracted image of an external totality. What transpires from these words is a methodological strategy which aims to subsume the particulars of the sensuous under a universal system of signification. Pervading Cassirer's philosophical enterprise is the tactile image of an overarching totality infused with symbolic values, whose existence is posited outside the bounds of the contingent: a universal, intelligible totality which encompasses the variety of configurational patterns of the sensible.

In line with this insight, Cassirer identified the 'whole' of phenomena - the theoretical ordering of contingency according to an external universal law - as a '*criterion* for the truth of the *particular* empirical phenomenon' (1955-57: 31)[69]. Accordingly, philosophical interpretation must fulfil a universal function of signification by excavating the spiritual content of symbolic forms inherent in language, myth science and religion. While arguing for an essential separation of the aesthetic from the spheres of language, science and myth, Cassirer nevertheless holds that the aesthetic function is similarly oriented - like the theoretical concepts in science - by the will to determine the undetermined, to privilege the 'determined over and against the undetermined' (2013b: 220). Significantly, he identifies a mediating organ of separation and connection, a kind of *limen*, at the juncture of the artistic object and its underlying mode of expression: the '*pure* figure' - one might think of it as the equivalent of Cohen's 'pure thought' in the realm of aesthetics -, entails an understanding of the process of figuring as a spiritual formative act underpinning the creation of form. Spiritual forming, Cassirer writes, 'applies to every pure function of the image' (2013: 335) and moves the interpretive act away from the concerns on the sensible and towards the 'intentional [*morphē*]' (2013: 330) or the 'noetic element'. Yet the dividing line between *noetic* and *hyletic*, sensible and intentional, subjectivity and object, cannot possibly bear the transformative potential of the threshold-*limen* in the architecture of Cassirer's aesthetics: conversely, the limiting line between contingency and the intelligible only retains the negative connotation of the boundary-*limes*, an operation of fortification which aims to encompass, appropriate and erase the limit's 'other' - in this case, the sensible, which is dismissed in favour of the noetic.

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[69] After accepting the philosophy chair at the University of Hamburg in 1919, Cassirer entered the Warburg-Kreis and was able to debate his theories not just with Warburg himself but also with the art-historians Fritz Saxl, Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind. Stepping into the majestic collection of the Warburg Library, Cassirer recounts his first impression with the image of 'awakening' (see Cassirer, Ernst. 2013. *The Warburg Years: Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology* trans. by S. G. Loft (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. x. The element which incites the feeling of being 'awoken' is the 'principle of its [library] construction' for which the different subject-materials of the human sciences were arranged according to 'a common ideal center' (Cassirer 2013: 72-73). This vision reflects the conceptual architecture of Cassirer's theoretical endeavours in those years, which was centred on the concept of symbolic forms as a 'universal systematic problem of the philosophy of spirit' (Cassirer 2013: 73).

The ideational, intentional cipher contained in the spiritual element becomes the forming principle through which the sensible is articulated and beyond which it cannot extend[70]. The spiritual, understood as an 'original act of designing' (2013: 335) fully determines the expression of the sensible[71], depriving it from any degree of independence or autonomous relevance.

1.2 *Liminal Images* (I). Panofsky and Saxl's *Melencolia* yet-to-come

Having sketched out the points of difference between a logic of the limit which, on the one hand, excludes the significance of the sensuous (Cohen) and, on the other, sets out to overdetermine it (Cassirer), it is now possible to demonstrate how Benjamin overcomes this alternative, precisely, via image[72]. The point of connection between Benjamin and the Neo-Kantian attitude which encapsulates the image's potential to upset the limits of what is thinkable, readable and communicable within the bounds of reason is, in fact, one image: Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) [Fig. 1].

Scholars have already attended to the link - and the gap - between Benjamin's, Panofksy and Saxl's - and Warburg's - various readings of the melancholic disposition[73], and while the dialectical interplay of the opposite tendencies staged by the image is usually placed at the forefront of interpretation, not enough attention has been placed on the different reasons for - and consequences of - melancholy's inactivity. The purpose of what follows is to examine the tensive knot of activity and inactivity, intellectual representability and material constructibility, in order to pinpoint Benjamin's different (with respect to Panofsky and Saxl's, Heidegger's, and later Warburg's) interpretation of the dynamics of 'undoing' which underpin melancholy's passive activity, and which are embodied by the image of the stone. The motif of the stone will also serve to extend the argument to the broader implications that this liminal image yields for re-thinking the bond

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[70] See Barale, Alice. 2009. *La Malinconia dell'Immagine* (Firenze: University Press), p. 23.

[71] While the determination of expression, in Cassirer's strategy, points to the annihilation of any 'inexplicable' and 'mystical' residue, in order to privilege the operation of determination and completability, Benjamin's association of 'manifestation' with the 'inexplicable' points to the potentiality, which simultaneously inscribes and exceeds language, to not signify, or to mean nothing.

[72] Of course there are many texts, in Benjamin's corpus, where it is possible to examine how he responded to the shortfalls of Neo-Kantian theories of the limit, however, for the argument here pursued and according to the methodology that informs this thesis, the focus will be placed on literary-visual images as a vehicle to philosophical reflections.

[73] On Benjamin's, Warburg's, Panofsky and Saxl's different interpretations of *Melencolia I* see Hanssen, Beatrice. 1999. 'Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)', *MLN,* 114(5): 991-1013; Wedepohl, Claudia. 2016. 'Warburg, Saxl, Panofsky and Dürer's Melencolia I' in *Schifanoia,* ed. by Marco Bertozzi (Pisa; Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore) pp. 27-44; Barale, Alice. 2016. "Collectione et quasi compressione': Warburg e Benjamin in dialogo con Panofsky e Saxl', in *Schifanoia,* ed. by Marco Bertozzi (Pisa; Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore), pp. 87-94; Weigel, Sigrid. 2013. *Walter Benjamin. Images, the Creaturely and the Holy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) see esp. pp. 207-211; Bertozzi, Marco. 2008. *Il detective malinconico*, (Milano: Feltrinelli), see esp. pp. 84-94.

between artistic and thinking gestures, calling for parallels with Heidegger's reading of the border stone in the image of a mourning Athena.

Only towards the end of section II in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*[74] does Benjamin touch upon the trait d'union between Dürer's engraving and the aesthetic form of German tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*), the latter being, as is well known, the subject of his post-doctoral thesis: 'the images and figures that the German *Trauerspiel* present - these are dedicated to Dürer's genius of winged melancholy' (OGT: 165). In the trajectory which moves from the un-graspability of fleeing beauty presented in the 'Epistemo-Critical Foreword' and culminates with the philosophical image of the *Trauerspiel* as beauty's last day, the chapter on Dürer's *Melencolia* stands as a paradigmatic example of Benjamin's ability to inscribe image and text, the visual and the philosophical, within a complex critical gesture that no longer seeks to find, in the image, a mere verification of presupposed philosophical principles but instead sees, in the image, a complex able to upset and to endlessly question the act of reading, thinking and interpretation. Drawing from a vast array of scholarship which includes - but is not limited to - the work of Aby Warburg, Karl Giehlow, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, Benjamin reads, in the image of melancholy, a constellation of dialectical tensions: between jovian and saturnine influences, the world's finitude and other-worldly aspirations, mathematic-rational worldview and the world of things, Renaissance magic and Medieval acedia, genius and the demonic. Dürer's engraving had been the object of at least three important studies in the Germanophone cultural landscape at the dawn of the twentieth century: Warburg's 1905 lecture on Dürer at the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* (Hamburg) - and the subsequent publication of the essay 'Heidnische-Antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten' in 1920[75], Karl Giehlow's three-part article 'Dürers Stich 'Melencolia I' und der Maximilianische Humanistenkreis' published in 1903-1904, and Panofsky and Saxl's monograph '*Dürers Kupfertstich 'Melencolia I'; Eine quellen - und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung*' (written 1920-21, published 1923), which was later included by Raymond Klibansky in the monumental volume *Saturn and Melancoly: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (1964).

In the concluding section of the chapter 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy' (II, *Trauerspiel-Buch*), Benjamin explicitly pronounces his debt to the 'beautiful study' by Panofsky and Saxl, and to their 'extraordinary critical model' (OGT: 153), Karl Giehlow. He also quotes more than once, as is well-known, from Warburg's 1920 essay, in order to expose the influence of 'Renaissance magic' (OGT: 154) on the antique interpretation of melancholic disposition, for which saturnine tendencies are intertwined with a 'theory of genius' (OGT: 155), an interpretation which endows the image of melancholy with a dialectical tension deprived of Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation). When recommending the 'Benjamin book' to Saxl in a letter dated May 24,

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[74] References are to this English translation: Benjamin, Walter. 2019. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel,* trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press).

[75] References are to this English translation: Warburg, Aby. 1999. 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images', in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance,* trans. David Britt, (Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities; Garsington: Windsor) pp. 597-699.

1928[76], Scholem cautiously hinted at the different perspective from which the problem of melancholy - the common visual denominator between Benjamin and the scholars of the Hamburg circle - was addressed in the *Trauerspiel-Buch*. Benjamin was, for his part, certainly aware of the different 'training' undertaken by Panofsky as an art-historian, but he nevertheless seemed to believe that they could be 'cut from the same cloth' (GB 3: 332, trans. and quoted in Weigel 2013: 269). Notwithstanding the probably opportunistic reasons - financial security, academic career - behind Benjamin's tentative approach to and aspired affinity with the *Kreis*, it is not far-fetched to think that a scholar like Aby Warburg, with his declared disdain for any 'limitations caused by the disciplines' *border patrol* [*grenzepolizeiliche Befangenheit*] (Warburg 1999: 133), would have welcomed the 'completely different angle' of Benjamin's approach. But it is likely that he never actually read Benjamin's book, having delegated the task to Saxl, who then left it to Panofsky to pronounce the final (negative) verdict.

Benjamin's acknowledgement of the influence that Panofsky and Saxl's study exerted on his own reading of *Melencolia* should not be interpreted as an indicator of a purported mutual agreement. Rather than staging a liminal kinesis, that is, a potential to unsettle the limits of what is thinkable and intelligible, Panofsky and Saxl's *Melencolia* is first and foremost an image of the limit, more precisely, an image of the limitations of finitude vis-à-vis the infinitude of an idealistic, invisible cypher *qua* symbolic function: 'Dürer's engraving *is the image of* an abstract and impersonal notion symbolised in a human figure […] the visible representation completely answers to the invisible notion' (Kilbansky, Panofsky and Saxl 2019: 304, emphasis mine). According to Panofsky and Saxl, Dürer's image achieves the 'dignity of a symbol' (2019: 306), or what Cassirer, lecturing in Hamburg during the same years, had defined as the potential - inherent in symbolic forms - to reduce the particularity of contingency to a refracted image of an ideational totality which encompasses the visible and yet extends beyond the presumed limitations of such a realm. In its being 'limited' or 'self-contained', the image answers to, i.e. is subject to, the ruling of an invisible, abstract 'notion'. Panofsky and Saxl certainly did not fail to notice the underlying tension pervading *Melencolia I*, namely the constellation of conflicting tendencies between knowledge and imagination, practical gestures and intellectual activity, saturnine and jovian influences. The most important tensive knot diagnosed by Panofsky and Saxl is to be found in the contrast between the two iconographic models underlying Dürer's engraving, namely the *Typus Acedia* - melancholy's inactivity - and the *Typus Geometria*, which was a representational motif of geometry exemplified by a woodcut from Georg Reisch's *Margarita Philosophica* (1504) [Fig. 2], one of the most popular encyclopaedias of the sixteenth century.

The woodcut from George Reisch's *Margarita philosophica* functions as a visual exemplification of the hierarchical split between the intellectual notion of pure geometry, whose personification is a woman sitting at the table surrounded by measuring tools, and the practical handwork of the constructors, depicted through the activities portrayed at the bottom of the image. As Panofsky and Saxl pointedly note, 'in an intellectual sense the activities shown here [in the bottom section] are 'subordinated' to 'Geometria'; for all the work that is going on is merely a practical application of her theoretical discoveries' (2019: 313). The implications of

[76] On the vicissitudes around Benjamin's attempts to connect with members of the *Warburgkreis* see fn 161, ch. 3.

this last claim are of considerable importance for the argument here pursued: 'work' and 'activities' become, in fact, equivalent with intellectual endeavours, dismissing the sensuous space of practical work, of bodies and gestures, of materials and tools, as a mere 'reflection' of a superior, intellectual gesture. The tracing of a clear-cut, hierarchical limit between intellectual activity and practical work became a popular trope since Renaissance. Not only is this idea visually conveyed in the various portraits of geometry but it also extends to other forms of art, such as architecture. In this cultural milieu, the origin of architecture is indeed recounted as yet another 'separating act' - between the stone cutter (Alberti's 'carpenter') and the profession of the architect. Against this backdrop, the novelty of Dürer's visual references to the *Typus Geometria* in his *Melencolia* becomes clearer: the problematisation of the idea of fixed limits - and, therefore, of separation - between intellectual ideation and practice. This why the *Typus Acedia* enters into the scene, in order to introduce a tensional, confrontational moment in face of the one-sided, conceptual hegemony of a pure mathematical worldview. In Dürer's picture, the fidelity in the supremacy of intelligible activity is now challenged by a stubborn opponent, namely astrological influences under saturnine and jovian jurisdictions. It should therefore not come as a surprise that Dürer's creature 'is doing nothing' with the instruments scattered around her. She is not caught up in an act of construction and she fails to engage with things, but these 'things', or objects, are no longer uniquely tied to the figural motifs that determined the classical activity of the geometer, namely the act of measuring - the compass being one of the elements of geometrical 'activity' par excellence. They now also reflect their affinity with saturnine influences, as Panofsky and Saxl rightly point out:

> Thus we can see that most of those occupational symbols whose presence in Dürer's engraving Melencolia has hitherto seemed explicable only in terms of 'the art of measurement' find a place also in the world of Saturn; for in so far as they are practical and manual, the trades represented in Dürer's engraving belong not only to that group which we have seen illustrated in the woodcut of 'Geometria' in the *Margarita philosophica*, but also to that which the writings on the planets label the 'artificia Saturni': namely, the trades of the 'carpentarius', the 'lapicida', the 'cementarius', the 'edificator edificiorum'" (2019: 332).

From this excerpt it is clear that, according to Panofsky and Saxl, *Melencolia*'s inactivity, or her failure to engage with the act of measuring - the compass - that is canonically associated with Geometry's mental action, goes hand in hand with the kinship between the 'practical' and 'manual' nature of the instruments depicted and the 'world of Saturn'. Because of their being 'practical' and no longer just mathematical, the tools and instruments at *Melencolia*'s feet open up a liminal place which irritates the presumed self-sufficiency of a purely mathematical space, throwing the realm of thought and intelligibility (the space devoted to the 'art of measurement', which in Reisch's *Geometria* appears to be unaffected by the sensuous space of work, bodies and objects) within the material, practical sphere of feeling, the senses - melancholy's *acedia*, or the feeling of apathy that comes from saturnine *qua* demonic influences. According to Panofsky and Saxl, Dürer's

exceptional synthesis is reflected in the 'merging of the two different worlds of thought and feeling' or the '*ars geometrica'* with the '*homo melancholicus'* (2019: 317).

We now reach a crucial point for the argument here advanced: Panofsky and Saxl clarify that *Melencolia*'s inactivity arises from her preoccupation with 'interior visions' (2019: 318), that is, with intellectual striving, rather than earthly contemplation, hence why she disregards the practical tools. In line with this insight, the 'practical' and 'manual' tools are read as obstacles, or limits, to the 'interior visions' which occupy *Melencolia*'s thoughts. Thus, the creature's practical non-doing is read as a consequence of intellectual action, in a move that seemingly retains the privilege of intellectual activity over the sensuous, practical and material. Indeed, as I will show, Panofsky and Saxl's interpretation still relies upon, and therefore does not emancipate from, the separation between visible and invisible, representability and constructibility, intelligibility and sensibility. The reasons for melancholy's inactivity are to be found in her failure to overcome the limits of finitude, enacting the struggle of thought to access a universal, invisible space of idealistic removal. In other words, Panofsky and Saxl read the insurgence of melancholy and inaction as a failure to grasp 'that' which lies beyond the visible - beyond the image's material body - and implicitly condemn Dürer's figure to the chains of immanence. According to this, the image, rather than staging an overflowing of limits, a crisis right at the heart of the limiting line between body and thought, material world and intellectual space, symbolically portrays a limit-point which can only be transgressed by giving up the world itself - its 'practical' consistency. Thus, the significance of *Melencolia I*, her 'true meaning', corresponds to an 'imaginative Melancholy, whose thoughts and actions all take place within the realms of space and visibility […] we receive the impression of a being to whom her allotted realm seems intolerably restricted - of a being whose thoughts 'have reached the limit'' (2019: 345). What is meant by 'limit' here is clearly synonymous with limitation: the limitation, or intolerable restriction, reflected in the 'practical' and 'manual' consistency of the 'realms of space and visibility' surrounding *Melencolia,* stand in the way of her intellectual striving beyond those limits.

The intolerable limitations of practical, material space and 'visibility': this is the melancholic moment glimpsed by Dürer, according to Panofsky and Saxl, who read the spatio-temporal coordinates of this image as the 'first stage' of an ascending motion which was bound to eventually enable a transition from the limits of '*melancholia imaginativa*' through to the consequent step, coinciding with '*melancholia rationalis*', up to the final stage of the ascent, namely '*melancholia mentalis*'. Leaning on Agrippa's theory of gradation, as it appears in his *De occulta philosophia* (1531), for which the melancholic disposition is inscribed into a threefold ascending process, which corresponds to the stages of (I) 'imaginatio', or mechanical arts (II) 'ratio', or 'knowledge of natural and human things' and ultimately reaches the 'higher spirits' (III), or 'knowledge of divine secrets' (2019: 359), Panofsky and Saxl identify *Melencolia I* with the very first stage of such ascending motion.

This assimilation has far-reaching implications for their central assertion on the significance of Dürer's engraving, namely the portrait of melancholy as a being confined within her own limits, a being who has accepted that mathematical or rational insight falls short of the higher mental faculties required to transcend the limits of the physical world - a power which, according to Dürer's revision, was no longer a prerogative of pure geometry or mathematics, i.e. rational knowledge, but of individual genius. The significance of Dürer's

achievement is, for Panofsky and Saxl, rooted in the recognition that the limits of visual immanence must still be overstepped, tensions between the limits of visual immanence and invisible, 'interior visions' must still be resolved, only now it is a matter of different intellectual strategies - the shift from calculating, mathematical *ratio* to the 'higher mental power' of genius.

The fruitful revaluation of melancholy which took place in Renaissance, via Ficino's *De vita* and then re-elaborated in Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia,* was grounded on the Pseudo-Aristoteles *Problemata, XXX,1* which established a kinship between the melancholic disposition and 'exceptional men' - artists, writers, philosophers. Melancholy was read, under this redeemed light, as a state of 'excess', rather than resignation. The first version of Agrippa's text was considered to be, according to Panofsky and Saxl's philological excavation, the main theoretical source of Dürer's *Melencolia*. But while there is strong agreement on Dürer's acquaintance with Ficino's texts and Agrippa's subsequent revision in *De occulta*, it is certainly plausible to think, as Bertozzi has suggested[77], that Dürer might not have followed Agrippa's text to the letter, and that he may have not subscribed to the threefold movement of melancholy's ascent. It is perhaps equally plausible to assume that Dürer, an artist, was more faithful to the *Problemata*'s insight on the association between melancholy and the artist's 'exceptional status', and that his portrait of melancholy, rather than staging the limitations and inadequacy of a being confined to the visual realm, hinted at the unique status of the artist who observes the world from his/hers exceptional *qua* melancholic position.

It is remarkable, in this sense, that Panofsky and Saxl place the significance of Dürer's *Melencolia* I in a 'new meaning' that is to be found extra-image, literally beyond the engraving itself, in a series of *Melencolias* yet-to-come: 'Dürer's Melencolia I, as portraying a 'melancholia imaginativa', would really represent the first stage in an ascent via Melencolia II ('melancholia rationalis') to Melencolia III ('Melancholia mentalis')' (2019: 350). Here lies Giehlow's error, according to Panofsky and Saxl, namely the failure to recognise the significance of Agrippa's theory of gradation in the numerical ordering of the three stages of ascent. Thus, even though *Melencolia I* stages the limits of mathematical-scientific knowledge, the 'overcoming' - but not the overflowing - of these limits is announced, by Panofsky and Saxl, in a subsequent, hypothetical intervention of 'higher faculties' (2019: 360) of the mind which take us beyond the frontiers of the image, in an aspired ascension toward a universal, ideational space. Seen under this light, Dürer's melancholy, for Panofsky and Saxl, coincides with the sorrowful failure of imagination to reconcile the tensions between the world's finitude and other-worldly, intellectual aspirations. Rather than pondering on the unsolved *coincidentia oppositorum* staged by the image, the 'new meaning' promoted by Panofsky and Saxl looks forward to the resolution of opposites - and to the departure from earthly finitude - in the higher, idealistic realm of a third image (Melencolia III) yet to come.

[77] See Bertozzi, *Il Detective Maliconico,* pp. 53-63 and pp. 84-93.

1.3 Doing Nothing

If Panofsky and Saxl are keen to point out what they believed was Giehlow's error, Benjamin, from a different angle, concentrates on a detail which has escaped not only Giehlow's but also Panofsky, Saxl and Warburg's attention: the image of the stone. Benjamin sees, in the image of the 'cold', 'dry' and 'hard' stone, the signs of medieval acedia, the syndrome of 'indolence of the heart' (OGT: 160) which plunges the subject into a terrifying fall. Read through the lens of medieval theology, acedia (from the Greek *ἀκηδία*) amounts to a marked disregard towards life, affection and activity, a general lack of care and apathy which was usually negatively associated with cowardice, inertia. Classed as a theological vice, acedia, in the medieval scholastic tradition, was associated with an unwillingness to partake in promoting the good, and therefore clearly at odds with Christian morality[78]. For Benjamin, acedia's inactivity is not merely inaction but an 'undoing'[79] (OGT: 161) which is paradoxically manifested, on the stage of Baroque mourning plays, by the actions of the prince, the tyrant and the courtier, which are characterised by the following hesitant traits: irresolution, becoming unhinged, indecisiveness, inconsistency. Acedia, of which the emblem of the stone is paradigmatic, according to Benjamin, is in fact a form of doing that can only undo, that is, it can only perform a kind of melancholic abandoning - 'submission' (OGT: 161) - in light of the absence of meaning, or 'lack of principle' that the earthly world exposes to the gaze of the brooder.

By claiming that the mourning plays of German Baroque dramatists are 'dedicated to' Dürer's engraving, Benjamin implicitly touches upon the trait d'union between the gaze of the allegorist and *Melencolia*'s one: neither directed to the distant planets nor to the practical tools at her feet, *Melencolia*'s gaze is, like the gaze of courtier in German mourning plays, absorbed in the world of things, in 'hopeless fidelity' (OGT: 161) towards them. Hopeless, because clearly human redemption is not in sight: from the world of things - and therefore from the image itself, the realm of visibility - there is no escape, no possible ascension extra-image by means of spiritual faculties towards a higher life, as it was the case in Panofsky and Saxl's reading. Does this mean that the only alternative to both the Christian and Neo-Kantian variations on the sublimation of the limit - respectively, salvation and ascension towards a 'new meaning' - is to surrender oneself to the limitations of the 'law of guilt' (OGT: 161) that governs the 'life of the creaturely' (OGT: 161)? A positive answer to this would apply to the Baroque allegorist's vision of the world, but it would not satisfy

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[78] See Wenzel, Siegfried. 1960. *The Sin of Sloth. Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*, (Chapel Hill: The University of north Carolina Press).

[79] The German passage reads as follows: '*An der Trägheit des Herzens geht der Tyrann zugrunde*' (GS 1: 333).

the broader question, which is the object of this excursus, of whether the image - indeed, the limits of the image - could be the site of a potential that not only overcomes the illusory totality of the symbolic-transcendental closure but also the limits of allegory. While this is not the place to engage in a proper examination of the significance of allegorical vision for Benjamin beyond the context of the *Trauerspiel*'s *Melencolia* chapter, it is nevertheless possible to show how the liminal image of the stone functions, in itself, as the performative of allegory's possibility for an intra-image reversibility.

Dürer's *Melencolia* is caught in the act of contemplating the creaturely, earthly world of things while not engaging with the instruments scattered around her; if, as we have seen, melancholy's gaze, read through the lens of medieval acedia, consists in a form of doing that does nothing - it neither achieves nor accomplishes but only passively receives and submits to the world of things -, that is, an undoing, then such a gesture exposes itself to a fundamental risk: faced with the lack of meaning brought about by allegorical vision, one can confuse allegory's limits - the image, appearance - with the essence, - reality - and therefore plunge into a melancholic despair brought about by becoming 'so unhinged' (OGT: 161) that it is too difficult to make sense of the loss and failure at play in the absence of meaning. The declared arbitrariness of allegory is simultaneously the force and the limit of its aesthetic form: that anything can mean absolutely anything else means that the limit between form and content is not simply irritated, upset or subject to crisis, but altogether erased, and with it difference is erased too. That allegorical vision, for Benjamin, shows promises to overcome its own limit is demonstrated by the significance that allegory exerts on his writings beyond the *Trauerspielbuch*. How can one upset the limit - the false totality of symbolic presentation, and of semblance - by means of allegory, without giving in to nonsense, mere ambiguity or absurdity? If, as scholarship rightly points out[80], the potential of the allegorical image is for Benjamin a means to, and not an end in itself, then this raises the question as to whether the melancholic envisioning of the world, too, might not be an end in itself, but a means to: faced with the lack of principle brought about by the mode of perception that is proper to allegorical contemplation - destruction, dismembering, fragmenting, disintegrating, displacing - melancholy encounters its limit when the ensuing failure and undoing are only legible in relation to the possibility of organic completion, progress and purposiveness (of life)[81]. But if we take the latter possibilities out of the equation, then melancholy's limit turns out to be both the positing and the upsetting of this picture: when the failure of existence is treated from the standpoint of death, that is, from life's finitude and limit, and not from the aberrant perspective of a heavenly infinitude, then acedia can itself reveal a positive side, no longer

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[80] For different discussions on allegory's potential for reversibility see Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*, pp. 49-51; Pinotti, Andrea. 2018. *Costellazioni. Le parole di Walter Benjamin* (Torino: Einaudi), see esp. pp. 3-6; Menninghaus, Winfried. 1980. *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt a.M. : Suhrkamp).

[81] Assessing the implications of allegory for Benjamin's theory of history, Friedlander makes a similar point when remarking that 'in viewing history as the accumulation of failings, one conceives of it in terms of how the incompleteness caused by death, rather than the purposiveness of life, provides it with meaning' (2012: 129).

measured against the norm of Christian morality. Indeed, before it became classified as a theological vice, and therefore before the term acquired an exclusively negative connotation in the medieval scholastic tradition, the Greek term for acedia used to retain both a positive and negative value, as Wenzel shows in his philological excavation of the transformations of the concept through history: on the one hand the lack of care, or carelessness, could be read as mere indifference towards life - and therefore associated with the *incuria* of the one who abandons himself or herself to the succession of events[82] - but, on the other hand, *ἀκηδία* could also be interpreted - specifically in the context of Stoic philosophy - as 'freedom from sorrow', a strategy or a means to access happiness, by envisioning life from the standpoint of death, that is, from a standpoint of non-existence, whereby human affairs are read through the lens of their inevitable, inescapable decline and ending. Acedia, which is read by Benjamin through the liminal image of the stone as the element which instills the winged creature's melancholic disposition, therefore contains within itself the potential for its own reversibility, namely the possibility to transform the failure of existence into an occasion not for despair or terror, but for happiness. Seen under this non-Christian light, melancholy's inactivity would not arise as a consequence of imagination's *sorrowful* failure to overcome the limits of finitude (Panofsky and Saxl), but would instead lend legibility to its reverse picture, namely a *lack of sorrow* in the face of (life's) failure.

According to the liminal efficacy of this image, *Melencolia*'s inactivity, or undoing, thus paradoxically and simultaneously functions as the negation of and the prompt for life itself, seen from the standpoint of its inevitable failure. The diagnosis of the dialectical turnabout here proposed via the image of the stone has far-reaching implications, certainly not for Benjamin's interpretation of Baroque allegory - the point here is not to offer another reading key to the Baroque vision of the world - but for the distinction between mere ambiguity, or the erasure of the limit (the efficacy of allegory) and undoing, or upsetting the limit (the efficacy of the liminal image). The method of thinking through the image - as opposed to merely thinking *the* image as an object of conceptual appropriation -, which is exemplified by Benjamin's attention to the image of the stone as a philosophical tool able to give access to a different reading - from Panofsky and Saxl, and also from Warburg, as we will see in ch. 3 - of melancholy's reasons for inaction, which does not give in to mere ambiguity of meaning, neither to the invention of a 'new' meaning beyond the image's limits, functions as an early prototype of what, in the 'Strenge Kunstwissenschaft' essay (1933), will be described as a preoccupation for the insignificant, or meaningless - '*Unbedeutenden*' (SW 2: 668) - aspect of the material.

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[82] The negative connotation of *acedia* is remarked by Benjamin in the seventh thesis ('On the concept of History', 1940): 'that *acedia* which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up. Among medieval theologians, acedia was regarded as the root cause of sadness' (SW 4: 391). In this context, *acedia* is negatively associated with a lack of action that merely accepts succumbing to the victor, in the name of infinite progress. But, as will be demonstrated, the semantic ambivalence rooted in the Greek word *ἀκηδία* - which calls for parallel with the ambivalence rooted in the word limit, seen through the lens of the *limes-limen* conjunction (cf. Introduction of the present research) - gives rise to the possibility of another reading of passive action - one endowed with a rescuing potential, as we will see in ch. 3.

For now, it suffices to conclude with one final reflection, which will also serve as an entry point to another image of brooding before a stone: *Mourning Athena* [Fig. 3], as read through Heidegger's gaze. Life's un-graspability and meaningless passing away - its undoing towards death -, if no longer seen against the foil of infinite progress, but only if regarded as a token for life itself, opens up a possibility which eschews both alternatives of 1) merely surrendering to the ambiguity of meaning (which for Benjamin famously foregrounds the emergence of myth), and therefore to the 'law of guilt', and 2) filling the lack of meaning with a 'new meaning' beyond the image (Panofsky and Saxl): the possibility of finding, in the linguistic articulation - and historic configuration - of life's meaningless dismembering and sorrowful passing away, its highest meaning, that is, a means to happiness[83].

1.4 *Liminal Images* (II): *Mourning Athena*'s Glance

In line with the methodology adopted throughout this research, the link between Benjamin's mourning *Melencolia* and Heidegger's *Mourning Athena*[84] is neither thematic nor chronological, but imagistic, that is, grounded on a praxis of thinking through images whereby the latter is the anchoring point from which relations are built, conceptual arguments are developed, and philosophical implications are assessed. Pondering on Benjamin's and Heidegger's reflections on two art images, which arguably function as allegories of the limits of philosophical thinking/brooding, offers a chance to critically confront, and to disambiguate between, two different variations on the liminality of the image.

The votive motif known as *Pensive (Mourning) Athena* is a bas-relief from Athens' Acropolis dating back to around 460 BC, and depicting the goddess Athena as she gazes upon, and meditates on, a *Grenzstein* (border stone) placed before her. Heidegger discusses the image of *Mourning Athena* in a lecture titled 'Die Herkunft der Kunst und die Bestimmung des Denkens' - 'The Provenance of Art and the Destination of Thought'[85] - given on the occasion of a visit to Athens on April 4th, 1967. The co-belonging of sensing, gazing, and

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[83] Benjamin discusses the paradoxical conjuncture and coterminous nexus of happiness and suffering on at least two important occasions in the early Twenties. In the *Theologico-Political Fragment* (1921), happiness and suffering are inscribed within a heterodox complex of the Messianic (associated with suffering) and the profane order (which should be 'erected on the idea of happiness' (OWS: 189). In section III (*Leib und Körper*) of the 'Outline of the Schemata for a Psychophysical Problem' (1921), happiness appears to be associated with bodily life, which strives towards it, whereas corporeal substance - *Körper,* namely 'one of the realities that stand within the historical process itself' (SW 1: 393), is associated, or geared towards, the 'greatest pleasure' (SW 1: 394).

[84] *Pensive or Mourning Athena* is a rather under-investigated motif in scholarship on Heidegger's writings about art, specifically sculpture. For existing discussions of the bas-relief *Athena* in the context of Heidegger's broader engagement with sculpture - and with the image of Greece, more generally -, see Sallis, John. 1994. *Stone.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), see esp. pp. 91-100; Mitchell, *Heidegger Among the Sculptors,* pp. 58-65.

[85] Hereafter referred to as *Athena* lecture.

thinking, or meditation, is qualified by the adjective '*die sinnende*'[86], which Heidegger uses to describe the pose of the goddess. Athena's pensive gaze falls on the *Grenzstein,* a limit which, in keeping with the Greek understanding of *Peras*, enables the 'setting free into the unconcealed' (BW: 208), as Heidegger already clarified in the *Addendum* to the *Kunstwerk* essay, more than thirty years before the *Athena* lecture. Far from signalling mere delimitation, the Greek rendering of the limit entails a potential which 'does not block off; rather, being itself brought forth, it first brings to its radiance what is present' (BW: 208). Athena contemplates a *presencing* which exceeds the limited outline of presence:

> Where is the goddess' meditating glance turned to? To the border stone [*Grenzstein*], to its boundary [*Grenze*]. But the limit is not only a border and a frame, nor only the point where something ends. The limit is that on account of which something is gathered in its ownmost constitution, so that through it, it can appear in its fullness, it can come to presence. Meditating on the limit, Athena already has in view what human action has merely in foresight, in order subsequently to create the thus fore-seen in the visibility of a work. (Heidegger 2013: 120-121, trans. mod. FM).

Two important points need to be developed and unpacked before advancing the argument. First, the limit demarcated by the border stone acquires, as it is clear from the excerpt, a potential which for Heidegger coincides with the 'stamping' presence to the world: the border stone is the site of dissemination afforded by the transformative power of *physis*, an endless coming to presence which begins anew, bringing forth nothing but the world - but a 'world up to then unknown' (2013: 121). This last point has significant consequences for the gesture of gazing upon and thinking about artworks or art images: far from doing justice to the world of things and its finitude, what is at stake in the act of contemplating the border stone, and the artwork, is the production of another world - the 'unknown' - which therefore gestures beyond the limit, despite being unable to do away with it. By referring to the 'unknown' world brought forth by the act of contemplating the border stone, Heidegger is taking up and further extending a discussion began in the thirties in the 'world picture' lecture[87], where he expressed his reservations towards the limits imposed by the scientific-technological type of enclosure, or limit-attitude. Technological-scientific pursuit only de-limits what is calculable by the rational *subiectum,* yet for Heidegger something essential lies beyond this *Grenze*: the 'incalculable', or something which is not technically outside the world but is rather concealed within it in the shape of an 'invisible shadow' (Heidegger 1977: 135). In order to perceive the presence of concealment, Heidegger famously advocated for an ontological reversal of man's posture: from the standing position of the

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[86] I agree with John Sallis's reading of the adjective '*sinnende*' as epitomising an ambivalence of the senses: 'the one who senses, who, watching and considering, exemplifies in her activity the double sense of sense, even if dissolving the distinction in the unity of her activity' (1994: 96-97). Mitchell also validates Sallis's insight and rightly remarks that 'sense' here retains both connotations of physical sensing and intellectual grasping. See Mitchell, *Heidegger among the Sculptors*, p. 111.

[87] See 'Introduction' of the present thesis, fn. 23 p. 17.

rational *subiectum* to the more discrete attitude of recollection that is required for the contemplation of un-concealment in artistic creation. In the *Athena* lecture, Heidegger returns to the same problem when he calls for a change in 'mankind's relation to the world' (2013: 126). The advocation for a reversal of man's posture in the *Weltbild* conference becomes, in the 1967 lecture, a 'step backwards' towards 'that which had to remain unthought in the beginning of Occidental European thinking, but which had already been named at that point and so, in advance, has been given to us to think' (2013: 127). What is strikingly unaltered between the arguments of the *Weltbild* conference (1938) and the reflections of the *Athena* lecture (1967) - and, therefore, between his pre-war and post-war philosophy - is the limit-position and limit-function of the artwork: to disclose the 'unconcealed' and the 'unknown', signposting to a world - an essence, a meaning, a history - beyond (read: before, in the sense of 'preceding') the one we know. The action of stepping backwards expresses what, in Heidegger's thought, figures as the performative of the artwork's function: a means to access an originary dimension of Being, whereby a new horizon of meaning - the 'other beginning' - can be produced[88].

It should now be clear that, for Heidegger, the image of the limit signalled by the border stone, as well as the limit-form at play in artworks, must be thought from the standpoint of a presupposed extendibility qua un-limitation to the beyond - and the before - of Being's origin. It is not coincidental that, in the *Athena* lecture, Heidegger retrieves a specific image of the limit from the Addendum to *Kunstwerk* essay, namely the outline of a mountain immersed in the Greek light. Writing on the perception of the mountain's limited outline against the radiance and profusion of light, Heidegger describes the boundary through the seemingly contrasting tendencies of 'repose' and 'motion': 'the boundary that fixes and consolidates is in this repose - repose in the fullness of motion' (BW: 208). The meaning of this becomes clearer when we make a connection between the 'fullness of motion' described in this image of the limit and the 'fullness' of a coming to presence described via the image of the border stone in *Mourning Athena*. The seemingly fixed repose of the limiting, finite outline - the mountain, the border stone - when seen against the backdrop of (Greek) light *qua* the illuminating profusion of Being, becomes itself extended towards infinite presencing - 'fullness', or plenitude of appearance. To be precise, it is not that the limit becomes itself over-extended but, quite differently, un-limitation takes place only - and literally - *in light of* and as *the light of* something produced through delimitation. The border stone signals a hierarchical split between the limit and its other, or between what is in (Athena's) 'sight' and what is in (mankind's) 'view'. What Athena has in sight, when contemplating the border stone, cannot be the object of experience, on the contrary, it foregrounds the contingency of what will be in view, available to perception. As Mitchell rightly points out, Athena sees the invisible 'as invisible'

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[88] Heidegger's un-limitation relies on a fundamental *return to,* that is, a getting-nearer-to the originary - Athena's '*provenance*' - by way of distancing, as he makes clear in the *Beiträge*: 'The return to the first beginning is rather, and precisely, a distancing [*Entfernung*] from it, the occupying of that distance-positioning [*Fernstellung*] which is necessary in order to experience what began in that beginning and as that beginning' (Heidegger 2012: 145-6, trans. modified) - I have partially modified the translation proposed by Rojcewicz and Vallega-Neu in their English translation of Heidegger's *Beiträge - Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event), 2012* - and followed John Sallis's translation of *Fernstellung* as 'distance-positioning' as opposed to 'remote' and his rendering of *Entfernung* as 'distancing' as opposed to 'removal'. See Sallis, John. 2006. 'Plato's Other Beginning' in *Heidegger and the Greeks,* ed. by Drew A. Hyland and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press), pp. 177-191, pp. 180-181.

(Mitchell 2010: 60), which means, she has insight into something that excludes any empirical experience of it, and nevertheless defines its essence. Athena gazes upon 'that' which, while not being the object of experience, determines its essence. Once again a point of continuity can be evinced between Athena's glance and a key argument of Heidegger's artwork essay: 'Self-assertion of essence, however, is never a rigid insistence upon some contingent state, but surrender to the concealed originality of the provenance [*Herkunft*] of one's own Being' (BW: 174). What Athena 'sees' is precisely an insight into the invisible and yet foreseeable, where the foreseeable is not some disruptive event able to radically upset the limit, but is, quite differently, a fortification - rather than an irritation - of the hierarchical limit separating 'some contingent state' and the 'concealed originality' of Being's provenance qua foreseeability. Athena glances as 'that' which is yet-to-come not in order to open up the present - and the world - onto itself, but to resign it to the futurity of a specific trajectory - the 'beyond' and 'before' - already marked by the provenance and destiny of Being. Needless to say that this 'mark' is one of exclusion: Athena, daughter of Zeus, knows that a lightning bolt will strike, she has insight into the lightning bolt in its repose, as Aeschylus's presentation of Athena at the end of the *Oresteia*, quoted by Heidegger, makes clear. 'Of all the Gods I am *the only one* who knows the key to the house wherein the lightning bolt rests in its seal' (*Eumenides* 827f, quoted and trans. in Heidegger 2013: 122, emphasis mine). She is, indeed, the 'only one': her power, or gift, puts her in an exceptional position, in relation to both mankind and the other Gods. Athena's power is neither imaginative nor visionary but anticipatory and exclusionist: it is inherent in her capacity to already have insight into the readiness or preparedness of that which will strike, and which is unavailable to others (mankind, the Gods).

Heidegger is careful to note that Athena does not only ponder on the invisible shape [*unsichtbare Gestalt*] of the *possible* works of men, i.e. she does not give in to the plural ambiguity of different possibilities. What she has in sight is not manifold but original: the unique provenance [*Herkunft*] of that which is about to be. According to this picture, the limit un-limits itself via image or, more precisely, the art image offers an occasion to problematise the limits of the thinking act only if such un-limitation adheres to a specific ontological trajectory that eventually causes the limit to give in, to *surrender* [*aufgeben*] to a more authentic demarcation of Being, to a more essential and radicalised delimit-action that re-marks Being's provenance and simultaneously renews its destination.

1.4.1 *Melencolia*'s sibling: Niobe's mute tears

Equipped with the two close-readings of Benjamin's gaze on *Melencolia* and Heidegger's gaze on *Mourning Athena*, it is now possible to assess the philosophical stakes of the two modes of contemplating the world epitomised by these thinking figures, which in turn shed light on Benjamin's and Heidegger's respective modes of thinking with images beyond the limits of representability and intelligibility. We should start with a common denominator: Benjamin arguably shares with Heidegger the insight on the image's irreducibility to epistemological rudiments: for both, 'image' is what appears at the frontiers of - and not within the bounds of - the thinking act. Both Benjamin's and Heidegger's diagnoses of the image's liminality are devised as a

response to specific images of the limit arose from the conflation of experience with the sciences - the Neo-Kantian limit-concepts; scientific-technological calculability. Art images, specifically, present the potential to unsettle the limits of what is thinkable and calculable, yet a major point of difference is to be found in the destination, to use Heidegger's language, assigned to this potential, more specifically the instrumentalisation of it. Read through Heidegger's gaze, Athena's glance on the border stone epitomises the potential, brought forth by the artwork, to reveal not simply the insignificant per se - a pure lack of meaning, the insignificant detail inscribed within the sensuous material - but the unthought, and this interstice - between the unforeseeability of the insignificant (Benjamin) and the foreseeability of the unthought (Heidegger) - is crucial. What Athena has in view, as we have just seen, is an insight into the foreseeability of something which was, up to then, not known, unthinkable, unimaginable. By contrast, *Melencolia*'s gaze, read through Benjamin's eyes, has in view, and presents us with, an image of the unforeseeable, for which the dismembering of limits does not signpost or give access to the provenance and destiny of an 'other' beginning, or to any 'new' meaning other that the limit's own excessive erosion. For the Heidegger of the artwork essay, and for the Heidegger of the *Athena* lecture, the limit un-limits itself - 'the boundary sets free into the unconcealed' (BW: 208) - by means of a 'setting free' which, despite not being able to dispense with the limit and despite acting through delimitation, endows the delimitation-act with a specific function: to unveil the *τέλος* of presence, its fullness and completion.

While both Benjamin and Heidegger's pensive figures bring into view a problematisation of the boundary's - and the image's - presumed fixity and imperturbability, Athena's un-limitation finds its apex in a more originary act of demarcation which holds the promise of a transition *to*, which is equally a completion *of*; by contrast, *Melencolia*'s inoperative gestures - doing nothing, contemplating the world of things, being subject to acedia - are unceasingly un-accomplished, inconclusive, broken off; in such undoing, they exacerbate - and rescue - what Athena's 'highest doing' aims to eradicate: incompletability, unforeseeability, unproductivity.

Athena's distance-positioning with respect to the proximity of the border stone could not be more foreign to *Melencolia's* immersive profundity (*Tiefblick*): if the goddess gestures towards the enduring, un-exhaustible in-gathering of the *presencing* of presence, the winged creature rescues the 'nothingness' in which images 'present themselves' (OGT: 255). The motif of the stone also provides an interesting reading key to disambiguate between the two liminal images in question: for Heidegger, looking at the Athena relief, the motif of the stone goes hand in hand with the one of light and clarity - specifically the 'exceptional light' of Greece, which Athena's 'clear glance' embodies when gazing upon the border stone. In the context of Benjamin's *Melencolia*, instead, the image of the stone, as we have seen, is exactly what precludes clarity of vision, inasmuch as it ignites the fundamental undoing, indecisiveness, and irresolution which affect Dürer's winged creature, and her non-action. The main philosophical implication of a disambiguation between the liminal efficacy of the image (what Benjamin diagnoses in Dürer's *Melencolia*) and the efficacy of the border stone upon *Mourning Athena*'s glance (as diagnosed by Heidegger) is the distinction between, on the one hand, an act of instrumentalisation of the limit - of delimitation - in order to let something 'other' emerge through it - and

through the image - (Heidegger) and, on the other, a gesture of undoing whereby nothing emerges or is being produced other than the limit's own decay, which is manifested via image. If Heidegger's reading of *Mourning Athena* hinges on one key detail, namely the border stone as an instrumental means by which to demarcate the (mythic) split between different hierarchical orders, then it is interesting to recall how the same motif - the border stone - is approached by Benjamin as the epitome of passivity, and in relation to another liminal image, incarnated by the myth of Niobe [Fig. 4] as she appears in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (1921).

Niobe[89] is here famously portrayed as 'an eternally mute bearer of guilt [*ewigen stummen Träger der Schuld*] and as a border stone [*Markstein*] on the frontier between men and gods' (SW 1: 248; GS 2: 197). In the same way in which the border stone contemplated by Heidegger's *Athena* marks a hierarchical frontier between what is in 'sight' and what is in 'view', and between Athena, mankind and the other Gods, which acts as a barometer for measuring the authenticity - 'fullness' - of presence, the frontier marked by Niobe also coincides with a separating act which is erected upon - rather than issued as a consequence of - injustice: her turning into stone is the result of the Gods' desire to mark boundaries - *Grenzsetzung.* On the surface, Niobe's petrified torso could be read as a border stone which endures as a permanent marker of a clear cut between the Gods and the humans. Yet, as suggested by substantial scholarly evidence[90], things are far from being clear-cut when it comes to the dialectic of the limit staged by the image of Niobe.

Niobe's mourning persists unredeemed in her enduring liminal existence: she has no access to the not-yet-been but continuously mourns what has been, the death of her children. The ambiguity of Niobe's position as a *Markstein* has been beautifully captured by Kierkegaard, amongst other philosophers[91], in *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*: 'is this a real being or is it an image, a living person who is dying or a dead one that lives? It is Niobe […] the world changes, but she knows no fluctuation, and time keeps coming, but for her there is not time to come' (2004: 451). The living and the dead, the 'real' being and the image, converge together within the liminal status which Niobe inhabits and embodies. What kind of *Markstein* is this, if all it does is to confuse and to conflate the life/death, real/image demarcations at stake?

Hölderlin would also seem to align with an interpretation of Niobe as an heterodox, liminal point of collision, paradoxically inscribed within what is seemingly a mark of separation and distinction, and this is

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[89] The figure of Niobe is mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* (Book 24.601, 618-19) and resurfaces in Greek tragedies, most notably in Aeschylus's fragments on *Niobe* and Sophocles's *Antigone*. For an account of Niobe's myth see Ovid. 1971. *Metamorphoses / 1. Books I - VIII*, trans. by Frank J. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), see esp. Book VI, pp. 298-311; see also Farrell Krell, David. 2005. *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press), pp. 349-350.

[90] For a detailed, insightful study on the liminal figure of Niobe in relation to some of Benjamin's anchoring philosophical preoccupations - myth, bare life, law, justice - see Palma, Massimo. 2008. *Benjamin e Niobe. Genealogia della nuda vita* (Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica). Palma's main contention with regards to the liminality diagnosed in Benjamin's Niobe hinges on the proposition that Niobe might be conceived as the 'material trace', a paradoxical knot of unsolved tensions, which lends legibility, despite what is seemingly a petrified, immobile torso, to a 'secret, inner motility' (2008: 79).

[91] Hegel and Schelling discuss the figure of Niobe in the context of aesthetics. See Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph. 1859. 'Philosophie der Kunst' in *Sämtliche Werke. Abt. 1, Bd. 5,* ed. by Karl Schelling, 10 vols. (Stuttgart: Gotta), pp. 622-624; See Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Fredrich. 1975. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art,* trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols., (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 825-6.

not insignificant given that the likely source of Benjamin's reference to Niobe in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* might have come from his readings of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles - specifically, Hölderlin's 'Antigone'. Hölderlin famously recalls the image of Niobe in the 'Anmerkungen zur Antigone' ('Notes on the Antigone')[92], and presents her as the heterodox interlacing of the organic and the aorgic (the non-organic): 'The fate of Phrygian Niobe; as it is everywhere the fate of innocent nature, which everywhere in its virtuosity passes over into the all-too-organic, to just the degree that man approaches the aorgic' (2009: 328). Significantly, the aorgic is described, in the 'Der Tod des Empedokles' ('Ground of the Empedocles'), as an extreme [*Extrem*], or as a fundamental un-limitation at the site of the limit (of form): 'nature, at least in its effects on a reflecting man, passes over into the extreme [*Extrem*] of the aorgic, the incomprehensible [*Unbegreiflichen*], the unfeelable [*Unfühlbaren*], the unlimited' [*Unbegrenzten*] (2009b: 261). Niobe is and endures in time only as an eternally unsolved passage, as an extreme, a boundary-case[93]. Niobe is for Hölderlin *antitheos*, which ambivalently implies both extremes of 'godlike' and 'against the divine'. In Niobe, the divine is co-terminus with the mortal, the limit is co-terminus with the un-limited, as exemplified by the weeping that persists and resists in her supposed petrification.

The necessity and simultaneously the impossibility of complete annihilation that accompanies the praxis of delimitation, which inheres in the mythic action of positing boundaries, and which renders such a gesture inherently incomplete, and therefore open *qua* 'subject to criticism' [*der Kritik unterworfen werden kann*] (SW 1: 248; GS 2: 197), governs Niobe's enduring as a *Markstein*[94]. The positing [*setzen*] of boundaries is not exactly the opposite of a breach, namely a closure: the act of *Grenzsetzung* never only attains closure, it never only accomplishes - it never only asserts - but remains open to susceptibility, it always articulates in relation to an 'other' with which it cannot dispense. Every act of limit-positing, or demarcation, based on power is inherently subject to 'demoniac' ambiguity: 'where frontiers are decided, the adversary is not simply annihilated' [*Wo Grenzen festgesetzt werden, da wird der Gegner nicht schlechterdings vernichtet*] (SW 1: 249; GS 2: 198).

Yet how is this impossibility of annihilation staged by Niobe? To what extent is the image of Niobe not only an exemplification of mythic violence or a paradigm of bare life, but also, simultaneously, the performative of a critical potential able to resist and to unmask, to historically circumscribe and to eventually

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[92] The material which composed the 'Anmerkungen zur Antigone' and the 'Anmerkungen zum Oedipus' appeared in Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, published in 1804. In 1913, Hölderlin's translations were published in Munich by Müller - see Hölderlin, Friedrich. 1913. *Sämtliche Werke, Band V: Übersetzungen und Briefe, 1800-1806* ed. by Norbert von Hellingrath and others, 10 vols (Munich: Verlag Georg Müller).

[93] It is not implausible to argue, as some scholars have suggested, that Hölderlin's fascination with Niobe lies in her interlacing of death and life, organic and aorgic, limit and unlimited, particularity and universality, mortal and immortal, human and divine. David Farrell Krell, for example, argues that 'Hölderlin must have been struck by the proximity - and even imbrication - of immortal and mortal in the figure of Niobe' (2005: 350).

[94] Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky has underlined the timeliness of Benjamin's understanding of the controversial action of setting borders and its political implications, showing how the problematic inherent in Niobe's limit-position continues to endure in contemporary examples which stage the dynamics of power, injustice and violence structurally embedded in certain delimit-actions - the killings at the border of Gaza in 2018, the Mexico-US border, refugees' border-crossings and, more recently, (my addition to Deuber-Mankowsky's list) the border-issue at the heart of Brexit - the characterisation of sovereignty as the gesture of 'taking back control of our own borders'. See Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid. 2019. 'Niobe and Korah, Different Orders of Time', *Critical Times* 2: 295–305 https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-7708363

overcome the myth staged by and via the liminality inherent in the image? How can Niobe, a border stone, also contain within herself the critical conditions for undoing the very logic of the limit which she is subject to? If we accept, following Benjamin, that the action of *Grenzsetzung* never only attains closure, it never only accomplishes, but remains open to susceptibility, and that it always articulates in relation to an 'other' with which it cannot dispense, what is the shape and survival of this other, in Niobe? And what are the implications for understanding the legibility of this 'other' in spatio-temporal terms?

A passage from Ovid's account of Niobe's myth - which Benjamin consulted via Johann Heinrich Voß's translation[95] - is telling, in this respect: '*nec flecti cervix, nec bracchia reddere motus, nec pes ire potest; intra quoque viscera saxum est. flet tamen*' (Ovid 1971: 308) - ['her neck cannot bend nor her arms move nor her feet go; within also her vitals are stone. Yet still she weeps' (1971: 309 trans. modified FM)]. The dramatic climax to Niobe's petrification, limb by limb, does not reach culmination in the complete stillness of her 'inside': after proclaiming the becoming-stone of the *viscera*, attention shift to that significant '*tamen*' - 'yet', or 'dennoch', in Voß's translation. The adversative conjunction 'dennoch' signals that there is something - a motion, a liminal fibrillation - which runs counter to the supposedly a-historical and hermetically-sealed logic and directionality of myth; even more significant is the fact that Niobe, despite being reduced to stone and condemned to complete stillness, *still* does something: she weeps. How do we reconcile - if reconciliation is indeed ever possible - the two extremes embodied by Niobe, namely her being a 'mute bearer', petrified by the Gods, and the fact that, in spite of all, she *still* weeps? Ovid goes on to underline the open-ended temporality of Niobe's petrification with the phenomenon of lacrimation: 'even to this day tears trickle from the marble' [*et lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant*] (1971: 309)]. What emerges in the coterminous conjunction of past petrification and present lacrimation can be read, on the one hand, as the endurance of the nexus of guilt in time, for which Niobe is condemned to mourn in the present and in future, a loss that took place in the past. On the other hand, however, the fact that Niobe weeps is an indication that something in her liminal status enables her to resist complete petrification and therefore annihilation, something of her life *still* happens, even if uniquely in the form of mourning. And this 'something', which is not an unreachable transcendental but a tangible, material motion (tears trickling from marble, pouring out of stone), can be seen, recognised, remembered, - according to the Benjaminian praxis of *Eingedenken,* which entails a dialectics of motion *and* stillness[96]. It should not come as a surprise, in light of this, that Niobe's weeping is quoted by Hamlet.

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[95] Voß, Johan Heinrich. 1887. *Verwandlungen: nach Publius Ovidius Naso* (Hall a.d. S. : Otto Hendel Verlag)

[96] Two of the most compelling interpretations of the often-quoted '*Dialektik im Stillstand*' in Benjamin-studies have emphasised that Benjamin's *Stillstand* does not coincide with a simple negation of movement: 'This is also how Benjamin's famous and oft-cited phrase, 'Dialektik im Stillstand' should be read—and translated: not as 'dialectics at a standstill' but, rather, 'dialectics in what is standing still.' […] What is at stake is the impossibility and yet inevitability of the limit, of cutting off what is an unending concatenation of images and impressions—and above all, the ineluctably problematic status of all de-limitation' (Weber 2017: s161); see also: 'the Stillstand - an arrest both of the flow of events (§11) and of the 'flow of thoughts' (§17) - exposes 'a present which is not a 'transition' (§16): a 'Messianic cessation of happening' (§17). This present is 'not a transition' because logically there can be no bridge or transition to what is unforeseen […] In coming to a 'standstill', time itself 'einsteht' (§16): not exactly 'stands still' (Zohn) but stands in for, answers for, pledges responsibility for a past which permits no substitutes' (Comay 1994: 272).

Hamlet's inaction, like Niobe's mute tears, is indicative of a form of happening[97] which can only be staged as withdrawal, interruption. Hamlet's inaction occurs in the form of a happening which reaches highest intensity at the moment of his death: in the interval where a linear transition should occur, from life to death, Hamlet's declaration of death - 'I am dead, Horatio' - famously interrupts and reverses the order of time so that Hamlet speaks of his death with the voice of the undead, before finally becoming silent. Hamlet's hesitancy as to when the moment of his death actually happens - traced by Rebecca Comay in the 'chronological wrinkle: *I am dead, I am dead, I die, I am dying*' (2014: 270) - is significant of the potential to interrupt the course of time in order to let something happen by ways of undoing. Like Hamlet's speaking of his death from the standpoint of the undead, Niobe's silent tears introduce a complication in time that prevents a transition 'to' and completion 'of'.

The diagnosis of passivity right at the heart of 1) the liminal images of *Melencolia*, via *acedia* and the emblem of the stone, and then 2) in the border stone Niobe, pointedly described by Benjamin as a passive 'mute bearer', enables us to further define the contours of the Benjaminian trajectory which, since the time of his early confrontation with the ambiguous motif the border-stone in the context of the third *Critique*, has informed his engagement with liminal species of the image. As it has been remarked, for Kant, the liminality of the border stone, in relation to the power of judgment and to the moral destination of aesthetics, was designed to enable the leap, via image, between man's purpose in the natural order and the transcendental ground of his freedom; for Panofsky and Saxl's Neo-Kantian reading of melancholy's liminality, the image presented a limit-point whereby a transition, or leap, towards higher faculties was not only possible, but desirable; for Heidegger looking at *Athena,* the liminality of the border stone coincided with the possibility of a 'setting-free' qua transition towards another beginning, understood as completion and fullness of presence. Detaching from all of these variations, Benjamin's early confrontation with the literary and visual motifs here analysed has uncovered a logic of the limit which is no longer read through the grammar of transition or completion, with respect to Kantian, Neo-Kantian and post-Kantian trajectories. It should be now verified whether and how such a divergent trajectory can lend itself to dislodging the image from the constrains of reason, but also as a fruitful, theoretic-practical tool to problematise and recast the relation between image and body, ethics and life, philosophy and art.

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[97] In *das Hamlet 'Problem'*, a caption which titles a diary entry of October 1906, Franz Rosenzweig argued that the issue at the heart of Hamlet's figure is not so much to ponder on the reasons of his inaction, or indecisiveness - 'why does Hamlet not take action?' (quoted and trans. in Desideri 2019: 119) but to understand the dynamics of inaction as the performative of a certain - theatrical - happening. See Rosenzweig, Franz. 1979. *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften, 1 Briefe und Tagebucher. 1. Band 1900-1918* (The Hague: Nijhoff), p. 61

Chapter 2 - Cutting Across: Transversality, Simultaneity and the Bodily Traction towards the Plane

2.1 Questioning the 'Mythic Roots' of Art: The Problem of Posture

In a short annotation to the second draft of the *Kunstwerk* essay, which begins with the caption 'Malerei und Graphik' (GS 7: 675-677), Benjamin reflects on the distinction between graphic and painterly images by means of two sets of coordinates: the opposition line-colour and the vertical-horizontal plane. The footnote is in dialogue with a homonymous short fragment ('Malerei und Graphik', GS 2: 602-603) written much earlier, in 1917, which highlights a similar concern on the surface's directionality in space. While painting evidently relies on the verticality of the support/surface, graphic images - such as the ones populating illustration books - call into question not just the imagination of the contemplating subject but also, importantly, their motor skills. In other words, the shift to the horizontal plane favours a bodily tension towards the image, inviting the subject to enter the picture and allowing the dissolution of the representational limit that canonically defines the subject-object distance: 'Graphics represents the world so that man can step into it' [*Die Graphik bildet die Welt so ab, daß der Mensch sie beschreiten kann*] (GS 7: 676).

In the 1917 sketch, written in response to Scholem's lost letter on *Kubismus*, Benjamin identifies a specific feature that is proper to the graphic image's plane, namely its 'neutral horizontal position' (WB 2008: 219), or the 'transverse section' [*Querschnitt*], as an alternative mode of image-beholding that problematises the presumption of an original verticality. Such a presumption is not only embedded in the phenomenology of the painterly picture, but also inscribed in a specific intentional and self-limited horizon which is intimately bound up with the hierarchical dualism (original versus copy, reality versus representation, art versus idea) that has prominently featured in those interpretations of *mimêsis* grounded on the adherence or adequacy between sensible form and intelligible cypher. The 'neutral' potential which Benjamin ascribes to the transverse section, I argue, lends itself to a different interpretation of the mimetic impulse which, far from relying upon the presupposition of a distance-regulated and upright original posture towards the picture plane, points instead to the undoing of the canonical limit that had been posited between image-plane and body, in a move that is much closer to Aristotle's account of mimicry as '*sumphuton*'[98], or the inborn bodily traction which seemingly prompts children to mimic gestures of others, as a means of assimilation to the surrounding environment. This traction, the tensive impulse to irritate the limits of the biological body in order to be at one with the picture plane, somehow gets swallowed by the conceptions of space that have underpinned, in different variations, the history of art and of aesthetics - what Benjamin, in the fragment, refers to as the 'profound problem of art and its mythic roots [*mythischen Verwurzelung*]' (WB 2008: 219).

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[98] See the discussion of mimesis in the context of the *Poetics* in Halliwell, Stephen. 1998. *Aristotle's Poetics.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 109-137. See also the passage in Aristole's text: Aristotle, 2013. *Poetics*. trans. by. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press), *Poetics 4*, 1448b6.

Benjamin briefly ponders on the 'problem' which he describes through the function of containment originally attributed to both the longitudinal plane of painting and the transverse section of graphic pictures: 'the longitudinal section seems representational - it somehow *contains* [*enthält*] things; the transverse section seems symbolic - it *contains* [*enthält*] signs' (WB 2008: 219, emphasis mine). This picture can surely be complicated and indeed Benjamin introduces the 'mythic roots' of art to then challenge their hierarchical character - 'is it only in *our* reading [*uns*erm Lesen] that we place the pages horizontally before us? And is there such a thing as an originally vertical position for writing - say, for engraving in stone?' (WB 2008: 219). The knot at the core of what Benjamin describes as the 'mythic' character of art is enclosed in that possessive determiner '*our*' [*uns*erm]: the presupposition of an originary posture, regulated by a vertical-horizontal paradigm, which encapsulates and conditions 'our' image of the world, the image of a solipsistic subject who keeps the world at such distance so that he or she can master its image. With the aforementioned set of questions, Benjamin is not only challenging the presupposition of an originally vertical posture towards the picture plane, but he also inviting us to envisage the possibility of a gestural and imagistic mode of grasping the world unhinged from and unruled by the fixed coordinates - possession, verticality, eternity, immortality - of an upright qua moral posturing. It is my proposition that reflecting on perceptual relations to the picture plane - rather than the distinction between graphic and painterly species of the image - offers yet another occasion, for Benjamin, to revise the grounding paradigms of Kantian and Neo-Kantian aesthetics, uncovering their 'mythic' residues.

Already in Aristotle - even though he does not follow through on this -, as Nietzsche has shown[99], it is possible to identify a perceptual relation to the plane (of tragedy) that does not preserve or prescribe the vertical-horizontal hierarchical paradigm, and therefore does away with the very presupposition of an 'original posture' which Benjamin associates with the 'mythic roots' of art: '*katharsis*', that is, the discomposed gestures and actions arising from the audience's state of being-acted-upon by the events of the tragic plot. It is noteworthy, in this sense, that Aristotle himself, by formulating a definition of tragedy that hinges on the primacy of action over character, introduces the possibility of dislodging gesture (action) from the moral

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[99] There is a notable example in the history of aesthetics, taken up by Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy*, where bodily action and gestural language are unhinged from the vertical posture of uprightness, and from the idea of fixed and separate spatiotemporal coordinates: Aristotle's definition of tragedy as 'mimesis not of people but of actions and life' (*Poetics* 50a 16-39, quoted and trans. in Halliwell 1998: 138) and his sharp distinction between action and character point towards the possibility of releasing one own's body and gestures from the uprightness of (moral) character, and from the economy of posture altogether. This is a possibility that certainly did not escape Nietzsche, who looks at Aristotle's mimesis of action, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as the only 'explanation of the effect of tragedy which would permit the conclusion that artistic states were involved, or that the audience was engaged in aesthetic activity' (Nietzsche 1999: 105). If the mimesis of action on which the tragic plot rests, following Aristotle, is the 'soul of tragedy, while character is the element of *second* importance' (*Poetics* 50a 16-39, quoted and trans. in Halliwell 1998: 138, emphasis mine), then it follows that the gestural language of action does not necessarily go along with the vertical uprightness of character. Nietzsche takes up the tensive possibility of bodily discomposure, arguing that aesthetic activity, or catharsis, that is, the gestures and actions that arise from the audience's state of being-acted-upon by the events of the tragic plot, is nothing more than a 'merely aesthetic play' unruled by 'extra-aesthetic spheres' and discharged from the 'pathological-moral process' (2007: 106). However, if Nietzsche takes up the possibility of releasing one own's body and gestures from the uprightness of (moral) character, and from the economy of posture altogether, only to reinforce his stance on the mere equivalence between physiological and artistic states, Benjamin's invitation to challenge the imposition of an upright posture towards the image clearly does not point in the same direction. On Benjamin's critique of Nietzsche's failure to engage with critiques of the moral disposition in the context of tragedy see OGT, pp. 97-98

disposition of character[100]. Yet he does not provide any more details on what a tragedy based entirely on the praxis of action and dislodged by the ethos of character would look like.

In order to take Benjamin's reflections on the undoing of uprightness by means of a transverse potential beyond the sketchy questions posed in the fragment, more elaboration is needed on the function of possession and beholding associated with the idea of an originally vertical posture towards the plane. In what follows, I attempt to shed some light on the reference to the 'mythic roots' [*mythischen Verwurzelung*] (WB 2008: 219) of art exposed in 'Malerei und Graphik' by proposing a peculiarly Benjaminian trajectory which casts the 'mythic' character of art as an historical, temporally-delimited and recognisable parameter.

Mythic space, an historically-grounded instance, according to Benjamin, does not exist in a vacuum but permeates through the tissue of history, filtering through the realm of aesthetics, in both Kantian and Neo-Kantian variations of it. Rather than siding with Cassirer's partition[101], which maintains a clear-cut divergence and distance between sensory and mathematical-conceptual types of space, and which defines mythic space as an in-between position between the two[102], Benjamin's stance on the 'mythic roots of art' anticipates what Didi-Huberman will diagnose years after him, namely the resurgence of myth within the Neo-Kantian reiteration of the 'Idealist operation': Cassirer's endeavours to seemingly dismantle the conception of being grounded on the mythic unity of substance and origin, as it had been purported by classical metaphysics, does not lead to overcoming the mythic image of unity as such but only reiterates and repurposes the Idealist myth by disguising it under yet another image of order - the functional unity of a spiritual act of mediation[103].

Seen through Benjamin's eyes, the space of myth and the myths of space permeate through even the most flourishing periods of intellectual renovation and cultural transformation. Based on this, Benjamin's reference to the 'mythic roots' of art and his challenge to the presumption of an 'originally vertical position' can be read, on the one hand, as a reminder that 'mythic' conceptions of space have since long irritated and conditioned the history of aesthetics, giving rise to the hierarchical dualism which has underpinned, in different variations, the 'profound problem of art', namely the mythically-grounded split between *hylē-morphē,* inside-outside, form-content, material-ideational, representational-symbolic, vertical-horizontal, original-copy, thing-sign. Yet on the other hand - and in line with Benjamin's lifelong endeavour to historicise myth and to

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[100] See in particular this passage from the *Poetics*: 'The events, the story are the point of tragedy and that is the most important thing of all. Again there could not be a tragedy without action but there could be one without moral character' (Aristotle 2013: 1450a25).

[101] See especially this passage in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: 'We may arrive at a provisional and general characterisation of the mythical intuition of space by starting from the observation that it occupies a kind of middle position between the space of sense perception and the space of pure cognition' (1955-57: 83)

[102] On Cassirer's understanding of mythic space as an intermediary zone [*Mittelstellung*] vis-à-vis Aby Warburg's own concept of interval [*Zwischenraum*] see Cirlot, Victoria. 2018. 'Zwischenraum/Denkraum: Terminological Oscillations in the Introductions to the Atlas by Aby Warburg (1929) and Ernst Gombrich (1937)', *Enagramma* 153 [online] <http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3343> [last accessed 23 April 2024].

[103] See Didi-Huberman's critique of what he refers to as the 'Kantian tone' of art history, namely the recurrence of the Idealist myth at different stages of art history's development, in Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2005. *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art,* trans. John Goodman (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press). See especially ch. 3, pp. 85-138.

locate its resurgence within those moments of transformation, transition and shift of paradigm in which myth re-presents itself disguised as a facet of the new - the 'mythic roots' mentioned in the fragment are not just traceable to ancient modes of envisioning the world, but continue to shape the present moment. Seen through such an historicised perspective, mythic conceptions of space found a place of resurgence in the Kantian modelling and repurposing of aesthetics along the coordinates of what is, essentially, a mythic 'place': the space of morality. Ernst Cassirer's definition of mythic space serves the purpose of illuminating the mythic quality of the Kantian moral substratum: 'When myth separates right and left, above and below', writes the Cassirer of 'Mythic, Aesthetic and Theoretical Space (1922)', 'it is not concerned with locations and places in the sense of empirical-physical space, nor with points and directions in the sense of geometrical space' (2013: 327). Instead, the coordinates of a space unregulated by mathematical measure - immeasurable - and unruled by physical laws - supersensible - are 'loaded with a certain mythical quality' (2013: 327). It is on the grounds of non-sensible and non-measurable qualities - 'Holiness', 'accessibility' - that mythic space is located and differentiated. In light of this, Benjamin's manoeuvre in 'Malerei und Graphik' acquires further significance: casting Kantian aesthetics as mythic means first and foremost to redeem space from any 'mythic' residue by rooting theories of painting and art *not* within an in-between [*Mittelstellung*] zone between the sensory and the non-sensory, but in the excessive tactility of sensuous reality, in the unplanned activity of perceptual-physical/body-image tensions, rather than modelling them upon the abstract coordinates of a moral posturing. Which, in other terms, means to dismantle the symbolic bond between art and ethics not in order to pursue, as Nietzsche would have it, the confluence of art and physiological life but in order to credit art with a life of its own, indifferent to any teleological advancing or moral perfectibility.

The purpose of acknowledging that Kantianism and Neo-Kantianism are part of the 'mythic roots' questioned by Benjamin is to evidence the implications that the recognition of myths of space and morality yields on the recasting, from a Benjaminian perspective, of the relation between language and life, life and ethics, ethics and art. Can the transverse neutrality mentioned by Benjamin signal a valid alternative to and a useful tool for the overcoming of the 'myths' of space grounded on the primacy of vertical uprightness? What happens to the envisioning of the world if the image-body tension is no longer regulated by the abstract coordinates of posture and positing, but only hinges on the reality of unplanned, reflexive and mimetic impulses and tensions towards the picture plane? And can the hybrid kinesis of 'cutting across', embodied by the transverse paradigm, also point towards a new reconfiguration of the limit between ethics, life and art, a reconfiguration of the limit which takes place by being dis-placed by the image, by being-acted-upon, by submitting oneself to the image's engendering and enactive, liminal agency?

2.2 Taking Simultaneity Seriously

One should stress, at this point, that Benjamin's invitation to challenge the 'mythic roots' associated with the 'problem of art' is particularly noteworthy if confronted with the dominant trends in the academic landscape of German aesthetics in the first decade of the twentieth century, given that such 'myths' were not at all a thing of the past but, on the contrary, acquired renewed significance in light of the philosophic-aesthetic project of the Marburg School. Cassirer's recasting of the Kantian limit-question, in particular, not only signalled an opposite direction of travel with respect to Benjamin's challenges to posture and positing before the picture plane - a directionality which pushes on unitary coherence and determinability instead of tensive traction and unforeseen mimetic impulses. It also highlighted the resurgence and survival of mythic conceptions of space - despite the willingness to efface the limit's structural ambiguity through the scientific-mathematical repurposing of experience - at the heart of the Neo-Kantian project.

Perhaps nowhere is the aspiration towards a resolution of all the frictions at the site of the limit more acutely expressed, prior to the writing of his opus magnum, than in these lines from *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity* (1923):

> There must be a factor, concealed in the individual case, that raises it out of its limitation and isolation. The function, that constitutes the real kernel of the inductive procedure, is that by means of which we trace an empirical content beyond its given temporal limits and retain it in determinate character for all points of the time series […] It is through this reference [to the whole already in the element] that our limited, spatio-temporal circle of experience, which is all we have, becomes the test and image of the system of reality in general […] (Cassirer 1953: 247).

Cassirer's attempt to move beyond the third Critique's impasse, namely the tensional knot opened up by a thought of the limit which must be, structurally and simultaneously, a thought of the un-limited, hinges on the extrinsic 'reference' to a symbolic construct that enables to unveil, within each particular, a universal, ideal process - a coherent image of the world - that remains exceptionally severed - mythically divided - from any matching in the physical, material world. In terms of spatiotemporal coordinates, which are the object of our attention - and our point of Benjaminian departure - it is interesting to note that such a symbolic totality - understood as the movement that raises the singular case beyond its physical limits - must be intimately bound up with the universal coherence afforded by Euclidean geometry. Cassirer was of course no stranger to the extraordinary shifting understandings of space time categories in the realm of physics during the years leading up to his excursus on Einstein's relativity. Indeed, he dwells extensively on the possibilities introduced

by alternatives geometries of space, recognising, to a certain extent, the incredible significance that relativity and simultaneity brought to bear upon the understanding of space and time in the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet a mythic divide, which is equally a mythic sovereignty and exceptionality, still persists in his early confrontation with modern physics and mathematics, on which his aesthetics of space and image of the world are forged: while prominent physicists such as Hermann Minkowski, in the wake of Einstein's groundbreaking theory of relativity, famously advocated for the fusion of spacetime in a four-dimensional continuum, Cassirer maintained that even if 'it thus appears that physical space and time measurements can only be assumed as taking place in common, the difference in the fundamental character of space and time, or order in coexistence and succession is not thereby destroyed' (Cassirer 1953: 424). The insistence on the survival of a differentiation, an 'order', a 'succession' for which one is still able, if not physically then conceptually, to discern between space and time cannot but unmask Cassirer's detachment from the true scope and significance of simultaneity, which is nothing but the radical undoing of such a thing as the 'purity' - and the aprioriness - of an inside *or* outside, limited *or* unlimited, spatial *or* temporal, position, which Cassirer would want to maintain at a logical level. In other words, simultaneity poses the problem of the limit neither in terms of mere limitation and containment nor solely in terms of abstract and limitless extension.

Taken as a paradigm for the coalescence and interdependence of both containment and excess, the tempo of simultaneity presents the potential to upset the rigid hierarchy of clear-cut separations and one-sided delimiting gestures that, as we have seen, traverse the 'mythic roots of art', dismantling the whole presuppositions, which underpins Cassirer's quest, later to be exposed in the trilogy on symbolic forms, of an aspired resolution and synthetic unity that would resolve the ambiguous frictions at the site of the limit. Cassirer's implicit dismissal of the full extent to which simultaneity was to transform the configuration of space-time and the very image of the world after 1908 is reflected in the 'superior' and 'exceptional' place - the 'advantage' -, the privileged position that Euclidean geometry maintains in his philosophical reflections even in the wake of relativity, i.e. even if, as he admits, Euclidean geometry loses its sovereign position in the realm of physics[104]. If Euclidean geometry loses sovereignty materially, it still retains, for the Cassirer writing in 1910, a logical sovereignty, an 'exceptional logical position' (Cassirer 1953: 435).

We must briefly touch upon this hierarchical distinction, between a logical and a material position, in order to really grasp the true significance of the paradigm of simultaneity as the undoing of such a thing as a 'sovereign position' - of geometrical constructibility over sensible materiality - in the first place. The 'special position' and methodical 'advantage' attributed to the homogeneous Euclidian space by Cassirer hinges on its 'logical simplicity', that is, on its structural detachment and independence from the physical world - from its 'relations to experience' (1953: 436). In other words, the autonomous sovereignty of geometrical - logical, intellectual - space relies on the basic fact that the relational configuration between elements - point, line, surface - is a pure intellectual construct independent from - that is, non-simultaneous to - the sensuous

[104] See for example these passages: 'the development of the theory of relativity leaves this methodic advantage of Euclidean geometry unaffected' (Cassirer 1953: 436); 'a special and exceptional logical position, a fundamental simplicity of ideal structure, can be recognized in Euclidean geometry even if it must abandon its previous sovereignty within physics' (Cassirer 1953: 435); 'The abstraction […] of homogeneous Euclidian space is not destroyed by the theory of relativity, but is only known as such through it more sharply than before' (1953: 437).

presentation of such a relation. One is clearly still confronting here two different ontological orders, two different images of the world - one logical and one material - that are not only independent from one another, but also non-simultaneous in the most rigorous and literal sense of the word as not-together: severed, disjointed, 'mythically' divided.

The real extent of Minkowski's advocacy, in his 1908 lecture[105] titled 'Space and Time'[106]- a year after the debut of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and in the wake of Einstein's 1905 theory of special relativity and the theories of light elaborated in 1907 - was surely not only limited to the realm of physics, but it dramatically upset the hierarchical core of the mythic split which Cassirer was keen to preserve: 'space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality' (Minkowski 2012: 73). Minkowski's name for such limit-undoing is 'world-line', a simultaneous interlacing of spacetime and a way of configuring reality across 4 axes - *x,y,z* indicating the three coordinates of space, and *t* for time which runs perpendicular to the three-dimensional space -, namely a four-dimensional continuum which he describes, significantly, with the image of a 'curve in the world' (2012: 76). If, as we have seen in the 'Introduction' to this thesis, the origin of painting and the image of the world's creation recounted in the Book of Genesis are equally regulated by a succession of straight-cut delimiting gestures, Minkowsky's world-line signals an end to the hierarchical dualism which would want to maintain a split between world *and* line, or sensible materiality and geometrical, ideational constructability. The simultaneity of spacetime fusion is visualised as a radical undoing of the straight line, that is, as a the irregular bending of that line, a curvature that challenges, Einstein argued, the very presupposition of such a thing as a straight line where gravity is concerned.

It is at this juncture that one must once again come back to Benjamin's 'Malerei und Graphik', but not before revisiting the trajectory of this detour via Cassirer and Minkowsky-Einstein: (I) we started by showing, building on what Benjamin leaves unexplained, that the knot at the core of what he describes as the 'profound problem of art' and its 'mythic roots' is to be found in the presupposition of an originary posture towards the picture plane, regulated by a vertical versus horizontal oppositional paradigm; (II) we then identified the persistence of a mythic conception of space, disguised as symbolic function, in contemporary Neo-Kantian revisitations of limit-questions via Cassirer; against this backdrop, and against the danger of progressive enclosure - ontological, symbolic, political enclosure - within the philosophic-aesthetic landscape in which Benjamin found himself working, the potential for radically undoing the hierarchical divisions and the self-sufficiency stemming from one-sided delimiting gestures which sit at the heart of the 'mythic' character of art - and of cognition - is offered by physics and the paradigm of simultaneity, in the early years of the twentieth century, but only if this paradigm is taken seriously: only if it is taken as the unsettling rhythm of a structural fibrillation and hesitation - and not as the homogeneity of 'speed, eternal and

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[105] Lecture given on the occasion of the 80th Meeting of the Natural Scientists in Cologne on September 21, 1908. See Minkowski, Hermann. 2012. 'Space and Time' in *Space and Time. Minkowski's Papers on Relativity,* ed. by Petkov Vesselin, trans. by Fritz Lewertoff and Petkov Vesselin (Montreal, Quebec: Minkowski Institute Press), pp. 39-54.

[106] Minkowski, Hermann. 1909. 'Raum und Zeit, Physikalische Zeitschrift' in *Jahresbericht der Deutschen Mathematiker-Vereinigung ,* 18 vols (Berlin: B.G. Teubner), pp. 104-111, see esp. pp.75-88.

omnipresent' (Rainey, Poggi, Wittman 2009: 51)[107] - which is able to upset the clear-cut hierarchy that enables all talks of ontological purity, exceptionality, autonomy, self-sufficiency.

To take simultaneity seriously means, in the context of this chapter, to recognise and to expel its mythic character: to disentangle this word from its ties with ideologies of relentless technological progress, future destiny and ambitions, and to take it 'literally', as the coterminous and con-temporary 'togetherness' - and not the effacement, as Marinetti and the Futurist movement would have wanted - of time and space. Unhinged from the connotations of relentless technological progress oriented towards the future, the tempo of simultaneity is not an absolute 'ever-present' endlessly projected ahead but its exact reversal, namely the transient and fleeting spatialisation of time within the singularity of gesture, a gesture which obfuscates any possible image of a future destiny and destination. If the paradigm of relentless speed was instrumental to Futurism's appropriation of simultaneity, interruption is the gesture which recognises and overcomes its mythic character: 'the concepts of the rulers have always been the mirror thanks to which the image of an 'order' was established. The kaleidoscope must be smashed [*das Kaleidoskop muß zerschlagen werden*]' (GS 1: 660). To take simultaneity seriously is to undo the 'image of an order' by recognising the myth disguised in the face of the new; to take simultaneity seriously is to direct our gaze away from the futurity of relentless progress and towards the presence of gesture - a hand that suddenly stops and does nothing, a hand no longer indulging on the spinning vortex of yet another image of an order - that breaks the speed.

My proposition, in other words, is that simultaneity, taken seriously, contributes to challenging the presumption of an originally autonomous, vertical posture by means of a fibrillation that constantly dislodges, de-shapes and displaces. The purpose of such a challenge would not be to somehow redeem the paradigm of transversality as yet another kind of prescribed and presupposed counter-posture towards the image and towards the world but to actually take the tensional traction between vertical and horizontal, body and plane, image and world as the very index of their simultaneous coalescence in a spacetime curvature whereby no self-sufficient posture is at all possible. Once the presumption of a self-enclosed privileged posture configured along a straight line is dismantled by the tension of the curvature, by the imagistic traction towards the plane, then all the straight-cut divides start to crumble: the vertical-horizontal paradigm, the space-time logical difference, the fiction of an inside-outside, material-ideational alternative. Simultaneity, taken seriously, shifts the grammar of being and presence not towards a more original sense of Being (Heidegger) but towards the radical undoing of the mythic conceptions of 'being' understood through the language of unity, self-sufficiency, autonomy, sovereignty, uprightness. Simultaneity, stripped bare of its mythic roots and ideological significations, is nothing but a painter's hand gesturing towards a complex and heterogeneous image of time, spatialised as picture: 'Kandinsky's pictures: the *simultaneous* occurrence of [*Zusammenfallen vom*] evocation and manifestation [*Beschwörung und Erscheinung*]' (WB 2008: 219, trans. mod. FM, emphasis mine).

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[107] References to Marinetti's 'Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', which was published on the front cover of *Le Figaro* on the 20th February 1909, are to this English translation: Rainey, Laurence, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (eds.). 2009. *Futurism. An Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 51.

2.3 Perceptual Relations to the Picture Plane

The shifting understanding of reality at the dawn of the twentieth century in the realm of physics and mathematics - the fourth dimension, non-Euclidean geometry, the theory of relativity[108] - go hand in hand with the pictorialisation of space operated by Cubism[109]. Not only does Einstein's intuition on the geometry of spacetime along the coordinates of an irregular curve - and the insight on gravity's manifestation as the undoing of straight lines coupled with Minkowski's four-dimensional 'world-line' - speak to the *Kunstwollen* that pushed cubist painters toward spacetime fusion within the pictorial plane, but it also evidences the radical tension towards the plane of experience that such fusion generates, giving rise to a way of organising reality which is not solely reliant upon the the function of containment - of 'signs' and 'things'-, but instead hinges on the irregular curvature: the radical and transformative potential of simultaneity and transversality.

Evidence that Benjamin, in 1917, was preoccupied with questions around the structure of space, alternative non-Euclidean geometries[110] and the repurposing of reality through the paradigm of simultaneity and transversality against the presuppositions underpinning the space/time categories of Kant's transcendental aesthetics is not only to be found in his sketchy reference to Kandinsky and the paradoxical structure of occurrence marked by his pictures, but also in his reflections on the picture plane vis-à-vis cubist art, exposed in 'Über die Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal'.

Benjamin's early fascination for perceptual relations to the picture plane of painting and drawing should be read in light of this broader and interdisciplinary context which encompasses art, mathematics and physics, vis-à-vis the simultaneity implied by the paradigm of the curvature. Not only is Benjamin's sketchy discussion of the picture plane influenced by well-known and direct theoretical sources, such as the confrontation with Riegl and Wölfflin, but it also fits within and speaks to the wider framework of limit-undoing(s) - and the radical re-purposing of the limit-function through the lens of simultaneity - which were taking place in the realms of figurative arts, physics and mathematics: from Kandinsky's 'pictures' and the liminal interplay of evocation and manifestation, through to Cubism's dismantling of the limit between object and background, up to the radical blurring of the line traditionally separating space and time.

Rather than simply using Benjamin's reference to Kandinsky's pictures and his engagement with cubist art strategically, as mere casual evidence which substantiates the argument, widely discussed in Benjamin

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[108] For different interpretations of the relation between Cubism, the fourth-dimension and non-Euclidean geometry see Henderson Dalrymple, Linda. 1983. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, (N.J.: Princeton University Press); _____ . 2005. 'Modernism and Science', in *Modernism,* ed. by Vivian Liska and Astradur Eysteinsson. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), pp. 383-403. See also Robbin, Tony. 2006. *Shadows of Reality: The Fourth Dimension in Relativity, Cubism, and Modern Thought* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press), see esp. ch. 3, part I, pp. 28-41.

[109] See Golding, John. 1988. *Cubism. A History and Analysis 1907-1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), pp. 198-99.

[110] It is quite significant, in this sense, that Benjamin, in his letter to Scholem dated 22nd October 1917 (GB I: 391), mentions Ernst Barthel's paper 'Die geometrischen Grundbegriffe' (1916), which focuses on the relation between non-Euclidean geometry and physical space. See Fenves, *The Messianic*, p. 99 and his extensive discussion of Benjamin's points of disagreement with Scholem on the conflation between geometrical space and painterly plane.

scholarship, that he took an active interests in material pictures since his early writings[111], my view is that the picture plane and its ambivalent structuring at the ungraspable crossroads of picture and image, material mark and intellectual cypher, visual appearance and linguistic manifestation - its neutrality, to use Benjamin's language -, offers an occasion, or even better a paradigm, for Benjamin, to rethink the very structure of spatiotemporal occurrence, starting from an 'object' that by default escapes conceptual appropriation and clearly defined ontological limits, namely 'pictures'. The mode of presence described via 'pictures' does not seem to lend itself to any possible inside-outside, extra-intra, material-ideational (op)position qua posture. If we take the simultaneity referenced in Kandinsky's reference seriously, then what Benjamin is touching upon here is not a mode of presence *to* or *in* the world; quite differently, it is the very worldly structure of 'togetherness' as such, through which spacetime occur, through which the world articulates itself as the originary co-implication - and not the isolation, neither the mere indifference - of form and content, physical and ideational, space and time, mark and sign, human and not human, one permeating, irritating, unsettling and blending into the other[112]. Perceptual relations to the picture plane and the picture plane's own ontological configuration itself become a model for an imagistic-aphoristic approach to the world forged on the mutual co-implication between human and non-human, body and image, vision and language. Co-implication does not lead - as it will be reiterated later contra Agamben - to undecidability or indifference, or in-distinction; more substantially, what is at stake here is the articulation of a 'neutral' mode of presence, a presence 'at-the-limits-of', a liminal disposition that is best exemplified by the ontology of the picture: a delimited yet simultaneously open-ended material surface. In what follows, I set out to demonstrate that Benjamin, long before the arguments of the *Kunstwerk* essay, first found in painterly pictures - whether Kandinsky's or cubist ones - a tangible materialisation of the model of simultaneity and the alternative structure marked by the 'with' that could pave the way to a new practical mode of envisioning the image-body and body-world relation.

2.3.1 Dislodging the 'view' from the 'viewer': Cubist Gestures

From a philological point of view, it is important to trace the following theoretical trajectory. Benjamin's main source - along with Wölfflin and Fiedler, as we will see - for his heteronomous discussion of image perception along the spatial coordinates of proximity and distance, optics and haptics, resides in his reading of Riegl[113], who in turn partly based his theory of art-history and the concept of *Kunstwollen,*

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[111] See for example Didi-Huberman, Georges, and Giovanni Careri. (eds.). 2015. *L'histoire de l'art depuis Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis), pp. 11-43.

[112] On the importance of spatiotemporal simultaneity for Benjamin's confrontation with Cassirer in relation to the early aesthetic writings see Fenves, *The Messianic*, pp. 18-43. As Fenves shows, already at the time of the *Two poems* essay Benjamin employs the simultaneity of space time - 'spatio-temporal order' (GS 2: 124) - as the main parameter to differentiate between the poetized of '*Blödigkeit*', where space and time permeate each other, and the poetized of 'Dichtermut', where the two remain bound to a hierarchical order.

[113] For a detailed and insightful overview of Benjamin's reading of Riegl's categories of proximity and distance see Pinotti Andrea. 1999. *Piccola storia della lontananza. Walter Benjamin storico della percezione* (Milano: Cortina).

famously introduced in *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901), on a theory of vision which had a significant impact on early critical discussions of Cubism: Adolf Hildebrand's reflections on the construction of three-dimensional images through vision and movement, exposed in *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture* (1893)[114] and taken up by Daniel Henri Kahnweiler in his 1920 important essay *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (written 1915).

Hildebrand's main argument on the three-dimensional image hinges on the assumption that it is possible to distinguish between two distinct yet interrelated faculties in human vision: on the one hand there is 'visual perception at a glance with the eye at rest', on the other hand there are 'a number of more complex perceptions made up of visual and kinesthetic factors' (Hildebrand 2012: 23). Thanks to the interaction of visual impressions and kinesthetic ideas, the 'continuity of vision from a single point of view' (2012: 31) can be challenged: 'to perceive in visual images the third dimension, however, we must imagine ourselves as changing our point of view, and getting merely a succession of disconnected shifting views of the object' (2012: 31). One can easily appreciate why Hildebrand's now discarded theory of vision found a fertile ground in early theorisations of Cubist pictures: what is at stake here is not only the increasing tension between mobility and the transitory, between static images and the production of movement, but also a mode of organising vision that hinges on the structural distortion and fragmentation of 'one' isolated and fixed viewpoint. Against the illusory techniques employed to achieve the self-contained 'illusion of form', such as the chiaroscuro in Renaissance painting, cubist painters delved into the heart of the conflict between structure and representation, without concealing the displacing effects of such a clash, activating short circuits between plastic view and bi-the dimensional surface[115].

It goes without saying that one of the most striking novelties of Cubism was the fusion and interpenetration of the object with the surrounding space, a clear attempt to overcome the binary and continuous presentation of the space-object, inside-outside, external-internal divides by ways of multifaceted pictorial composition(s). Cubist pictures made the ontological difference, or the discontinuous relation, between reality and image palpable, severing the natural bond between model and representation, moving towards the simultaneous plasticity of spacetime advocated by Minkowski. They showed the potential, inherent in the picture plane, of becoming other than natural representations of reality, in other words, they staged the potential of de-naturing nature, leading the way, with other avantguardes to follow, to the basic intuition that seemingly static images such as paintings can produce divergence, discontinuity, distortion, displacement, a chain of differentiation that certainly did not escape Benjamin's eye. Looking at pictures becomes, with the advent of Cubism, a mode of losing one's way, giving up the limits of ontological security and de-centralising the act of seeing from the supposed fixity of one single viewpoint.

As has been previously remarked, Benjamin's reference to the state of simultaneity diagnosed in Kandinsky's pictures should be read in conjunction with the theory of painterly pictures advanced in the

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[114] For an analysis of Riegl's interpretation and further elaboration of Hildebrand's theory of vision see Iversen, Margaret. 1993. *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England). See esp. ch. V, pp. 70-92. As the author points out, Hildebrand's theory draws from 'post-Herbartian psychology of perception' (1993: 73).

[115] See Kahnweiler, Daniel Henry. 2022. *The Rise of Cubism* ([S.l.]: FB&Ltd), pp.10-13

1917 text *Über die Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal.* Conceived as further elaboration of the notes sketched in *Malerei und Graphik*, written in the same year, *Über die Malerei* builds on and expands upon the neutrality diagnosed in the transversal disposition towards the picture plane mentioned in *Malerei und Graphik.* This time, 'neutrality' appears in association to the 'power of the linguistic word', an invisible power that, despite entering the medium of the mark - the realm of the painterly picture -, does not 'use any aspect of the graphic to explode the mark', but only 'lodges in the medium of the language of painting' in a 'state of neutrality' (WB 2008: 224). Despite being invisible, there is a potential for manifestation that the linguistic power displays by means of the painting's composition. This claim on the articulation between invisible yet manifestable linguistic power sheds some light on Benjamin's cryptic description of Kandinsky's pictures as 'the simultaneous occurrence of evocation and manifestation' (WB 2008: 219, trans. mod. FM). The spatial manifestation of a picture is coterminous with, simultaneous to - and not subsumed or effaced by - the image of time (evocation).

The neutrality encountered in the linguistic tension towards the picture plane enables heterogeneous concurrence - correlation, co-implication - that does away with the traditionally binary distinctions not only between space and time but also between line-colour, form-content. It is in this light that one should read Benjamin's somewhat strange statement that 'there is no ground in painting, nor is there any graphic line' (WB 2008: 223). Of course there are lines in painting, and of course there is ground - and Kandinsky is perhaps a very appropriate example here. The broader implication of this claim is a direct refusal to read painterly images according to the distinction of their separate formal elements, an exegetic strategy that had accompanied, since Alberti's *de Pictura*, the Western tradition of pictorial representation, notably grounded on one overriding myth: the sovereignty of the ideational space of geometrical constructibility, or the geometrical primacy of the configuration of lines that make up the perspectival view. With this claim Benjamin distances himself from the primacy of the outline, or the graphic line, over colour, that has historically - and mythically - conditioned the development of aesthetics. More specifically, he is distancing himself from Scholem's aspiration of a mathematical *Farblosigkeit* that he envisaged as Cubism's highest achievement, after visiting the *Sturm-Ausstellung* in Berlin in 1917 - where he could see works from Chagall, Braque, Picasso and Kandinsky[116].

2.3.2 No Longer Standing-Against: Inclination, Passage, Contamination

Central to Scholem's reflections on the *Sturm-Ausstellung* is the argument - evinced by the pages of his diary, as the original letter to Benjamin is lost - that endows Cubist pictures with a function of mathematical signification. The lines and their directionality - '*der Halbkreis, die Senkrechte und die Horizontalen*' (TB 2: 31) - within the surface of paintings ought to be seen, according to Scholem, through the lens of their

[116] For other critical discussions of Benjamin's 'Über die Malerei, oder Zeichen und Mal' see Benjamin, Andrew. 2009. 'Framing pictures, transcending marks: Walter Benjamin's 'Paintings, or Signs and Marks'' in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity,* ed. by Andrew Benjamin and others (Melbourne, Australia: Re.press), pp. 129-142; Fenves, *The Messianic,* pp. 97-102; Borneuf, Annie. 2010. "Radically *Uncolorful* Painting': Walter Benjamin and the Problem of Cubism', *Grey Room*, 39: 74-94.

mathematical symbolic function. Building on this, he argues for the essential *Farblosigkeit* (colourlessness) of Cubist pictures, attributing a superior symbolic value to *die Linie* (the line) over colour[117]. Scholem's aspired exclusion of colour from the purity or essentiality of Cubist art coincides with a refusal of synthesis, as he argues, between *Linie* and *Farbe* - '*Will ich Synthese zwischen Linie und Farbe, gehe ich zu Rembrandt, dazu gehe ich nicht zu den Kubisten*' (TB 2: 32). This last claim relies on the somewhat formalist precept that only the geometrical reduction of reality to the graphic line should contribute to the sphere of (painting's) essentiality. Scholem's stance on '*das Wesentliche'* of cubist paintings is reminiscent of §14 of the third *Critique*, where Kant, adopting a seemingly formalist stance, claims that in painting (*Malerei*) and all pictorial arts (*bildenden Künsten*) the 'drawing [*Zeichnung*] is what is essential [*das Wesentliche*]', whereas the 'colors that illuminate the outline [*Abriß*] belong to charm' (CPJ: 110). Closely following the Swiss mathematician Leonard Euler and his formalist theory of colour, Kant goes on to elucidate that colours can 'enliven the object itself for sensation [*Empfindung*], but they cannot make it worthy of being intuited and beautiful' (CPJ: 110).

Looking further back, the mythic roots underpinning the primacy of the linear - *Linie, Abriß,* - at the expenses of that which only 'enlivens' sensation but does not relate to '*das Wesentliche'* can also be found in Plato's *Republic,* with specific reference to the image of the stars, where the linearity of the 'patterns' [*παραδειγματα*] also evidences a correlation with the function of mathematical signification (Republic, 529). Plato's infamous exclusion of painting from the realm of truth is rooted in the same opposition between *εἶδος* (figure) and *εἴδωλον* (image) which, as Cassirer has notably demonstrated, both separates and connects the sensible, colourful *εἶδος* (figure) of the stars - a 'colorful work in the heavens' (Cassirer 2013b: 233) - and the ideal image (*εἴδωλον*), or the formal 'patterns' [*παραδειγματα*] that are presented when one (the dialectician) sees past their sensible attributes (colourfulness, dazzlingness) and acquires knowledge from the 'mathematical showing [*Shau*]' (Cassirer 2013b: 223), or the mathematical signification, which the formalist configuration of the stars as purely geometrical points in space gives access to[118].

Yet Benjamin's two-word answer to Plato, Kant, Cassirer and Scholem is not to be found in 'Über die Malerei', but in a line written to Scholem: '*unfarbige[n] Malerei*' ['unchromatic painting']. Far from advocating the redemption of colour over the outline, Benjamin's advocacy of *'Unfarbigkeit'* points neither to the primacy of the graphic line line nor to the sole triumph of colour, but signals instead an altogether different dimension, quite literally, a different dimensional space that shifts from the bi-dimensional *plane* to a three-dimensional *place*: the all-encompassing *Umraum* that is proper to architecture. Benjamin briefly touches upon the possible shift from pictorial plane to architectural space towards the conclusion of his 1917 reply to

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[117] Despite clearly arguing for the primacy of the line over colour in Cubist pictures, Scholem also problematically claims that the 'ingenious Cubist picture' must be both colourless [*farblos*] and formless [*formlos*] - '*Das genial Kubistische Bild muß farblos sein. Daß es formlos sein muß, ist klar*' (TB 2: 31) - thus implying a correlation between the line, or the linearly, and the formless.

[118] Benjamin is also both connecting with and distancing himself from a line of thought that exceeds the philosophical-aesthetic domain, namely the Vienna School of *Kunstwissenschaft* and, in particular, Wölfflin's writings between 1988 and 1915. In *Renaissance und Barock* (1888), Wölfflin operates within the terminology of the *linearish* and *malerish*, setting up a formalist opposition that will be taken up years later in the *Kunstgeschichte Grundbegriffe* (1915) and which seemingly finds resonance in Benjamin's organisation of *Über die Malerei* along the theoretical sets of *Zeichen* and *Mal.*

Scholem's lost letter on Cubism, where he expresses his presentiment of a possible relation between Cubism and church architecture.[119]

Benjamin's '*unfarbig*' in relation to Cubism's tension towards three dimensional space - and against mathematical *Farblosigkeit* - can be read in conjunction with later reflections on the *Umraum* of architectural space, as yet another variation on the bodily tension towards the plane to the point of self-excess where 'one' becomes attached to, and con-fused with, the surrounding space. More than ten years later, writing enthusiastically on Carl Linfert's study of 17th and 18th century architectural drawing, 'Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung'[120] - published in the first volume of the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* in 1931[121] -, Benjamin takes up again his dialogue with a newer generation of Vienna School's affiliates and describes the undoing of the representational edge of the image-space as an 'apprehension [*durchspüren*] of structures' which allows the optics-haptics contamination between *Bildraum* and *Umraum* - a sui generis, surrounding space. From the short references to 'Kandinsky's pictures'[122] and cubist paintings through to the more accomplished review of architectural drawing, what transpires is a constant preoccupation with the traction that prompts the (body's) limit *not* to over-extend beyond itself but to implode on itself allowing for passage, crossing-over and contamination, giving way to the image's vitalism so that it can take hold of what is no longer an autonomous, self-defined and contoured being but merely the scattered pieces of its own undoing via imagistic insurgence[123].

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[119] 'Incidentally, however, you may infer from these jottings that even I could imagine a profound relationship between, for example, cubism and church architecture' (C: 101)

[120] It is now well-known that Benjamin's first review (1932) of the volume was rejected by the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, while a second one was published in July 1933 as *Strenge Kunstwissenshaft*, in which Benjamin had integrated Linfert's suggestions. On the correspondence between Benjamin and Linfert with regards to Benjamin's review see GS 3, pp. 652-660.

[121] Linfert, Carl. 1931. 'Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung: Mit einem Versuch über granzösische Architekturzeichnungen des 18. Jahrhunderts' in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen I*, ed. by Otto Pächt (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt), pp. 133-246. The first volume of the *Forschungen* consisted of three monographic studies from G. A. Andreades, Otto Pächt and Carl Linfert with an introductory essay by Hans Sedlmayr.

[122] Interestingly, not only 'Kandinsky's pictures' but also Kandinsky himself, in his *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* (1926), understood the boundary-position - '*an der Grenze*' - as the undoing of such a thing as a fixed 'position' and through the bodily language of a crossing-over that entails a moment of loss, displacement and self-release: 'Only by feeling, are we able to determine when the point is approaching its extreme limit and to evaluate this. This approach to the external boundary - indeed, the crossing of it somewhat, the attainment of that moment when the point, as such, begins to disappear and the plane in its stead embarks upon its embryonic existence - this instant of transition is a means to the end' (Kandinsky 1979 : 39). What Kandinsky describes here is not merely what Cassirer would have called a conceptual deduction of the connection between the 'elementary contents of geometry' (1953: 91-92) - which for him could only be graspable conceptually, and not materially - but a material trembling, a feeling, a physical and material traction towards the limit which marks out the interval between the point's disappearance (evocation) and the plane's 'embryonic' appearance' (manifestation). Might we take this even further, and claim that this interval at the juncture of the point's extinguishing and the plane's embryonic appearance can be understood as the 'means' (the transition) to the following 'end': the undoing of a specific standpoint, or uprightness, namely the undoing of the self-standing position of the positing subject who proclaims its sovereignty and autonomy over the the painterly - and worldly - plane? That Kandinsky, in the short excerpt titled 'an der Grenze', describes the instant of the point's transitional undoing towards the plane as a 'means to the end' is not insignificant. If the transitional moment of the point's extinguishing towards the extreme limit is a 'means', then the 'end' is nothing but the very gesture of becoming exposed to, touched by, the plane's living body, in a bodily tension towards the plane - *zu Fläche* - which precludes any final closure.

[123] By imagistic insurgence I refer to the image's potential to act upon our body and gaze, taking hold of, instead of being taken hold. There will be more on the significance of this formulation in chapter 3.

The state of being transverse, understood as a curvature that problematises the very paradigm of solipsistic enclosure, would thus indicate the flickering rhythm of a traction-towards, the tensive dislocation of being-out-of-posture. This implosion performed at the site of the limit achieves nothing but the paradoxical concurrence of contrasting tendencies in one 'thing': simultaneous limitation and un-limitation, the heteronomy of rhythm inherent in a singular, limit-like stroke.

In light of this, part of the answer to the questions previously advanced - what happens when the image-body limit comes loose, when it is no longer regulated by the distancing and fixed coordinates of individual posture and positing, when what remains is only the 'traction and tension' of the unplanned, incidental and transversal impulse to be at one with the picture plane, at one with the world? - is to be found in the structure of occurrence marked by obliqueness: the curvature, the bending, the traction towards the limit. Parallel to the fermentation brought about by the scientific reframing of reality through the paradigm of the curvature, the very status of the limit-line in painting[124], as Stephen Kern has underscored[125], acquires an altogether new significance in the first decade of the twentieth century: no longer an imperturbable boundary that demarcates the separation between A and B, as the chiaroscuro hoped to achieve, but the irregular and tensive spacetime of endless negotiation and simultaneous co-implication. The shifting status of the limit-line, in painting and in physics, becomes the performative of a new way of envisioning the world as 'that' which is structurally marked by obliqueness, a world no longer standing intra or extra, an 'object' no longer standing-against, [*Gegenstand*], no longer 'standing' at all: a place no longer hostile to inclination, penetration, passage, contamination.

2.4 Complicating the Kantian Picture: from Moral Uprightness to Reflexive Transversality

It has been previously argued that the paradigm of transversality, the shifting status of the limit-line in painting and physics through the lens of simultaneity, the newly proposed mode of envisioning the world as the bending of a 'world-line' curvature at the dawn of the 20th century, offer an occasion for Benjamin to challenge 'mythic' conceptions of space and morality which infiltrate the realm of art - specifically the presumption of an originally autonomous and vertical posture which conditioned the development of Kantian aesthetics and its afterlife. It is now time to demonstrate how Benjamin, beyond the sketchy notes on painting and graphics, further and more systematically develops the insights on the possibility of a gestural, imagistic and aphoristic mode of relating to the world and to the picture plane that not only does away with

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[124] The painter's gesture is once again a useful paradigm to exemplify the paradox here implied: Kandinsky's definition of abstract form as a singular occurrence defined by a heteronomy of rhythm - a 'dual note in a single form - that is, the creation of a double sound by a single form' (1979: 40), can be understood as a the visual parallel of the gesture described by Nancy, namely the 'single stroke', the mark of union and, simultaneously, of division - a 'mark of sharing' (Nancy 2000: 37) -, the 'single, continuous-discontinuous mark tracing out the entirety of the ontological domain' (2000: 37).

[125] For a broader investigation on the relation between visuality and spacetime contraction at the turn of the twentieth century, which includes a chapter on Cubism, see Kern, Stephen. 1983. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press), see esp. ch.11, pp. 297-313.

its 'mythic roots' but also contributes to recasting some of the key systematic questions left open by the third *Critique*.

First, let's briefly illustrate the myths based on the vertical-horizontal hierarchy which Benjamin is seemingly responding to when denouncing the problem of posture. In his charges against Herder[126], Kant criticises the view that man 'acquired reason as a result of his erect posture' (1991: 204): unlike Herder's, Kant's uprightness has nothing to do with a physical precondition endowed by nature, but is traceable to the 'four steps' that guided man beyond its natural state and instincts. This is made clear by Kant in the 'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History', where a line is drawn between the 'state of servitude under the rule of instinct', a 'purely animal existence' and, on the other hand, 'the state of freedom' (1991: 226), or 'a state of humanity', which coincides with the elevation of man, by virtue of reason, above the natural world, having realised that 'he is the true end of nature, and that nothing which lives on earth can compare with him in this respect' (1991: 225). Elevation, here, is much more than an originally vertical posture: it is the hallmark of the human species' hierarchical superiority over and mastering of nature.

If uprightness is not a mere natural state endowed to man, but a moral posture (rectitude) that arose from the rational elevation above the natural state, then by abandoning natural instincts, man's uprightness strives towards 'moral purity': purity thus amounts to the mastering of all 'individual inclinations', as Kant makes unmistakably clear in both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in the essays on the relation of theory to practice[127]. Confirming the argument that uprightness is not merely the present default posture endowed to man by nature, but the futurity of a destination to be achieved by means of striving, is a short and peculiar annotation from the *Opus Postumum*, where Kant disambiguates between speculative and practical reason by reflecting upon different bodily postures: the 'highest standpoint [*Standpunkt*] of speculative (*not yet* practical) philosophy' is described as a 'view from a height over the plain of experience [*über den flächen Boden der Erfahrung*], not touching or testing by tapping, but gazing about oneself into the distance [*in der Ferne*]' (1998: 234, emphasis mine). The epistemological posture or standpoint described with the image of 'flight' is *not yet* the moral disposition of uprightness, rather, 'speculation' - literally the act of looking, *speculatio*, 'contemplation, observation' - seemingly calls into question a horizontal extension over the plane, or a 'bird's eye view': by definition, a scene depicted from an 'imaginary viewpoint high up so as to give a comprehensive overview'[128], as if captured by a bird in flight.

The transition from the horizontal standpoint of a bird's eye view to the vertical standpoint of moral disposition can be pictured as a change of directionality which exerts a traction towards uprightness. Yet 'transition' is not the correct word here, for there is *yet* no straightforward liminal kinesis possible between the

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[126] For an overview of Kant's position against Herder's arguments in the tenth book of *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-1781) see Kant, Immanuel. 1991. 'Introduction to Reviews of Herder's Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind and Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History' in *Political Writings*, ed. by Hans Reiss and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 193-200.

[127] See in particular Kant's third essay 'On the Relationship of Theory to Practice in International Right' in *Political Writings*, pp. 87-93, p. 91

[128] See the definition of 'bird's eye view' in Clarke, Michael (ed.). 2000. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

two standpoints and planes. That is, until the faculty of judgment is introduced in the architectonics of Kantian critique. There will be more on how the paradigm of the transverse, from a Benjaminian standpoint, serves to complicate the role of uprightness in a specific type of sublime - the kind of sublime which is designed to purport sociability and perfectibility as purposes of human destiny - but first let's see how Benjamin rebuts, on a purely epistemological level, the 'mythic' conception of space underpinning the split between a distanced 'view from a height' and a physical 'touching or testing by tapping', using nothing other than once again the kinesis of transversality or 'cutting across'.

The split is implicitly picked up by Benjamin, I argue, in a short vignette titled 'Chinese Curios', in *One Way Street*. Depicting a counter-move to the non-sensuous and distanced-based contemplative posture described by Kantian flight, the vignette can be read, alongside the notes on painting and graphic, as one of Benjamin's imagistic and aphoristic attempts to propose a different, non-hierarchical way of picturing the world, starting from the reality of perceptual-bodily relations to the plane. Here, Benjamin draws a sharp distinction between two kinds of body postures towards the plane which give rise to two different modes of grasping the world: the airplane passenger, flying above a country road and reminiscent of Kant's 'comprehensive view', and the one who walks through the road on foot, in other words, the physical body which traverses the road and penetrates the landscape from within. While the flier can only witness the unfolding of the image (of the road) from a distance, 'according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it' (OWS: 50), the one who walks through the landscape and literally *traverses* the landscape, walking across the road, is able to learn 'the power it [the landscape] commands' (OWS: 50). By ways of analogies with the Chinese practice of copying books and its potential for neutral imparting of literary culture, Benjamin compares the flier who does not penetrate and traverses the landscape with their body - and does not submit to its [the landscape's] (physical) law - with the reader who 'follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming' (OWS: 50). The counterpart to the abstract removal, detachment and distanced-contemplation of Kantian flight is, for Benjamin, an incidental, oblique gesture with respect to plane of experience: only by physically *traversing* the landscape, only by means of the reality of gesture denied by Kant - 'touching' and 'tapping' - can one 'learn' *qua* think the world. Not by shaping it according to the free movement of the mind - i.e. according to purposes of self-organisation - but, quite differently, by being de-shaped, by being-acted-upon, by being 'subject to' the power - the law - *of* the image and not ascribed *to* the image.

The epistemological disposition, the very act of knowing, contemplating, observing, is configured, in Benjamin's counterpart to the privileged position and detached posture of flight, first and foremost as a praxis that one could perhaps name the 'obliqueness' or the 'curvature' of gesture: the incidental, cutting-across trajectory that crosses the image, transfixing it while being simultaneously and inevitably transfixed by it. We could perhaps describe Benjamin's countermove with respect to Kantian flight as a way of un-mastering the image: to traverse the landscape, to touch and to feel it, to submit oneself to its command is not to master anything but, on the contrary, to make oneself vulnerable, to undo one's own privileged - autonomous, self-sufficient - position with respect to it.

Having pondered on Benjamin's undoing of the mythic image of Kantian flight - and the epistemological posture of a distanced-based contemplation associated with it - through the kinesis of 'cutting across', and the paradigms of obliqueness and transversality - 'trans-', or across, and '*vertere*', to turn -, it is time to demonstrate how the same set of oblique coordinates serves to complicate the moral posture of uprightness, and to therefore expose 'mythic' conceptions of space and morality in the context of (Kantian) aesthetics and its political reverberations. The most fruitful territory for such analysis is the experience of the sublime, namely the the experience of the Kantian 'trans' par excellence. One ought to start from an ambiguity inherent in the Kantian framework: the sublime is, in purely kinaesthetic terms, the movement, the fibrillation of un-limitation (*Entgrenzung*) at the site of the limit. But it is not, of course, an experience of transversality per se, in other words, it is an *Entgrenzung* only to a certain extent, and exactly here is the paradox: to make oneself vulnerable to the fibrillation of the limit is not, for Kant, to give up one's own autonomous and upright position, but only to reinforce it and to broaden it in light of the 'inextinguishable' glare of morality. The experience of *Entgrenzung* is of course still *bound* to the moral goal which repurposes the un-limitation at stake through the lens of a human destiny and destination - which for Kant is nothing other than the destiny/history of the entire human species, in other words, infinite progress. Such a universal progressing of man as a 'species' famously runs counter to the 'ends of men as individuals' (Kant 1991: 91), which are clouded by natural instincts and inclinations[129]. If sociability and perfectibility are some of the properties by means of which humanity 'distinguishes itself from the limitation of animals' (CPJ: 229), Kant nevertheless admits that 'separation from all society is also regarded as something sublime if it rests on ideas that look beyond all sensible' (CPJ: 157). A distinction between self-sufficiency and unsociability is made on the grounds that the former is classified as a higher form of independence from needs, whereas the latter only amounts to unsocial natural instincts of isolation. The socio-political outreach of the 'terrifying' sublime, in a nutshell, is that by mastering natural impulses and instinctual needs, the upright subject is either driven towards a superior state of self-sufficiency or towards the perfectibility and sociability to which the entire human species is destined. In both instances, a state of 'superiority over needs' (CPJ: 157), in both instances, infinite human progress.

In light of this, in what follows I aim to demonstrate, using a specific literary image employed by Kant to exemplify the sublime experience of 'noble dread' in the *Observations on the Feeling of Beautiful and Sublime*, how the premises on which the political aims of sublimity are grounded - reason's mastering of natural inclinations, reason's striving towards moral uprightness, reason's broadening of the mind and the consequent formation of a coerced political constitution upon which concepts of happiness and freedom depend - are dismantled and rebuked by a single, oblique and transversal gesture which is ignored by Kant, but which Benjamin, years later, will take as the foundation of a new way of complicating the seamless transition between the moral, the political, the aesthetic and the natural.

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[129] Kant, in the second *Critique*, famously grounds the striving towards moral achievement on the premises that individual happiness arising from natural instincts cannot be incorporated with the 'supreme moral principle' (Kant 2015: 76, 5:93) as a condition of it.

Taken as a poignant example of how the isolated, unsociable and avaricious self is driven towards sociability and perfectibility, Carazan's dream-image[130] illustrates the performative of a postural shift from individual inclinations to the highest good[131]. What should catch our attention here is the following point: if the political purpose of the 'terrifying' sublime is to guide man towards the perfect state of 'superiority over needs' to which he is destined, having mastered natural instincts and individual inclinations in favour of uprightness, then the dream-image which Kant uses to exemplify all of these tells us a slightly - yet dramatically - different story.

In being seemingly cut off from the world[132], from all forms of relationality, Carazan needs to experience an 'unspeakable shudder' to become upright, but he can only experience this 'shudder' via a dream-image, by means of an imaginary flight towards the limit of the world, at the end of history: 'a fearful realm of eternal silence, solitude and darkness! Unspeakable dread overcame me at this sight' (Kant 2011:17). Having lost himself and his standpoint, Carazan loses sight of the last stars. It is here, in this instant of loss, that something remarkable happens, something which Kant seems to ignore, but which has the potential to confute, I argue, the very theory that the dream-image is meant to exemplify. What lets Carazan off the grips of eternal solitude and unspeakable dread is significantly articulated, in language, as a gestural and impulsive kind of striving which cannot but phenomenalise the unspeakable transcendence of the limit, an unconscious and reflexive impulse, a bodily transversal traction towards the plane which seriously problematises the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the moral subject with respect to natural life, inclinations and needs: 'in this bewilderment, I stretched my hands out [*Ich streckte darauf meine Hände*] to actual objects [*nach den Gegenden der Wirklichkeit*] with such vehemence [*heftigen Bewegung*] that I was thereby awakened' (2011: 17).

An impulsive traction towards the plane of 'actual objects', towards the realms of reality, a gestural and bodily striving which is unequivocally measured by a material gradation of intensity - 'vehemence'. Carazan's impulsive gesture of 'striving-towards', I argue, is not upright but transversal, not just in the simplest sense of oblique versus vertical, but taking into account the philosophical baggage of these two terms: obliqueness, transversality, inclination as a 'state of servitude under the rule of instinct' (Kant 1991: 226); verticality,

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[130] For different interpretations of Kant's reference to Carazan's dream see Fenves, Peter. 1991. *A Peculiar Fate. Metaphysics and World-History in Kant* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press) pp. 71-77; Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1985. 'Dies Irae', in *La Faculté de Juger,* ed. by Jacques Derrida and others (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit) pp. 9-54, pp. 50-52; Arendt, Hannah. 1992. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) pp. 10-12. For an interpretation of Carazan dream as the prototype to Kant's principle of autonomy see Meld Shell, Susan. 2009. *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press), see esp. ch.1, pp. 36-38.

[131] Kant quotes at length from the text that was published anonymously in 1761 as 'Carazans Traum. Eine morgenlandische Erzahlung', *Bremisches Magazin zur Ausbreitung der Wissenschaften und Künste und Tugend,* 4: 539-46. See also Kant, Immanuel. 2011. *Observations on the Feeling of Beautiful and Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 16-17.

[132] As scholarship has rightly pointed out, the declared non-relationality and un-communicability that the image is meant to symbolise is already problematised by the fact the he is watching himself from the standpoint of another, as he is being-acted-upon by some external force, as he is being blown away towards the 'most extreme limit of nature' (2011: 17). See Luftig, Jonathan. 2011. 'Fiction, Criticism and Transcendence: On Carazan's Dream in Kant's Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime', *MLN*, 126, 3: 614–29, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23012680 [last accessed 23 April 2024]. See especially p. 625, where the author discusses Carazan's images as issued from the Angel's standpoint. See also fn.40 of the same page, where the problem of a heteronomy of voices in the narration of Carazan's dream is also discussed with reference to relevant scholarship.

elevation, uprightness as a 'state of superiority over needs' (CPJ: 157). To suggest that Carazan's hands cutting across, reaching out towards 'actual objects', embody the oblique potential of the transverse is to admit that inclination, instinct, impulse, need - and not uprightness, nor self-sufficiency - is what initiates Carazan to a sociable life. Sociability, if we accept what the image is really suggesting us beyond the instrumental and symbolic purpose which Kant ascribes to it, is not issued from the autonomous, out-of-touch and privileged position of someone who has mastered natural impulses; on the contrary, morality and sociability are issued by actualising what Benjamin would have called a receptive, reflexive and intensive 'innervation of the hand' (SW 2: 204). In other words, morality is here second to and issued from a transversal gesture: the hand stretching out towards 'actual objects' is the unexpected, intensive and impulsive incident along the vertical presumption of a moral untouchable substratum, and it is also what inevitably casts doubts on all the political aims previously mentioned - the mastering of natural impulses, the self-sufficiency of morality's concept and its independence qua separation from empirical ends.

Carazan's hands stretching out, the impulsive striving towards actual objects is not, I argue, the performative of reason mastering natural inclinations but the exact reversal, namely the upsurging, interruptive motion of a de-natured - that is, historicised, temporally delimited - natural life over the presumed autonomy, infinite perfectibility and abstract self-sufficiency purported by Kantian uprightness. It's in line with this reversal of trajectory, from moral uprightness to reflexive transversality, that Benjamin's own repurposing of morality away from myths of Enlightenment and towards the coordinates of '*Neigung*', inclination,[133] should be read. No longer a counter-ethical source of evil[134], inclination, as it appears in the context of the fragment 'On Kantian Ethics', 'is to be transformed through a change of meaning into one of the supreme concepts of morality in which it is perhaps called upon to take the position that 'love' held' (WB 2021: 71). What position did love hold? In Kantian ethics, love notoriously falls short of respect, for it cannot be commanded or coerced, it cannot be the subject of duty. Non-legislative and non-coercive, love's position eschews the constraints of duty to occupy the un-circumscribable, fleeting space of an interval, of a traction in-between. Love's position is clearly one of obliqueness and non-self-sufficiency: Platonically described in the *Schemata* as a 'the binding element in nature" (SW 1: 400), love occupies the liminal place of a bond that cannot be prescribed, anticipated or mastered.

If inclination is taken to occupy, through a 'change of meaning', the position held by love, then it must also account for the independence from human will and duty, and for the instinctual component that such a liminal position entails. The trajectory from moral uprightness to reflexive transversality proceeds by means of un-mastering not the self but the image, un-mastering natural inclinations, so that the relation between

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[133] For a critique of uprightness - 'rectitude' - at the crossroads of literature, philosophy and art, which takes as a starting point a short and quite obscure fragment written by Benjamin on the concept of inclination in Kant - 'Zur Kantischen Ethik' (GS 6: 55) - see Cavarero, Adriana. 2016. *Inclinations. A critique of rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press). While the confrontations with an impressively heterogeneous wealth of sources is admirable, her engagement with Kant - naturally a key figure in the vast panorama on the variations of rectitude - and the ensuing insightful discussion of the 'postural geometry of Kantian ethics' is only limited to Kant's moral and anthropological writings, and does not engage with the arguments exposed in the third Critique.

[134] 'Only inclination [*Neigung*] disarms the evil act' (WB 2021: 68), writes Benjamin, implicitly contrasting Kant's characterisation of inclination as a source of evil, in the short fragment 'From Life and Violence'.

ethics, life and art is no longer conceived according to the linear hierarchy purported by the third *Critique*, for which art and nature seamlessly lend themselves as symbolic instrumental vehicles to the ends of human freedom; on the contrary, Benjamin's sketchy yet radical theory of reflexive and receptive transversality, from the notes on painting and graphic to the Chinese curios vignette, up to the fragments on morality, corrects the Kantian ethic-aesthetic trajectory on at least three occasions: not the independence from inclination but the contrary; not the dependence from duty but the contrary; not the possibility of being self-sufficient but the contrary. If the re-purposing of sublime un-limitation along the upright coordinates of self-sufficiency and autonomy leads, for Kant, towards higher forms of independence from needs, towards a conciliation of purposes of art and nature with purposes of human freedom, progress and moral perfectibility, then Benjamin's reflexive transversality forms the matrix for a reconfiguration of the relation between the natural, the aesthetic and the ethical, which entails neither reconciliation nor harmonisation, but rather keeps alive the irreducible tension and traction that subsists at the margins of, in the liminal 'gap' which the third *Critique* so desperately wanted to fill.

2.5 The Striving of Gesture

Benjamin's imagistic and aphoristic theory of reflexive transversality makes it clear that what is at stake in the revised experience of limit-undoing at the site of the limit offered by the image is no longer an experience of universal communicability, propelled by aesthetic ideas, between the self and *n* other selves, where the existence of 'others' purported by aesthetic unity is instrumental to human progress and perfectibility. What is instead marked out in Benjamin's transversal response to Kantian uprightness is a liminal state that does not involve communicability or sociability, but only an endless negotiation, tension and traction between the body and the image's plane.

In the essay titled 'A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books', published in *Die literarische Welt* in 1926, Benjamin takes up once again the bodily traction towards the picture plane which children experience when reading graphic picture books. The child enters into the world of graphic images 'as a cloud which becomes suffused with the riotous colors of the world of pictures. Sitting before his painted book, he makes the Taoist vision of perfection come true: he overcomes the illusory barrier of the book's surface' (WB 2008: 226). The material and physical dimension which characterises this particular experience of the image is remarked by Benjamin's reference to the resemblance between the Chinese '*Hua*' - '*tuschen*', to paint in watercolours/ink - and the gesture of '*Gua*' - to 'attach' or to 'hang' [*anhängen*] -, which in German typically becomes *anlegen*, to 'lay on'. Not only does the hand of the painter create pictures by laying stratifications of lines and colours on the surface, but the child also lays his body on pictures, he becomes entangled with, touched and displaced by, the image-world which he no longer merely observes and beholds, but by which he is taken away. Precisely this 'laying on' of colour on the surface, and of the body on the picture book - as opposed to the vertical, distanced position adopted when contemplating paintings - denotes the peculiar receptive manner of the child who enters the picture and who becomes displaced, concealed [*entstellt, vermummt*] into the image.

In 'Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater', written only two years after, Benjamin takes up again the bodily tension towards the picture plane to emphasise the liminal nexus of and contamination between the gestures of 'beholding' and 'attaching'. Drawing from Conrad Fiedler's *Schriften über Kunst* (1913-14)[135], Benjamin notes how the contamination between optics-based perception and haptics-based reception allows the painter to be someone 'who sees more accurately with his hand when his eye fails him, who is able to transfer the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand' (SW 2: 204). Fiedler's intuition on the cooperation and inter-dependence of hand and eye in pictorial activity clearly situates the haptics of gesture at the *ending* point - at the limit - of optical perception: 'the hand takes up the further development of what the eye is doing and continues it at the point where the eye itself has reached the end of its activity' [*die Hand nimmt die Weiterentwickelung dessen, was das Auge tut, gerade an dem Punkte auf und führt sie fort, wo das Auge selbst am Ende seines Tuns angelangt ist*] (Fiedler 1913 : 275). Not only, therefore, is the undoing of the image-threshold achieved by the child entering the picture plane, but also the painter's gesture - 'attaching' or 'hanging' colours onto the picture plane's surface - speaks to the possibility of a pictorial action that displaces the limits of the body in a 'leap' from sense to sense, a sensuous excess grounded in reality, which does not lean on extra-worldly, supplementary frameworks.

What might it mean, for a painter, to see with his hands? To become attached to the plane of the image - and not to behold it - must entail a sort of detachment from one's own self-standing posture - from one's own self. Such a gesture of bodily exposure - the hand reaching out towards the picture plane - may seemingly resonate with George's description, in the *Rainbow* dialogue (1916), of the painter's activity as excess - 'I mix the colors, and I then see nothing but color. I'd almost say: I am color' (Fenves 2011: 80.) -, and with what Margaret describes, in her dream-image, as non-self-existence: 'I was nothing but seeing […] Even *I myself* did not exist, nor my understanding' (2011: 80, emphasis mine). Both Margaret and George are, like Fiedler's painter and like Carazan's dream, caught up in a tensive traction towards the plane which prompts the body to abdicate the fixed coordinates of the beholder's posture.

What these variations of undoing reveal is the possibility of a motor activity - a gesture - which touches upon the very core of the making-visible process and which is unhinged from the self-standing posture and position of a contemplating subject. Letting go from oneself, letting go from beholding, according to the kinesis exposed by the figural-literary motif of the hand stretching out, paradoxically coincides with the

[135] Konrad Fiedler (1841-1895) was one the most prominent German scholars of the 19th century in art theory/history.

undoing of grasping - beholding -, shifting one own's body balance towards the outside, or better, towards the neutral zone of a transversal traction - obliqueness of gesture - or curvature towards the plane[136].

Being-acted-upon, being displaced into the image, being at one with the world, in the context of this chapter, means neither complete disappearance nor a different kind of appearance, it only means, going back to Kandinsky's pictures, 'the simultaneous occurrence of conjuration and manifestation [*Beschwörung und Erscheinung*]' (WB 2008: 219, trans. Mod. FM). In other words, it only means the heteronomous and liminal in-between state which undoubtedly problematises the dynamics of ontological solipsism and self-sufficiency.

If one is to think, following Kandinsky, the existence of the picture's plane ('Basic plane') as a 'living organism'[137], then the extinguishing of the (self's) upright standpoint in favour of tensive neutrality cannot but reinforce the claim that being is only 'together', only 'with': neither a fictional 'self' nor just a biological body, but the tension, the liminal oscillation, which defines the heteronomous structuring of coexistence, or existence as 'co-'. Long before Jean-Luc Nancy's proposition that the liminal spacing marked out by the 'co-' is neither a (Kantian) 'question of coming out from a being-in-itself in order to approach others' (2000: 67), nor a (Heideggerian) 'question of coming into the world' (2000: 68) but, rather differently, 'the simultaneity of being-with, where there is no 'in itself' that is not already immediately 'with'' (2000: 68), a kind of 'primordial plurality that co-appears' (2000: 67), the Jewish philosopher Erich Unger[138] also posed the question of 'human plurality' in existential terms.

In his *Politik und Metaphysik,* published as a monograph in 1922 and regarded by Benjamin as 'the most significant piece of writing on politics in our time' (C: 172, quoted in WB 2021: 214), Unger ponders questions of plurality, simultaneity, transversality and (bodily) constructibility, through the lens of the so called

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[136] It is not by chance that Benjamin ascribes to the transverse section a very specific power, namely a neutral status - its 'neutral horizontal position' (WB 2008: 219). Neutrality, of course, is not only to be understood in terms of the bodily abdication of self-standing posture, but also as a philosophical counter-move, voiced in the *Program* essay, to the progressive tendency towards enclosure that animated the intents of the Marburg School, as previously discussed in relation to Cassirer. This detail on the neutrality of the transversal plane that eschews the dualism of the image-imageless, subject-object, substance-form, oppositions by holding onto traction and tension is incredibly significant, since it allows us to bypass the risk of falling into a double trap. On the one hand, neutrality rejects the argument that the undoing of contemplative beholding would simply coincide with mere imagelessness and inaction; on the other hand, it also eschews the opposite alternative that would ascribe to this undoing a somewhat productive agency or a revolutionary function, i.e. the equivalence between image and political action. Benjamin's reference, in the 'Programm' essay, to the 'sphere of total neutrality' has been extensively investigated, vis-à-vis Husserl, by Fenves in *The Messianic*, see especially 'Husserl and the 'Sphere of Total Neutrality', pp. 161-165.

[137] That Benjamin would agree with Kandinsky's attribution of 'life' to the picture's plane is not simply inferred from his direct yet sketchy reference to Kandinsky's pictures, but also, naturally, from his engagement with and distancing from Nietzsche's physiological transformation of aesthetics, which is culpable of inscribing the metaphysical life of artworks - the pure tearing and opening at the heart of artistic creation which shatters the illusion of a permanent, stable identity - within the biological framework, failing thus to recognise the true task of the philosopher, namely the comprehension of 'all natural life through the more encompassing life of history' (SW 1: 255).

[138] On the relationship between Benjamin and Unger see Voigts, Manfred. 1999. 'Walter Benjamin und Erich Unger: Eine jüdische Konstellation', in *Global Benjamin: Internationaler Benjamin Congress,* ed. by Klaus Garber and others, 2 vols. (Munich: W. Fink), pp. 839-55.

'psycho-physical parallelism'[139], a philosophical entanglement that clearly had a positive and lasting impact on Benjamin, testified by his acknowledgement to Scholem that, 'surprisingly', Unger's reflections on the problem 'have some points in common with my own' (C: 173, quoted in WB 2021: 218)[140]. For the purposes of this chapter, it proves fruitful to briefly examine Unger's specific references to transversality, simultaneity and constructibility, in order to advance the argument that these three paradigms likely correspond to the 'points in common' diagnosed by Benjamin upon confronting Unger's ideas. This brief analysis, in turn, will be pivotal to outlining the physiognomy of the transversally-directed body which Benjamin opposes to the upright moral posturing, besides further validating and finalising the argument, discussed at the outset of the chapter, that Benjamin's cryptic and under-investigated references to the picture plane's 'simultaneity' and 'transversality' are significant of a newly-configured mode of envisioning the world - a configuration that, as Nancy's 'singular-plural' demonstrates, does not cease to be relevant today.

In contrast to the Kantian assumption, underpinning the political reverberations of aesthetic experience, that plurality is second to and totally dependent upon the precondition of an autonomous self, and against the well-established direction of politics, which has 'always proceeded as if only the individual existed, albeit the individual repeated *n* times' (WB 2021: 227), Unger suggests that 'plurality [*Vielheit*] as such could have an equally originary validity of existence as a 'single entity' [*Einzelheit*]' (Unger 2021: 227). The existential question of plurality is necessarily a question of heteronomy and, from the outset, it is not posed in terms of *aut-aut* or either/or schematisms, as the 'alternative' of 'body *or* spirit [*Körper* oder *Geist*]', but as simultaneous and heterogeneous co-existence, a point which Benjamin closely follows in all the subheadings of the 1921

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[139] German psychologist Gustav Theodor Fechner is considered the father of psychophysics, which became known with the publication of *Elemente der Psychophysik* (1860). The theoretical apparatus underlying psychophysics influenced the development of the Marburg School, and it had a lasting impact on Cohen's confrontation with Kant. For an overview of the influence of psychophysics on Cohen's work see Giovanelli, Marco. 2017. 'The Sensation and the Stimulus: Psychophysics and the Prehistory of the Marburg School', *Perspectives on Science*, 25 (3): 287–323. For a critical assessment and overview of the mind-body relation from mid-nineteenth century up to the resurgence of the psycho-physical parallelism in the 1920s, and with specific reference to the Germanophone cultural landscape, see Heidelberger, Michael. 2004. *Nature from Within. Gustav Theodor Fechner and his Psychophysical Worldview* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), see esp. ch.5, pp. 165-188.

[140] Uwe Steiner links Benjamin's interest in psychophysics to the seminars of Paul Häberlin at the University of Bern, while the editors of the newest English translation of the *Schemata* (Benjamin 2019: 311fn) remark that the only literature reference listed is Ludwig Klages, suggesting that Benjamin may have written the manuscripts in conjunction with the appearance of Klages's *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* (spring/summer 1922). For a reading of Benjamin's engagement with the psycho-physical problem vis-à-vis Klages's ideas on body [*Leib*] and soul [*Seele*], bodily expression and rhythmic movement see Charles, Matthew. 2018. 'Secret Signals from Another World: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Innervation', *New German Critique,* 135: 39–72. Charles's work has the merit to challenge a sustained tendency inherent in Benjamin scholarship (Hanssen, Weigel) to one-sidedly read his engagement with gesture, bodily and motor innervation through the prism of Freudian-Marxist theory, missing, as such, the rich nuances offered by more faithful philological accounts, as opposed to thematically-filtered interpretative frameworks.

'Schemata for the Psychophysical Problem'[141], where the connector between different types of the body is always '*und*', never '*oder*' .

The psycho-physical problem, namely the incongruence between psychic and physiological data which outline two heterogeneous kinds of body - one physiologically disposed as an organism, and one which coincides with psychical 'innerness', or consciousness - is a 'problem' to the extent that consciousness falls short of grasping the plurality-existence, the disposition of the social body, within its own singular body, which it only sees as separated and delimited from other human bodies[142]. Due to the mind's limitedness, the 'plural' of the body is therefore only reduced to the biological multiplication of *n* other bodies, as the 'cyclic-biological', 'ever-repeating' movement of human species' reproduction, and not as an originary structure; in other words, the challenge is to grasp, within the limits of one own's body, the psychic structure - and not the merely biological one - which makes us aware of the body's excess with respect to its own singularity. The excess at stake is clearly not an all-encompassing, universally validated, saturating expansion, understood as a Kantian 'enlargement' of the mind - a 'broad-minded way of thinking' (CPJ: 227) -, but a tensive traction towards the paradoxical spacing of the interval and distance which subsist between one's body and another's and yet also ties them together - a distant proximity, to use the language of Benjamin's 'Schemata'.

How can one grasp such a singular-plural, limited-unlimited spacetime interval? How would the reality of 'plurality as such', a primordial and originary 'plurality-existence [*Vielheitsexistenz*]' (2019: 227) - a question 'upon which both the psychophysiological problem and, at its deepest foundations, the sociological problem depend' (Unger 2021: 227) - be perceived? Unger's response hinges on two key paradigms: transversality and simultaneity.

I) Transversality

Transverse kinesis is diametrically opposed to the cyclic movement of biological, developmental progress: if the rhythm and force of the 'ever-repeating biological cause' (Unger 2021: 227) - the infinite reproduction of the species - is cyclic, circular, centripetal, then the force defining what Unger calls the 'unique causal genesis', i.e. not the cause of the body's reproduction but of the body's (social, organic) 'construction', operates not 'at the very '*beginning*', but *transversally* as a concentrating cause' (Unger 2021: 227). The question

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[141] Benjamin's engagement with what has passed down in history as the 'psycho-physical parallelism' calls into question a broader network of thinkers which spans from Gustav Theodor Fechner and proceeds via Nietzsche, Ludwig Klages and key tenets of the *Lebensphilosophie*, Henri Bergson and Hermann Cohen. Nietzsche, in turn, came across Fechner's work via Friedrich Lange's *History of Materialism,* which clearly had a direct influence and lasting impact on his repurposing of aesthetics towards psycho-physiology. Equally, scholarship has suggested than Cohen himself might have learned about Fechner's propositions on the possibility to measure the degree of sensations on the basis of their functional relation with the physiological stimulus via Lange. Lange's role in the reception of Fechner within the post-Kantian philosophical tradition of the time is quite significant and, far from merely restraining itself to a divulging operation, *History of Materialism* (second edition, 1873-75) offered new avenues for a general rethinking of the relation between the materialistic view promoted by the sciences, on the one hand, and, on the other, the insights provided by sustainers of the psycho-physical parallelism - a rethinking in which the two contrasting tendencies are not seen as mutually exclusive.

[142] See Rosenstock, Bruce. 2021. 'Erich Unger, from Politics and Metaphysics. Translator's preface', in *Toward the Critique of Violence. A Critical Edition*, ed. by Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 214-219, p. 218.

of 'plurality-existence' is not, one will have understood by now, the question of the origin and reproducibility of the species, but the question on the structural and originary construction of the 'plural' body, whose force is 'concentrated' within and cuts across, transversally, each and every single body.

Crucially, Benjamin gets very close to Unger's 'transversality' and indeed reiterates the contrast between a centripetal force and a centrifugal one when discussing visual perception, in part II of the *Schemata* ('*Geist und Körper*', or 'Spirit and Somatic body'):

> Least invested in limitation is perhaps visual perception, which, for instance, in contrast with the more centripetally directed perception of taste and especially tactile perception, can really be called centrifugal. Visual perception shows the somatic body, if not as unlimited, then nevertheless in a fluctuating, shapeless limitation' (WB 2021: 99).

Benjamin places visuality at the apex of those 'states of perception' which, in their 'highest elevation [*Steigerung*], constitute ecstasy [*Rausch*]' (WB 2021: 99), and which in such an elevatory striving would make us aware of our body's [*Körper*'s] 'shapeless limitation'. 'Ecstasy' arguably acts transversally: literally, a state of joy and great happiness arising from a displacement which upsets the firm 'standing' posture of a rational being - from the the Greek *ekstasis* and *existanai - 'ek'* ('out') and '*histanai'*, 'to place, cause to stand'. The 'modification of consciousness' described as visual perception at its highest elevation, or ecstasy, I argue, constitutes Benjamin's parallel of Unger's extension or 'elevation' [*Steigerbarkeit*] of the mind, an 'elevation of consciousness' which can only 'lie in the expandability of this innerness' (Unger 2021: 228) by means of which it is possible to perceive a psychic, originary plurality within a 'single consciousness'. Transversal expandability means a totally different kind of *Entgrenzung* from Kant's, one which is not bound to (human) exclusiveness but which includes and gestures towards 'originally alien psychical factors' (Unger 2021: 228).

II) Simultaneity

Benjamin builds on and expands upon Unger's move from the hierarchy of 'unlimited exclusiveness' to unlimited inclusiveness, by extending the context of the 'living body' [*Leib*] of humanity to encompass the 'nonvivified [*Unbelebtes*], plants and animals' (2021: 100). Benjamin's version of Unger's 'organism' - a 'system of forces' whereby 'each force acts as if the others had been included in it from the very beginning', as if 'there had been a prior reality of *togetherness*', as if 'each force from its *beginning*, *right away*, a the *point of its emergence*, had experienced the action and influence of all other forces' (Unger 2021: 225) - is a heterogeneous 'living body' whose tempo is necessarily one of simultaneity: 'Humanity as an individuality is the completion [*Vollendung*] and *at the same time* the demise [*Untergang*] of embodied life' (Benjamin 2021: 100, emphasis mine).

As scholarship has emphasised[143], the advancing of 'embodied nature' towards dissolution is not antithetical to or dissonant from the advancing of the 'somatic body' [*Körper*] towards 'resurrection', both processes - and both bodies - are simultaneous, co-terminus, and this 'togetherness' is indicative of the heterogeneous concurrence and coincidence of the 'end' - demise - of historical life and the 'beginning' of creaturely life. The limit in question - between these two spheres of life - is oblique, transversal: it is the simultaneity of 'beginning' and 'end', 'completion' and 'demise', as both Plato and Aristotle[144] never ceased to demonstrate, the limit always cuts across. The advancing of embodied nature towards dissolution is, simultaneously, the advancing towards the blissful creaturely state defined by that 'prior reality of *togetherness'* which preceded any image of hierarchical 'order'. The decline of the historical life attached to the living body [*Leib*] and the simultaneous possible revelation of a 'higher life', namely what Benjamin, elsewhere, defines as the 'presentation [*Darstellung*] of its significance', 'the expression of its [life's] nature' (SW 1: 255), is not a theory of the individual body's incorruptibility - eternity of the soul - but of the body's afterlife, understood as its historical constructibility. It goes without saying that the constructibility of the body, its afterlife possibility, is not a potential situated in the life of an individual and its reproducibility, but is instead inclusive of - elevated to - a 'non-vivified' plurality.

If the grasping of a non-biological plural-existence, for Unger, was a matter of 'creation [*Schöpfung*] or construction', and not of mere 'procreation [*Zeugung*]' (Unger 2021: 230), for Benjamin, similarly, to grasp a plural-existence where biological multiplication is undone means to grasp the 'life of history', a transversally-oriented nexus at the limits of interior and exterior, human and non-human, simultaneously singular and plural.

Equipped with these insights, it should not come as a surprise that Benjamin situates visual perception as the means per excellence through which we become aware of what Unger aptly called the 'prior reality of *togetherness*', an experience of un-limitation (ecstatic), self-alterity, heterogeneous displacement and de-shaping, an experience whose trajectory leaps from picture to image, from body (*Leib*) to body (*Körper*), and from sense (sight) to sense (touch): from the visual proximity of the picture's phenomenological, spatially delimited presentation, to the touching of the liminal excess that traverses the picture's surface and underpins the image's afterlife.

We are now in a better position to answer the question opened at the outset of the chapter: what happens to 'our' image of the world - and of ourselves - when the image-body relation is no longer regulated by the fixed coordinates of an upright, autonomous posture, but only hinges on the impulsive, reflexive transversality that is epitomised by the gesture of hand reaching out for, striving towards, the picture plane? Nothing happens, except for the striving of gesture itself - a gesture which is also crucial to Benjamin's reflections on the category of justice[145]. The hand striving for - reaching out towards the surface of painting (Fiedler's

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[143] See Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin. A Philosophical Portrait*, pp. 82-83

[145] See Benjamin's fragment 'Notes toward a work on the Category of Justice' in Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of violence,* pp. 65-66. On the significance of striving and dispossession for Benjamin's revision of Kant's critique of reason - particularly the gap between law and justice - see Fenves, *The Messianic*, §7, pp. 187-226, see esp. 190-202.

painter), towards 'actual objects' (Carazan), towards the moon (the child) - is not a symptom of a distant goal's unreachability, it does not signpost to some other ethical or logical realm that excludes or downgrades the question of existence and life but brings that question to the fore, makes it the centrepiece of striving itself, deprives the 'highest good' of any superior purity and futurity. In sharp contrast with the arguments that will be later exposed in the *Kunstwerk* essay (1936), what emerges from the unproductive striving of gesture[146] outlined in the context of this chapter is exactly nothing - no communicability, no production of a community, no social emancipation[147]. Paradoxically, the hand reaches out towards the moon, towards the surface of painting, yet it grasps no things; it cannot possess but only dispossesses.

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[146] Adding to the repertoire of hand gestures reaching out is also a well-known example of a child reaching out for the moon, stretching his hand out to grasp it in the same way in which he would reach out for a ball. While the Neo-Kantian philosopher Friedrich Lange, for example, employs this example to remark the material-logical, sensual-abstract split, namely the hierarchical distinction between perceiving images through our 'sensorium' and interpreting them by means of 'our calculating reason' (Lange 1925: 210), Benjamin's reference to same image in the artwork essay (SW, 3: 135) points in another direction. It is not simply that the child's hand reaching for the moon remarks the logical difference between material image and mental reasoning. It does not mark out the unreachable distance between senses and reason but, on the contrary, it underscores an intra-world dis-measure qua excess grounded in reality itself.

[147] This motif - the passivity of a political gesture which produces nothing - finds a close resonance with Nancy's thinking of communion as articulated through the impossibility of community: 'Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject. In a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes - this is its peculiar gesture - the impossibility of community. A community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project - nor is it a project at all' (1991:15). For different yet interrelated contributions to the French debate on the problem of community, see also Bataille, Georges. 2009. 'Silence and Literature' in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille,* ed. by Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (New York: Suny Press), pp. 197-202; _____.2009. 'The Political Lie' in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille,* ed. by Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (New York: Suny Press), pp. 203-208; Blanchot, Maurice. 1988. *The Unavowable Community,* trans. by Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press); Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press); Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2016. *The Disavowed Community,* trans. by Philippe Armstrong (New York: Fordham Press).

Chapter 3 - The Tangram, the Cloudy Spot and the Legendary Painter: Benjamin's Imagistic Insurgence vis-à-vis Warburg's Emphatic Binding

3.1 A Peculiar Gesture: Undoing the 'image of an order'

There is an image, included in the vast visual inventory of the *Passagenwerk*, which allegorically stages two different perceptual relations to the picture plane, a contrast also reflected in the vertical-horizontal paradigm that regulates the two different postures at stake and which is also significant of two opposite principles of image-construction, and consequently different modes of envisioning the world. The 1818 lithograph, which so far has received little to no attention in scholarship, is titled 'The Triumph of the Kaleidoscope, or the Demise of the Chinese Game'[148] (*Cabinet des Estampes*, *Bibliothèque Nationale Paris*) [Fig. 5]. It is worth noting that the years between 1810-25 provided a much fertile ground for visual experimentation in Europe. Goethe's groundbreaking *Theory of Colours*, published in 1810, paved the way for the scientific study of retinal afterimages[149], acting as a catalyst for ensuing research threads that culminated in the invention of the diorama, the kaleidoscope and the stereoscope, amongst others.

There is general consensus, in scholarship, to cast the visual optics of the kaleidoscope-motif as a model for the image-based construction of history which Benjamin aspired to, while far less attention is given to the tangram's principle of construction - and Benjamin's brief remarks on it. To only name a few examples, Samuel Weber claims that, according to Benjamin, 'the kaleidoscope exemplifies the discontinuous relation of ordered states that characterizes history' (2008: 336) and that it 'attracted Benjamin's attention for precisely the reasons that elicit Habermas's critique: the radical discontinuity of the successive configurations' (2008: 132). In a similar fashion, Didi-Huberman argues that the visual configurations arising from kaleidoscopic imagery are significant of the image's polyrhythmic and prolific dialectics. Immersed in the spectacle of ever-changing patterns, the viewer can never forget that the kaleidoscope's 'magic' is to be found in the fact that the 'self-enclosed perfection and symmetry of visual patterns owes its inexhaustible richness to the open-ended and erratic imperfection of a dust of debris' (DH 2000: 5, trans. FM). None of these positions devote the same amount of attention to the tangram's haptics-optics[150] and the difference it presents with respect to

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[148] The Chinese tangram is a dissection-puzzle which became part of Europe's popular culture at the dawn of the 19th century, roughly around the same time in which the kaleidoscope was first introduced to the public.

[149] See Purgar, Mirela R. 2021. 'Early Interactions of Static and Moving Images' in Purgar, *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies*, pp. 147-166, p. 154

[150] Seeing the haptic-optic dimensions brought forward by the tangram's mode of image-construction not through the lens of a false opposition, but as the coalescent interlacing of different yet non-binary modes of perception matters, insofar as it leads to the envisioning of new modes of relating to the picture plane, as will be clarified throughout the chapter.

kaleidoscopic imagery, and even when the tangram-motif is indeed addressed, it appears to be only a visual cognate of the kaleidoscopic mode of image-construction, regulated by similar principles[151].

In what follows, I aim to challenge this proposition by building on and expanding upon Benjamin's sketchy remarks on the tangram's principle of construction, drawing attention to the mechanisms through which the tangram-motif invokes a more nuanced, non-binary gesture and imagery from the kaleidoscope's one, which in turn suggests a different understanding of the 'construction' at stake. This analysis will prepare the ground for the ensuing confrontation between Benjamin's and Warburg's respective modes of envisioning the world via image, which, as will be demonstrated, hinge on interrelated yet different gestures (imagistic insurgence; emphatic binding). In line with the broader scope of this research, the methodology adopted here will take the image (the 1818 lithograph) as a starting point of questioning, as a visual springboard for pursuing specific research leads, and not as a mere visual document serving the purpose of validating a pre-existing argument. Equally, I will refrain from arguing that Benjamin's cryptic and sketchy remarks on the tangram provide a somewhat substantial critical reading of the image: both text and image function, in the context of what follows, as visual-theoretical stimuli to reflect, with and beyond Benjamin, with and beyond the lithograph, on certain philosophical questions concerning the relation - and the limits - between gesture, image and body.

Let's start, therefore, with the lithograph in question. The lithograph highlights, on multiple levels, a set of differences inherent in the perceptual relations to the plane that the two types of imagery exemplify. Allegorically staging the kaleidoscope's imagery of symmetrical order is a French woman, pictured as she is stood upright, while 'planting her foot' on a reclining man, who is leaning over a picture puzzle whilst subjected to the woman's triumphant stance. Seen through the lens of Benjamin's concept of history, the figure of the oppressor - in this case the kaleidoscope-woman - embodies the tempo of history's continuum[152], while the 'loser' - in this case the reclining man - instead carries the potential to interrupt the continuous trajectory of progress. In line with this insight, the tangram's imagery is intimately bound up with the interruptive or destructive moment that is so crucial to Benjamin's multifaceted reflections on the gesture of imagistic construction in relation to history: detaching from both principles of self-enclosure and beautiful

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[151] Unlike Weber, Didi-Huberman briefly engages with the construction principle of the tangram, yet his interpretation places both the kaleidoscope's and tangram's contrasting optics-haptics and structural mechanisms on the same level, failing to fully acknowledge the nuanced differences between a principle that hinges on self-enclosed beautiful semblance and one which relies on disruptive displacement. See Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2000. 'Connaissance par le kaleidoscope. Morale du joujou et dialectique de l'image selon Walter Benjamin', *Études photographiques* (7), Open edition available online at https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/204, [last accessed 15th November, 2023]. The article is included in *Devant les temps* (2000), where Didi-Huberman argues that the image of the kaleidoscope occupies a position of relevance for Benjamin's philosophy of history and for his understanding of the image's dialectics. Conveniently, Didi-Huberman's argument on the kaleidoscope's principle of construction makes no mention of Brewster's treatise, specifically the principles outlined there (mathematical symmetry, beautiful semblance, self-enclosure). While most of the chapter focuses on the image of the kaleidoscope, the *casse-tête* is only mentioned towards the conclusion and treated pretty much as a visual analogue of the former. From a different angle, Susan Buck-Morss instead acknowledges Benjamin's remarks on the Chinese tangram's principle of construction in contrast with the kaleidoscope, and she at least identifies a key point of difference between the two, without further developing it: 'the kaleidoscope was itself an invention of the nineteenth century. But it was preceded by the Chinese Puzzle (figure 3.6) which, because its juxtaposed elements were not randomly arranged but cohered around a central idea, was the true ur-phenomenon of the principle of montage as a constructive principle' (1991: 74).

[152] 'Das Kontinuum der Geschichte ist das der Unterdrücker' *Druckvorlage: Benjamin-Archiv*, Ms 469 (GS 1: 1236).

semblance on which the kaleidoscopic image relies, the Chinese tangram incites haptic gestures of displacement. This is because, in order to play the puzzle, one must undo the initial image to then create others, therefore any act of construction, within the puzzle, always requires a prior act of destruction/ undoing. One could argue that this is also the case for the kaleidoscope's method of image-construction, by which the formation of new images is similarly anticipated by the dissolution of others. Yet there is a structural, physical element of difference between the two which bears the potential to produce a difference on a conceptual level too: the status of the fragment. While the fragmentary reflections of the kaleidoscopic images will always be circumscribed within a self-enclosed circle, the fragments of the Tangram puzzle are not bound to the contouring, delimiting line which both produces and contains kaleidoscopic imagery - a condition reflected in the double presence, within the lithograph, of loose fragments as well as fragments composing a figure. This may be disregarded as a subtle, insignificant detail, however, following Benjamin's fidelity towards the insignificant - '*Unbedeutenden*' (SW 2: 668) - aspect of the material, the status of the fragment reveals to be an original interpretative key lending access to a different principle of construction, unhinged from the self-enclosure of the overarching line.

Looking at the lithograph, one should note, for example, the contrast between the repetition of circular, circumscribed patterns on the woman's dress, on the paper she is holding and, on the other hand, the disconnected pieces of tangram lying around before the reclining man, next to the constructed figure, a detail which problematise the idea of self-enclosure and organic totality. The presence of loose fragments is significant of the Tangram's double possibility: one the one hand, assembling the loose fragments to create a finished figure, on the other hand, however, the absence of an outer, overarching limit-line also invites the possibility for those fragments to remain loose, un-organised, non-constructed.

If we consider that the kaleidoscope's fundamental purpose, as described by its inventor David Brewster, is to produce beautiful patterns, relying on mathematical symmetry and adopting a composition principle which exploits optical deceptions created by successive reflections to arrange individual forms 'into one perfect whole' (Brewster 1819: 17), and if we take into account that such an imagery hinges on the self-enclosed circle - a motif undeniably stressed by the woman's visual dress-code -, it proves hard to ascribe to it the radically 'open-ended' character suggested by both Weber's and Didi-Huberman's interpretations.

The lithograph not only illustrates two modes of image-construction of the time, but it also elicits broader reflections on ever-recurring dynamics of oppression and sovereignty, self-sufficiency and nationalist/ imperialist postures which, notwithstanding the temporally-delimited instance captured by the picture and the specific framework in which it was conceived, notably find a mythic resurgence well beyond 1818. Describing the cultural and socio-political climate of crisis in Germany between the Wars, Didi-Huberman pointedly writes about a progressive 'political enclosing', or a 'politics of the enemy carried on by all European nationalisms seeking to "close the boundaries" (2018: 165). The 'thirties', of course, the time of Benjamin writing, epitomised the disastrous escalation of ontologies of self-sufficiency and nationalism, and the mythic structures fuelling those narratives are certainly not a thing of the past. While the catastrophe unfolded in the thirties may be behind us, this particular thought of the limit, grounded on the security of mythically-

established ties and bonds, which underpin nationalist rhetorics and politics of state identity, is far from being buried underneath the ruins of a long-gone history. It was not so long ago that one of the most philosophically-charged terms in post Wars history, Derrida's *'différance',* made its first appearance, carrying with itself a deconstructive potential that had all the promises of posing an end to the mythic thought of the limit which sits at the heart of self-sufficiency, bringing forth, instead, the fragile yet radical potential of the 'margin'. Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy's 'praxis of the (k)not' (2008: 112), as outlined while trying to come to grips with the profound crisis of history, of democracies and of sense from the thirties onwards, offers a further counter-move to the 'politics of the enemy' underpinning certain narratives of autonomous subjectivity. Yet it would seem that this enemy 'has never ceased to be victorious' (SW 4: 391): what today goes under the name of 'ontological security'[153] is yet another symptom of the resurgence, even in the face of a globalised world, of self-sufficiency narratives filtering through the fabric of socio-political discourses and practices. So long as the mythical structures of autonomy, ontological security and self-sufficiency permeate through the socio-political fabric, no matter if in the shape of mutated variants, there exists a possibility of 'replaying the 'thirties'' (Nancy 2008: 92)[154]. The gesturing towards self-sufficiency ignites the strengthening of identity-based limits, which in turn translates into a marked desire to hold fast to a network of established borders, ties and bonds. In this basic manoeuvre, what is dramatically erased is the fragile hesitation inherent in a thought of the limit which, if it wants to avoid acting as a catalyst to ontological security and self-sufficiency, must also be, simultaneously, a 'thought of excess' (Nancy 2008: 40) - where what is meant by 'excess' is not merely transcendence but the intermittent, heterogeneous kinesis and praxis of crossing-over.

Denouncing the structural failure of binary choices between self-enclosed, identity-based types or poles within the political spectrum - sovereignty versus community, left versus right, subject versus citizen and so on -, Nancy's counter-question to ontological security and self-sufficiency reads as follows: 'can one think of a politics of nonselfsufficiency? That is, as one will want to say, a politics [read: praxis][155] of dependence or interdependence, of heteronomy or heterology?' (2008: 111).

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[153] Ontological security, a term that is much in use in the context of international relations, is defined by Moses Dirk and Kornelia Kończal as a condition determined by 'the security of state identity, usually articulated in terms of national identity that emphasizes continuity, historical legitimacy and rights' (Kończal, Dirk 2022: 155). The problem of ontological security has been also critically examined by Jennifer Mitzen, who suggests that 'ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time — as being rather than constantly changing — […] Individuals need to feel secure in who they are, as identities or selves. Some, deep forms of uncertainty threaten this identity security. The reason is that agency requires a stable cognitive environment. Where an actor has no idea what to expect, she cannot systematically relate ends to means, and it becomes unclear how to pursue her ends. Since ends are constitutive of identity, in turn, deep uncertainty renders the actor's identity insecure. Individuals are therefore motivated to create cognitive and behavioral certainty, which they do by establishing routines' (2006: 342). On another variation of continuous ontological security - 'permanent security' - in relation to Holocaust memory and genocide see Moses, Dirk. A. 2021. *The Problems of Genocide* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press).

[154] This predicament was given by Jean-Luc Nancy while describing the crisis of democracies and of sense, whose reverberations are yet to disappear from our socio-political and cultural landscape - a mythic resurgence which is best sum up by the claim that 'all of our politics are politics of the undoing into self-sufficiency' (Nancy 2008: 111). Nancy describes the meaning of 'the thirties' as a crisis of sense and of democracy: 'the 'crisis of sense' is, first of all and most visibly, a crisis of democracy (this is precisely what 'the thirties' meant)' (Nancy 2008: 90)

[155] It is important to remark that this 'thinking of a politics', for Nancy, goes beyond the dual alternative of 'substance' and 'form', and it is configured first and foremost as a hybrid gesture, or the praxis of the '(k)not': 'politics would henceforth be neither a substance nor a form but, first of all, gesture' (2008: 112)

Can the bodily praxis or gestural kinesis implied by the tangram's principle of construction-by-displacement offer a valid model for understanding perceptual relations to the world based on nonselfsufficiency, heteronomy and heterology? And did Benjamin's succinct remarks on the tangram, perhaps, already foreground a positive answer to Nancy's timely question? And could such a positive answer, enclosed in imagistic and aphoristic language, resonate with current concerns, especially if those 'concerns' on ontological security are still informed by the resurgence of the same mythic undercurrents? To put it in Didi-Huberman's words - paraphrased from Benjamin -, can we recognise this image of the past - the 1818 lithograph, and 'that' which it gives us to think, the tangram's principle of construction and Benjamin's remarks on it - as 'one of our own concerns' (DH 2003: 128)?

I aim to answer these by building on and expanding upon a remark made by Benjamin on the lithograph, which he leaves unexplained and under-developed and which, if looked closely and attentively enough in conjunction - and not in substitution - with the visual details of the picture, conceals a prototype of Nancy's gestural praxis of the '(k)not' in the tangram's principle of (non)construction and the gestural kinesis it entails - a praxis which does not cease to be relevant today. As my arguments will show, there is a specific and valid justification for binding Benjamin's sketchy notes on the tangram - as well as his cryptic and interrelated references to the cloudy spot, as will be demonstrated and further elucidated - with Nancy's praxis of the '(k)not', a theoretical juncture whose *fil rouge* will be later exposed.

3.2 The Tangram's 'non-construction': Piling up the Loose Fragments of Existence

The lithograph unequivocally stages the kaleidoscope-woman on the triumphant side of the struggle, as the title itself suggests. Yet, despite this evidence, in a brief note which provides a short commentary to the picture, Benjamin seemingly questions the moment of 'triumph' depicted and explicated by the title, and writes:

> To verify: whether in an allegorical representation in the *Cabinet des Estampes*, the brain-teaser replaces the kaleidoscope or vice versa' [*Zu verifizieren: ob auf einer allegorischen Darstellung im Cabinet des Estampes der Kopfzerbrecher das Kaleidoskop oder dieses jenen ablöst*] [AP: 164, F 6, 2, trans.mod. FM][156].

Benjamin's invitation 'to verify' whether or not the tangram [*Kopfzerbrecher*] 'replaces' the kaleidoscope in this allegorical representation could be dismissed, quite simply, as a mere allusion to the possibility of switching of positions, within the all too notorious triumph-demise logic. Yet, upon closer inspection, a

[156] After confronting translations in both French and Italian, I chose to translate '*ablöst*', in the context of this passage, as 'replaces' instead of 'undoes', which is the term proposed by the editors of the *Arcades Project*.

different proposition may emerge, one which is consistent with the scope of '*Eingedenken*' - the rescuing of the marginal, the impossible yet necessary task of thinking that which is unthinkable[157]. My proposition is that the semantics of *ablösen,* the key verb in the passage which regulates the relation between kaleidoscope and tangram, lends itself to a more nuanced and sophisticated interpretation of the dynamics of undoing and reversal here at stake, one which provides access to a different mode of relationality, no longer regulated by the aut-aut /either-or alternative. I aim to demonstrate that the choice of *ablösen* complicates the picture of a mere shift of body-object positions, for which the Chinese tangram would simply switch places, from the realm of the oppressed to the one of triumph, therefore 'replacing' the kaleidoscope, since such a 'replacement' would only replicate the Hegelian structure of a master-slave dialectics for which one part must always sublate its otherness and attain reconciliation towards a shared original unity.

I argue, instead, that the fundamental 'loosening of bonds and ties' implicated in the German term reflects Benjamin's larger and multifaceted attempt to irritate the relational bond established by the image of triumph allegorically presented by the picture, and to exhibit a mode of relating to the plane that does away with the hierarchy of the position-positing (upright) posture, enabling, as a consequence, the insurgence of a transversal, marginal gesture. The rescuing of the marginal does not simply reveal what, within tradition, has been left unthought, as Heidegger would want, but stands for an altogether different 'tradition' of its own right. Yet how does that 'right' come about without exerting overriding force? How can its rightful manifestation disrupt the hierarchy of triumph? What does it actually mean, to rescue the marginal without merely subverting the terms of the opposition, without transforming the 'marginal' into yet another affirmation of the limit - of victory -, into another variation of uprightness, that is, into yet another 'image of an order'? In answering these, the aim is not to advance an argument for the elimination of the unsolvable and ever-recurring triumph-demise, friend-enemy, oppressor-oppressed dialectic, forged in established and all-encompassing structures of power, but, borrowing from Benjamin's often-quoted line in the *Critique of violence,* the aim is to 'subject' this logic 'to criticism'.

The verb *ablösen* is difficult to render in English, as other Benjamin-scholars have pointed out in relation to different passages where the term appears[158]. The possible translations in English as 'replacing' or 'undoing' do not fully reflect the intimate connection with the movement of loosening, or '*los machen*', which the German retains. The Latin root of the word comes from *'solvere'* - to loosen, to dissolve, to release, untie but also to remove, to detach - which clearly indicates a 'letting go of', or the loosening of ties and bonds.

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[157] For a compelling reading of Benjamin's *Eingedenken* as a way out of the oppressor-oppressed dialectical impasse see Comay, Rebecca. 1994. '*Benjamin's Endgame*' in *Walter Benjamin's philosophy,* ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge) pp. 251-291. See in particular this passage: 'Eingedenken thus announces the return of lost possibilities as the return of the repressed. It signals the entry into history of those forgotten or trampled in the victory march of the conquerors. It is not here a question of recuperating those previously excluded by means of a more capacious or inclusive memory - bringing the margins into the centre, essentializing the inessential, thus turning losers into winners according to the endlessly familiar dialectic (for Nietzsche, ultimately, a slave logic) of the qui perd gagne. For in challenging 'every victory, past and present, of the rulers' (4) - this in the face of an enemy which 'has not ceased to be victorious' (6) - historical materialism in fact overturns the very logic of victory and its obverse by thinking the unthinkable (because contradictory) double imperative or double bind of a past which is at once both irretrievable and yet - for this very reason - incomplete' (1994: 266).

[158] See Weber, *Benjamin's-abilities,* p. 273

These dynamics evidently point to a certain gesturing towards undoing, yet how can this undoing bypass the threat of self-sufficiency and point to its reversal, namely nonselfsuffiency? How can the experience of the image offered by the tangram coincide with an experience of fundamental loss?

It proves useful, in order to answer these, to look closely at Benjamin's definition of sudden reversal, or dialectical overturn, which he describes in a short passage from the *Passagenarbeit.* Coincidentally, it is in the imagery of Chinese 'fairy tales and novellas' that Benjamin famously finds a 'wholly unique experience of the dialectic', which is nothing but a 'thoroughly-composed' dialectical overturn [*Umschlag*], that 'refutes everything 'gradual'' (AP: 389) about becoming. There are two key movements that are significant for the argument pursued here. The first is evidently '*Umschlag',* overturn[159]. The Latin cognate is '*mutatio*', '*commutatio'* - exchange, change, overturn, conversion - while the Greek root is *μεταβολή* which appeared in Pre-socratic philosophy as 'change' and 'mutability', also significantly in the sense of 'changing the course' of something. Heraclitus, most notably, used the term and its related lexicon in his theory on the unity of opposites, where *μεταβολή* (*Umschlag*) and *μεταπεσόντα* (*umschlagend*) did not subscribe to the logic of identity and assimilation, for which the movement of reversal would simply establish an equivalence, or a coincidence between opposites. Quite differently, within one and the same thing contrasting forces and qualities can be found, which are transitory by nature. This is clear upon reading fragment B88: 'As the same thing in us are living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these things having changed around are those, and those in turn having changed around are these' (B88). The examples chosen are telling: the living and the dead, the young and the old, waking and sleeping, all these extremes come to collide in a marginal *Zeitraum* which cannot but adhere to the structural fibrillation of a limit which both delimits and upsets the limit, is evidently not far from Benjamin's own understanding of *Umschlag,* and the exemplification it finds in the contrast between the dream and the moment of awakening. The intra-differentiated co-implication of opposite tendencies exposed by Heraclitus's fragment and the 'experience of the dialectic' found in the Chinese literature of 'fairy tales and novellas' are both pointing to the liminal tension marked by a turning-over, exemplified by the 'moment of awakening' from dreams. If the movement of *ablösen* allows for a certain 'letting go', or '*los machen*', from ties and bonds, and from the fixity of 'position' per se, then, in a similar fashion, the significance of *Umschlag* lies in the disjuncture opened up with the negation of assimilation and with the 'letting go' of a fixed positioning not only in space, but also in time. Such a discrepancy shows that the basic manoeuvre which moderates the relation between contrasting tendencies is a heteronomous interlacing of non-coincidental temporal fragments that does not rely on the fixing of 'position'.

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[159] I translate *Umschlag* as overturn - and not as reversal - to retain the German literal (though not semantic) difference between *Umschlag* and *Umkehr* (reversal or inversion). From a semantic point of view, I consider 'overturn' and 'reversal' to be interchangeable in the context of this chapter, and more significantly in the context of Benjamin's theory of history. Excerpt K I, 2 of the *Arcades Project* offers evidence of such interchangeability in Benjamin's configuration of the historical present: 'Now this relation [between 'what has been' and the 'present'] is to be *reversed,* and what has been is to become the dialectical *overturn* - the flash of awakened consciousness' [*Nun soll sich dieses Verhältnis umkehren und das Gewesene zum dialektischen Umschlag, zum Einfall des erwachten Bewußtseins werden*](AP: 388, K I,2: GS 5: 491, trans. Mod. FM, emphasis mine).

Here we come to the second key moment for the purposes of this brief analysis, which is the 'thorough composition' (of overturn), a gesture arguably practised by Benjamin writing before the lithograph. What could have caught Benjamin's attention, I argue, is the possibility of radically 'changing the course' - in line with the Pre-socratic semantics of *μεταβολή* [*Umschlag*] - of the triumph-demise order. In light of this, what needs to 'be verified', I suggest, is whether the triumph-demise order - the mastery bond - can indeed be interrupted and fractured, in a move that is reminiscent of the game of displacement and deconstruction promoted by the tangram. In other words, one needs to verify whether the cyclic rhythm of the kaleidoscopic imagery of order can be 'smashed', to put it with the words of another kaleidoscope-excerpt, where Benjamin writes that 'the concepts of the rulers have always been the mirror thanks to which the image of an 'order' was established. The kaleidoscope must be smashed [*das Kaleidoskop muß zerschlagen werden*]' (GS 1: 660).

With regards to the lithograph in question, the thorough-composition of dialectical overturn, a gesture able to irritate existing relations and bonds based on the triumph-demise order finds a conduit, paradoxically, in the reversal of composition via image exemplified by the tangram. It is worth pondering for a brief moment on the disambiguation between these two bodily gestures, 'composition' and 'construction', and the different tensions towards the plane they entail. Composition implies the taking of a position, and it entails a positing-gesture, a 'placing of', as the latin '*compōnere'* unequivocally suggests. Composition is, borrowing from Kandinsky, an 'inwardly-purposeful subordination' and 'law-abiding organization' of elements (Kandinsky 1979: 145). Composition is a law-abiding principle entirely suited to kaleidoscopic imagery inasmuch as it presupposes the existence of order, however erratic. Indeed, one can go as far as admitting that composition *is* the creation of an 'image of an order'.

Construction, on the other hand, has no etymological link to the positioning/positing gesture - *ponere*, 'to place' -, but instead hinges on the action of 'piling up' - '*struere'*. There is no pre-existing principle of order or hierarchy implied here, on the contrary, the absence of an underlying, self-enclosed teleological order is arguably what marks the distinction between the two gestures of *ponere* and *struere*. Construction, for Benjamin, must also be distinguished from mere reconstruction, inasmuch as *Konstruktion* structurally demands a moment of destruction[160], in line with the tangram's logic that every newly-constructed figure must begin with a gesture of de-construction. In other words, while composition is tended towards the purposive integration of different elements on the plane, construction indicates a tensive accumulation which entails a build-up towards space, beyond the bi-dimensional plane. That Benjamin looks at the tangram through the lens of construction and not composition is testified by another excerpt from the *Passagenarbeit.* Far from collapsing and crumbling under the Empire's sovereignty, allegorically represented by the kaleidoscope's 'image of an order', the Chinese dissection-puzzle is for Benjamin a testament to the 'century's awakening sense for construction [*Konstruktion*]' and the 'first presentiment of the cubist principle in the figurative arts' (AP: 164). With his characterisation of the Chinese tangram as the *ur*-history of cubist principles of construction-by-displacement, and while exposing the anachronistic link between Chinese popular culture and European avant-garde art, Benjamin departs from the framework of optical composition that defines

[160] See AP, p. 470, N7, 6

kaleidoscopic imagery and emphasises the dissection-puzzle's potential to stage the bodily tension towards (*sui generis*) space, as well as the distorted relation between reality and image, that would be later taken up and exacerbated by cubist artists.

That Freud, in 1900, had warned against the tendency to read the 'picture-puzzles' of dream images through the purposiveness of pictorial composition is not insignificant[161]. Criticising the shortcomings of a mimetic reading of dream images, Freud famously distinguished between dream-images and dream-thoughts [*Traumgedanken*], a distinction forged in the non-mimetic relation between the two. This distinction also reflects a further difference, between the gestures of reconstruction and construction. If the relation between dream-images and the unconscious text of dream-thoughts is always tainted by distortion, then the text can never be a faithful and accomplished reconstruction of the dream-image, but an altogether new act of imagistic-literary construction[162]. The term which Freud opposes to *mimesis* and which is best suited to characterise the operation of imagistic and aphoristic construction is *Entstellung*, distortion, a term which famously appears in Benjamin's mid-to-late late writings on different occasions, notably in his reading of Kafka's work as a 'code of gestures' (SW 2: 801) in the 1934 essay 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth anniversary of his Death'. It is my view that Benjamin's reading of Kafka's *gestus* - as well as Kafka's own cryptic remarks on the 'doubleness' of gesture - through the lens of *Enstellung* bears striking affinities with the mode of presentation and the principle of construction of which the tangram is paradigmatic, and can therefore serve the purpose of further elucidating the broader implications of the displacing potential here at stake. It will suffice to briefly direct our attention to the following points: referring to the 'unfinished state' of Kafka's assistants, Benjamin identifies a peculiar feature of Kafka's world in the impossibility to 'speak of any order or hierarchy' (SW 2: 799). The 'gestural components' through which Kafka builds his literary world are, like his assistants, significative of the unfinished, non-teleological, unaccomplished state of affairs. To construct a world on the singular 'components' of *gestus*, for Benjamin reading Kafka, is to reject the aspiration of a comprehensive, contextual order that would prescribe purpose, position and directionality to the body and 'gesture' beyond its pure happening as the interruption of representation, as the limit's own undoing into the marginal. The place where the limits of a purportedly self-enclosed individuality start to tremble and eventually come loose is not the point at which the text gives in to ultra-mundane signification or moral instruction, but the very locus from which Kafka's writing is issued: from the point of displacement where it is not possible to speak of an order or hierarchy, immanence or transcendence, agent or object, where what 'takes place' is a language of gesture that does away first and foremost with the idea of subjectively 'placing' and 'positing'. 'Distortion' is the lens through which life is understood as displaced, that is, as a hybrid attachment of organic and

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[161] 'But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate clement by a syllable or word that can be represented by that clement in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance. A dream is a picture puzzle of this sort and our predecessors in the field of dream interpretation have made the mistake of treating the rebus as a pictorial composition: and as such it has seemed to them nonsensical and worthless' (Freud 1953: 278, quoted in Klammer 2016: 145)

[162] See, Klammer, Markus. 2016. 'Mimicry, Ekphrasis, Construction. «Reading» in Freudian Psychoanalysis' in *Aisthesis. Pratiche, Linguaggi E Saperi dell'estetico*, 9(2): 139-151, p. 146.

inorganic, existence and non-existence, as a 'living embodiment' which endlessly upsets and irritates the limits of one own's self-enclosed individuality. There is one fragment from Kafka[163] that perhaps more than any other speaks to this distorting act of self-undoing, which arises as a consequence of one's 'own's strangeness' towards his/her own body:

> Zwei Aufgaben des Lebensanfangs: Deinen Kreis immer mehr einschränken und immer wieder nachprüfen, ob du dich nicht irgendwo außerhalb deines Kreises versteckt hältst. [Two tasks for the beginning of life: to keep reducing your circle, and to keep making sure you're not hiding somewhere outside it] (Kafka 2006: 93, fr. 94, trans. mod. FM).

The 'two tasks' here in question are two different yet coterminous gestures - the tracing of a limit ('circle') and the limit's own undoing (eschewing the limit, hiding outside it - being at-the margins-of) - which are not to be developed in separate moments or stages, both concur *simultaneously*, in the same temporal frame marked by a vital 'beginning' - the '*Lebensanfang*'. What Kafka's excerpt suggests is that life is, from the outset, inherently structured by what can be defined, with Unger and Benjamin, as a liminal 'plurality-existence', or existence *at once* within and outside one's 'own circle' - what is this circle, if not the fiction of a self-enclosed, autonomous individuality? - that is, existence at-the-margins-of, or what in the 1921 *Schemata* appeared as the body's non-biological plural disposition, its own undoing and transversal tension towards the hybrid and ecstatic experience of liminality - 'shapeless limitation'. The two 'tasks' that are necessary to begin life are to be read, in my view, in conjunction with the 'two alternatives' that made up, for Kafka, the dialectics of inaction and action:

> Zwei Möglichkeiten: sich unendlich klein machen oder es sein. Das zweite ist Vollendung, also Untätigkeit, das erste Beginn, also Tat. [Two possibilities: either to make oneself infinitesimally small, or to be so. The former is perfection and hence inaction; the latter a beginning and therefore action] (Kafka 2006: 89, fr. 90, trans. mod. FM).

This either/or [*oder*] formulation, I suggest, does not mark a point of separation between inaction and action, or perfection and beginning, on the contrary, it acts as structural knot of mutual interdependence.

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[163] The text is part of Kafka's *The Zürau Aphorisms,* a collection of fragments he wrote between September 1917 and April 1918, while staying with his sister Ottla in the small villlage of Zürau (Bohemia). The manuscripts were edited by Max Brod in 1953, and published in Frankfurt under the title *Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way.* I have consulted (and modified) the following English translation: Hofmann, Michael and others (eds.). 2006. *The Zürau aphorisms of Franz Kafka* (New York: Schocken Books).

Seen in this light, 'action', the possibility of 'beginning', is not a Heideggerian 'other beginning' that has be forged from within tradition, an act of productive *poiesis* which culminates into yet another variation of ontological 'self-sufficiency', or yet another image of an order; on the contrary, 'action' and gesture are to be foregrounded by the moment of inaction, the 'nothing' which, while not giving in to sublime imagelessness, does not present or represent anything but only opens up, makes room, de-shapes, distorts, strives for, without effectively producing some-thing. This is nevertheless a form of gesture inasmuch as it corresponds to the state of dispossession and displacement arising from 'that' which is not taking (a) place, from the undoing of all placing and positing. Distortion of existence - '*Entsellung des Daseins*' (GS 2: 678) -, this is what makes Kafka's writing, his 'studies', seen through Benjamin's eyes, truly unique: 'perhaps these studies had amounted to nothing. But they are very close to that nothing which alone makes it possible for a something to be useful' (SW 2: 813). Significantly, what can be encountered on the trajectory to 'study' are the 'fragments of his [Kafka's] own existence' (SW 2: 814), those which are lying, exactly like the loose tangram fragments scattered around the tangram figure in the lithograph, outside the self-enclosed circle allegorically staged by the kaleidoscope - outside the 'circle' mentioned in Kafka's '*zwei Aufgaben*' aphorism.

The different gesturing suggested by the tangram-praxis in contrast with kaleidoscopic imagery can be now further elucidated: if kaleidoscopic optics aims to recollect fragmentary reflections into the image of a perfect whole, under the law-abiding order of composition, the tangram's 'perfectibility' lies in its potential to stage and to construct *nothing*: no figure, no image, no order but only the scattered, loose fragments of distorted existence, of existence as no-thing. The visual-tactile motif of the tangram, arguably, elicits a mode of envisioning the world that entails the possibility of doing away with the image of an order and, in doing so, it directly responds to Benjamin's invitation to 'smash' the kaleidoscope.

The tangram's principle of construction is not only a variation of the kaleidoscopic imagery, as Didi-Huberman would want, but in fact its own reversal, or undoing: a reversal of the kaleidoscope's principle of composition for which the very motion of '*Umkehr*' should be understood as the same displacing and distorting practice of undoing which informs Kafka's 'studies'. The loose fragments scattered around are a testament to the possibility, denied by kaleidoscopic imagery, of unordered, unaccomplished, nonselfsufficient and distorted existence. If the tangram lends itself to a mode of envisioning the world that hinges on the fundamental undoing of the image of triumph, then the loose fragments scattered next to the complete figure cannot simply reinstate yet another image of an order, they actually reverse the idea of order altogether. What those fragments lying around entail is, therefore, non-construction: the non-construction gesture invoked by the loose fragments inverts the principle of composition, in a manoeuvre which recalls Bucephalus's inversion: taking the road back, inverting one's way, 'without the powerful Alexander - which means, rid of the onrushing conqueror' (SW 2: 815). Which in turn means, I add, undoing the image of triumph, undoing the position of both the victorious and the loser. Not only Benjamin reading Kafka, but also Kafka himself reading life, offers evidence that the image of triumph must be clouded by a gesture that can only take place as reversal, that is, a gesture which not only interrupts principles of composition and order, but the future order of representation in toto - a non-constructive gesture:

> Der Tod ist vor uns, etwa wie im Schulzimmer an der Wand ein Bild der Alexanderschlacht. Es kommt darauf an, durch unsere Taten noch in diesem Leben das Bild zu verdunkeln oder gar auszulöschen. [Death is ahead of us, say in the way in our classrooms we had a picture of Alexander the Great in battle. What must be done is by our actions to blot out or obscure the picture, in our lifetimes] (Kafka 2006: 88)

Reversal, in line with the Pre-socratic understanding of *Umschlag* as 'changing the course' of something, is a mode of displacing 'our actions' from the fixation of a purpose or task that lies ahead. Only there, on the road back from the calculability and constructability of what lies ahead, in the non-calculable, transitory spacing of unordered actions and gestures, can one begin to live, that is, can one begin to 'pile up' the loose fragments of existence that lie outside the self-enclosed circle, at-the-limits-of. 'Actions', or 'what must be done', amount to 'obscur[ing] the picture': this gesture of obfuscation finds a significant resonance in the image of the 'cloudy spot' [*wolkige Stelle*], which Benjamin repeatedly mentions, with reference to Kafka's parables, in the 1934 essay[164]. The cloudy spot is described as an ungraspable and noncognitive '*gestus*' from which Kafka's writings 'emanate' (SW 2: 808). It is worth pondering on the peculiar physiognomy of the cloud and the state of being clouded: a cloud is nothing but visual kinesis, it is the visual and transitory phenomenon that is able to obfuscate without appealing to iconoclasm; it is, in other words, the visibility of the 'transient' as such. One could go even further and claim that the cloud is the visibility of endless displacement, or the displacing phenomenon per excellence, the most radical undoing of any possible fixed '*Stelle*'. Reviewing an exhibition of paintings at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in 1938, Benjamin associates the motif of the cloud with the elusiveness of something that resists interpretation, communication and understanding - something that resists our ability or willingness to grasp - describing it as an 'enigmatic substance, made up of mutability' (GS 4: 65) - the same enigmatic substance which for Benjamin also makes up life, existence[165]. Like the loose tangram fragments, the cloud presents the metamorphic potential for endless de-shaping [*Entstaltung*], where limits are not reinstated but perpetually undone, in their own doing. Presenting nothing and representing no thing but their own de-shaping and displacement, the loose tangram fragments and the cloudy spot both amount to the same 'action': to unhinge existence from the ties and bonds of fixed hierarchical orders, from the illusion of ultra-mundane ends, from the limits of grasping and possession.

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[164] For an insightful interpretation of the image of the cloudy-spot in Benjamin vis-à-vis Kafka see Hamacher, Werner. 1996. 'The gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka' in *Premises. Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 294-336.

[165] 'Ce qu'elles [*peintures chinoises*] fixent n'a jamais que la fixité des nuages. Et c'est là leur véritable et énigmatique substance, faite de changement, comme la vie' [What they [the Chinese paintings] fix is nothing but the fixity of clouds. And this is their authentic and enigmatic substance, made up of mutability, like life] (GS 4: 64-65).

And yet this picture can be further problematised, inasmuch as the peculiar, liminal spatiality - the 'nothing' - called for by the motifs of cloudy-spot and the tangram cannot be merely described in terms of absence, or negatively: inherent in the moment of loosening from ties and bonds that is testified by the untied fragments and by the mutable kinesis of the cloudy spot is also the reversal of *Ablösung*, namely a potential for tying with no beginning, no end, no principle, no order, no inside, no outside, no figure, no content. The space occupied by the loose fragments and by the cloudy spot is what Nancy, more than fifty years after Benjamin, will call the 'nowhere': the marginal place of no-position and no-positing, the radical undoing of composition, the dis-placed 'wherein ties have come untied, or are not already tied' (2008: 90). It is the *place* of indeterminate tying, or tying in waiting, where infinite 'recasting' and 'retying' takes place. It is neither the place of the *imageless* nor the space of *another image*: it is the space of unordered and unproductive piling up. The *Entstellung* and *Enstaltung* potential embodied by the loose tangram fragments and by the cloudy spot function as a visual-theoretical metaphor for a heteronomous praxis of gesture which amounts to the simple piling up of singular fragments, dismembering the illusory and comprehensive image of a complete, self-enclosed and self-sufficient 'whole', shattering the kaleidoscope, as Benjamin would have wanted. Both the tangram and the cloudy spot lend themselves as literary-imagistic prototypes of the 'praxis of the (k)not', a transversal[166] striving-for, the 'traction and tension' towards, the receptive and reflexive practice of 'undoing into nonselfsufficiency'.

The trajectory which binds the motifs of the tangram and the cloudy spot with Nancy's 'praxis of (k)not' can be now further exposed. In the face of saturating nationalist rhetorics which contributed to strengthening the politics of self-sufficiency - 'politics of the enemy' - during the thirties, Benjamin significantly turns his attention to literary-visual motifs and gestures which harbour the potential for construction, yet also, significantly, for non-construction, as it has been demonstrated. Nothing is constructed with the tangram fragments that remain loose and scattered; equally, the cloudy spot coincides with no-thing - no fixed place, no fixed object, no subject whatsoever. Observing the mythic resurgence of self-sufficiency and conscious of the fact that the ''thirties' remain still possible', Nancy vouches for a praxis of gesture that is very much in line with Benjamin's variations on undoing, a 'praxis of the (k)not' which is neither re-construction nor de-construction (of deconstruction) but is, quite differently, a matter of non-construction: 'in latin *struo* means to rick, to pile up. The rick is a non-construction'[167]. The loose tangram fragments, their intimate etymological connotation with the gesture of *struere,* signal a severance in the relation between means and ends: piling up is

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[166] As scholarship in image theory recently pointed out, a link between the image and the paradigm of the curvature is to be found in etymology - 'imago', from the latin 'reflection'; 'reflection', in turn, is a cognate of 'flex', namely 'bend' or 'curve'. See Nail, *Theory of the Image*, pp. 10-11. Given its premise to 'overcome the supposedly ahistorical nature of the image' (2019: 9) and given that the leitmotif of mobility traverses the entirety of the book, one would expect Nail's kinetic theory of the image to sustain a much more extensive and nuanced engagement with Benjamin's and Warburg's respective attempts to read images against classic historicism and in light of their potential for migration and mobility. Yet Benjamin is only referenced figuratively, via the often-quoted image of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus,* and a somewhat superficial assessment of Warburg's 'pathos of images' only appears in a couple of footnote references - see p. 12 and pp. 366-367.

[167] Ferrari, Federico. 2020. 'Che cos'è la decostruzione? Intervista a Jean-Luc Nancy', *Doppiozero,* [online], https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/che-cose-la-decostruzione [last accessed 23 April 2024]. The interview has also been translated and published in English: Ferrari, Federico, Nancy, Jean-Luc and Pietrogrande, Filippo. 2020. 'What is Deconstruction? An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy', *Derrida Today*, 13(2): 236-253.

a means with no ends whatsoever, it gestures to nothing else than its own unfolding, its accumulation, it does not point beyond itself, it does not ascribe a superior signification or political goal to the displacement at stake but takes the crisis of the 'displaced' as a structural form of existence and, in this movement of loss and loosening - *ablösen* - from place, ties and bonds, which the rick is paradigmatic of, it vouches for a mode of envisioning the world that stands in direct contrast with the ethos of ontological security and self-sufficiency. The emphasis on undoing and the experience of the image defined by loss and loosening also stands in contrast with the particular trend, informing a strand of Benjamin scholarship, which tends to read the body-image or gesture-art nexus uniquely through the prism of a somewhat 'revolutionary' political function[168]. What I hope to have demonstrated by devoting attention to the under-investigated imagistic motif of the tangram and its affiliation with the cloudy-spot, and by linking these to Nancy's praxis of heteronomy and 'undoing into nonselfsufficiency', has nothing to do with *poiesis*, or with the act of 'bringing-forth' from nothing. The 'nothing' here at stake does not point to yet another variation of being and it is equally not defined by mere negativity; it only indicates the marginal, trembling site of a non-foreseeable opening which nevertheless remains 'cloudy', that is, which paradoxically resists dis-closure or unveiling.

If the gesture of undoing into self-sufficiency calls for the very opposite of '*los machen*' - e.g. holding fast to established ties, cementing networks and bonds, and 'systematically relating means to ends' (Mitzen 2006: 342) - then the loose tangram fragments and the cloudy-spot are paradigmatic of the kinesis of displacement and nonselfsufficiency which presents the potential to undo the overarching structures underpinning any 'image of an order'.

3.3 Antinomies of Gesture: Imagistic Insurgence and Emphatic Binding

[168] There is a certain tendency in scholarship to read Benjamin's engagement with art and with images uniquely through the prism of Marxist theory and/or one-sidedly focusing on some specific writings that are instrumental to these arguments - e.g., the artwork essay, the Surrealism essay -, a tendency which results in a homogeneous favouring of 'political action' over imagistic receptivity when discussing Benjamin's concept of history and the role played by images - both material images and linguistic images. See for example Weigel (2005: 19-20), who uses the attribute 'revolutionary' at least twice to first describe Benjamin's 'ways of looking at history and its revolutionary constellations', and secondly to further claim that Benjamin's previous engagement with the Surrealist gesture (1929) is indicative of a 'revolutionary praxis of art'. Another example along this line is Esther Leslie (2000: 23-25), who sees Benjamin's usage of and engagement with the 'image' as a means towards a political-revolutionary end/goal, and thus reiterates the means-to-end schema which, as I have tried to demonstrate, is precisely what Benjamin sought to undo when claiming that the kaleidoscope qua 'image of an order' must be smashed: while the productive gesture of repurposing the image towards a specific political goal would dismantle the image of an order to establish a different one, the praxis of gesture suggested by the loose tangram fragments and the cloudy-spot shatters the very logic which underpins the discontinuous alternations of different images of an order, without reimposing one.

The motif of construction[169] (of history, of time) via the image's potential to unsettle the very presumption of fixed boundaries both binds and separates Benjamin's reflections from Aby Warburg's[170]. Construction - understood as gesture by means of which the image of history comes alive, rather than a purely conceptual act of organisation that anticipates and grounds space and time - reveals to be a fruitful philosophical territory to uncover not simply the link, and neither simply a point of detachment per se, but the liminal intertwining of Benjamin's species of the image and Warburg's. Such a point of simultaneous congruence and yet undeniable divergence is, in turn, crucial to later question some of the presuppositions underpinning Didi-Huberman's seamless weaving of the two liminal images together. To uncover a point of divergence right at the heart of the theoretical nexus which binds Benjamin with Warburg does not mean to merely separate one's work from the other's, falling into the trap of establishing an un-dialectical, false opposition. It means, instead - and in line with the logic of the limit underpinning this research - to visualise the limits of Warburg's own approach - limits that are inextricably bound to a worldview rooted in Enlightenment, which intermittently surfaces in Warburg's species of the liminal image - as they gradually take shape when confronted with Benjamin's parallel erosion of those limits. This is not to say that Benjamin's thinking does not present its own limitations and criticalities; but the point here is rather different: to further uncover the 'radicalness' of Benjamin's liminal image, or the way in which, when seen against the backdrop of Warburg's, such a species of the image is able to do away with the residues of a worldview that still, instead, persists in the latter.

Reading Warburg's own version of the liminal image through the lens of - or, better, vis-à-vis - Benjamin's approach, in the context of this chapter, does not mean merely filtering Warburg's own thinking on the liminality of the image through a uniquely Benjaminian lens; rather, it is only by intersecting - and not simply overlapping - Benjamin's version of the liminal image with Warburg's that a point of dialectical nearness and distance can be best brought to the fore.

It should be therefore now clear that the purpose of what follows is not to engage in a thematically-oriented reading of Benjamin's and Warburg's projects, in a kind of *Atlas* versus *Arcades* style, which would be neither feasible nor critically fruitful in the context of this research - and which scholarship has already extensively addressed[171] -, but to pursue a research lead which identifies a tensive knot in their respective diagnoses of the image's liminality. This will be achieved by departing from a close reading of two different excerpts - an extract from the *Passagenarbeit* and a passage from Warburg's *Dürer* essay - which, in my view, can

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[169] It is interesting to not that the word 'construction' in relation to aesthetics gives the title to Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift*, 'Kierkegaard. The construction of Aesthetics' (written 1929–30), which Benjamin read and reviewed in his text *Kierkegaard: The End of Philosophical Idealism* (SW 2: 704). Notably, Benjamin remarks that Adorno's merit is to have taken Kierkegaard's work 'not forward [*fortgeführt*] but back - back into the inner core of philosophical idealism' (SW 2: 703). A close inspection of this comment suggests a movement whereby the work of critique is constructed by means of a movement contrary to progression, a way backwards or an undoing which, as we will see, lays the ground for the recasting of the relation between image and critique.

[170] For a comparative study on the link between Benjamin's and Warburg's respective images of history - i.e. their understanding of the image's ability to problematise linear conception of time - see Zumbusch, Cornelia. 2010. 'Images of History. Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg' in *ImageScapes: Studies in Intermediality,* ed. by Christian Emden and Gabriele Rippl (Bern: Peter Lang), pp. 117-144.

[171] See fn. 185 of the present chapter, p.113.

be considered as paradigmatic *exposés* of their own modes of working with images. From this, it will be possible to extrapolate and examine the philosophical implications of the methods identified, which in turn will enable us to disambiguate between what will turn out to be interrelated yet different imagistic modes of envisioning the world; different modes of complicating - or erasing - the subject-object dialectics; different species of the liminal image and, finally, different methods of 'making things present'.

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of global migration of images and gestures that facilitates, since time immemorial, the circulation and interexchange of different cultural motifs into seemingly closed circles is, in itself, a timeless reminder of the image's limit-like, hybrid and medial structure, and its ability to undo the fixity of spatio-temporal and territorial boundaries. In his lifelong visual-theoretical effort to understand the kinetic potential of images and gestures and their ability to irritate the subject-specific limitations of different academic disciplines[172], Aby Warburg, at the turn of the 20th century and years before embarking on the *Bilderatlas*, was already tracing the migratory trajectories of visual motifs throughout various epochs, media, styles and places, taking the image as a liminal place par excellence. Like Benjamin's, his approach to artworks and images entailed releasing the picture from the conceptual ties and bonds of genre, while refusing to reduce history, the history of art - or the 'psychology of style', as he preferred to call it - to the stringent and static rigour of pre-established conceptual 'categories'.

Benjamin's attempts to reach out to Warburg and his circle - the *Warburgkreis*, housed in the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* (KBW) in Hamburg - are now well documented[173]. It only suffices here to reiterate that when recommending the 'Benjamin book' to Saxl in a letter dated May 24, 1928, Scholem cautiously hinted at the 'completely different angle' (Weigel 2013: 203) from which the problem of melancholy - the common visual denominator between Benjamin and the 'circle' - was addressed in the *Trauerspiel-Buch.* Benjamin was, for his part, certainly aware of the different 'training' undertaken by Panofsky as an art-historian, but he nevertheless seemed to believe that they could be 'cut from the same cloth' (GB 3: 332, translated in Weigel 2013: 269). Notwithstanding the probably opportunistic reasons - financial security, academic career - behind Benjamin's tentative approach to and aspired affinity with the *Kreis*, it was not far-fetched to think that a scholar like Aby Warburg, with his declared disdain for any 'limitations caused by the

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[172] See Haug, Steffen and von Müller, Johannes. 2021. 'Aby Warburg and the Foundations of Image Studies' in Purgar, *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies*, pp. 131-146, p. 133.

[173] The vicissitudes around Benjamin's attempts to connect with members of the *Warburgkreis* have been first exposed in Kemp, Wolfgang. 1973, 1975. 'Teil 1: Walter Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft, Teil 2: Walter Benjamin und Aby Warburg', *Kritische Berichte* 3: 30-50. In English-language scholarship, see Rampley, *The Remembrance*, pp. 11-14. See also Weigel's 2013 *Walter Benjamin. Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy* which also contains extracts from the letter exchange revolving around Benjamin's missed opportunity to cross the doorstep of the *Kulturwissenshaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*. Panofsky's 'cool' response to Benjamin, upon receiving a preview of the *Melencolia* chapter published in the *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* in 1927 and sent to him by Hofmannsthal, was never found. And, while there is evidence that both Warburg and Panofsky received Benjamin's book, it is not clear whether they actually read it. What we know is that Benjamin could not 'make heads or tails' of Panofsky's dispassionate reply, as it appears in a letter to Scholem, written in January 1928. Panofsky later received a copy of the entire 'Benjamin book' from Saxl - who had, in turn, received the book from Warburg - corresponding to the edition published by Rowohlt in January 1928, to which Benjamin had added the philosophically-dense *Foreword*. As it is clear from Panofsky's reply to Saxl, he agreed with his colleague's previous assessment: despite offering new insights on the topic of melancholy, which could have been - but never will be - incorporated in the new expanded edition of their 1923 study, the book was 'too clever'. Cf. F. Saxl's letter to A. Warburg, 6th June 1928 in Weigel (2013: 270) and Panofsky letter to Fritz Saxl, 21st June 1928 in Panofsky (2001: 289) and Weigel (2013: 272).

disciplines' *border patrol* [*grenzepolizeiliche Befangenheit*] (Haug, von Müller 2021: 133), would have welcomed the 'completely different angle' of Benjamin's approach. But it is likely that he never actually read Benjamin's book, having delegated the task to Saxl, who then left it to Panofsky to pronounce the final (negative) verdict.

The *Warburgkreis*, to Benjamin's eyes, embodied the hallmark of the 'new type' of art-historian whose 'love for the thing' [*Liebe zur Sache*] presented the potential to undo the 'rigid partitions' (SW 2: 78) between disciplinary domaines, beyond the 'territorial character of art' (SW 2: 78)[174]. Yet questions could be raised as to what extent Warburg's theoretical desire to undo rigid disciplinary partitions was also translated into practice, especially the practice informing the broader circle's academic output. In other words, serious doubts can be cast on whether the *Warburgkreis* was really exempt from practising its own form of 'political enclosing', or limit-attitude.

Around the same time in which Benjamin reached out to the Hamburg circle, in the second half of the 1920s, Warburg had been working, amongst many other things, on the organisation of the 1930 congress of the *Gesellschaft für Ästhetik* - centred on the topic of space and time in aesthetics - due to take place in 1930 but eventually held in 1929, after Warburg's death (October 1929). On the list of possible speakers, one name stands out: Martin Heidegger[175]. It was only in March-April of the same year that Cassirer and Heidegger had clashed together in what has passed down in history as the Davos dispute[176], and it is plausible to suggest that, as a result of the debate, Heidegger's intervention at the Congress was perhaps no longer desired. As a matter of fact, Cassirer's influence on the philosophical orientation of the Hamburg circle is not to be underestimated and, according to Scholem's testimony, it played a pivotal role in Benjamin's missed opportunity to enter the *Kreis*:

> I could tell you with almost absolute certainty that the main reason [for the missed encounter] was of this type: the circle, from a philosophical standpoint, was rigorously oriented toward Ernst Cassirer's doctrine, and a man like Panofsky had rightly sensed that, from Benjamin's part, there were great reservations toward such a thinker. In other words, he [Benjamin] was absolutely not an admirer of Cassirer. I think it was exactly his dialectical way of thinking, which transpires in all clarity from the analysis conducted in the *Origin of the German Mourning Play,* what has contributed more than anything to attract negative judgements on his work' (Kemp 1982: 238)[177]

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[174] In version III of the *Lebensläufe* (draft ca.1928, GS 6: 217-19), Benjamin writes: 'Just as Benedetto Croce opened the way to the individual concrete work of art by destroying the theory of artistic form, I have thus far directed my efforts at opening a path to the work of art by destroying the doctrine of the territorial character of art' (SW 2: 78)

[175] The documentation of the conference planning is enclosed in the folder titled *Ästhetik Kongress* at the Warburg Institute Archive (WIA), see WIA, IV.51. I thank Philipp Ekardt for pointing this out in Ekardt, Philip. 2016. 'Certain wonderful Gestures: Warburg, Lessing and the Transitory in Images', *Culture, Theory and Critique,* 57(2): 166-175, p. 169.

[176] For a detailed and lucid account of the main philosophical arguments at stake in the Davos dispute see Gordon, Peter E. 2012. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.).

[177] I translated from Italian and references are to this edition: Kemp, Wolfgang. 1982. 'Walter Benjamin e la scienza estetica II: Walter Benjamin e Aby Warburg', *Aut Aut*, 189-190: 234-262.

According to Scholem, it was the undeniable friction between Benjamin's 'dialectical way of thinking' and Cassirer's un-dialectical limit-attitude that would undermine the former's aspirations to enter the circle. Warburg, for his part, especially after returning from Kreuzlingen, relied heavily on Fritz Saxl, who had been steering the research activity of the KBW in his absence. In light of this, it is not surprising that Warburg also relied on Saxl to give an assessment of the 'Benjamin-book', and in relation to Scholem's point on the significance of Cassirer's philosophy for the circle, especially for Panofsky's project, the latter's negative assessment on the book should also not come as a surprise. Yet, within the circle, Cassirer's influence on the late Warburg, specifically, has been the object of a controversial debate which sees scholarship split between two extremes; on the one hand, the invention and conflation of a "Warburgian" Cassirer and a "Cassirerian" Warburg' (DH 2017b: 285)[178], and, on the other hand, the unequivocal distancing of Warburg from the 'edifice of iconology', whose foundations were first laid by Panofsky, under the influence of Cassirer's notorious concept of symbolic form. Didi-Huberman, in particular, goes as far as claiming that by 1923 an 'ontological gulf' (2017b: 268) separated Warburg from Cassirer, and that the former maintained a certain theoretical distance from the latter's philosophical project, having given no substantial response to it in his own late work. While this contention is in itself highly disputable[179], it is nevertheless plausible to suggest that

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[178] Didi-Huberman is likely to be referring here to those scholars who argue, against his position, that Warburg's late writings bear evidence that he held Cassirer's philosophical work very close. Christopher Johnson, from a completely different angle and directly opposing Didi-Huberman's claim that by 1923 an 'ontological gulf' separated Warburg and Cassirer, and that Warburg never gave prominent theoretical relevance to his theory of the symbolic, points to the evidence that this purported distancing, or 'ontological gulf', is not corroborated by Warburg's own remarks on the possibility of Cassirer leaving the *Kreis* in 1924: 'That Cassirer wants to stay for so little is […] irresponsible. […] Since I have to learn from him - and him from me - that which would make of Boll, Cassirer and Warburg a superior unity: the origin of the mode of expression of man, who orients himself spiritually starting from the experience of his cosmic totality' (Warburg 2008: [fol. 18], trans. FM, German text quoted in Johnson 2012: 123, fn 52). Another scholar pointing the finger against Didi-Huberman's 'ontological gulf' is Fabrizio Desideri, who suggests that Warburg's late years were marked by a profound dialogue with Cassirer, mediated by Giordano Bruno, through which he rediscovered the Kant of 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason', more specifically the Kantian question on 'What it means to orient oneself in thinking?'. See Desideri, Fabrizio. 2106. 'L'estetica possibile di Aby Warburg' in *Energia e rappresentazione. Warburg, Panofsky, Wind,* ed. by Alice Barale and others (Milano: Mimesis) pp. 63-84, p. 73. Significantly, as Dorothea McEwan pointedly observes, the prompt for Warburg's paraphrasing of the Kantian orientation-question, formulated on the morning of his death (26th October 1929) - 'What does it mean to orient oneself in space?' in Warburg, Aby. 2011. *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag) -, was Cassirer's lecture of 7th November 1929 titled 'Forms and Change of Forms in the Philosophical Concept of Truth', where he talked about the process of making visible the world of ideas. If we accept McEwan's observation, then it is even harder to follow Didi-Huberman's thesis on the 'ontological gulf' between Warburg and Cassirer. See McEwan, Dorothea. 2006. 'Aby Warburg's (1866-1929) Dots and Lines. Mapping the Diffusion of Astrological Motifs in Art History', *German Studies Review,* 29(2): 243-268, p. 243. Adding to the pile of evidence linking Warburg's thinking with Cassirer's in a much more intimate way than Didi-Huberman would like to admit is also a letter Warburg sent to his brother Max in June 1928, where the nickname 'Cassirer *in being*' underscores the crucial role that Cassirer's permanence - against the backdrop of a feared defection of the latter to Frankfurt - would have on the continuation of a stylistically appropriate management [*stilgemässer Weiterverwaltung*] of the 'Bibliothek'. See WIA, FC, Letter from Aby Warburg to Max Warburg, 13th June 1928. The letter is quoted in Warburg, Aby. 2014. *Per Monstra ad Sphaeram,* ed. by Davide Stimilli and Claudia Wedepohl (Milano: Abscondita), p. 137.

[179] My position on the influence of Cassirer on Warburg, and on Warburg's supposed distancing from Cassirer, situates somewhere in between the extremes of a "Cassirerian" Warburg" and the idea of a Warburg-Cassirer 'ontological gulf': while it is not possible, in my view, to swiftly assimilate Warburg with Cassier and to dismiss the very evident fact that Warburg never completely ascribed to the Neo-Kantian tone pervading Cassirer's philosophical endeavours, it is equally not possible to agree with Didi-Huberman's characterisation of the Warburg-Cassirer relation from 1923 onwards, given that Warburg's own words on Cassirer directly disprove the claim that he actively sought to distance himself from the latter (see fn. 28 above).

the specific 'nameless' endeavour of undoing traditional disciplinary boundaries - the undoing of 'genre', essentially - by means of a 'dialectical way of thinking' was not necessarily the Hamburg-circle's project, nor specifically Cassirer's, but only Warburg's. Of course, it was also Benjamin's: it was the very epistemo-critical premise of the *Trauerspiel-buch* which made it clear, and it is therefore hard to imagine how this elective affinity, had Warburg really read the edition published by Rowohlt in January 1928 - of which he acknowledged receipt -, which included the epistemo-critical prologue, would have left him indifferent.

Yet despite being equally motivated by a common desire to challenge the same un-dialectical thought of the limit which, beyond the disciplinary boundary and compartmentalising of art history and aesthetics, also underpinned the progressive political enclosure that eventually forced both Benjamin and the Warburg Institute to flee Germany, there remain substantial differences in their proposed 'methods' to undo and overcome the undercurrents at the core of such a limit-attitude. The strand of scholarship which is adamant to isolate Warburg from Cassirer and the rest of the *Kreis*, and which finds its apogee in Didi-Huberman[180], is usually less keen to diagnose a similarly lucid distinction when it comes to Benjamin and Warburg, and the argument on Cassirer's and Warburg's different understandings of the form-content, particular-universal relation in the context of symbolic form is often used instrumentally to consequently bind Warburg with Benjamin[181], usually through a survey of common denominators and colliding themes - melancholy, the

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[180] Not only Didi-Huberman's, but also Agamben's comparative reading of Benjamin and Warburg is partly culpable of quickly dismissing key divergences between the two in order to favour an argument of general theoretical affinity. Borrowing from both Benjamin's extracts on the dialectical image and Warburg's general understanding of *Pathosformeln*, Agamben argues that both notions are grounded on an intermediate space between immobility and movement where the interplay of living and spectral forces at stake in the image comes to the fore. Agamben defines this space, in relation to Benjamin's dialectical image, as 'a threshold between immobility and movement' (2011: 68) and, with reference to Warburg's symbol and *Pathosformeln*, as a 'central zone between two opposites pose of the human' (2011: 71). He fails, however, to uncover the different kinesis, spatiotemporal paradigms and liminal dynamics which distinguish Benjamin's version of the liminal interplay from Warburg's. See Agamben, Giorgio. 2011. 'Nymphs' in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media* ed. by Khalip James and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 78-9. This research situates itself in direct conflict with Agamben's interpretation, insofar as it insists on the fact that what Benjamin understands by 'threshold' has little in common with Warburg's own understanding of the threshold.

[181] See for example Johnson, Christopher. 2012. *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images, Ithaca* (New York: Cornell University Press). Johnson's examination of the metaphorical and metonymical forms of expression at stake in Warburg's Atlas offers an occasion to establish a parallel with Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*. The Atlas is here defined as a 'concrete analogue' to Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* since they both provide a 'metaphoric archeology of Modernity' (Johnson 2012: 12). Johnson emphasises, in this regard, affinities between the Atlas and Benjamin's attempt to construct a 'graphic, concrete representation of truth' (2012: 36) by means of dialectical images in the *Passagenwerk*. But rather than unpacking the linguistic differential between the mediums of literacy and visuality - a lacuna which he will correct in his 2016 'Configuring the Baroque: Warburg and Benjamin', where he provides a more lucid examination of the key differences between the two versions of the Baroque - Johnson links Benjamin's dialectical image with Warburg's *Pathosformeln* by establishing a controversial and relatively fragile affinity between the dialectical image and allegory. The spatiality produced by the dialectical image is defined as allegorical in virtue of its tension towards a *Denkraum* in which multiple possibilities are held open, more specifically, the possibility to 'see back and forward in time' (2012: 18). A similar *Denkraum* is at stake, according to Johnson, in Warburg's *Pathosformeln*. Just like Benjamin 'grounds the *Passagen-Werk* in dialectical images, Warburg's metaphoric pathos formulas determine the content and direction of *Mnemosyne*' (Johnson 2012: 18). This research, however, disputes the claim that the concept of *Denkraum* lends itself to be interpreted as a binding element between Benjamin and Warburg. On the contrary, as I will try to show in the next couple of paragraphs, one of the key differences between Benjamin's and Warburg's species of the image lies exactly in the inevitability, for Benjamin, to undo the purported independence and autonomy of a self-limited and self-oriented *Denkraum*, in favour of the body-image hybridisation provided by disruptive imagistic insurgence.

Baroque, memory, montage -[182], while less efforts are generally made to identify the fracturing points at which these two trajectories glance off[183].

[182] There is a growing body of literature on the relation between Benjamin and Warburg, although a sizeable proportion of it remains untranslated in English. In the context of English-language scholarship, see Hanssen, Beatrice. 1999. 'Portraits of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)', *MLN*, 114(5): 991-1013; Rampley, Matthew. 1999. 'Archives of Memory: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas' in *de-, dis-, ex-. Vol. 3, The Optic of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Coles Alex (London: Black Dog) pp. 94-117; Rampley, Matthew. 2000 *The Remembrance of Things of the Past. On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz); Johnson, Christopher. 2012. *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, New York.: Cornell University Press); _____. 2016. 'Configuring the Baroque: Warburg and Benjamin', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 57(2): 142–16; Benjamin, Andrew. 2017. 'Two Forms of Gesture: Notes on Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin', *Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico*, 10(1): 21–40; Weigel, Sigrid. 2013. *Walter Benjamin: images, the creaturely, and the holy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press). In French-language scholarship, the main reference is Georges Didi-Huberman, see especially the hitherto untranslated texts: Didi-Huberman, Georges. 1992. *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit); Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2000. *Devant le temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit) and the 2002 volume on Warburg *L'image survivante: histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit). In German-language literature, see Kany, Roland. 1987. *Mnemosyne als Programm: Geschichte, Erinnerung und die Andacht zum Unbedeutenden im Werk von Usener, Warburg und Benjamin* (Tübingen: Niemeyer) and Zumbusch, Cornelia. 2004. *Wissenschaft in Bildern: Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag). See also Barale, Alice. 2009. *La Malinconia dell'Immagine* (Firenze: Firenze University Press) and Agamben, Giorgio. 2011. 'Nymphs', in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media* , ed. by Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press) pp. 60-80.

[183] There are, of course, exceptions. For example, Andrew Benjamin provides a a compelling account of gesture which aims to identify a fundamental difference between Benjamin and Warburg. Taking Warburg's Nymph as an instance of the 'doubling of gesture' inherent in the tensive interplay of *Bewegung* and *Leben* which she introduces in the peaceful atmospheres of the 'Florentine Soil', Andrew Benjamin shows the nymph to be a figure of reconciliation, where the two polar opposites of calm and vibrancy are held together - not however, to form a unity of any sort. Indeed, the key difference diagnosed with respect to Walter Benjamin's understanding of gesture is to be found not in the taking place of reconciliation itself as a kind of achieved unity, but in the possibility, which Warburg leaves open, for reconciliation to be posited. On the contrary, Walter Benjamin's reflections in the context of Brecht preclude the very idea that reconciliation can ever be posited within the interruptive kinesis of gesture. While Warburg's 'gesture' is one of aspired reconciliation and sought-for balance, Walter Benjamin's radicalness insists on the interruptive character of gesture, allowing for a very different kind of 'doubling', in which self-enclosure and self-identity cannot be posited. See Benjamin, Andrew. 2017. 'Two Forms of Gesture: Notes on Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin' in *Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico*, 10.1: 21-40. Another example in this direction is Matthew Rampley, whose work on Benjamin and Warburg is generally critical of Didi-Huberman's approach - a critical skepticism which is reciprocated by Didi-Huberman. Rampley's major study of Warburg and Benjamin focuses on the relation between spatial metaphors and visuality, and leads to the individuation of a fundamental difference in the way Warburg and Benjamin apply these metaphors to the 'cultic' origin of images. While Warburg, in Rampley's words, 'conceives of the cultic image as functioning through the *lack* of a critical distance […] for Benjamin, conversely, the cultic image gains its aura precisely *because* of the distance between the object and the spectator' (2000: 75). Another important difference which Rampley will emphasise throughout his entire engagement with the work of the two authors after 2000 is that, in spite of the number of similarities emerging from Benjamin's and Warburg's interest in expression and mimesis, Benjamin was essentially interested in 'the bases of linguistic representation' while Warburg 'was concerned primarily with *visual* representation' (2000: 47). My research adds to this strand of scholarship which tries to distinguish between Warburg's and Benjamin's 'gestures', by further exploring a line of inquiry which hinges on the difference between 'imagistic insurgence' (Benjamin) and 'emphatic binding' (Warburg), threshold and interval, swelling and distancing, unproductive and productive undoing(s).

3.4 Two Methods of 'making things present': Benjamin's *Pathos der Nähe* and Warburg's *Distanzgefühl*

Writing in the 1905 paper on Dürer and the Italian antiquity, Warburg hints at a method for history-construction that does away with the one-sided, un-dialectical view that precludes contamination, and which therefore misses the hybrid phenomenon of 'interchange of artistic culture' between 'past and present', 'North and South' (RPA: 558), arguing that 'the psychology of style is not the kind of issue that can be forcibly brought to a head by imposing the categories of military history, 'winners' and 'losers'' (RPA: 558). The attentive reader will notice a striking similarity between this remark and Benjamin's notorious critique of traditional historicism which, in a similar vein, condemns the rigid schematisation that relegates 'true life' into hermetic theoretical containers: 'the constructions of history are comparable to instructions that commandeer the true life and confine it to barracks. (AP: 846; GS 5: 1014-15; compare S1a3). Scholarship has rightly pointed out that it would be incorrect to conceive Warburg's image of antiquity and its survival through history - with the ensuing conceptualisation of pathos formula - as a timeless ideal[184] that occasionally resurges, unchanged and untouchable[185]. The dynamics of transformation, disruption and differentiation, involved in the 'interexchange of artistic culture' between different times, epochs and places, have often been used as a springboard for establishing thematic and conceptual analogies between Warburg and Benjamin's understandings of the configuration of bodily life, historic/cultural/social processes and the subject-object dialectics in relation to visual artworks.

While both the aforementioned quotes on the construction of history point to a similar critique of the methodological fallacies that concern traditional methods adopted by classic historicism, this alignment

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[184] In relation to this point, Cornelia Zumbusch's work deserves particular attention, insofar as it convincingly shows that Warburg's antique 'type' - which, in relation to his study of the *intermedi*, eccentric and rich musical dramas, takes the shape of a Florentine nymph, whose garment re-stages a classic motif in the context of Renaissance - is not a mere timeless ideal. The gesture of reiteration and survival, as Zumbusch argues, is not read by Warburg in the sense of re-appearance of a 'timeless classic, but leads to citations that expose and even highlight the historical difference'. There is another interesting point which is brought up by Zumbusch, namely how Warburg understands the resurgence of the 'antique dress' not as a watershed moment which would mark the limit-line between Renaissance and Mannerism, but as a 'logical consequence of the Renaissance's wish to uncover antique forms'. This is reiterated by Warburg a number of times, as I will show in this chapter, when discussing the *pathosformula* of the Laocoon as the result of the Renaissance artists' quest for extremes of gestural expression. That Warburg ascribes the survival of the image to a certain artistic intentional will, or what Riegl would have called *Kunstwöllen*, is significant, insofar as it places the resurgence of the image of antiquity, or the image's survival, as second to and dependent upon a certain subjective intentionality - a point of clear divergence with respect to Benjamin, as I will try to show. See Zumbusch, Cornelia. 2012. 'Modern Forms of Fashion: Warburg, Simmel, Benjamin', (Power point conference presentation. Delivered at *Warburg, Benjamin and Kulturwissenschaft Conference,* Friday 15 June 2012), https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/podcasts/modern-forms-fashion-warburg-simmel-benjamin [last accessed 23 April 2024].

[185] In a similar fashion, Andrea Pinotti has compellingly shown how Warburg's *Nachleben der Antike* does not stand for a mere repetition or reproduction (according to a mimetic gesture (mis)understood as copy of something) of an already-forged 'Form' [*geprägte Formen*], but instead entails a 'productive' and 'constructive' re-actualisation of *Vor-Bilder* in the sense of conditions of possibility - not in the classical sense of pre-established models - which are subject to reformulation, repurposing, transformation. See Pinotti, Andrea. 2005. 'La Sfida del Batavo Monocolo. Aby Warburg, Fritz Saxl, Carl Neumann Sul 'Claudius Civilis' di Rembrandt', *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, 60(3): 493-524, p. 514. Again, the emphasis on the productive and constructive process by means of which, according to Warburg, images resurge through history stands in direct contrast to the passive and receptive character encompassing Benjamin's understanding of imagistic insurgence, as I will argue throughout this chapter.

should not prevent us to differentiate between Warburg's and Benjamin's counter-moves to the insular attitude pervading art-history and, more generally, the limit-attitude or narrow-mindedness fuelling

> Uprising [*Aufstand*] of the anecdotes […] the 'modernity' that concerns men with respect to the bodily is as varied in its meaning as the different aspects of one and the same kaleidoscope. - The constructions of history are comparable to instructions that commandeer the true life and confine it to barracks. On the other hand: the street insurgence [*Straßenaufstand*] of the anecdote. The anecdote brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter into our life [*rückt uns die Dinge räumlich heran, läßt sie in unser Leben treten*]. It represents the strict antithesis to the sort of history which demands 'empathy' [*Einfühlung*], which makes everything abstract. *'Empathy': this is what newspaper reading terminates in*. The true method of making things present is: to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space) [*sie in unserm Raum (nicht uns im ihren) vorzustellen*]. Only anecdotes can do this for us. Thus represented, the things allow no mediation construction from out of 'large contexts'. - It is, in essence, the same with the aspect of great things from the past - the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum: to receive them into our space (not to feel empathy with their builders or their priests). We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life [*Nicht wir versetzen uns in sie: sie treten in unser Leben*] […] This pathos of nearness [*Pathos der Nähe*], the hatred of the abstract configuration in human life in epochs, has animated the great skeptics. A good example is Anatole France. On the opposition between empathy and actualization [*Vergegenwärtigung*]: jubilees, Leopardi 13.33 (AP: 846; GS 5: 1014-15)

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> Dürer thus assumed his rightful place among the opponents of the Baroque language of gesture, toward which Italian art had been moving since the mid-fifteenth century. For it is quite wrong to date the Roman grand style from the unearthing of the Laocoön in 1506. That event was an outward symptom of an inward, historical process; it marked the climax, not the birth, of the 'Baroque aberration'. It was a revelation of something that Italians had long sought - and therefore found - in the art of the ancient world: extremes of gestural and physiognomic expression, stylized in tragic sublimity […] And in 1488, when a small replica of the Laocoön group was found during nocturnal excavation work in Rome, the discoverers, even before they recognized the mythological subject, were fired with spontaneous artistic enthusiasm by the striking expressiveness of the suffering figures and by 'certi gesti mirabili' (certain wonderful gestures). This was the Vulgar Latin of emotive gesture: an international, indeed a universal language that went straight to the hearts of all those who chafed at medieval expressive constraints. These 'Plates to Illustrate the Death of Orpheus' are thus a record of some initial excavations along the route of the long migration that brought antique superlatives of gesture from Athens, by way of Rome, Mantua, and Florence, to Nuremberg and into the mind of Albrecht Dürer. Dürer's response to this migrant rhetoric varied at different times. For the psychology of style is not the kind of issue that can be forcibly brought to a head by imposing the categories of military history, 'winners' and 'losers'. (RPA: 558)

conventional methods of working with images and history.

The limit-like structure of the image lends itself as a the perfect visual-literary tool with which to address the insular character of art and history, if what is understood by 'image' is a hybrid complex, not a one-sided concept, able to irritate and problematise strict ontological definitions of what is and what is not 'image'. I argue that image 'is', in fact, only this liminal kinesis: it 'is' what, by virtue of a kinetic and medial potential, is able to eschew the 'instructions that commandeer true life into barracks', and to radically undo the triumph-demise, winner-loser, visual-textual, rigid fixation, without vouching for the annihilation of difference. The common point of departure which binds Benjamin's and Warburg's gestures together is, arguably, the acknowledgment that the image entails the potential to present a different 'picture' of the limit, another possibility for thinking the limit, for thinking-at-the-limit qua thinking with images, which eschews both alternatives of a Kantian *Entgrenzung* and Idealist sublimation. Yet for Warburg, as we will shortly see, this limit-possibility is a 'means' that still relates to a specific 'end': as one of the often-quoted dictum from the 1920 essay *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther* puts it, 'Athens has to *constantly* be won back again from Alexandria' (RPA: 650, emphasis mine). This 'end' is not only applicable to the 'polar functioning' of the 'emphatic pictorial memory' which marked the age of Luther, but it also serves the purpose of illuminating Warburg's own broader and polarity-based understanding of the liminal image. Even though the winner-loser, subject-object dialectics is here never finalised and never definitive - the temporal marker 'constantly' [*immer wieder*] (WGS 2: 534) is crucial, and the strongest indicator of the fundamental instability and mutability at the core of Warburg's polar dialectics - the aspiration for - if not the positing of - harmonisation and reconciliation, is still an 'end' to be sought[186].

For Warburg, the question concerning the liminal image coincides with a mode of productive and active limit-undoing which nevertheless '*constantly*' re-constructs what it undoes, culminating in the aspired possibility of yet another variation of limit-affirmation, or *Grenzsetzung*, however temporary. For Benjamin, on the contrary, the question concerning the image's limit-like status hinges on a radically passive undoing, where what is undone cannot be redeemed or reinstated in any shape or form, where what is at stake is the very phenomenon of de-shaping as such, in its complete severance from any aspiration towards triumphant or reconciliatory 'ends'.

Having now briefly sketched the starting points of the analysis to be developed throughout the rest of the chapter, it should be further clarified that the theoretical anchor and guiding line of the ensuing confrontation hinges on the point of difference between productive and receptive undoing. This distinction forms the matrix for two different reconfigurations of the relation between body and image, subject and object, vision and knowledge, image and critique, in a move that could be best described as a fundamental antinomy of gesture: a gesture which retains the possibility of reinstating distance, or acting-upon (Warburg); and one which instead takes the receptive state of being-acted-upon as the only striving and surviving gesture which outlives and sidelines any definitive form of mastery and *poiesis*.

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[186] Andrew Benjamin reaches a similar conclusion in his disentanglement of Benjamin's gesture from Warburg's. See fn. 186 of the present chapter, p.123.

3.4.1 Resembling porcelain: a 'technique of nearness'

Bodily gestures and literary/visual images are, according to both Benjamin and Warburg[187], endowed with a kinetic potential to surge and re-surge: '*Aufstand*' - uprising, insurgence - is the word which Benjamin employs, in one of the first sketches of the *Passagenarbeit* - which will be referred to as the anecdote-passage hereafter -, to describe an action of insurgence able to upset existing hierarchical orders - 'the constructions of history' -, an action which bears no relation to an active, intentional subjectivity. Instead, the action of 'uprising' is the performative of figural language, of language's imagistic potential to present 'things' without appealing to mediating 'construction' out of 'large contexts': the linguistic dimension of the 'anecdote' is taken as a poignant example of language's immediacy, namely - as Weber has extensively demonstrated - of language's ability to be 'not a means to an end', nor 'a middle between poles' but to simply be 'there' - to 'make things present', unequivocally writes Benjamin - while also problematising the limits of such 'presence' by 'taking leave of itself' (Weber 2008: 42), by insisting on non-self-containment and self-alterity, and by constantly irritating the limits between near and distant, image and body, the textual and visual.

The undoing of limits between 'our space' and the space of 'things' is, following Benjamin's passage, a pivotal feature of the 'true method of making things present'. The 'trueness' of this method consists not simply in recognising the image, whether literary or visual, as the tensive site of a liminal interplay and undoing, but, more substantially, it requires the viewer to take a tangent, transversal position in the face of such phenomenon, or to take the standpoint of no-position: 'we don't displace our being into' objects and images of the past - the 'cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum' - but 'they step into our life'. Note the disappearance of the subject 'we' - *wir* - in this inversion-movement from *wir* to *sie*, which is more explicit in the original German: '*Nicht wir versetzen uns in sie: sie treten in unser Leben*' (GS 5: 1014-15). Benjamin will reiterate and actualise this complication at the heart of the *wir-sie/*body-image relation a number of times, and often using nothing less than a literary anecdote: the legend of a Chinese painter[188] of the Tang dynasty, Wu Tao-

[187] Literary images and the use of texts in conjunction with the image's visual details is a methodology that accompanied Warburg since the time of his *Botticelli* dissertation. A very similar argument can be made for Benjamin, with scholarship often underscoring how the confrontation with visual images, since the early years of Benjamin's academic engagements, shaped his literary criticism/epistemology - see for example Weigel, Sigrid. 2015. 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History', *Critical Inquiry* 41(2): 344-366. There is a tendency, on both parts of scholarship (Benjamin and Warburg) to take sides on the issue of the relation between literary/linguistic species of the image and visual images. For what concerns Warburg, for example, scholarship is divided into those commentators who want to implement Warburg's engagement visual legacy with an epistemological structure and claim to write the philosophy of the image that Warburg never wrote (Desideri, Didi-Huberman) and, on the other hand, the commentators who identify Warburg's most valuable lesson with the elaboration of a visual critique of images by means of images (Rampley, Carboni), dismissing the role played by literary texts in the composition of the Atlas, for example.

[188] For a study of Benjamin's broader image of China, beyond references to the Chinese painter, see the insightful reconstruction of Benjamin's life-long engagement with *Daodejing* in Fenves, Peter. 2008. 'Benjamin, Studying, China: Toward a Universal 'Universism'', *Positions,* 26 (1): 35–57. As it has been recently demonstrated by Julia Ng, Benjamin's image of China was influenced by his early reading of Gu Hongming's *China's defence against European Ideas* (1911), a theoretical encounter which instilled in him the belief that 'in both East and West there exist internally divergent tendencies; including the tendency to decline, suggesting a deeper consensus between the two traditions than can be adequately explained by the model of a clash of civilizations' (Ng 2021: 14). See also Hongming, Gu. [Hung-ming, K.]. 1911. *Chinas Verteidigung gegen europaischen Ideen: Kritische Aufsatze*.(Jena: Eugen Diederichs) 6, pp. 22-27.

tzu, who, according to a popular legend[189], invites his friends to see the picture he painted and then disappears into the painted landscape before him:[190]

> This picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter's friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he had left them - that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through the narrow opening. 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. (SW 3: 393)

The image of the painter disappearing into the painted landscape - and by means of comparison Benjamin's displacement into the cloud of colours - functions, in the fragmented architecture of *Berlin Childhood*, first and foremost as a 'method of making things present' - a childhood recollection, in this case - via anecdote. Benjamin's 'displacement' into the cloud is a literary anecdote which presents us the image of a childhood recollection; in turn, the legend of the Chinese painter itself found its way to Benjamin in the form of anecdotal reference thanks to the timeless phenomenon of global circulation of images and gestures that

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189 Benjamin also mentions the legend of the Chinese painter in his 1933 review of Adorno's dissertation *Kierkegaard: The End of Philosophical Idealism* (SW 2: 704) and in some of his notes on Kafka - see Tiedmann, Rolf (ed.). 1981. *Benjamin über Kafka: Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen,* (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp), p. 170.

190 There are two meticulous studies on Benjamin's use of the Chinese painter legend in recent scholarship. First, Jan Cao's (2019) 'Benjamin's 'Chinese Painter: Copying, Adapting, and the Aura of Reproduction' carefully reconstructs the transnational journey of the painter legend from its original Chinese source - Wang Younpeng's *Liexian quanzhuan* (1600) - through the Japanese translation by Edo painter Tachibana Morikuni in *Ehon Tsūhōshi* (1729), up to its diffusion, via multiple (mis)translations, in European philosophical and art-historical circles at the dawning of the 20th century. It is important to note that the first appearance of the Chinese painter story in English, via Giles's and Anderson's translations, relies not on the original Chinese text but on Morikuni's Japanese translation. Cao raises the interesting point that, if Morikuni's translation was relatively faithful to the original Chinese source, the illustration that accompanies the anecdote and which circulated amongst European circles is completely different from the one found in *Liexian quanzhuan* and provided by the painter Huang Yimu. Furthermore, Anderson's and Giles's English translations/ quotations from Japanese are also inaccurate. As a consequence, Benjamin's likely sources for the Chinese painter legend - Martin Buber's German translation of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (1766) in 1911, which had been previously translated in English by Giles as 'Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio' (1905), and Ernst Bloch's quotation of the anecdote in his *Durch die Wüste* (1923) and *Traces* (1930) - also retain the same degree of misreadings and mistranslations with respect to the original Chinese text. If Cao's study uses the transnational journey and mass-circulation of the Chinese painter legend through the ancient copybook tradition in order to challenge Benjamin's argument on the disappearance of the aura, suggesting instead its potential reproducibility, Andrea Pinotti's 'The Painter Through the Fourth Wall of China' situates Benjamin's references to the Chinese painter legend within the larger framework of his writings on perception, image-reception and mimicry in relation to different media, such as theatre and cinema. While establishing a fruitful dialogue with key concepts that Benjamin encountered in his engagement with *Kunstwissenschaft,* mainly via art-historians Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin, as well as with contemporary appearances of the legend in Kracauer, Belázs and Brecht, Pinotti's study presents a meticulous picture of Benjamin's engagement with different variations of the Chinese image, with particular attention to the ambivalent and contradictory usages of the anecdote throughout Benjamin's own corpus. See Cao, Jan. 2019. 'Benjamin's 'Chinese Painter: Copying, Adapting, and the Aura of Reproduction', *The Germanic Review*, 94: 39-56; Pinotti, Andrea. 2014. 'The Painter through the Fourth Wall of China. Benjamin and the threshold of the Image' in *Benjamin-Studien 3,* ed. by Daniel Wiedner and Sigrid Weigel (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink), pp. 133-149.

facilitated the migration of Oriental cultural motifs into European circles. I stress this point not to merely make the argument that Benjamin's proposed solution to problematise the subject-object, body-image nexus, in contrast to Warburg's, simply amounts to employing literary anecdotes in the text; more substantially, what should catch our attention here is not the 'means' - the literary anecdote itself - but what is opened up by it: namely how, by means of a specific literary image, Benjamin describes a mode of displacement - imagistic insurgence - which acts as a catalyst for envisioning new modes of relating to the picture plane - and which is, paradoxically, anti-anecdotal, inasmuch as it radically displaces emphatic being from linguistic life. Cast against the distance-regulated gesture of emphatic binding, the technique of bringing 'things' closer and 'making things present' exemplified by the anecdote demands not empathy - the anecdote 'represents the strict antithesis to the sort of history which demands 'empathy' [*Einfühlung*]' (AP: 846) - but a 'pathos of nearness' [*Pathos der Nähe*] (AP: 846)[191]. This 'pathos' enables the displacement-move at stake in the *Mummerehlen's* vignette, fuelling a mimetic and receptive gesture of body-object resemblance - 'I would resemble the porcelain' - , a gesture which has nothing to do with the reiteration of distance between what is mimed and the mimer but which, quite differently, undoes the contours of 'one' and the 'other', making it impossible to establish who is what, and what is who. In this blurring of limits, in this undoing of clear-cut spatiotemporal paradigms, what we are left with is the the interruption, via gesture, of hierarchical perceptual relations to the world - of already-established ties and bonds. The paradox of this receptive gesturing is that, by marking out the suspension of existing relations, it also exposes the true character of such bonds, namely the kinesis of circulation proper to the network: in another version of the anecdote passage, Benjamin writes about a 'technique of nearness' (AP: 203), which the anecdote is paradigmatic of, that complicates, or better neutralises, Being's favourable standpoint, in order to emphasise, I argue, the alternative ontological structure and 'nearness' of the network, where by network[192] we understand not a homogeneous community of *n*-beings held together by a symbolic mediation towards a shared, extrinsic and abstract substratum - the 'pathos of nearness' is a sentiment of 'hatred of the abstract configuration in human life' -, but the very material kinesis of circulation which traverses and crosses, *transversally*, 'all available positions in space'[193]

[191] As outlined by the editors of the 2021 volume *Toward the Critique of Violence,* Benjamin's references to the state of being determined by distance, in the context of segment VI of the 'Schemata', trace back to Nietzsche's own phrasing to define his critique of moral philosophy - 'pathos of distance' (WB 2021: 312, fn. 10). It is plausible to suggest that Benjamin's 'pathos of nearness' in the context of the anecdote-passage is to be read as an explicit counter-move to the Nietzschean gesture of being distance-determined.

[193] While in the picture painted by Kant the position of 'everyone else' is only thinkable according to the original position of a thinking 'I', in the methodology exposed via anecdote Benjamin indicates, instead, that 'things' are made present only insofar as they are endowed with an independent, transversal potential to rise up and to irrupt into 'our space', to the point where the possessive determiner 'our' no longer indicates a space we master and posses, but the sharing - hybridisation, heterogeneity - which characterises its vital kinesis and rhythm in the first place: circulation.

without ever fixing into one dominant position, a mobile network in which there is no 'placing' which is also, simultaneously, a 'mis-placing' and a 'dis-placing'[194].

The kinesis of uprising, insurgence, which is used to describe the anecdote's linguistic potential to rise up and to interrupt existing modes of relating to the world, existing images of an order and hierarchies, finds a resonance with the 'sudden' and unplanned insurgence of *Entstellung* recounted in the *Mummerehlen* anecdote via Chinese painter image: in both cases what is at stake is not only displacement but, consequently, decontextualisation - 'thus represented, the things allow no mediating [*vermittelnde*] construction from out of 'large contexts' [*Zusammenhängen*]' (AP: 846). As a gesture of ex-traction - from the Latin '*extrahere',* to 'pull out or remove from a fixed position' -, decontextualisation clearly amounts to a relief from the fixed position. At this juncture, we can now clearly see how the visual-literary motifs and gestures considered so far are all pointing towards the movement of loss and relief, '*los machen*', which sits at the core of Benjamin's praxis of gesture: the loose tangram fragments imply displacement and decontextualisation, the cloudy-spot certainly speaks about the impossibility of a fixed *Stelle,* and, finally, the Chinese painter's gesture, mimicked by Benjamin as a child, stands for a mode of envisioning the world - 'making things present' - which rejects the markers of 'positing' and 'position' altogether. The liminal image, and the image of the limit, that emerges from these constellating gestures does not amount to a case of mere undecidability or suspension between

[194] The undoing of a fixed *Stelle*, already introduced with the motifs of the tangram and the cloudy-spot, is further evidenced by the Chinese painter's anecdote, more precisely, by Benjamin's inconsistent and contrasting usages of it. As Pinotti demonstrates in his 2017 study, Benjamin's accounts of the Chinese painter legend show a degree of inconsistency with respect to the experience of the image that the anecdote is meant to exemplify. If, in the 1933 published version of the *Mummerehlen,* the legend of Wu Tao-tzu is paradigmatic of a certain undoing of subjectivity and distance, in favour of displacement and resemblance, then in the 'Taktile und optische Rezeption' section (XVII) of the first draft of the *Kunstwerk* essay (1935-36), the legend is associated with the (negative) optics-based contemplation of artworks via absorption: 'A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [*versenkt sich*]; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves [*versenkt in sich*]'. (SW 3: 119). A similar inversion-tendency can also be highlighted when comparing two excerpts from 'A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books' (1926) and 'Dream Kitsch' (1927) - this inversion is exposed by Brigid Doherty (2008) in her introductory essay to *'Painting and Graphics'* in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,* ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others. (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press), pp. 195-215, p. 204. While the 1926 sketch evidently remarks, against Anderson, that 'things do not come out to meet the picturing child from the pages of the book' (WB 2008: 226) but the child, instead, steps into the world of pictures, the 1927 text operates an inversion for which it is 'the world of things' that now 'advances on the human being' (WB 2008: 238). On the one hand, these sets of contradictions could be played down as mere theoretical inconsistency. I argue, however, that Benjamin's conflicting usages of the painter's anecdote really testify to the impossibility of fixedly 'placing' - or 'misplacing' - the displacement and disembodiment at stake in the image/body reciprocal undoing of limits, which is at the heart of the legendary painter's disappearance, within the secure limits of a purportedly 'correct' - or incorrect - posture. Benjamin's contrasting variations of the anecdote, as well as the discrepancy between stepping into and being-stepped-upon, signal not so much an arbitrary misplacement, but a methodic modus operandi that cannot dispense of the very reversal of what it strives to show, in a move that prevents completion, self-enclosure, conclusiveness, one-sided directionality. In other words, Benjamin's inconsistent usage of this liminal image reflects, I argue, the inconclusive, liminal character of (the painter's) gesture: neither completely on one side (absorbed contemplation) nor on the other (bodily displacement) - and, equally, not in the middle or between - but always at-the-limits-of.

poles, as Agamben would have it[195], missing the point. The problem with this particular interpretation of image's limit-like ontological structure is that it still falls into the trap of assuming the existence of such a thing as 'one' agent A and an 'other' agent B[196], whereas what really is at stake in the kinesis exposed by the tangential and transversal motifs hitherto examined is a state of the world whereby it is no longer possible to speak of such a thing as A and B as two, clear-cut, separated and occasionally interacting entities. In this complex state, to 'make things present' is to be-acted-upon, to let 'things' corrode the presumed self-sufficiency of any autonomous, self-enclosed and self-sufficient position. Yet this picture needs to be further problematised in order to fully understand Benjamin's 'method' or manoeuvre: this is not, it should be clear, a mere shift of posture - from *wir* to *sie* - which exploits 'things' to access a more originary version of Being, in a quasi-Heideggerian fashion. Heidegger's distancing gesture - which, as we will shortly see, finds a parallel in Warburg's variations on the act of distancing - famously vouches for a shift of posture, from 'rational *subiectum*' to the man who has 'overcome himself as a subject' (Heidegger 1977: 153), a reversal which culminates in a 'nothing' that is 'never nothing', on the contrary, it signals the apotheosis of fulfilment and the securing of position and posture - 'nothing is never nothing; it is just as little a something, in the sense of an object [*Gegenstand*]; it is Being itself' (Heidegger 1977: 153). The challenge posed to this type of distancing inversion, or reversal, by the interrelated motifs of the tangram, the cloudy-spot and the legendary painter is the refusal to instrumentalise the 'nothing' there at stake to the service of 'something'. Doing nothing, in this context, is not literally to take no action, but to take the only possible action that has the potential to dislodge gesture from purpose, means from ends, body from posture: to only 'receive things' into our space, to

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[195] Giorgio Agamben, in his *Nymphs*, famously argues that the spatiality of Benjamin's dialectical image and Warburg's symbol is suspended between immobility and movement and marked by the interplay of living and spectral forces. - see fn. 36, p. 22. Agamben defines this space, in relation to Benjamin's dialectical image, as 'a threshold between immobility and movement' (Agamben 2011: 68) and, with reference to Warburg's symbol and *Pathosformeln*, as a 'central zone between two opposites' (Agamben 2011: 71). In getting his point across and by using repeated references to the purported existence of 'middle-point', or an in 'between' zone, Agamben actually misses the point, I argue, which is the very basic idea that the whole purpose of Benjamin's dialectical image is to avoid altogether any kind of 'between' or 'middle' ground. It is telling, in this sense, that Agamben's conclusive definition of the *Dialektik im Stillstand*, which follows Melandri's intuition, hinges on the duality in which his interpretation remains stuck - and which Benjamin surely wanted to avoid -, as it is evident in the survival of the words 'bipolar' and 'two': 'the opposition it [*Dialektik im Stillstand*] implies is not dichotomous and substantial but *bipolar* and tensive: the *two* terms are neither removed from nor recomposed in unity but kept in an immobile coexistence charged with tension' (2011: 69-70, emphasis mine). For other critiques of Agamben's interpretation on this issue, see See Barale, *La Malinconia dell'Immagine,* p. 107 and Benjamin, 'Two Forms of Gesture', p. 30. For another interpretation of the mode of relation between opposites as a liminal space of suspension in relation to Benjamin (and Warburg) see Zumbusch, *Wissenschaft in Bildern*, pp. 347-9. In Zumbusch's view, the dialectical image 'forms a space between experience and thinking' (2004: 341). Zumbusch's insistence on the intermediate form that characterises the spatiality of the dialectical image and the symbol (Warburg) is instrumental to her final argument on the liminal relation between knowledge and art. In Zumbusch's words, 'knowledge does not coincide with art in *Mnemosyne* and the *Passagenwerk* but remains suspended between the two' (2004: 348).

'resemble the porcelain', is to reduce oneself to the ambiguous state of a host-hostage[197]: an emptied-out shell ready to be-acted upon, like a Kafkaesque hybrid creature, ready to be transfixed, displaced, dispossessed - ready to be no-thing.

The anecdote-excerpt, as well as Benjamin's literary usages of it as a 'technique of nearness', add a further conceptual layer to the argument hitherto advanced: to be-acted-upon is to submit to the image's command, to submit to the image's command is to experience a radical self-dispossession, and this experience of loosening and loss, in turn, amounts to a 'nothing' that is not simply definable in terms of absence, but which instead, following Benjamin's under-investigated anecdote-excerpt, amounts to the 'true' mode of 'making things present', inasmuch as it paradoxically brings to the fore a fundamental crisis at the very heart of 'presence'.

4.4.2 'Straight to the hearts of those who chafed'

Reaching the conclusion of his 1905 lecture on *Dürer and Italian Antiquity* and holding the 'death of Orpheus' as a pivotal visual motif for the exemplification of his newly-coined 'Pathos formulas', Warburg sets out to describe, like Benjamin did in his anecdote-passage, the image's kinetic potential to rise up and to upset existing hierarchies and orders, or traditional, hermetic and one-sided modes of understanding the construction of history - or what Warburg here calls 'the psychology of style'. If the key to read Benjamin's

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[197] The term 'host' is haunted by ambiguity, as evidenced by Levinas's contrasting variations on the hostage-hospitality knot, a paradoxical conjuncture further taken up by Derrida in *Of Hospitality* (2000) - 'Let us recall Levinas's formulations, which we shall come back to in another register: 'The subject is a host'; then, some years later, 'The subject is hostage'' (Derrida 2000: 109) - for specific references to Levinas's two formulations, quoted by Derrida, see respectively Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority.* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, p. 299.; _____. 1974. *Autrement qu'etre ou au-dela de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), p. 142. The host-hostage structural ambiguity, or the inescapable, simultaneous possibility of becoming hostage while becoming host is a condition that Benjamin, more or less explicitly, addresses in the *Kunstwerk* essay (1936): throughout the drafting of the *Kunstwerk* essay, Benjamin famously grapples with a shift of paradigm that consequently invests art practice with a new social function - the artwork as politics-based *Gebilde*. This research will not rehearse the arguments on the double possibility concerning the aesthetisation of politics and the politicisation of art - which are well-known and have received enormous attention in scholarship. I will, however, point this out: the interplay host-hostage is arguably at stake in the political possibilities opened up by new perceptual modes of relating to the image and to the world, and is indeed reflected in the *versenkt sich/versenkt in sich* alternative that the Chinese painter legend exemplifies in this context. Echoing Levinas's host-hostage possibilities, Benjamin's variations of '*versenken*' point to the fact that the (contemplating) subject is hostage to the image and he/she becomes 'absorbed by it'; instead, the 'distracted masses' present the potential to 'host' the image and to absorb it into themselves, thereby avoiding being hostage of it. In other words, the cult-value associated with the 'hostage' condition of being absorbed into the artwork, following Benjamin, should be supplanted for the rapid exacerbation of exhibition value, leading to the possibility of becoming image-hosts, and not image-hostages. Of course, we are now in a position to challenge this proposition: what Benjamin did not live to see is how the image's potential for technical reproducibility actually led to the reversal of the *picture* he first diagnosed - the decline of *Kultwerte*. The rapid exacerbation of exhibition value has not supplanted cult value. On the contrary, the imperative 'to be seen' has become the most dominant, all-encompassing cult of our time - a cult which presupposes, as we are constantly reminded when confronted with social media debates, becoming 'hostages' of the image, to the point where not only is it no longer possible to distinguish between the image-body and the real body, but the real body actually becomes hostage of the image-body and real life is only 'lived' to service the constructed life purported by Instagram shots. Benjamin's complaint on cult value still stands today, but with a substantial twist: not simply the cult value per se but the cult of the image as the only surviving *post*-postmodernism value 'tends today, it would seem, to keep the artwork out of sight' (SW 4: 25).

version of imagistic insurgence is to be found, as we have just seen, in language's ability to interrupt and to displace, and in a praxis of gesture for which action is dislodged from the ends of an active, intentional subjectivity, then the key to read Warburg's own interpretation of the image's ability to surge and resurge within history is to be found in a praxis of gesture which figures as the exact opposite of what Benjamin described.

The 'antique superlatives of gesture' (RPA: 558) referenced by Warburg appear multiple times throughout the lecture, in the guise of 'extremes of gestural and physiognomic expression', 'certain wonderful gestures', 'emotive gestural language'. All these expressions are clearly charged with an intrinsic intensive quality, which the Italian artists of the mid and late quattrocento recovered from the 'tragic sublimity' of antiquity. As it is evinced from the extended quote provided at the outset of §3.4 (p.124), the intensive, emotional charge of gestural language brings together, in a universal historic-stylistic configuration, different epochs, places and artistic media - 'Athens, Rome, Mantua, Florence, and Nuremberg', the 'North and the South', 'past and present', visual and literary references. The study of migratory gestural kinesis offered an occasion, for Warburg, to challenge the basic idea of a progressive and linear construction of historical processes, as it is clear from his reference to the 'unearthing of the Laocoön in 1506' (RPA: 558)[198], which he describes as the 'outward symptom of an inward, stylistic-historical process [*innerlich bedingten stilgeschichtlichen Prozesses*]; it marked the climax, not the birth, of the 'Baroque aberration'' (RPA: 558, trans. mod. FM)[199]

The first, most straightforward implication of this claim is that the question of artistic style - in this case the Baroque - is fundamentally, for Warburg, not a matter of forward-projected development that abides to the law of logical causality, but is the result of a structural tension already inherent in cultural movements. But there is also another implication, less straightforward yet incredibly significant for the argument pursued here: the mimics of gesture, or the visual patterns of the human body that travelled from Athens to Nuremberg, arguably underscore a fundamental continuity between the 'tragic sublimity' of the ancient world and the 'language of gesture' sought by Italian artists 'since the mid-fifteen century'. With the unearthing of the Laocoon in Rome (1506), Italian artists of the late fifteen and early sixteen century were reminded, through a 'universal language' of gestures, of a profound sense of crisis and danger which binds together different epochs, styles and cultures. The binding element - and not the sudden, interruptive

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198 For other discussions of Warburg's nuanced engagement with the pathos-formula of the Laocoon see Pinotti, Andrea. 2001. *Memorie del neutro. Morfologia dell'immagine in Aby Warburg,* (Milano: Mimesis), see especially Part II, ch. 4, 'L'invenzione del Laocoonte', pp. 119 - 124; Ekardt, Philip. 2016. 'Certain wonderful gestures. Warburg, Lessing and the transitory in images', *Culture, Theory, Critique* 57(2): 166-75; Michaud, Philippe-Alain. 2007. *Aby Warburg and the image in motion* (New York: Zone Books), see esp. pp. 85-90 and 285-86.; Centanni, Monica. 2003. 'L'originale assente. L'invenzione del Laocoonte. Saggio interpretativo di Mnemosyne Atlas, Tavola 41a', *La Rivista di Enagramma,* 25, [online] http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2165 [last accessed 1st May 2024]

199 References to the Laocoon emerge in some of Warburg's most important essays and papers, including the 1893 thesis on Botticelli, as well as 'The emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance painting' (1914) and the 1923 Lecture on the Serpent Ritual, while also figuring in the final version of the Mnemosyne Atlas (1929). Gombrich traces Warburg's encounter with the Laocoon in the semester of 1889 when Warburg, a student at the University of Bonn, presented a paper in Karl Justi's seminar titled '*Entwurf zu einer Kritik des Laokoons an Hand der Kunst des Quattrocento in Florenz*' ('Towards a Critique of the Laocoon in the light of Florentine Quattrocento Art') (Gombrich 1986: 50).

displacement - is what actually takes precedence here: the consequence of framing the image of the Laocoon's unearthing as the 'climax' - and not the 'birth' - of 'Baroque aberration' is a moment of rejoicing between ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. The insurgence of antique gestures, via Laocoon, is fundamentally denied, according to Warburg, the status of birth-moment (principle, beginning, arché), but only contributes to the intensification of a process that was already inherent in Renaissance's cultural fabric. The image of the Laocoon actually represents, following Warburg's wording, the fulfilment and culmination - 'climax' - of a human striving towards 'certain wonderful gestures'.

It has been often suggested that the 'long migration' which allowed the global exchange of visual-literary motifs from Athens to Nuremberg signalled, for Warburg, the tangible proof of a *fil rouge* that runs through history, namely the survival and resurfacing of similar expressive patterns throughout different epochs and artistic styles. Indeed, Warburg's often-quoted and now well-known conceptualisation of the image as 'pathos formula', first explicitly introduced in the 1905 lecture, hinges on the rhythm of recurrence - though one that undoubtedly requires continuous mutability.

While this acknowledgement certainly does not amount to claim that Warburg's image of history merely corresponds to the linear continuum advocated by traditional historicism, it nevertheless points to the evidence that, even if the resurgence of antique forms can be understood as the performative of a visual cut in the continuum of history, which problematises the presumed homogeneity of the temporal tissue, such a disturbance nevertheless operates within the framework of already-existing impulses and transformations occurring within a certain culture, and does not radically undo, upset or displace the fundamentals of its fabrics. This is explicitly emphasised by the contrast between the '*innerlich'* dimension attributed to the stylistic-historical process which led Pollaiuolo and Mantegna to rediscover the 'true voice of antiquity', and the status of '*außere Symptom'* given to the appearance of the antique gestural language embodied by the image of Laocoon in Renaissance - 'That event [the discovery of the Laocoon group in Rome] was an outward symptom of an inward, historical process' (RPA: 558, trans. Mod. FM).

Writing to Carl Neumann in January 1927, Warburg significantly describes the Laocoon, among other images of antiquity, as one of the 'innumerable masks of pathos in the choir of the tragedy 'Energeia'' [*unzähligen Pathosmasken im Chor der Tragödie 'Energeia'*] […] 'we then call the acts of these tragedies 'epochs of culture' [*die Akte dieser Tragödien nennen wir {dann}: 'Epochen der Kultur'*][200]. Laocoon's appearance acts as a visual reminder that 'a tragic sense of classical unrest' (RPA: 273)[201] keeps unfolding through the different acts of human civilisation, or epochs of culture. It is not that the 'language of gesture', so vividly embodied by the pathos formula of the Laocoon, 'steps into' the life of Italian artists, interrupting and arresting their flow; quite differently, the language of gesture is described as 'that' 'toward which Italian art had been moving

[200] WIA, GC, Warburg to Carl Neumann, 22 January 1927. The entire letter and related notes have been published in the original German language by Pinotti, Andrea. 2005b. 'Lettera di Aby Warburg a Carl Neumann, 22 Gennaio 1927', *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* (1984-), 60 (3): 525-539, available online at https://www.jstor.org/stable/44024523 [last accessed 1st May 2024]

[201] Warburg's reading of the Laocoon directly challenges Winkleman's and Lessing's interpretations, grounded on the ideal of classical repose.

since the mid-fifteen century' [*zu der die italienische Kunst schon seit der Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts hindrängte*] (RPA: 558; WGS 2: 448). The use of '*hindrängen*' clearly points to a tension and traction towards the image's plane which evidences a specific directionality: from (the artists') volition or intentionality to the insurgence of gesture/image[202]. The resurgence of the Laocoon's image marks the fulfilment-moment of a long-standing yearning that moved Italian artists 'from afar' towards the image of Greek antiquity, or towards extremes of 'physiognomic expression' embodied by antique 'tragic sublimity'. The non-interruptive, non-disruptive character of Laocoon's unearthing is emphasised by the fact that Italian artists 'had long sought - and therefore found' [*was man längst in der Antike gesucht und deshalb gefunden hatte*] (RPA: 558: WGS: 449) - these gestural extremes in the pathos formula 'Laocoon'. It should be now clearer why the Laocoon's unearthing retains neither an '*Ursache*'-status nor an '*Anfang*'-position in the development of Baroque extremes, according to Warburg: the pathos formula of the Laocoon places itself at the '*Zenit*', i.e. culmination, climax, fulfilment of (Italian artists') yearning. This image marks the fulfilment of a distance-regulated process that can only be defined in terms of emphatic binding: a purely emphatic bond established between Italian Renaissance artists and tragic sublimity, a gestural trajectory that 'went straight to the hearts of all those who chafed at medieval expressive constraints' (RPA: 558, emphasis mine).

Diverging from Benjamin's 'true method of making things present' - which instead invites to passively receive things into our space '(not to represent ourselves in their space)' - Warburg's interpretation shows that Italian artists did not 'receive things' - antique superlatives of gesture - into their space, they did not simply let antique extremes of gestural expression 'step' into their lives but they actively displaced their own being - their volition, desire, intention - into the space of antique tragic sublimity, seeking, and therefore finding, the pathos-formula 'Laocoon'.

Panel 41a of the final version[203] of the Atlas (1929)[204] [Fig. 6-7] provides a visual analogue of Warburg's argument on the Laocoon's '*Zenit*'-position with respect to Renaissance's quest for the extremes of gesture: the image of the 1506 excavated Laocoon group does not figure in the panel titled 'Suffering pathos. Death of the priest', which is quite remarkable given the caption/theme of the panel. The upper part of the panel proposes images of the priest's death which date back before the actual discovery of the Laocoon group in Rome (1506). As Centanni has noted in her suggested interpretation of the panel[205], there are striking

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[202] For this one-directional, body-to-object kinesis, Benjamin had a specific name: the 'yearning' that 'from afar towards the image' (SW 2: 269), a 'yearning for for fulfilment [*Erfüllung*]', to which he firmly opposes another type, or the 'yearning to be without yearning' (SW 1: 265; GS 6: 124).

[203] For a detailed and fairly recent account of the different stages in the making of the *Bilderatlas* see Wedepohl, Claudia. 2020. 'The making of Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*', in Roberto Ohrt, Alex Heil, et al. (eds.) *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne The Original* (Hatje Cantz Verlag: Berlin), pp. 14-20.

[204] In the past couple of years, Warburg's *Bilderatlas* has been the subject of two exhibitions both taking place in Berlin: 'Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original', at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (1st September–30th November 2020); 'Between Cosmos and Pathos: Berlin Works from Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas' (8th August–1st November 2020), at the Gemäldegalerie. For a review of the exhibitions see Zöllner, Frank. 2020. 'Aby Warburg's 'Bilderatlas Mnemosyne': systems of knowledge and iconography', *The Burlington Magazine* (162), pp. 1186-1191.

[205] See Centanni, '*L'originale assente* [online] http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2165 [last accessed 1st May 2024].

resemblances between the two Pisanello drawings (1435) [fig. 5 and 6, panel 41a], as well as the (1494-95) Fresco in S. Maria Novella in Florence [fig. 8 and 13, panel 41a], and the visual expression of the priest in the 1506 Laocoon group. The deliberate decision not to feature the original group excavated in Rome - which appears on Panel 6, instead [Fig. 8-9] and to showcase, in its place, the visual patterns of 'suffering pathos' emerging in the gestures of Italian artists of the Quattrocento (Pisanello) really speaks to the point that Warburg emphasises in the *Dürer* essay, namely that Italian artists of the Quattrocento already established an emphatic bond with - i.e. already displaced themselves in - the pathos of antiquity, before the actual discovery of the Laocoon group in Rome. In keeping with the logic that the Laocoon-discovery was only an 'outward symptom' of an 'inward' cultural-stylistic process, Warburg leaves the image of the excavated group 'out' of the panel, to prioritise the visual emergence of Italian artists' 'yearning'. As Centanni noted, to make the Laocoon group present, according to this logic, is to make its canonical image absent, and to present instead the artistic, empathy-driven binding gestures that strove towards it[206]. The undeclared subject of Panel 41a is seemingly the binding element, the human *intentio* that led artists towards images of antique suffering, which is also, arguably, the subject of Panel 6 - the panel which actually depicts the 1506 Laocoon group. In Panel 6, Warburg binds the image of the Laocoon group excavated in Rome with different motifs around the theme of sacrifice and priests' deaths - (Polyxena, Dancing Meanad). More specifically, he decontextualises the death of Laocoon from 16th century Rome in order to re-contextualises it in a broader, anachronistic framework of sacrificial gestures and images.

In light of this, it proves hard to agree with Didi-Huberman's assessment of Panel 6 - and, more broadly, of Warburg's general 'method' in *Mnemosyne* -: in a recent intervention[207], Didi-Huberman proposes that, according to Warburg, the decision to insert the Laocoon group, in Panel 6, within a 'labyrinth of relations' - which includes images relating to the theme of sacrifice - is to be interpreted as an attempt to evidence 'certain iconographical or chronological discontinuities, 'fractures'' [*certaines discontinuités iconographiques ou chronologiques, « fractures »*] (DH 2021)[208]. Yet the counter-argument to this could also be made: what if the *fil rouge*, the binding element - iconographical, non-chronological ~~dis~~continuity - and not the 'fracturing line' [*ligne de fracture*], was the real aim of Warburg's 'gesture' - to single out the pathos formula Laocoon and to then reinsert the image into a newly-created, thematic-based, non-chronological yet iconographical kind of 'continuum'? Nowhere are the words 'fracture' or 'interruption' used to describe the purpose or the method of *Mnemosyne* in the disparate segments making up Warburg's *Einleitung*[209]. On the contrary, much emphasis

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[206] See Centanni, '*L'originale assente* [online] http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2165 [last accessed 1st May 2024].

[207] See Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2021. 'Gestes, formules et blocs d'intensité', *Socio-anthropologie* [En ligne], 44, mis en ligne le 30 novembre 2021, last accesssed 29 novembre 2022. Available online at http://journals.openedition.org/socio-anthropologie/10675.

[208] This claim seems to be at odds with Didi-huberman's main definition of the very purpose of montage, which is 'not the misleading creation of a temporal continuum […] it is, rather, a way to visually unfold the continuities of time at stake in each sequence of history' (DH 2006: 436).

[209] The original typescripts of the *Introduction* in question are collected in Rapp, Werner, and others (eds.). 2006. *Mnemosyne Materialen* (Hamburg: München).

lies on the mobile circulatory kinesis - 'Automobilen Bilderfahrzeuge[s]' (vehicle for mobile images) - 'Kreislaufprozesse' (process of circulation) - 'Technik seiner Verkehrsmittel' (mechanics of [its] transmission) - which binds 'expressive values of the past', or 'pathos formula *all'antica*' (Rampley 2009: 280), with Renaissance Rome.

Offering a critique of emphatic binding as a method of construction - of 'making things present' -, Benjamin's implicit counter-argument to Warburg can be found in a short excerpt from the *Passagenarbeit*: objects, images, gestures can be singled out of the continuum of history - and the unearthing of the Laocoon can arguably be read as one of those interruptive instances - yet culpability is to be found in the ensuing attempt to 'reinsert the object into the continuum, which it [historical narration] would create anew through empathy' (AP: 475, N10a, 1). While Warburg firmly rejected linearly-developed constructions of history based, the praxis of gesture grounded on empathic binding described in the *Dürer* paper, and materialised in Panel 41a and 6, nevertheless does exactly what Benjamin sets out to undo: it 'singles out' the pathos-formula 'Laocoon' only to then reinsert the 'object' into a newly-created kind of 'continuum'.

It is now possible to see how the previous examination of the tangram-motif, the praxis of non-construction, the kinesis of '*los machen*', the undoing of a fixed *Stelle,* which the loose fragments, the cloudy-spot and the legendary painter's disappearance point to, serves as a fruitful critical tool to differentiate Benjamin's praxis from Warburg's: if this *ensemble* of gestures testifies to the refusal of reinserting the 'object' within the continuum, and to the refusal of creating yet another image of an order, then the 'extremes of gesture' repeatedly mentioned by Warburg in the *Dürer* paper point in the opposite direction, that is, the 'rejoicing' opportunity to re-construct, to re-create another 'image of an order', however unclosed, in which antique gestures re-take and re-claim position within history.

To insist on the fracturing point between imagistic insurgence and emphatic binding is to uncover yet another mode in which Warburg's 'gesture' collides with and yet departs from Benjamin's: if the 'pathos of nearness' advocated for by Benjamin testifies to the fundamental hybridisation of the image-body limit, or the possibility of *not* reinstating pre-existing relations of order - the subject-object dialectics - then Warburg's opposite championing of a 'feeling for distancing' ['Gefühl der Entfernung'] (WGB: 76, fr. 189) clearly suggests and foregrounds, instead, the preconditions for reinstating the possibility of acting-upon, of constantly winning back Athens from Alexandria, of not losing oneself into the image. If the tangram, the cloudy-spot and the legendary painter's motifs figure, in Benjamin's corpus, as gestures of 'undoing into nonselfsufficiency' and modes of being-acted-upon and of self-dispossession, then Warburg's distance-regulated variations of emphatic binding in the *Dürer* paper - and beyond, as will be shortly demonstrated - function as indispensable amulets of self-preservation: 'you live', image, and 'do me no harm' - [Du lebst und thust mir nichts!' (WGB: 26)

3.5 Saving Humanity or Saving Things, being 'I' or being 'nothing'

The results of the comparative close readings enable us to finally tease out the philosophical stakes of the 'methods' of working with images respectively embodied by the variations of limit-undoing previously uncovered - emphatic binding and imagistic insurgence. Despite the fact that Warburg never intended to write a philosophy of images per se, there is sustained evidence of an affiliation between the theoretical apparatus informing Warburg's work with images and Nietzschean influences. Introducing the English translation of Warburg's *Einleitung* to *Mnemosyne,* Matthew Rampley writes that 'the basic outline of Warburg's *Kulturwissenschaft* is fundamentally Nietzschean' and that Warburg's theoretical manoeuvre towards the 'Apollo–Dionysus opposition' consisted of a repurposing 'in terms of the contrast between the maintenance of rationalizing distance and empathic absorption in the objects of perception' (Rampley 2015: 274-75). In a similar move, Didi-Huberman devotes an entire chapter of *The Surviving Image,* titled 'The tragedy of culture: Warburg *with* Nietzsche' (emphasis mine), to the identification of binding elements between the two[210]. Yet, in an attempt to problematise Didi-Huberman's 'with', it should be noted that Warburg's enthusiastic reception of Nietzsche did not refrain him from identifying a fundamental danger inherent in the state of hosting - and becoming hostage of - the 'mnemic waves' of history, as it emerges from the 1927 notebook titled *Burckhardt-Übungen*[211]. Nietzsche appears, in comparison with Burckhardt, to be 'victim of his own ideas', having exposed himself to the 'most violent shocks, believing as he did in a superior logic of fate' (Gombrich 1986: 256, 258). The grounding paradigm of his critique of morality, the pathos of distance, is instrumental to the further creation of a state of superiority and elevation - *Steigerung* -, which in turn gives way to a 'widening of distance within the soul itself', and not between world and body, image and subject, as Warburg would have it. Nietzsche's gesture, in a nutshell, points towards a '*Weltbewusstsein*' for which the intensification leading to *Steigerung* internalises 'distance' within the expanded borders of the overman. It is not so much a case of losing oneself into the image, but of losing the image into one-elevated-self. With this in mind, any straightforward association between Warburg's project and Nietzschean philosophy[212] can be problematised in lieu of the fact that the distancing gesture between 'the self and the outside world', for Warburg, is not only the culmination of his endeavours - materialised in the incipit of the 1929 *Einleitung,* where 'conscious distantiation' is famously described as an 'act fundamental to human civilisation' (Wedepohl 2020: 20) - but

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[210] See, Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2017b. *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms.* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press), see esp. Chapter 2, pp. 67-138.

[211] The notes were translated by Gombrich and the appeared alongside the German text. As Gombrich points out, the notes were written in view of the final meeting, devoted to the figures of Burckhardt and Nietzsche, which concluded Warburg's summer seminars at Hamburg University between 1926-27. See Gombrich Ernst H. 1986. *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p.254.

[212] For a study of the relation between Warburg and Nietzsche see Pfotenhauer, Helmut. 1985. 'Das Nachleben der Antike. Aby Warburgs Auseinandersetzung mit Nietzsche' *Nietzsche Studien* 14: 298-313.

also, significantly, its point of departure, or better, the '*Grundprinzip*' (founding principle) of his entire theoretic-visual project, as it is evinced from a much earlier fragment (1896) of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*: 'Here lies already an idea of 'distance' [distancing] as founding principle' - [*Darin liegt bereits eine Ahnung von der Distanzirung* [*Entfernung*] *als Grundprinzip*] (WGB: 26, fr. 50 trans. FM). In keeping with this logic, Warburg's closest phrasing to the Nietzschean 'pathos of distance' appears in a 1891 fragment titled '*Denken* und *Entfernung*': here Warburg writes about a 'sentiment of distancing [*Gefühl der Entfernung*] in the subject' (WGB: 76, fr. 189, trans. FM) which arises, contra Nietzsche, from the endeavour to maintain an 'effective distance between subject and object' (WGB: 76, fr. 189, trans. FM) - and not from its destruction. In another fragment of the the *Bruchstücke*, written in the following year (1892), we read:

> 29.I.92
>
> υβρισ
>
> Versprengte quiescirte Stücke…….
> Indem wir die Dinge entfernen, den Raum produziren, denken wir
> - *ich!*
> Indem wir zusammen sind, aufgesogen sind, sind wir Materie -
> *nichts!*
> halb Raum und halb Materie - Kunst. (WGB: 89, fr. 233)

> 29.I.92
>
> υβρισ
>
> Scattered quiet pieces……
> Insofar as we keep things distant, at the time when we produce space, we think
> - *I!*
> Insofar as we are together, at the time when we are absorbed, we are matter
> - *nothing!*
> Half space and half matter - art.

This passage deserves particular attention for the argument pursued here, not only because it evidences one of the early prototypes of that 'interval' between 'impulse and rational action' which traverses Warburg's entire oeuvre and culminates in 1929 *Einleitung,* but also because it clearly situates Warburg's vision of the limits between the 'I' and the image on a different philosophical trajectory than Benjamin's.

First, let's examine the parallel established between the thinking 'I' and the gestures of 'keeping things distant', and 'producing space': what is anticipated by this image is Dürer's *Melencolia*'s gesture, or what Warburg, years later and in the 1920 paper 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther', will describe via the image of the 'thinking, working human being' (RPA: 644). *Melencolia*'s gesture, or its 'truly creative act', according to Warburg's interpretation, coincides with the human ability to heroically 'spiritualise' the saturnine disposition, the 'fear' and 'gloom' of the antique worldview, into an act of modern 'humanistic contemplation' (RPA: 645). *Melencolia*'s thinking act amounts to 'individual mental efforts' aimed at the mediation between magic-mythical forces and mathematical logic, between antique demonic influences and modern intellectual worldview. The point at which Warburg's philosophical trajectory starts to glance off from Benjamin's can be traced as follows: if, according to Warburg, the 'salvation of the human being' (RPA: 645) is the aim at which every mental effort of the thinking creature is directed, we know that, instead, Benjamin's interpretation of the 'thinking creature' points in an opposite direction, towards a totally different kind of 'salvation': 'Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But its persevering absorption takes the dead things up into its contemplation in order to save them' (OGT: 162). In order to save *them*: looking back at Warburg's phrasing in the aforementioned fr. 233, it becomes clear that Benjamin's *Melencolia* is caught in the act of doing exactly what Warburg describes in the second part of the fragment: she is perseveringly 'absorbed' in the world of things, she is sat 'together' with objects, unable and unwilling to keep *them* at distance, which means she is 'matter' - therefore, following Warburg, she is '*nothing!*'.

Saving 'humanity' or saving 'things', being '*I*' or being '*nothing*': here lies the fracture not only at the heart of Warburg's and Benjamin's species of '*Melencolia*' but, more significantly, at the core of their respective modes of repurposing the image-body, thinking-seeing, doing-undoing dialectic. If Warburg's *Melencolia* can still exclaim '*I!*', if she is able, unlike Benjamin's one, to 'save humanity' it is because her thinking still maintains the hierarchical structure for which the thinking of 'things' and 'others' is issued from the standpoint of a prior, autonomous 'I' which can, according to Warburg, be momentarily upset, displaced by the 'most violent shocks', disturbed by the 'mnemic waves' of the image and history, but which should never be completely won over by them. The 'I' can never be reduced to 'nothing', and in order to avoid being 'nothing' it needs to 'produce space' - to maintain distance.

The disambiguation of - and the problematisation of the affinity - between Benjamin's and Warburg's gestures is enriched with a further conceptual layer which can be now validated: it is not simply a (false) opposition between 'emphatic binding' (Warburg) and 'imagistic insurgence' (Benjamin) that is uncovered here, and it is also not just a case of 'feeling of distance' (Warburg) versus 'pathos of nearness' (Benjamin). It is, more specifically, I argue, a case of different repurposing of the rhythm of undoing here at stake: for Warburg, it is a matter of a productive undoing, whereby the liminal fibrillation between *pathos* and *ethos*, emphatic absorption and detached restraint, perseveres in aspiring for a specific posture and directionality, namely the tendency towards the prevalence, however temporary, of a contemplative space able to reinstate the subject-object distance and dialectics. What must prevail in the image-body, subject-object, encounter/undoing, according to Warburg, is the possibility of still claiming '*I!*': this can only be achieved through the

variations of 'detached restraint' that he employs from the early fragments on expression (*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*) up to the 1929 introduction to *Mnemosyne*. This 'prevailing' or superior status attributed to 'detached restraint' should be read through the broader philosophical lens of a human destination - the 'act of human civilization' (Rampley : 276-7) - which is oriented, with a nod to the Kant of the *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History*, towards the fundamental undoing of '*Greifmensch'*. In a short *postscriptum* to Alfred Doren's conference '*Fortuna im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*' (1922 - 1923), which Saxl transcribed from Warburg's manuscript in October 1923[213], Warburg, commenting on the gesture of a warrior grasping the goddess' (Fortuna) hair, writes about two different human states and postures, determined by the gestures of *greifen* and *begreifen*, respectively. The condition determined by the human gesture of '*Besitzergreifung*' - the 'taking possession of' - is described as the 'tragic destiny' that befalls the man who is deprived of *sophrosyne* (*Besonnenheit*) and plunged into the pathos of reflexive, instinctual impulses. These two gestures, *greifen* and *begreifen*, which in English language resonate with the ambivalent meaning of the verb 'to grasp' - to take hold of something, physically, and to comprehend something conceptually - are significantly at odds with each other in the picture presented by Warburg: to possess something, is to undo the possibility of comprehending logically.

Grasping does not coincide with a taking possession of, and it is here that Warburg is perhaps at its closest with Benjamin: yet, it also exactly here that a tangential divergence can be uncovered, inasmuch as for Warburg, the act of thinking is still to be sought in the liminal distancing from sensuous impulses, whereas for Benjamin, the bodily-material gesture of 'grasping', 'hanging' [*anhängen*], laying on [*anlegen*], and the body's material traction towards the picture plane testify to the possibility of undoing the hierarchical superiority of *Besonnenheit.* More importantly, the bodily traction towards the picture plane, for Benjamin, opens up the possibility of a fundamental incongruence between 'grasping' - understood in its purely intellectual, non-sensory sense - and 'seeing', a condition whereby 'to see' becomes disjointed from conceptual comprehension or intelligibility and comes closer to the physical, material connotation of 'grasping' as gesture: the painter 'who sees more accurately with his hand when his eye fails him, who is able to transfer the receptive innervation of the eye muscles into the creative innervation of the hand' (SW 2: 204), as well as the child who enters the picture book 'as a cloud which becomes suffused with the riotous colors of the world of pictures' (WB 2008: 226), are all testaments to the possibility of dislodging *greifen* from *begreifen*, not to favour the latter, as Warburg would have it, and neither to simply overturn the hierarchy between the two in order to uniquely favour the former. Benjamin's distance from Warburg, in this specific context, is to be located in the possibility, for 'seeing', to become the experience par excellence of non-grasping, that is, an experience that has nothing to do with the conceptual 'taking hold' of something, with mastery or possession, and which nevertheless constitutes, in its own mode, the 'true method' of envisioning qua comprehending the world through 'that' which eschews the grasp of comprehension. What is opened up by the interstice of incongruence between 'seeing' and intellectual 'grasping' is firstly an experience of disorientation, in a

[213] See Warburg, Aby. 2014. *Per Monstra ad Sphaeram,* ed. by Davide Stimilli and Claudia Wedepohl (Milano: Abscondita), p. 18.

significant inversion of Warburg's distancing and orientation-manoeuvre. If the image, for Warburg, provides the most fruitful terrain to test the quasi-Kantian question on what it means to orient oneself in space[214], Benjamin instead sees, in the image, the potential to lose directionality, posture, orientation, namely to lose oneself, to become, 'matter', or '*nothing!*'. In contrast with this experience of loss, Warburg's aspired trajectory from *Greifmensch* to *Besonnenheit* - which coincides with the trajectory '*per monstra ad sphaeram*' -, although not to be intended as a process of linear sublimation but of constant polar interaction, nevertheless retains a significant residue of the Kantian posture and directionality for which perceptual relations to the picture plane, and to the world, are to be filtered through the lens of a specifically defined goal, namely infinite human progress. This is clear upon reading the first section of fragment 332 of the *Bruchstücke:*

> 28.VIII.96.
>
> Der Erwerb des Distanzgefühles zwischen Subjekt und Objekt die Aufgabe der sogenannten Bildung und das Kriterium des Fortschrittes des Menschengeschlechts.
>
> 28.VIII.96.
>
> The acquisition of the feeling of distance between subject and object is the task of the so called culture and the criterion of progress for the human species (WGB: 273, fr. 332).

This short yet significant fragment calls for parallel with a Kantian motif already exposed in ch. 2, namely the posture and standpoint of a bird-eye view, or what Kant described as a 'view from a height over the plain of experience', and the posture of 'gazing about oneself into the distance [*in der Ferne*]' (1993: 234, emphasis mine). As Dorothea McEwan convincingly argued[215], Warburg's methodological approach to images of orientation - cosmological and astrological images, in the context of *Mnemosyne* - entailed the language of cartography: in order to orient oneself in space, it is necessary to view the '*Wanderstraße*' from a distanced-position, from above the plain of experience. Once again, the kind of interval-distance here at

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[214] Kant's original formulation famously read as 'Was heisst: Sich im Denken orientiren?' [What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?] (1786). See, Kant, Immanuel. 2012. 'What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?', in *Religion and Rational Teology,* ed. by Allen w. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1-18.

[215] See McEwan, Dorothea. 2006. 'Aby Warburg's (1866-1929) Dots and Lines. Mapping the Diffusion of Astrological Motifs in Art History', *German Studies Review,* 29: 243-268, pp. 263-65.

stake is one which opens up the possibility of re-instating posture, position and directionality - the conditions for 'orienting oneself'.

The Kantian echo in Warburg's question on orientation points to yet another instance of favouring *begreifen* over mere *greifen*: things can only be comprehended if they are not within our immediate, sensual reach/grasp, but once they are seen from above, at distance. This distinction and hierarchical friction - between sensual grasp and conceptual comprehension - is reiterated in the 1929 introduction to *Mnemosyne*, in the form of a linguistic and conceptual juxtaposition between the words - and gestures - of '*Zugreifen*' and '*begrifflicher Schau*': 'between the imagination's act of grasping [*imaginärem Zugreifen*] and the conceptual act of observing [*begrifflicher Schau*], there is the tactile encounter with the object, subsequently reflected in sculpture or painting, which we term the artistic act' (Warburg, Rampley 2009: 277).

The artistic image/gesture appears to be a *Zwischenform* between what, in Warburg's approach, inevitably remains split between two distinct gestures, intellectual contemplation and sensuous grasp, or between 'I' and 'nothing': Gombrich will claim as much when writing about the 'middle position' occupied by the image as an 'instrument of orientation' (1986: 253). The *zwischen*-position here at stake is significant of the willingness, from Warburg's part, to eventually maintain the distinction, the distance - and the limits - between emphatic absorption and intellectual reflection. The dissociative potential of the limit is not undone in favour of its transversal potential, even though interaction[216] - and not 'sublimation', as Gombrich would have it - is the regulating gesture between the extremes of 'I' and 'nothing', '*imaginäre Zugreifen*' and '*begriffliche Schau'*. The liminality of the image, its potential for cutting-across, in this case, amounts to yet another variation of an 'in-between' which still preserves the existence of something like two distinct poles, or actors, despite admitting mutual interaction. In other words, the limit-like status of the image does not emancipate itself, as in Benjamin's case, from a means-to-ends schema: for Warburg, the liminal site of fibrillation opened up in the image-body encounter is not an end in itself, but must be repurposed to the specific human 'ends' of infinite progress, thereby denying the possibility of completely submitting 'oneself' to the image's command.

If Warburg's variations of the *Zwischenraum* keep alive the possibility to productively reinstate posture, purpose and directionality at the heart of the image-body relation, then Benjamin's variations of the *Schwelle*-like instances of 'tactile encounters' between image and body are instead significant of the fundamental undoing of 'containment', 'possession', and 'posture' that precludes any possible resurgence or re-production of the split between *begreifen* and *greifen*, or between 'I' and 'nothing'. Indeed, exactly at the points where Warburg's theoretical references best aligned, to some extent, with Benjamin's - A. Riegl, A. Hildebrand, F. Th. Vischer -, it is also possible to detect a philosophical divergence in approaching the image-body liminal nexus. Acting against the possibility of radical undoing and irreversible hybridity, the persistence of a

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[216] Victoria Cirlot, in her compelling examination of Warburg's use of the terms '*Zwischenraum*' and '*Denkraum*' - and of Gombrich (mis)interpretations of these - in the context of the 1929 *Einleitung*, is right to point out that the *Zwischenraum*, in contrast with the *Denkraum*, 'necessary implies a hybridity' and that this liminal space is 'participated by both poles' / (intellectual and sensuous). Yet the point that is missing from this view is that we cannot get away from the basic fact that hybridisation, for Warburg, cannot be the *end*, but only the *means* to then open up again the possibility - and the need - for distanced contemplation, or *Denkraum*. See Cirlot, Victoria. 2018. 'Zwischenraum/Denkraum: Terminological Oscillations in the Introductions to the Atlas by Aby Warburg (1929) and Ernst Gombrich (1937)' in *Enagramma* 153 [online], Available at http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3343 [last accessed 23 April 2024].

distancing, contemplative interval further separates Warburg's gesture from Benjamin's, inasmuch as it enables the former to still pose the question of image-orientation, or thinking with and via images, through the grammar of human progress.

It seems only pertinent to conclude by returning to the one picture that both connects and separates Benjamin from Warburg: if only Warburg's 'heroic' *Melencolia* could speak, not only would she exclaim '*I!*', but she would also warn us against the dangers of being an object amongst objects, of being nothing but matter, in a bid to save Being. And if only Benjamin's apathetic winged creature could speak, she would perhaps use the words of a poet, in order to suggest that there is no *begreifen* or *greifen* gesture that is not fundamentally underpinned, traversed and doomed by its own undoing: 'we possess nothing, for we don't even possess ourselves. We have nothing because we are nothing. What hand will I reach out, and to what universe?' (Pessoa 2018: 268).

Chapter 4 - The relevance of Benjamin's Liminal Image for Contemporary Visual Cultures and Philosophies of the Limit: Georges Didi-Huberman's Method

4.1 Premise: Image-*seuil*

What Benjamin had so aptly captured in his philosophic-pragmatical distinction between '*Schwelle*' and '*Grenze*'[217], namely the liminal status of the image, its ability to trace borders while simultaneously irritating the presumption of the border's imperturbability, its potential to elicit reflections on the limit's coterminous palpability and un-graspability, finds a contemporary resurgence and relevance in the work of French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. It goes without saying that Didi-Huberman's understanding of the image's liminality - which informs and underpins his life-long work at the crossroads of philosophy, art-history and literature - is heavily and evidently influenced by Benjamin's (and Warburg's)[218] variations on the limit-like status of the image. While this is not the place to engage in a comprehensive analysis of Didi-Huberman's numerous references to Benjamin or Warburg, it suffices to point out that one of his earliest definitions of the image through the grammar of a limit-like potency stems from the interlacing of two notions of the image's liminality, respectively formulated by Benjamin and Warburg. Quoting directly from Warburg's phrasing in the *Introduction to Mnemosyne* and from Benjamin's 'Rites de Passage' excerpt in the *Passagenwerk*, Didi-Huberman weaves together the physiognomy of the 'interval' - *Zwischenraum* (Warburg) - and the potential of the 'threshold' - *Schwelle* (Benjamin) - to lay the foundation of what will be the conceptual capstone of his method of thinking and writing about images: 'the image […] is formally apprehended as the potential of the threshold [puissance du *seuil*]' (DH 2000: 115).

The purpose of this chapter is to unpack this claim and to clearly demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Didi-Huberman's understanding of the image's liminal potency, as filtered through the lens of Benjamin's own distinction between '*Schwelle*' and '*Grenze*', and the way in which such an understanding opens up new avenues for rethinking the relation between seeing and thinking, vision and touch, images and us, the body and the world, at a time where the very limits between these are subjected to a process of relentless conflation, erosion and annihilation. If Benjamin's reflections on the image *Schwelle*-like potential, against the 20th-century backdrop of a politics of self-sufficiency and division, in which a thought of the limit was violently instrumentalised to erase, literally speaking, the place of the other - the Holocaust being the epitome of such a tendency -, were significant of an attempt to situate the question of the other at the margins of the limit's own limit, then Didi-Huberman's retrieval of such a gesture, at a time where a politics of division and self-sufficiency finds a surprising and worrisome resurgence in the aftermath of what had been considered the

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[217] For a discussion of the brief excerpt titled 'Rites de Passages' (AP: 495), where Benjamin advocates for a philosophical distinction between *Grenze* and *Schwelle* see the 'Introduction' of the present thesis, §0.2.

[218] This is not to say that Didi-Huberman's theoretical references are limited to Benjamin and Warburg: as it is well known, Didi-Huberman's oeuvre encompasses an impressive amount of references, naturally linked to the French tradition of literary and philosophical thought - Maurice Merlau-Ponty, Georges Bataille, Pierre Fédida, Maurice Blanchot, Victor Hugo, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, just to name a few.

point of exhaustion of all philosophical enterprises to undo the *limit's otherness* for the sake of *something other* - an origin, a destination, a direction, a place, an identity - finds a contemporary relevance and urgency insofar as it holds alive the hope of a different possibility: to articulate a thought of the limit, via image, by which to envision the nothing, the no-one and the non-place that inexplicably and paradoxically takes shape at the margins of the limit's own undoing and de-shaping.

In what follows, despite tracing significant parallels between Benjamin's variations on the *Schwelle*-like quality of the image and Didi-Huberman's understanding of the image as *seuil*, attention will not be given to the way in which Didi-Huberman interprets or appropriates Benjamin's (or Warburg's) insights, rather, the focus will be posed on the relevance and contemporary potential of Didi-Huberman's method to interrogate the image's liminality, in other words his philosophical questioning of the image's ability to relentlessly problematise our thinking of the limit, considering the broader implications that his own diagnosis of the image's - and the gaze's - liminal potential bear upon the rethinking of the interstice between philosophy and art, writing and image, image and thought.

4.2 On Method as Gesture: Georges Didi-Huberman's 'Loving Touch', or '*Caresse*'

We begin with method where Didi-Huberman ends with it: gracefully placed at the liminal site of an ending, the short caption '*Méthode: Caresse*' is the final act of Didi-Huberman's *Aperçues*, a collection of almost 200 fragments published in 2018, hitherto unavailable to the English reader[219]. Yet this concluding piece does anything but sealing off: the stitching come loose, thrusting the book forward towards the granular dimension of a vertiginous, direct experience of the world. Method begins where the book ends, at the very moment when one closes the last page and lifts the gaze upon the world before them. A solicitation to sketch the glimpse - '*Inscrire l'aperçue*' - offers an insight into the method and gesture - i.e. the method *as* gesture - by which Didi-Huberman touches upon the indescribable interlacing of image, gaze and thought. By ways of analogy with the gentle gesture of a loving touch (*caresse*), Didi-Huberman invites the reader to envision the delicate nexus of writing and looking, history and art, through the grammar of non-possession. The lack of grasp inherent in the gesture of caressing someone, or something, speaks to the intuition, elicited by Didi-Huberman's long-standing confrontation with images, that the act of looking is intimately bound up with an experience of loss - loosening, dispossession - and, consequently, of inexhaustible desire.

The desire here in question is not, however, a desire to hold, to possess - in both senses of comprehending, grasping logically and of physically taking hold - but a desire to dance-with, and dwell-with,

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[219] An English version of a small selection of fragments later to be included in *Aperçues* is available: Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2016. 'Glimpses. Between Appearance and Disappearance', trans. Melissa McMahon, *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung,* 1: 109-124. References will be given to the 2018 French original edition.

as Didi-Huberman makes clear in an interview published in the same year as *Aperçues*[220]: to 'dance anew' - with words, and with images - is to 'reopen the field of the possible' (2018: 128). Looking at - and not merely seeing - glimpses[221] - is thus a gesture constructed not on the grounds of a possession - grasp - which would register on the level of knowledge, or conceptual appropriation, but on the quality of a fundamental lack, in a similar way in which Eros's flight, in the *Symposium*, is fuelled by a lack, or a deficiency of resources - 'yet his resources always slip through his fingers' (Plato: 40, 203c). Encountering a glimpse means also encountering a palpable epistemological limit, beyond which no knowledge - and no moral illumination - can reach: a glimpse - '*aperçue*' - is precisely defined by the rhythmic kinesis of a constant slippage, whereby 'that' which comes only does so inasmuch as it simultaneously goes, slipping through the open cracks of our intentional, intellectual grasp. A glimpse is not merely the image, or the visible, but a peculiar efficacy of the image, or of the visible, a potential for - but for what? For setting and simultaneously upsetting limits, and for cutting across our gaze, displacing both the image and the gaze, undoing the the very possibility of a subject who sees and knows as a self: it is a potential for being touched by a certain 'appearing' as no-self, as Nancy would put it, a potential for appropriating 'touch as an event' (2019: 22). The choice of wording needs attention here, since what Nancy articulates - writing about the relation between philosophy and art - really goes to the heart of the method exposed in Didi-Huberman's *caresse*-fragment. An 'appearing' is not appearance, in the same way in which a glimpse is not just the image, it is first and foremost rhythm, temporality. Equally, an 'event' - with a clear nod to Derrida[222] - is not merely 'that' which happens, but the very incalculability, unpredictability and un-graspability of a 'coming', the coming of a slippage - of that which always slips away, and which can never be an object of appropriation. Thus, to 'appropriate touch as an event' unveils the paradox of a displaced gesture, unhinged from a selfhood, which tries to catch something that is by default in-appropriable, or better, a gesture which tries to catch on the fly the very un-graspability of an appearing.

Benjamin's distinction, when referring to Eros's flight in the *Symposium,* in the context of the 'Epistemocritical Prologue', between the gesture of the 'pursuer' [*verfolger*] and of the 'lover' [*liebender*] can serve as a useful theoretical tool to illustrate this last point: if the action of '*verfolgen*' is intimately bound up with the purpose of '*einfangen*', or 'chasing' with a view to 'capture', or to hold still, then the lover's gesture cannot but unfold as a loving touch, a touching-upon, or gentle caress, which gives up all aspirations to grasp. Consequently, the method described in Didi-Huberman's *caresse*-fragment can be understood by ways of analogy with the flight, and the gaze, of the lover, and not the pursuer: the lover knows that beauty will always slip away, he or she can sense this limit; therefore, the lover does not *pursue* it; rather, the lover *desires* it, which means he or she desires not beauty per se, but its very un-graspability, its fleeting, indescribable

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[220] See Didi-Huberman Georges, and Muriel Pic. 2020. 'Danzare, a libri aperti. In dialogo con Georges Didi-Huberman', *Frontiere della psicoanalis*i, 1: 117-130.

[221] The difference between seeing and looking, the visible and the visual, the the visible and the legible, is at the heart of Didi-Huberman's reflections in at least two major seminal works: see Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images,* pp. 11-52; see also Didi-Huberman, Georges. 1992. *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit).

[222] On Derrida's discussion of the kind of presence marked by the event see Derrida, Jacques. 2015. *Penser à ne pas voir. Écrits sur les arts du visible, 1979-2004* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence), see esp. 1 'Les Arts de l'espace. Entretien avec Peter Brunette et David Wills', pp. 13-60.

slippage towards something and somewhere else.[223] Needless to say, the *caresse*-method is not a methodology, i.e. it does not fall under the domain of a certain *-logy*, but can only be articulated as gesture, more precisely, as a loving gesture:

> I will understand nothing if I just want to grasp [*prendre*]. To grasp is to immobilise, to immobilise is not to understand. I must therefore accept that I can only catch in passing, only on the fly, and that I can only have the shreds of a movement as my treasure […] We must, of course, give shape, and relentlessly so. Bringing to life that which only passes by. Sketching the glimpse [*Inscrire l'aperçue*]. But without holding anything still, so that the caress does not freeze […] One must assume for each form - a printed sentence, a book are forms - that it is transitory, that it relentlessly moves over the body of the world, like a loving touch [*caresse*] (DH 2018: 332).

In the economy of this excerpt, the loving touch, or '*caresse'*, does not merely function as a metaphor but it indicates a modus operandi which structures the praxis of writing and of looking. Didi-Huberman's '*caresse*-method' shifts attention to the edges on which looking overflows into writing, raising questions on the enigmatic coexistence of delimitation (*inscrire,* writing down) and the ungraspable (*aperçue,* 'that' which appears only in passing by). This paradoxical co-belonging, inscribed in the formulation 'sketching the glimpse', goes straight to the heart of the semantic ambivalence of the word 'limit', for which ideas of separation, delimitation and detachment are structurally entangled with alluring gestures of touching, crossing, passage, mediation and excess. The simultaneity of cutting, crossing, - cutting-across, transversally, obliquely - and of intangibility, detachment - cutting out, delimiting - unfolds through the rhythm of a loving touch, in its distinction from touching per se. What is the difference between a *loving* touch and a touch?

If we refer back to the gaze and flight of the lover, in its distinction from the pursuer, the difference between a caress and a touch becomes clearer, inasmuch as it can be articulated through the grammar of a double rhythm, or a heteronomy of rhythms: inscribed in the gesture of caressing something or someone are both movements of touching a limit - a body, the world - and then detaching from it, coming and then going, precisely like the glimpse's intermittent mode appearing. A loving touch is the performative of a desire to slip, over and over again, to never grasp, and never trespass. A simple touch does not necessarily entail rhythm: I can reach my hands out and touch something, thereafter holding my hand still, grasping what I touch. But a loving touch would not be 'loving' if it did not necessarily entail the doubling of gesture whereby to touch is also to detach, never holding still, being bounded by the coterminous inevitability and yet impossibility to grasp. A loving touch means touching a limit by giving up all aspirations of incorporating or sublimating this

[223] It is important to specify that to desire, in this context, is not exactly the opposite of grasping. If to desire is to not-know, then the very gesture of desiring as the not-knowing configures itself, paradoxically, as a mode of grasping, more precisely as the only mode of grasping able to undo the premises on which the 'grasping' of an object relies upon.

very limit into one's own movement, respecting the materialisation of its un-graspability without appealing to a transcendental solution. Yet what does all of this mean when we translate gestures from the plane of relations between 'glimpse' and 'sketching', shifting from the distance-proximity between bodies to the specific relation between writing and looking, image and thought, philosophy and the visual?

4.3 *Liminal Images* VI: The 'night that moves'

When confronted with glimpses, or an appearing that slips through the limits of our ability to grasp, I can only retain the memory of a fleeting tangency, in other words, I can only retain the 'shreds' of that motion, the moving, the touching - not the object that was momentarily adjacent to me. Writing about glimpses, or writing about the image's slippage-ability, from within my lack of grasp, would be to keep trace of a liminal collision, the point of contact and friction where the visible touches the thinkable, upsets it and questions it, displacing and challenging its own parameters: the point at which both the visible and the thinkable overshoot their limits towards something other - their own margins - that will always defy the self-enclosed schemes of productivity, possibility, determinability, morality, logos. At the margins of language, where words and logic fail, there is nothing: a lack, a loss. 'I am speech*less*, I am breath*less*', are common expressions we use to articulate a fundamental inability to grasp: to put into words an 'event', something we confront, to paraphrase Derrida, that takes us by surprise, 'obliquely'[224]. Being touched by the indescribable, the inexplicable and the unforeseeable, cannot but give rise to a moment of astonishment, surprise, amazement: it is not coincidental that in the first lines of the fragment '*Méthode: Caresse*' one reads about the sense of renewed astonishment which leads to the desire of caressing. Picturing an encounter between bodies - a hand posed on someone's breast -, Didi-Huberman writes that 'it always amazes me to see that, despite your breathing - which is already movement - my own fingers are gradually forgotten if they remain immobile' [*cela m'étonne toujours de constater qe'en dépit de ta respiration - qui est dejà mouvement -, mes propres doigts s'oublient peu à peu s'ils restent immobile*] (2018: 332). This acknowledgment leads to the conclusion that being touched by, and touching something, always implicates movement, motion, displacement - I forget that I am touching you if my fingers lay still, so I move them a little, 'and this is called a loving touch' (2018: 332) .

In light with the insight that a 'loving touch' corresponds to the ability of moving and of being moved by our inability to grasp - the clear sensation that 'our resources' slip 'through our fingers' -, the touching of this limit ignites a desire to envision, literally, to *put-into-vision*: not merely to make the invisible visible, but to see into the inexplicable, the indescribable, the unforeseeable. Here, Didi-Huberman's method converges upon and yet also detaches from a Kantian motif pertaining to the experience of the sublime: if Kant famously wrote about the 'inscrutability' of presentation - of the idea of freedom -, and about the 'negativity'

[224] See Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: Harverster Press Limited), see esp. 'Tympan', pp. xiv-xxix.

of presentation with regard to the senses, Didi-Huberman's method in turn modifies a key parameter regarding the form of presentation which defies our ability to grasp: no longer just 'abstract', no longer 'inscrutable', 'that' which exceeds our comprehension is not merely invisible, in the Kantian sense for which it is not logically possible to see it, but it gets very close to a 'nothing', a de-saturation of presence, that functions as a vital stimulus for the very possibility of sensing and envisioning 'something'. It is a kinetic potential for moving the visible, rather than abstracting from it, within its own limits, towards something irreducible to the visible yet still grounded within the sensible. To put into vision, to envision, thus means to move the visible, the knowable and the thinkable: it is not a matter of the unspeakable, the invisible, the unpresentable or the unthinkable per se[225], it is, more precisely, a matter of being able to see into - and not beyond - the indescribable and the unforeseeable, the unknowable. Rejecting the Kantian precept, elucidated in the third *Critique*'s discussion of the role played by imagination in the context of the sublime, for which imagination's ability to apprehend but inability to comprehend is a source of displeasure, Didi-Huberman's *caresse*-method finds, in the inability to grasp and to comprehend, the cornerstone of an imaginative potential to 'give shape' - '*donner forme*' -, to put the visible into motion, a move that does not entail abstraction, but remains tied to and grounded within the senses. What is shaped in the act of envisioning is a particular kind of 'nothing' or nonbeing, namely 'non-knowledge'[226]:

> Let us simply admit that images are very often the vehicles of something like a non-knowledge [*non-savoir*]. But non-knowledge is not to knowledge what total darkness would be to full light. Non-knowledge is imagined, thought and written. It thus becomes something other than the 'nothing' of simple ignorance or obscurity: it becomes the night that moves, where faint glimmers pass and fill us with wonder in the dark, and make us want to see them again. (DH 2018: 12)

Rather than giving in to inscrutability, non-knowledge is put into vision, it is 'that' which is envisioned - 'imagined, thought and written'. One could say that non-knowledge is a potential for motion, for moving and being moved-by. If there were one residue of the Kantian sublime to still resurface in Didi-Huberman's *caresse*-method, that would be the intuition that what exceeds our ability to grasp necessarily entails movement - the 'vibration' [*Erschütterung*] mentioned in §27 of the Analytic of the Sublime. 'Nothing is touched that isn't in movement' (DH 2018: 332): it is this imagistic, kinetic potential for moving and being moved, this

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[225] For an insightful overview and comparative discussion of the political issue of unrepresentability in contemporary image theory - Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Ranciére, Didi-Huberman -, see Alloa, Emmanuel. 2015. 'The Most Sublime of All Laws: The Strange Resurgence of a Kantian Motif in Contemporary Image Politics', *Critical Inquiry* 41(2): 367-89. Alloa's own contribution to the debate is useful inasmuch as it pinpoints the crucial difference, already inherent in the Kantian sublime, between an experience of the beyond and a liminal experience: 'presentation does not give in to unrepresentability' (2015: 384), but, in the experience of sublimity, the conditions of presentability are transformed from positive to negative. A negative presentation is not mere invisibility or impossibility of presentation but a 'presentation (exhibitio) in which the rules of presentation themselves come to the fore' (2015: 385). Thus, the sublime is the most radical experience 'of the threshold' and not 'beyond the threshold' (2015: 384).

[226] On Didi-Huberman's notion of '*non-savoir*' see Saint, Nigel. 2017. 'Georges Didi-Huberman: From non-savoir to the Atlas', *Images, Imagini, Images,* 5: 39–62.

displacing and tangential touch and detachment, that non-knowledge presents to the senses. In another fragment, titled 'Écrire l'abord', Didi-Huberman claims that to write about images is to 'write, first of all', since we do not write after having thought about what we have seen', instead, 'it is by writing that our gaze unfolds and loosens itself up [*se déplie, se délie*], becomes sensible to ourselves' (2018: 257). Looking at images, according to this process, is to sense the rhythmic pulsation that moves before, through and at the edges of language, a vibration able to move, and to begin, language anew.

It is certainly, as Kant intuited and as Didi-Huberman still maintains, a question of movement, of rhythm: if what counts is the 'dance', namely the 'how' and not the 'what', then the question of method really comes to the fore, a method which cannot prescribe any theoretical instruction or paradigm, but which can only unfold as gesture. To put-into-vision, to envision, coincides with the difficult gesture of 'finding words for what is before our eyes' (GS 4: 364), and indeed Didi-Huberman's method inherits an important Benjaminian insight on the relation between writing and looking. Limning a glimpse of everyday life in the sunbathed and picturesque village of San Gimignano, Benjamin wrote that 'only when I had found these words, from the turmoil of immediate impressions, there it emerged, with its precise reliefs and deep shadows, the image' (GS 4: 364). A closer look at this passage reveals a hybrid, from image-to-image process whereby a visual image ('what is before our eyes') elicits and and arouses the imagistic potential of language, and once language unfolds through and articulates the loss here at stake - being speechless, lost for words -, it gives it shape - '*donner forme*', according to the *caresse*-method fragment -, in other words, it creates out of that image, out of the loss that the image inevitably entails, a new life and corpus. This is exactly what 'sketching the glimpse' means: to see into the loss, to find words for - to give shape to, to bring to life anew - the relentless touching and detaching, the vibrating rhythm of a loving touch by which the image becomes tangent, if only for a brief moment, to our gaze.

Having now sketched the contours of the *caresse* method underpinning the praxis of 'sketching the glimpse', it is time to ponder the philosophical stakes, critical questions and potential perplexities that such a method invites to attend. Let's consider the image chosen by Didi-Huberman to describe the alternative sense of 'nothing' that 'non-knowledge' comes to embody: irreducible to the 'nothing' of simple ignorance [*méconnaissance*] or obscurity', the 'nothing' of non-knowledge is pictured with the image of the 'night that moves' [*la nuit qui remue*] (2018: 12). Yet, in line with the premise that the *caresse* method in question is first and foremost a matter of gesture, a praxis of the gaze and of writing, how can the difference *qua* interstice between mere obscurity and the 'night that moves' be sensed, if what separates them is by default indescribable, inexplicable and un-graspable? How are we to understand the shift from mere obscurity and ignorance to the 'night that moves'? In what sense does this kind of 'nothing' elicit motion and becomes something other than ignorance? And how can the vision elicited by 'non-knowledge' be articulated along the lines of a *non-savoir-faire* able to the keep the 'vibration' alive?

Taking up Didi-Huberman's invitation to sketch - not to grasp - the glimpse via images and words, I will approach these questions by engaging in a close reading of two moonlit encounters with the night where the interstice between mere obscurity and the 'night that moves' is neither explained nor simply described

but, crucially, sensed and envisioned. I will begin by examining Rainer Maria Rilke's moonlit encounter with the image of the Sphinx[227], which will serve the twofold purpose of disambiguating between the the 'nothing' of simple obscurity and the nothing vouched for with the liminal image of 'the night that moves', while also functioning as a literary prototype and performative of Didi-Huberman's method of 'sketching the glimpse'. I will then move to the second image hereby considered as fertile ground against which to measure and evaluate Didi-Huberman's method, namely Benjamin's vignette 'The Moon', in *Berlin Childhood*. This will achieve the following objectives. I) Benjamin's vignette will present an occasion to rethink and challenge one of the key insights ensuing from Didi-Huberman's theory (read praxis) of the gaze. II) It will also offer a different interpretation, with respect to Didi-Huberman's, of what is means to turn the experience of looking at and writing about images into an experience of (linguistic) renewal. Finally, it will be instrumental to unpack and to elucidate the claim that the relation between knowledge and non-knowledge is 'something other than one of simple privation' but rather 'a relationship of point of view' (DH 2018: 12).

4.3.1. 'Indescribable outline[s]'. An Owl's gentle Brushing upon the Sphinx's Cheek

'My friend', wrote Rilke on the 1st of February 1914[228], 'in Berlin take a look at the bust of Amenophis the Fourth in the center glass-roofed pavilion of the Egyptian Museum' (1975a: 138). This letter to Benvenuta[229] centres around one inexplicable paradox, which is introduced straight from the outset through the image of Amenophis: Rilke invites his 'friend' to 'sense' [*fühlen*], from this image, 'what it means [*was es heißt*] to be face to face with the infinite world [*der unendlichen Welt*] and in such a limited surface [*beschränkter Fläche*]' (1975a: 138). It is not only the fascinating concurrence of the 'limited' and the 'infinite' that is particularly remarkable here, but also the contrast between 'sense' and 'meaning'. Amenophis's bust elicits a deep and complex philosophical questioning - 'what it means' to confront the image's potential to upset the limit - that ought to be 'sensed', not explained nor described. In other words, what seems to be at play in the interstice between 'sense' and 'meaning' is a material potential to set the limits of language into motion. The question at stake is how 'meaning', clearly something that belongs to the realm of philosophic-theoretical questioning, can be 'sensed', as opposed to understood, comprehended, explained. It is *the* question that Didi-Huberman asks in the short fragment titled - with a clear nod to Benjamin's trajectory

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[227] The rationale of bringing this text by Rilke - 'The Tenth Elegy' of the collection of poems *Duineser Elegien* (published in 1923) - into fruitful confrontation with Didi-Huberman's *caresse*-method lies in the potential, inherent in the literary image of the 'indescribable outline' sketched in the elegy, to literally act as a performative (and prototype) of Didi-Huberman's liminal image of the 'night that moves'.

[228] See Rilke, Rainer Maria, and Elaine B. Boney. 1975. 'Appendix C.: Letter about Egypt, 1 February 1914', *Duinesian Elegies*, 81: 138-140. For the original German text see Rilke, Rainer Maria and Magda von Hattingberg. 1954. *Briefwechsel mit Benvenuta* (Esslingen: Bechtle), pp. 22-26.

[229] The pianist Magda von Hattingberg, with whom Rilke had a brief romantic relation in those months.

from the centre to the peripheral, or the marginal - 'From main characters to extras': 'To elicit a question - philosophical decision - in the field of visual things, what is that?[*Qu'est-ce que susciter une question - décision philosophique - dans le domaine des choses visuelles*?]' (2018: 112). What is it? What, in Amenophis's bust, raises a philosophical questioning that eschews the limits of meaning and ought to be sensed?

We would be deviating off trajectory if we were to look for an answer solely in the image: it is not exactly the image alone that raises a question, better, a questioning, but the act of looking itself, the gaze that touches it and is in returned touched by it. There would be no questioning if the image were not seen, not looked at; one must 'take a look', as Rilke suggests to Benvenuta, before any question - more dramatically, any utterance, including the letter itself - can arise. Building on the same paradox introduced at the incipit of the letter, Rilke goes on to recount how one night in Egypt, confronted with the majestic view of the Sphinx, he also experienced a fundamental un-graspability, touching the limits of his ability to comprehend while simultaneously sensing inexplicable 'connections and insights'. It is exactly on this point, on the mode of 'sensing' here at stake, that I would like to draw attention. To this end, it is important to set the scene: Rilke's viewing of the Sphinx takes place at night and the image comes into view after walking past the pyramid from behind, then turning one's back to it and realising that the full moon 'poured such a flood of moonlight over the endless view' (1975a: 138) that it was necessary for him to temporarily shade his eyes. What happens after the view becomes settled is arguably a practical implementation of the *caresse*-method vouched for by Didi-Huberman:

> From time to time I closed my eyes and although my heart pounded, I reproached myself with not feeling this deeply enough: did I not have to reach a point in my astonishment [*meines Staunens*] where I had never been before? I said to myself: just imagine you had been carried here with eyes blindfolded and put down here obliquely in the deep, scarcely blowing coolness and now you open your eyes ... And when I actually opened them now, good heavens, - it took a good while before they recovered, comprehended that creature, the mouth, the cheek, the forehead on which moonlight and shadow [*Mondlicht und Mondschatten*] flowed from expression to expression. How many times already had my eye attempted this detailed cheek (Rilke, Boney 1975a: 139).

Let's ponder, for a brief moment, on the striking similarities between this passage and Didi-Huberman's fragment on method: in the same way in which, for Didi-Huberman, 'astonishment' arises from the realisation that, despite the *rhythmic vibration* of [the chest] breathing, his fingers would be no longer felt - 'gradually forgotten' - unless he began the touching anew - with a 'caress' -, equally, the 'astonishment' felt by Rilke originates from the acknowledgement that, despite the *rhythmic pulsation* of his heart pounding, he would not feel this 'deeply enough' unless he began the looking anew, once his eyes reopened. 'How many times' had Rilke's gaze already touched upon the Sphinx's cheek, and how many times had that same outline

slipped away from comprehension, one could add. What happens at this point in Rilke's vision is quite remarkable:

> And then, just as I observed it again I suddenly was drawn in an unexpected manner into its confidence, and I got to know it, then I experienced it in the most complete sensing [*vollkommensten Gefühl*] of its roundness. Not until a moment afterward did I comprehend [*begriff*] *what* had happened. Just imagine this: behind the protrusion of the crown on the head of the Sphinx an owl had flown up and slowly, indescribably audible [*unbeschreiblich hörbar*] in the pure depth of the night, had brushed [*gestreift*] the face with its gentle flight: and now there emerged in my hearing which had grown very sharp in the long stillness of the night the contour of that cheek, sketched [*eingezeichnet*] there as if by a miracle. (Rilke, Boney 1975a: 139).

What is particularly remarkable in this short excerpt is the fact that 'comprehension' only arises a-posteriori, from a prior inexplicable sensing [*Gefühl*]: from the audible and sensuous spacing of gesture - from the noise of a gentle touching, the 'brushing' of the owl's wing upon the Sphinx's face. Going back to the contrast between 'sense' and 'meaning' with which the letter opens via the image of Amenophis, it is interesting to note how the outline, the limit in question, marking out the Sphinx's cheek, is 'sensed' rather than 'comprehended'. What is 'comprehended' here is not exactly the outline, its purportedly hidden meaning, but only the practical, material mode in which this outline was 'sketched', and becomes sensible to Rilke. The manner in which the outline is 'sketched' places itself at the antipodes of any foreseeing or anticipation, it defies all expectations and comes 'unexpectedly', 'as if by a miracle', as something 'indescribable' and yet 'audible', or the 'indescribably audible': the indescribable here is neither the invisible nor the unknowable as such - Kant's 'inscrutability' - but, in line with Didi-Huberman's insight that 'non-knowledge' is *not* the ''nothing' of simple ignorance' but can be 'imagined, thought and written' (2018: 12), the 'indescribably audible' outline unfolds through the sensuous interlacing of gazing, touching, feeling, hearing, thinking, writing. The outline is not merely seen or understood but sensed and envisioned: it is literally put into vision, elicited by the sound of an owl's brushing along the cheek, whose reverberations touch upon the gaze, which in turn overflows into writing, acquiring a new corpus in the lines of the letter to Benvenuta, and afterwards in §80-85 of the 'Tenth Elegy'[230], which notably gives new life to the moonlit vision of the Sphinx's cheek:

[230] See Rilke, Rainer Maria, and Elaine B. Boney. 1975b. 'The Tenth Elegy', *Duinesian Elegies*, 81: 56-63.

> Not that his *sight* [*Blick*] comprehends it, still dizzy
> from recent death. But her *gaze* [*ihr Schaun*] startles an owl
> from behind the double crown's edge. And it,
> skimming slowly, brushing along the cheek,
> the one with the fullest curve,
> gently sketches [*zeichnet weich*] in the new
> hearing of the dead, across the double opened-out page,
> the indescribable outline [*den unbeschreiblichen Umriß*]
> (Rilke, Boney 1975b: 61, trans. Mod. FM, emphasis mine).

Two important and interrelated points of reflections can be developed from the first two sentences. First, the contrast between *Blick* and *Shaun,* and the two actions respectively associated with them: while 'his' - the newly-dead's - 'sight' touches a limit, her gaze - Lament's gaze, the gaze of the early-dead - frightens an owl, which in turn prompts it to sketch the 'indescribable outline', brushing along the Sphinx's cheek. The prompt for the owl's brushing upon the cheek, making the outline available to the senses, is clearly the act of looking - 'her gaze', an experience of looking at, and not of mere 'sight' -, in the same way in which, in the 1914 letter, it is only "just as" Rilke observes the Sphinx 'again' that the outline is sensed, and that the 'immense' is inscribed into the sensuous spacing of gesture where the owl's wing gently touches upon the cheek. From this, it follows that mere sight does not suffice to render the interstice between nothing and the 'night that moves' - the sketched outline - sensible. If to look properly, in its difference from mere sight, is to get things moving, literally, then this motion, this elusive yet palpable vibration that cuts across sound and vision, vision and language, presents the potential to make the interstice between mere obscurity - 'the pure depths of the night'- and the 'night that moves', or the owl's brushing along the cheek, available to the senses. The kinetic potential for moving the sensible elicited by Lament's *Shaun* stands for a mode of displacing the gaze from the prejudices of only seeing what we already see, recognise and comprehend, and of seeing nothing, or losing sight of the senses. Sketching the glimpse, or the 'indescribable outline', is to inscribe the structural impossibility of a definitive closure - the Sphinx's, Amenophis's un-graspability and immensity - within the finite outline, within that which is 'sensed', available to the senses - a stone, a sound, a caress, a letter, a poem. To see into, to envision the 'indescribably audible' outline is thus to cherish and nourish the vibration, to keep renewing our capacity to move and to be moved, to displace and to be displaced - first and foremost from our own certainties and parameters, from our own being. That's why the loving touch, the caress, the owl's gentle brushing, the intermittent opening and reopening of the eyes, the intermittent touching on and detaching from a body, are not only possible but necessary: necessary in order to keep moving, and to keep loving.

We are now in a position to attempt a preliminary answer to the questions underpinning this excursus on Rilke's moonlight vision which, as I argued, serves to shed light on - and to tease out the philosophical stakes of - the mode of presence of 'non-knowledge' as 'the night that moves', in its distinction from the

'nothing' of simple 'obscurity'. Interestingly, Rilke refers to the simultaneous and coterminous occurrence of moonlight and shadow - *Mondlicht* and *Mondschatten* - when finally experiencing the Sphinx's cheek in its 'most complete sensing'. The obscurity of the 'night that moves' is not simply the negation of light, or what darkness would look like if enlightened, but it is, quite differently, the ontological condition for the emergence of fleeting glimmers.

Where does the experience of looking into the 'night that moves', and of writing about the 'non-knowledge' it arouses, eventually lead to? Something happens, something indescribable touches upon Rilke's gaze, and precisely because this 'something' carries with it the inconclusive and inexhaustible character of its mode of presence, it demands more: more than recognisability, more than knowledge, more than graspability, more than simple obscurity. Neither leading to clarity, nor to obscurity per se, the fleeting movement of this exceeding demand is nothing other than a simple 'caress', or the liminal point of contact and detachment between one another: unexpected, indescribable loving touches of flare right at the heart of darkness, like 'a flood of moonlight' (Rilke, Boney 1975a: 138), gently skimming the depths of the night.

4.3.2 Moonlight Philosophy. Why the World?

The second visionary encounter here considered for its potential to further elucidate the philosophical implications of Didi-Huberman's species of the liminal image as the 'night that moves' is a short vignette from Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*, titled 'The Moon'. As it has been previously pointed out, to 'dance anew', namely to turn the experience of looking and of writing into an occasion for moving language, for giving new form and life to things, is, for Didi-Huberman, to 'reopen the field of the possible' (2018: 128). By closely engaging with 'The Moon', I aim to show that Benjamin's text invites us to expand on Didi-Huberman's proposition, and to advance the argument that what gets moving, what gets 'reopened' by the capacity to begin the dance anew, is not exactly the 'field of the possible' but, more crucially, the rhythmic, tangential touching and detaching of the possible *and* the impossible. While the previous excursus on Rilke's moonlight encounter served the purpose of shading more light on the distinction between the nothing of mere obscurity and the liminal image of the 'night that moves', this detour via Benjamin's 'The Moon' lends itself to elucidating the quite cryptic claim, expressed in the same fragment by Didi-Huberman, that the relation between knowledge and non-knowledge - light and darkness, appearance and disappearance, the possible and the impossible - is 'something other than one of simple privation' but rather 'a relationship of point of view' (2018: 12).

Since the incipit of both versions of 'The Moon' vignette - the last and shorter draft (1938) and the draft written in 1932-34 -, the moonlight is presented as an ominous luminescence which is not destined for 'theatre of our daily existence' (BC: 115), but which points to an alterity - 'an alternate' or secondary 'earth'

[*Nebenerde*]. The peculiar feature of this other earth, caressed by moonlit strokes, is that it is first and foremost an astronomical body, inasmuch as it does not assume (human) existence, but precedes it: 'its broad bosom, whose breath was time, stirs no longer; the creation has finally made its way back home, and can again don the widow's veil which the day had torn off' (BC: 115). Rather than serving as a stage for human existence, this earth is itself 'transformed into a satellite of the moon' (BC: 115), and its status is therefore defined the by movement, the orbital gravitation, towards that which it follows. Defined by the intermittency of a 'coming and going' (BC: 115), the light emitted by the moon 'cuts through' human existence and displaces it as we know it: 'when it [the moonlight] was there in the room and I awoke, I was effectively unhoused [*ausquartiert*], for my room seemed willing to accommodate no one besides the moon' (BC: 115).

What unfolds through the experience of looking at things bathed in the moonlight, recounted by Benjamin, can be preliminary sketched as a shift of viewpoint implicating an upset, a disturbance. In this move from the stage of existence - realm of possibility - to the ground zero of creation - the space once occupied by 'what had been' - the perception of things as we see them in daylight is disrupted, altered:

> The first things that attracted my gaze were the two cream-colored basins on the washstand. By day, it never entered my head to dwell on them. In the moonlight, however, the band of blue that ran around the upper part of the basins was upsetting me. (BC: 115-16, trans. Mod. FM).

In the alternate earth, noises - 'the gurgling of the water, the noise with which I put down first the carafe and then the glass' (BC: 116) - are inexplicably not alien to everyday experience but they strike Benjamin's ear as 'repetition', indicating that this 'earth' does not relate to the world through a logic of exceptionality; quite differently, its relation with the world is, arguably, a 'relationship of point of view', to use Didi-Huberman's formulation. This suggests that the bond between moonlit earth and the world as we know it is only readable through a shift in the mode of looking, a move that does not entail 'privation', i.e. it does not invoke an either/or situation. In other words, the moonlit earth is not simply the world in its complete deprivation of daylight and clarity: far from being a breach to illuminate some kind of otherworldly beyond, the moonlit earth is an opening onto the world as captured in its own obscure strangeness to itself - it is the world seen under a different (moon) light, in its 'upsetting', moonlit darkness. From the muddled soil of a moonlit land lacking transparency, there it emerges a questioning - perhaps what Blanchot would have called the 'most profound question'[231]:

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[231] 'The most profound question' is the expression famously coined by Blanchot to articulate the potential - the movement of 'slipping' - marked by an exceeding with respect to the 'power of questioning', in other words, a potential to exceed the realm of possibility - what is already given - by means of impossibility. See Blanchot, Maurice. 2003. *The Infinite Conversation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), see esp. II 'The Most Profound Question', pp. 11-17.

> It appeared that nothing more remained of the world than a single, stubborn question. It was: Why is there anything at all in the world, why the world is? 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 ocean and its continents had little advantage over my washstand set while the moon still shone. Of my own existence, nothing was left except the dregs of its abandonment. (BC: 117, trans. Mod. FM)

To question the world, its own existence - to question 'everything': this questioning, as Maurice Blanchot's excursus on the 'profound question' convincingly suggests, can only be done 'by way of a non-world' (Blanchot 2003: 19) - by way of the world's 'nonbeing', in Benjamin's vignette. To be more precise: the profound questioning at stake does not merely coincide with the posing of the question - 'why the world is?' [*warum die Welt sei*?] - but with the sense of 'amazement' that follows from it - 'With amazement, I realized that nothing in it could compel me to think the world'. It is the realisation that right at the heart of the possible, exactly at the core of the world's material evidence - a 'washstand', the 'ocean and its continents' - something is not given; it is the realisation that the 'non-knowledge' of the world is not exactly in the world, it does not already belong to it. The peculiar feature of this 'something' that is no-thing and yet exists, albeit only in its non-belonging to the world, is that it is always not given - which means, it is not simply 'beyond' but nowhere to be found. Its existence as nowhere can only be sensed as a movement of displacement and dispossession: 'It [the profound question] reaches us constantly as what constantly gets away from us and allows to get away […] designating us as anyone at all' (Blanchot 2003: 19). This is evidently reflected in the final line of 'The Moon' - 'Of my own existence, nothing was left except the dregs of its abandonment'. It is certainly, once again, a matter of rhythm, a movement whereby we can neither 'grasp' nor 'escape' the very fact that the world is all there is and yet something is - has always been and will always be - not given, and therefore exceeds the 'field of possibility'. We now come to a crucial point for the argument here advanced. Benjamin's moonlit vision, and the 'profound question' that this vision elicits, goes straight to the heart of Didi-Huberman's manoeuvre towards the relation between knowledge and non-knowledge, more specifically the recasting of such a relation through a logic of non-privation. It does so inasmuch as the relation described in the 'The Moon' vignette, between the world's 'nonbeing' - its impossibility - and its 'being' - its possibility -, is pictured via one (loving) gesture, not a caress this time, but a 'winking' [*zuzublinzeln*]. To wink, literally, to close one eye for a short time, signalling friendliness, love, complicity: in no way can these different nuances of gesture imply a 'privation', a clash or a mere opposition; on the contrary, they elicit the standing-together of two different viewpoints, or a doubling of gaze that entails heterogeneous complicity. Winking, clearly, requires the presence of another gaze, of the gaze of the other, which it responds to and to which it directs itself. Such a gesture points towards the opposite of privation, namely excess: in this abundance, the transformation from a relation of 'privation' - one for which obscurity would merely be defined as the deprivation of light, and vice versa - to a relation 'of point of view' therefore coincides with an exceeding

movement for which daylight world and moonlit earth, the world's being and the world's nonbeing, the possible and impossible, are held together by a gaze able to sense, in one 'view', the excessive reverberations of their dance: of their loving touches and their friendly winking, as well as their inevitable glancing off.

Reading the praxis of the gaze as it appears in Benjamin's 'The Moon' through the lens of Blanchot's 'profound question' enables to challenge Didi-Huberman's own understanding of such an experience of looking, whereby to look is to 'dance anew', or to sense the rhythmic vibration of the tangent collisions between 'everything' - the world - and 'nothing' - what in the world is not given. To 'dance anew', as it has been demonstrated via detour through Benjamin's Moon-vignette, vis-à-vis Blanchot's 'profound question', is not simply to 'reopen the field of the possible' (DH 2018: 128), as Didi-Huberman would argue, but, quite differently, it coincides with the capacity to envision the impossible - what Benjamin calls the world's 'nonbeing', what Blanchot refers to as a 'non-world' - neither as an exceptional reverse to the field of possibility, nor as a being beyond the world, but as an 'alternate' earth that underpins it like a fertile subsoil. Benjamin's questioning in the vignette seemingly anticipates the insight, taken up years later by Blanchot, that the impossible does not register on the order of an 'exceptional experience' but runs 'behind' - '*derrière*' - each one of our experiences, behind everything[232], like a *Nebenerde.*

From Derrida's invitation to revisit the bond between light and night beyond logics of mere opposition, through to Blanchot's liminal image of the impossible, for which 'the obscure' is that which 'would give itself in its obscurity' (1993: 44), up to Nancy's proposition that 'sense is an obscurity that leads to its obscurity' (2008: 81): the dancing of these heterogeneous yet interlaced voices finds an echo in Didi-Huberman's shifting of the relation between obscurity and the 'night that moves' from one of 'privation' to one of excess. Didi-Huberman's method-gesture of 'sketching the glimpse' strives to transpose the repercussions of this shift not into a theory of the image but into the granular fabric of a praxis of looking - a gesture, a method as gesture - that harbours the imaginative potential to envision a *different* mode of seeing the world: a world seen in light of its obscure and finite inconclusiveness, in the mute questioning of its impossibility, in the ungraspable yet tangible spacing opened up by its infinite *aperçues*.

4.4 On Method as Gesture II : '*Souffle*'

How does one write about the ungraspable yet sensuous spacing opened up by the image's liminal efficacy as *aperçue,* or its simultaneous appearing in absenting? 'No word without breath [*souffle*]' (DH 2005b: 16), writes

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[232] Blanchot's description of the relation between possibility and impossibility is given through the spatial coordinates of the 'behind', or that which is lies not beyond but in the background: 'Thus we can begin to surmise that "impossibility"—that which escapes, without there being any means of escaping it—would be not the privilege of some exceptional experience, but behind each one and as though its other dimension' (Blanchot 2003: 45). This relationality bears striking similarities with the shifting of position advocated for by Didi-Huberman when describing the relation between knowledge and non-knowledge not in terms of 'privation' but through a shift in the 'point of view': such a move, echoing Blanchot's '*derrière*', also means displacing one's gaze from the 'figure to the background' (DH 2018: 112).

Didi-Huberman in a short pamphlet devoted to the work of Pierre Fédida[233], titled *Gestes d'Air et de Pierre*. Breath is not so much the absence of speech, its 'suspension', but the very 'condition' that makes speech possible (2005b: 16). The excursus, via Fédida[234], on the modes in which the thinking of absence unfolds through material, immanent relations between body, word, breath and image, reveals how, for Didi-Huberman, the absenting at play in the appearing-disappearing of images is intimately bound up with the materialisation of breath - the 'respiration of time', the temporal vibration which reverberates within the seemingly stable surface of an image. Interestingly, breath and air are not solely pictured as vehicles of speech but as the locus 'par excellence' of the 'figurable', an insight that Didi-Huberman will take up again and further expand on a ten years later, in his *Ninfa fluida: Essai sur le drapé-désir* (2015), where he explores the motifs of air, breath, breeze, with reference to the specific mediums of painting and drawing. Taking up the intuition, forged in Renaissance, that the visibility and presentation of 'air' - *aere* - and *spiritus* (movements of the mind) could only take *place*, literally, through the material movements of bodies and of surfaces, in such a way that they - breath and body, absence and material, time and image - become not simply interlaced but indistinct, Didi-Huberman dwells on the complexities arising when asking, in the wake of Alberti, Leonardo, Botticelli, Ghiberti and many others, how to depict air. How to draw, how to make manifest the very absence (invisibility) of a potency to elicit movement, desire, torment, disarray? What this demand entails is nothing less than confronting the 'thought of absence' as a 'vital question' (2005b: 11). In the same way in which breath is not merely the suspension of speech but its spacing, then air, breeze, wind, are not merely situated *between* bodies and surfaces, but they inhabit, traverse, affect and transform their very material presence. The motif - '*souffle*' - which Didi-Huberman explicitly takes from Fédida points to this heterogeneous and complex inextricability of senses - beyond the visual, encompassing sound, smell - harboured by the image's potential to present, for example, the absenting of breath - its shapelessness and invisibility - through the tangible presence of stone - the most obvious reference here is the motif of moving draperies sculpted in stone.

Approaching the thought of absence as a vital question thus necessarily entails putting things into motion: quite simply, without motion the shapelessness of breath and air cannot be fathomed, or brought to life. It is possible to think of this entanglement, proposed by Didi-Huberman's reading of Fédida's gesture, in a different perspective than what suggested by the Genesis: rather than functioning as the original infusion of life in a dead body - God's breathing through man -, breath is not exactly the spirit that puts bodily life into motion, as the Bible recounts, but it is 'that' which is being put into motion by living bodies and material surfaces - when speaking, when sketching, when sculpting. It is not solely that the body needs breath but breath needs the body too, or a surface - a stone, a tree, a leaf, a wave - to come alive, to become sensed. A thought of absence repurposed in terms of vitality also entails shifting viewpoint from the myth of (human)

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[233] Didi-Huberman's book is devoted to Pierre Fédida's *L'absence* (1978). Pierre Fédida was a French psychoanalyst and philosopher whose work attracted interest from both Didi-Huberman and Gilles Deleuze.

[234] For a study of the relation between Fédida's and Didi-Huberman's work in English-language scholarship see Saint, Nigel. 2023. 'Dream Images, Psychoanalysis and Atrocity. Pierre Fédida and Georges Didi-Huberman' in *Dreams and Atrocity. The Oneiric in Representations of Trauma,* ed. by Emily-Rose Baker and Diane Otosaka (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

creation to something like an 'anthropology of the sensible', as Emanuele Coccia suggests in his ode to sensible life: a 'micro-ontology of the image' based on an 'anthropology of the sensible' should 'study the manner in which the image and sensible *give body* to activities of the spirit and give life to man's own body' (2016:15). The sensible - a piece of stone, a sheet of paper, a straw of hair - gives *life* and *body* to breath. Neither solely defined by its invisibility, shapelessness - 'spirit' - nor uniquely identical to a material 'object', breath is a current of continuous tangentiality, it is medial existence: its mode of simultaneous presence and absence is defined by its tangent touching upon, a condition that is certainly reminiscent of the 'caress' gesture previously examined.

Yet how does breath become, for Didi-Huberman, not only a 'vital question', and not only a question deeply entangled with the materiality of the image, but also a question of 'method' and, importantly, a matter of praxis - a practice of the gaze and of writing? And why would such a 'parameter' - if we can consider it as such - be relevant for exploring current philosophical questions concerning the relation between gaze and image, and between looking and writing?

A preliminary answer to this can be found in a short text included in a collection of essays on appearance published in 2013 - *Phalènes.* The short yet incredibly significant text is titled '*L'image brûle*', and it is one of the few instances, alongside the fragments of *Aperçues,* where Didi-Huberman reflects not so much on specific texts or images - though references to particular literary and visual images are present -, but more broadly on the relation between image and knowledge (*connaissance*) - especially in light of the current proliferation of visual information - through the lens of a double critical movement of 'implication' - *implexité* - and 'explication'. There will be more on the critical efficacies and also potential perplexities that this double movement raises for the praxis of writing about images - and of writing images, literally. For now, I want to draw attention to a particular motif used by Didi-Huberman to rethink the relation between the gaze and the image through the grammar of a vital absenting. Faced with an *aut-aut* alternative to either see 'nothing at all' (2013: 364) or to only see clichés - to only see images as mere vehicles of information -, the proposed lateral solution to this conundrum comes in the form of a praxis of looking: more specifically, it comes from a gaze able to glimpse images in their capacity to keep 'burning', that is, to keep burning with desire, movement, destruction, pain, memory, even at a time - our time - of 'ripped imagination' (2013: 364). Re-training our gaze to critically discern between images of the limit - images that are nothing but representations of limits, dictated by an overdose of signification and information - and liminal images - images able to set the limits imposed by visual clichés into motion, and to upset them (images that 'burn') - becomes therefore a critical strategy implemented via gesture - the praxis of looking. It is not coincidental, in this sense, that the short essay concludes with a shift from image to gaze: that images are still able to burn, and will continue to harbour the potential to burn, regardless of whether a human gaze will see them, is a fait accompli. What is not at all granted, and therefore what is definitely at stake - at risk - is the sensing of this burning: in order to see where an image burns '*il faut oser*', one needs 'to dare' (2013: 372), to submit one's gaze to the image's burning in the very likely possibility of being burned. This daring gesture takes the vital shape of a breath: 'you need to bring your gaze closer to the ashes. And blow softly [*souffler doucement*] so that the embers below

begin to emit their heat, their glow, their danger again. (2013: 372). Breath, here, becomes the gesture, medium and method by which our gaze begins anew, re-learns again to look at images by giving a body, a life to the scattered ashes. The motto exposed in *Gestes d'air et de Pierre* - 'No word without breath' (2005b: 16) - arguably undergoes a further mutation here: no burning image - and no gaze either - without breath.

4.5 *Liminal Images* (VII): Absence, or 'spatiality without things'

The liminal spacing of breath, its existence only in tangent, is not only the condition for speech but also for gazing at images which harbour the potential to 'burn'. No real gaze without breath: how to transform an experience of looking into an experience of breathing, namely into an experience of absence as a 'vital question'? Is it merely a matter of unveiling some kind of invisible ? Certainly not. It also not a case of seeing things as if it were for the first or for the last time, as Jean-Christophe Bailly recently argued[235]. More substantially, it is a case of no longer seeing only what we already recognise - the limits imposed by cliché, information, signification. Learning to look at that which we do not already recognise, in other words un-learning to look[236]. An experience of looking transformed into an experience of 'vital absence' coincides with a praxis - a practice of the gaze - as pure receptivity: at a time of relentless proliferation of visual information, at a time of ever-increasing saturation of signification, a gaze stripped of all clichés, desaturated with information, retains the potential of the pure medium, a purely receptive potential to welcome another body - the image's body - without making it one's own, without transforming it into something 'other' than its otherness[237]. To receive only, without possessing, without understanding: this is no more and no less that what stone does when it encounters air in the figuration of moving drapery. It does not become identical with air; it only receives it in order to give it body and refuge - a different and yet indistinct body from its own.

This capacity for co-existential dissimilarity is, I argue, not only the indistinct blow -'s*ouffle indistinct'* - of the image but of the gaze too: to look at images that 'burn' would thus coincide with a capacity to sense the vital absence of breath, the fleeting miraculous breeze of something we can neither recognise nor completely assimilate, still whistling through the suffocating visual clutter that is our current, hyper-visible 'world picture'. Breath and gaze - breath *as* gaze - would thus be located, like writing and caress, between the extremes of seeing nothing and seeing everything, namely on a 'dizzying limit': on the 'tightrope of the risk to be taken: to

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235 See Bailly, Jean-Christophe and Matteo Martelli.. 2021. 'La cesura delle immagini. Conversazione con Jean-Christophe Bailly', *Antinomie.it*, available online at https://antinomie.it/index.php/2021/06/17/la-cesura-delle-immagini-conversazione-con-jean-christophe-bailly/ [last accessed 1st May 2024].

236 The process of undoing, or un-learning, is also called into question by Alloa in his reading of Didi-Huberman's method as it appears in *Phasmes. Essais sur l'apparition 1* (1998): 'Phasmid thinking is, as it were, the thought of disparateness, i.e., of dis-paring. This means to un-learn or, as it were, to dis-prepare oneself to see what we believed we were seeing and which we in fact saw precisely because we knew (or believed we knew)' (Alloa 2018: 104).

237 This capacity for non-assimilation is well described by Coccia with his definition of mediality, which 'consists in the ability to be affected by something without being transformed and without transforming the thing that affects it' (Coccia 2016: 28)

write in order to contain something […] taming the limitless? Or else to write in order to let something go, drawing the very absence – or porosity – of any limit?' (2018: 12). This timeless limit-question question is not much different form the material, pictorial and sculptural issue of how to depict air: limiting the limitless - sealing breath in a piece of stone - or else making its limitless absence sensed through the materiality of stone, drawing its porosity? Is it not the case that the very paradox of inscribing breath's limitlessness into the tangible finitude of matter eludes and undoes the possibility of posing this question in terms of an either/or? Could we not argue, following on the lack of grasp diagnosed in both motifs of breath and caress, that any effort to contain is doomed by that which it cannot dispense with, the absenting or desaturation of presence? And that precisely this infinite impossibility of saturation - a finite inconclusiveness - constantly tarnishes what 'delimiting' strives to illuminate? What is a mode of presence determined by the evidence of its own un-graspability?

Didi-Huberman takes up what Maurice Merleau-Ponty had named a 'spatiality without things' (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 330): by ways of analogy with the image of the night, this kind of spatiality is presented as having no 'outlines' - 'Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses' (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 330)[238]. It is no coincidence that the echo of these words finds a way into Didi-Huberman's image of the 'night that moves' and also in his depiction of breath: night, air and breath are described as non-objects with no outlines whose main mode of manifestation is diffusion, pervasion, infiltration. Didi-Huberman's limit-question also finds a contemporary parallel in Nancy's definition of the exceeding potential inherent in artworks: when he writes that art exceeds 'meaning' (2019: 23), and that an artwork, despite certainly being defined by the limits of form, is nevertheless not reducible to them and that this 'form forms something other than its own form' (2019: 13), he is pointing precisely at this capacity for a spatiality without things and, crucially, without meaning - a spatiality of absence. Nancy describes this spatiality as a form of absenting presence - 'sense' - which 'surpasses' the 'given' (2019: 13), while simultaneously belonging to it. John Berger, in a similar fashion, describes the spatiality of absence as 'multiform presence'. Addressing the 'loved one', he writes:

> When you are away, you are nevertheless present for me. This presence is multiform: it consists of countless images, passages, meanings, things known, landmarks, yet the whole remains marked by your absence, in that it is diffuse. It is as if your person becomes a place, your contours horizons. I live in you then like living in a country. You are everywhere. Yet in that country I can never meet you face to face. (Berger 2005:78)

[238] This quote also appears in the short text devoted to James Turrell's work; see Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2017. *The man who Walked in Colour* (Minnesota: Univocal Publishing), p. 58

The artwork, like the loved one's absence, is 'everywhere': its mode of manifestation is diffusion, profusion in excess of the given, afterlife within death, infinite inconclusiveness of the finite, contingent form. The 'whole' of an artwork remains always 'marked' by its 'absence', inasmuch as this 'form' insists on relentlessly undoing the stitches of our attempts at delimitation, hence why we keep writing and talking about *Lascaux*, *Las Meninas*, the *Mona Lisa* and so on - because the 'whole' is never there, and it can never be there; because a vital absence is continuously at play[239]. One could perhaps put it this way: the artwork is 'everywhere' because its 'whole' is nowhere - not in the idea, not in the image, not in the concept. Like the night enveloping the world, the 'whole' of an artwork has no outlines, it only infinitely diffuses, displacing and de-shaping - yet not erasing - the limits of form. Simultaneously everywhere and nowhere: such is the 'spatiality without things' for which absence is not only death but simultaneously vital impulse, liminal respite.

In the last chapter of *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (1992)[240], significantly titled 'The interminable threshold of the gaze' [*'L'interminable seuil du regard'*], Didi-Huberman writes about the feeling of being 'threatened by absence' (1992: 183), with reference to Freud's notion of '*Unheimlichkeit',* or the discomfort experienced when we no longer recognise if what is before is exactly before us or not: when we encounter a spatiality without things which envelopes, diffuses and traverses our body. The 'disorientation' at stake is described as a double liminal movement: 'a limit is effaced' while simultaneously a 'threshold is opened' (1992: 184). This spatiality is not simply the place of the image, its mode of existence, but also defines the 'place' and phenomenology of our gaze: to look is to vacillate at-the-limits-of, or to stand 'interminably before the end' (1992: 178). Arguing against the Kantian precept which would contend that space is nothing but a form of intuition, an ideal category of the understanding, Didi-Huberman significantly writes that 'space' is the 'unperceived, fundamental element' of all 'our sensory and ghostly experiences' (1992: 194). Space is all there is when the absenting of sense, meaning and things becomes sensuous to us, enveloping us. 'You are everywhere', yet 'I can never meet you': before, after, here, now, beneath, above, underneath, inside, outside, the 'whole' of space, like the 'whole' of the loved one, like the 'whole' of artworks is never just 'there' but is nowhere to be found, which means it is everywhere and nowhere. The spatiality of the here and now is underpinned by the nowhere of the whole of space, which is to say that the here and now[241] is both 'all there is' - space, finitude - and also the absenting of space as a whole - nowhere, absence. Only two years before the

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[239] My position is at odds with Benjamin's aspired transformation of the artwork's function as the vector of a new social function, whereby the production of a community is indeed a political possibility to be sought in light of the increasing overtaking of exhibition value with respect to the cult value famously associated with the auratic quality of artworks.

[240] As mentioned in an earlier footnote, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* is a seminal text by Didi-Huberman, one which is able to condense all the key leitmotifs that will populate his later production, and it is therefore all the more astonishing that no English translation has yet to appear to this day. In this early work Didi-Huberman explores the relation between certain artworks and our gaze, interrogating peculiar modalities of looking which artworks invite us to attend. The philosophical stakes of Didi-Huberman's main arguments throughout the book are of an equal theoretical calibre to the ones expressed in his *Confronting Images*, a text which has attracted much more scholarly attention, to the detriment of other equally important parallel works such as *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (1992) and *Devant le temps* (2000).

[241] For an insightful interpretation of the way in which Benjamin's concept of the aura survives within and is also transformed by Didi-Huberman's work see Katherine Smith, Laura. 2018. 'Re-imagining the 'loss of a place'', *Angelaki*, 23(4): 113-132.

publication of Didi-Huberman's *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Une Pensée finie* (1990), advocated for a thinking of the limit[242] - a 'finite thinking' - which would require its own transformed 'transcendental aesthetic: that of space-time in the finite here and now, which is never present, without, however, being time pressed up against its continuum or its ecstasy' (2003: 27). There is no 'finite' presence that is not propped up by the constant 'pressure' of its own endless standing outside itself - *ekstasis*, *ek-* 'out' + *histanai* 'to place' -, of its being everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Building on Nancy's crucial insight, which situates finitude as the ''a-priori' irreducibility of spacing' (2003: 27), Didi-Huberman arguably transposes this philosophical demand to the plane of art images, asking whether the image's function could thus be 'to *begin* [*commencer*] *with the end* [*fin*]' (1992: 196). To look, to stand 'interminably before the end' (1992: 178), is neither to die nor to live: it is to envision both together, suspended at the liminal site of their inevitable interlacing. It is in this sense that Didi-Huberman's praxis of the threshold - *seuil* - should be understood as 'interminable' and 'absolute' (1992: 176), as opposed to instrumental - an example of the instrumental threshold being, for instance, Carazan's dream threshold[243], as ch. 2 has demonstrated. The threshold of the gaze, seen under this light, does not give access to and does not bar from entrance either; the spatiality of the threshold is the 'a priori' condition for existence - it coincides with it. We are that threshold, or existence only in passage.

All of this certainly needs further elucidation, and one of the most fertile grounds for probing the non-clashing articulation of beginning and end, everywhere and nowhere, life and death, is undoubtedly the non-instrumental, liminal surface of artworks, namely the point of exposure where space - the 'unperceived' vital element of existence - becomes, as if by miracle, perceived as 'spacing', that is, perceived as the everlasting breath of absenting.

4.5.2 'Out of the outline, through the underneath': Undoing Transcendental Dissolution, Rescuing Immanent Inherence

It has been stated, in the premise of the present chapter, that the contemporary relevance of Didi-Huberman's method lies in its potential to articulate, via countless mute dialogues with images, a thought of the limit which is simultaneously a vision of the limit, an envisioning of the limit from the standpoint of its margins, a vision of the limit as no-thing: as 'that' which is beyond any inside-outside alternative, beyond any either-or false opposition. The limit as the token of a non-transcendent breach, out of the outline, yet never beyond. It is now time to demonstrate how this thought of the limit from the standpoint of its non-

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[242] Nancy famously distinguishes the 'thinking of the limit' he vouches for from a thinking of mere limitation: the thinking of the limit is not 'a thinking of limitation' inasmuch as the latter 'implies the unlimitedness of a beyond', whereas the limit is instead that 'on which, infinitely finite, existence arises, and to which it is exposed' (Nancy 2003: 27).

[243] For my interpretation of Carazan's dream-image, which differs from and problematises Kant's instrumental usage of it, see chapter 2 of the present thesis.

transcendental outside takes shape via image, more specifically, via those images which best give shape to the erasure of the other: images of the Holocaust.

'You work within the immanence of the image and not within the transcendence of the concept' [*Vous travaillez dans l'immanence de l'image et non dans la transcendence du concept*]. (2019: 26). This sentence, written by Didi-Huberman with reference to the German artist Gerhard Richter's *September* (2005) - a photo-painting[244] realised by painting over an image of 9/11 - signals an attempt to rethink abstraction through the prism of painting's matter, or better, to think the absenting of abstraction not in terms of an unreachable transcendental beyond, but in purely spatial terms. A paradoxical manoeuvre, certainly, and one which arises in response to and in contrast with Benjamin Buchloh's characterisation of Richter's photo-painting(s) - not only *September*, but also the series titled *Birkenau*[245] - as modes of abstraction designed to represent an unpresentable subject[246].

According to Buchloh, Richter's gesture, by ways of abstraction, effaces the very image - the subject[247] - of Birkenau from the *Birkenau* series. In line with this insight, the paintings of the *Birkenau* series would thus be the remaining empty shells of the subject's own dissolution towards the transcendence of a purported unpresentability. To the movement of abstraction as the dissolution of the unpresentable, Didi-Huberman opposes the material process of a '*défiguration*' which, instead of doing away with the subject by ways of abstract purification, does justice to its incomprehensibility. Only in the 4th and last letter to Gerhard Richter, however, does the meaning of this shift become clearer in its potential to (re)think the subject of painting entirely on the basis of its spatial, non-conceptual inherence in the image. Indeed, going back to the opening quote, only in the last letter does the practical configuration of this 'within' ('*dans*') relating to the image's immanence - the taking place of the 'work' - is exposed to its own outside - its potential for absenting without ever taking leave from the image.

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[244] The collection of overpainted photographs by Richter, begun in the mid 1980s, amounts to more than 2,000 works, is available to see online at https://gerhard-richter.com/en/art/overpainted-photographs#div-brief-popup-content

[245] *Birkenau* is a photo-painting realised by Richer in 2014 and based on the 4 pictures secretly taken by *Sonderkommmando* prisoner members in 1944, in the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

[246] Didi-Huberman explicitly argues against Buchloh in his 3rd (out of 4) letter to Gerhard Richter. Between February 2014 - in the same month in which Richter began the working at the *Birkenau* series - and July 2016 Didi-Huberman wrote 4 letters to Gerhard Richter, first published in French as follows: Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2016. 'Sortir du plan. Deux lettres à Gerhard Richter', *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, 135: 75-105; _____ 2016. 'Sortir du plan 2. 3e et 4e lettres à Gerhard Richter', *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*,137: 17-59. The four letters were later translated in German and published in a unique volume: Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2018d. *Wo Es war. Vier Briefe an Gerhard Richter,* (Dresden: Gerhard Richter Archiv, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen; Dresden, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König). In 2019, an English translation of Didi-Huberman's 4th and last letter to Richter - hereafter abbreviated to 'Out of the Plan' - was published as follows: Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2019. 'Out of the Plan, Out of the Plane 2: Stripping, Fourth Letter to Gerhard Richter' in *Testimonies of resistance: representations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando,* ed. by Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams (Oxford: Berghahn Books Ltd), pp. 247-265.

[247] Crucial to Didi-Huberman's interpretation of Richter's gesture is a reading of the word 'subject' through the prism of its subjacency, in the material sense proposed by Aristotle in the *Categories*, namely the subjacent subject as 'the most concrete meaning of being or of matter: it is that which lies (*keitai*) beneath our feet, under our noses or at the heart of our spoken words' (DH 2019: 251). The material, concrete sense of the word subject lies in its potential to inhere in matter, in this case within the matter of painting, or oil paint. See DH, *Out of the Plan,* pp. 249-251; On Aristotle different yet interrelated senses of the subject see Aristotle. 1963. *Categories and De Interpretatione,* ed. by J.L. Ackrill (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 3-6.

Writing from Paris on the 8th of July 2016, Didi-Huberman clarifies, from the outset, the object of his questioning: 'I just wanted to know if the figurative images of the four *Sonderkommando* photographs you had painted already were dry or not when you decided to switch to 'abstraction'' (2019: 247). As is well known, the four photographs in question, taken by a prisoner member of the *Sonderkommando* in Birkenau's concentration camp, were the prompt for Didi-Huberman's *Images malgré tout* (2003), arguably the most debated of Didi-Huberman's contributions to date. Richter first saw these photos in the 1950s[248], and then once again in 2008, through a published review of Didi-Huberman's book. Between February 2014 and January of the following year, he began and completed his *Birkenau* series, which comprises four paintings - photo-paintings - based on the four *Sonderkommando* photographs. It is precisely the making of, the taking form of, these paintings from the photographed figures that is at the forefront of Didi-Huberman's writing - it is the issue of the process itself (of painting) and not the meaning of the process, that is questioned. Before evaluating the relevance of Didi-Huberman's '*défiguration*' for the broader question of method as gesture and for the central argument of a transformed transcendental aesthetics of the finite 'here and how', it is necessary to briefly ponder on the pictorial process underpinning Richter's photo-paintings.

Richter's abstract paintings begin with the outline: first, he projects the four photographs on four different canvas, copying them and therefore obtaining 4 figurative drawings on canvases [Fig. 10; 11]. Second, he starts to paint over the drawings in black and white, therefore obtaining 4 figurative paintings [Fig. 12]. Only at that point, when the oil paint of the four figurative images is *not yet* completely dry, Richter starts to gradually paint over the images by ways of colour stratification - oil colour - with brushes, which would then be repeatedly spread over the canvas as well as scraped off before the colour completely dried out, therefore obtaining the four abstract paintings we see today [Fig. 13].

Why should this detail - whether or not the paint of the painted figure was completely dry - matter? Because if the paint were indeed already dry, then any gesture over the painted figure would have worked in terms of addition to the figure. In other words, it would have been a question of simply painting on top of - and not *within* - the paint of the figurative image (the figurative image being not the painting (Richter's *Birkenau)* but the image of Birkenau, the photograph that is the subject-matter of the *Birkenau* paintings). But if the paint had not *completely* dried out - as per Richter's answer, 'Yes, dry […] but not fully…' (DH 2019: 247) -, then any subsequent stroke of paint on the surface would have necessarily worked *within* the image, penetrating and altering the paint of the painted figure - not simply sitting on top of it. Rather than a cover up that would signal a refusal to depict the figurative images of Birkenau, the material detail of the non-dry paint provides access to a radically different reading of the process at stake, one which is no longer legible through the lens of form-matter, figurative-abstraction, positive-negative set of oppositions. Looking at the four images from which the *Birkenau* series takes shape, it is hard not to see how Richter's gesture 'begins with the end', to take up Didi-Huberman's phrasing at the end of *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde.* Shot No. 281 [Fig. 14], taken from the inside of a gas chamber, looks onto the scattered naked bodies laid on the ground,

[248] See Buchloh, Benjamin. 2020. 'Documents of Culture, Documents of Barbarism: Richter's Birkenau Paintings' in *Gerhard Richter: Painting After All,* trans. Russel Stockman (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art), pp. 22-41.

and soon destined to evaporate in the cloud of smoke already taking leave from the soil behind them. 'My dear Gerhard', you 'have created a tomb' (2019: 253): Richter's paintings 'begin with in the end' in the twofold sense of beginning with death, and also of beginning with the finitude of the bodies.

Birkenau begins with the tracing of the bodies' outlines, yet what does it end with, if not with the cover up, if not with burial of those figures, if not with transcendental abstraction, what is the end of *Birkenau*? As it will become clear, to begin with death is to end with survival, not with erasure: absenting, yes, since we no longer see the four photographs at the end of the process; yet this is not quite accurate, as Didi-Huberman shows. It is not that we no longer see the painted photos, we just cannot see them clearly, we are unable to distinguish them from the strokes of paints that set the figure into motion - a motion of de-figuration. It is possible to trace a close parallel between what Didi-Huberman means by 'défiguration', in its difference with respect to mere dissolution, and a motif of Benjaminian resonance, namely *Entstaltung,* or de-shaping. Didi-Huberman's de-figuration arguably hinges on the same unproductive and inconclusive movement of undoing (of form) which was already inherent in Benjamin's countermove to *Gestalttheorie,* vouching for a mode of presentation in withdrawal whereby no meaning or new formation can possibly arise[249]. Both de-figuration and de-shaping mean nothing, and precisely in their potential to sensually present the nonsense or senselessness they eschew both alternatives of unrepresentability - the closure of transcendental dissolution - and figurative comprehensibility - the closure of form, meaning, signification, communicability. It's in this sense, I argue, that Didi-Huberman's *défiguration* does justice to the subject's incomprehensibility: confronting Richter's *Birkenau* means to confront a 'subject' - Birkenau - only in its sensuous obscurity and immanent withdrawal, without forcing a transcendental meaning upon its senseless happening. We look at *Birkenau* - the four photographs - only in its obscurity, which does not mean that the subject is merely unpresentable, destroyed or dissolved but inaccessible: 'an inaccessibility which is not a beyond, not transcendental […] but, very precisely, below, immanent, *just beneath our ability to see it clearly'* (2019: 256-7). Neither negative, nor dissolved, neither completely buried nor clearly visible, neither purely outside nor simply inside, the 'subject' of *Birkenau* is, crucially, not *in* the painting but *within* the paint: 'inherent' in the paint, underlying the painting, '*out of the outline through the underneath*' (2019: 253). It's in the paint precisely because the paint over the figure was not *completely* dry, in the same way in which the past of 1944 is not *completely* closed. Indeed, one could perhaps argue that Richter's *Birkenau* shows no more no less than the impossibility and absurdity of completion and accomplishment - to use words that very much apply to the incomprehensible, abhorrent program of the *Endlösung.*

What does all of this say about our object of questioning - an aesthetics of finitude, of the 'here and now', a practice of non-instrumental thresholds, the art image as the taking place of the unperceived spacing

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[249] For a convincing and insightful reading of Benjamin's *Entstaltung* see Kim, Hyŏn-gang. 2015. 'Die Politik der Entstaltung bei Walter Benjamin', *Weimarer Beiträge* 61(3): 342-363, available online at https://publikationen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/49099/file/WB_61_3_2015_342_363.pdfla [last accessed 11 April 2024]. See especially this passage: 'Shape means something; de-shaping means nothing and it appears as sense without meaning, that is, as sense-less or non-sense. It dissolves the view of the shape in favour of an original giving as a caesura. It is the way in which original giving takes place, which manifests itself only in withdrawal' (Hyun Kang 2013: 343). This mode of presentation as sense without meaning is not far from the mode of presentation of sense, or non-knowledge, as 'obscurity', which has informed my reading of Didi-Huberman's liminal image of the 'night that moves'.

of an absenting? Contextualising Didi-Huberman's philosophical method within the framework of Richter's material gesture sheds more light on the process at stake in both instances - material and philosophical operations. Richter's gesture arguably rescues the scattered bodies, inasmuch as the brushes of paint penetrating within the non-completely dried figures give those outlined bodies a new form, a new corpus, made of oil and pigment. The inherence of the figure in the layers of paint stands for a mode of rescuing the image, and the bodies, from their destiny - from being erased, respectively, by Buchloh's negative abstraction and by the cloud of smoke and ashes of the bodies' destruction. We return to the interlacing of ashes and breath: Didi-Huberman's writing on Richter's rescuing-gesture is, in turn, a form of immanent rescuing in itself, to the extent that it does not sweep the ashes of this burning image under the carpet of un-presentability, instead, words, like breath, blow softly on the painting's surface so that the 'embers below' - the immanence and inherence of the four figures - begin to 'burn again', not from *outside* the paint - from the transcendence of the concept - but from *underneath* the paint. 'Out of the outline, through the underneath': out of the madness of systematic completion, through the image's miraculous inconclusiveness. Absenting, indeed, but without ever taking leave from the space - the material paint - of the image.

We are now in a position to properly answer the guiding questions posed in 4.3 which justify and underpin this excursus via Richter - how does breath, how does the question of absence, becomes a 'vital question' and a matter of method, a praxis of the gaze and of writing? And why would a thought of absence as a vital question be relevant for exploring current philosophical questions concerning the relation between gaze and image, and between looking and writing?

By practicing an absenting than can only have as its 'a-priori' the tangible space of the oil paint, and the lines written in the letter of 8th July, Richter's and Didi-Huberman's respective gestures - looking at the photos, painting the photos, writing about them - do justice to the incomprehensibility and senselessness of what is figured. They give body - shape, form, life - to the complete absence of sense that those photos bear evidence to. Like the 'multiform presence' of Berger's loved one, the four surviving images of Birkenau are 'everywhere' - within the paint, not simply located 'somewhere' in the painting -, yet we cannot meet them 'face to face' in the 'country' of Richter's paintings. This peculiar mode of presence 'pressed up against' its own material exceeding is glimpsed by Didi-Huberman's gaze as it unfolds into writing.

No longer mere empty remnants of a departed (read: dead) unpresentable subject, the Birkenau paintings, seen through the lens of Didi-Huberman's praxis of the gaze as a praxis of non-instrumental thresholds, become the liminal spacing of a tangible, interminable absence inherent in the lively - 'not completely dried' - matter of paint.

4.6 'Image, language': a Vision at the Limit

The praxis of non-instrumental threshold which underpins Didi-Huberman's method of thinking through images goes hand in hand with the claim that 'perhaps there is no image to radically think if not beyond the principle of imitation' (DH 1992: 57). Thinking the image beyond the copy-original, model-real split necessarily entails, as one commentator has suggested, not only a praxis of the threshold but equally an 'ethics of the border' (Kirchmayr 2018: 70). If the practice of the threshold exposed via detour through Richter's paintings and Didi-Huberman's writings reinforced the claim that method is, for Didi-Huberman, first and foremost a gesture - caress, breath, looking, writing, painting - towards the image, now the question remains as to how this praxis of gesture can open itself up to an ethical-political dimension which would disregard any form of systematic closure and normative character. How can an 'ethics of the border' be 'open', or non-systematic, and release itself from the restraints that have seen the image bowing at the services of moral instruction? Posed in an epoch where, as chapter 3 of the present research has remarked, we are witnessing an increasing resurgence of the mythic narratives underpinning self-sufficiency, ontological security, the politics of the enemy and so on, this question is not only a way to further probe the philosophical stakes of Didi-Huberman's method, but an anchoring point of hope which keeps alive the fragile, luminous potency of the margin. It is not a case of ascribing moral significance to gestures but of grounding the ethical within - and not beyond - the critical potency of gesture. To 'envisage critique as gesture' (DH 2017b: 254) means to shift attention from the paradigm, the concept, the idea, to the immanent 'process'.

A non-normative ethics of the border, implicated in a praxis of non-instrumental thresholds, would indeed entail a process, rather than the formulation of paradigms: taking position, yes, but only as a double stance, as a liminal, unfixable position at once implicated and yet non-assimilable. As one reads at the incipit of *Quand les images prennent position - l'œil de l'histoire 1,* 'to take position means to situate oneself at least twice, on the two and more fronts that any position entails, since any position is fatally relative' (DH 2009: 20). Not only 'there is no image to radically think if not beyond the principle of imitation' (DH 1992: 57), there is also, for Didi-Huberman, no image to radically think if not *with* and *beyond* the Kantian gesture: *with* Kant, because the issue of a critical judgement remains at stake in order to discern the potential, inherent in certain images, to 'burn'; *beyond*, because clearly the worldview at the basis of the Kantian enterprise has been shattered into pieces, having since long been exposed to its own fatal fallacies and shortcomings. But how can a critical gesture towards the image - a gesture that self-evidently aims to 'separate' (*krinein*) to discern - do away with: I) the systematic closure of the first Critique's schematism, namely with the operation of subsuming the sensible under the intelligible II) the second Critique's distinction between two 'views': the 'within' and the 'above', the moral and nature - III) the third Critique's solution to see images submit themselves to the non-sensuous destination of Kantian aesthetics? And how can such a *post* post-Kantian gesture situate itself directly at the liminal edging of those 'many fronts' without giving in to the logics of mastery (appropriating the passage), overstepping (dissolving the passage) or privation (denying the passage)?

In other words, how can this limit-gesture - simultaneously a critique of images and a critique by images - exist only in and as passage?

It is my proposition that Didi-Huberman's 'ethics of the border' and 'practice of the threshold' transposes the insights of Benjamin's *Schwelle*-potential, of Nancy's 'vision *at* the limit', and of Derrida's reading of the 'Limit/passage', to the plane of the relation between image and gaze. An ethics of the border arising from a praxis of the gaze able to implicate itself with the critical potency of the image would be a hybrid complex articulated along the 'many fronts' that such an act of heterogeneous implication - which is neither mere overstepping nor distanced impenetrability - entails: in the same way in which, for Nancy, 'sense' - the sense of the world - is neither just *in* the world nor just *beyond* but only *on* the world's 'confines' (2008: 40), and in the same way in which, for Derrida, philosophy is only at the 'margins of', then Didi-Huberman's critical gesture towards the image refuses to take sides and oscillates at the liminal edging where images become words and vice-versa: this gesture is neither uniquely reliant on a purported self-sufficiency of the image - the image's own critical efficacy - nor solely hinged on the autonomy of language - the linguistic potential to critique the image - but simultaneously inhabits both fronts, refusing the autonomy of any *position* and embracing instead the 'fatal' relativity of many *positions*. This is why, I argue, to situate oneself on more fronts, at least twice if not more, necessarily entails fatality - 'any position is fatally relative': it is fatal because with it dies the modern idea, underpinning Kant's worldview, of the self-sufficient position occupied by the subject of knowledge.

More needs to be said about the relationality in question: is it just a case of mere (post-modern) relativism? Certainly not. The philosophical and critical implications resulting from the taking of this liminal positioning become clearer in Didi-Huberman's crafted defence to Jacques Ranciére's criticism. Responding to Ranciére's challenge - what is this other possible relation, what 'other dialectic' is possible between images and words, language and the visual, philosophy and art, that is dissimilar to the 'platonic scene' where one wants to 'illuminate by means of words' the 'lack of intelligence of images'? (Ranciére 2018: 17) -, Didi-Huberman traces the two-word contour of a relationality that escapes mere relativism, an 'other dialectic', or arguably the *other of* dialectic: 'image, language' (DH 2018b: 19). A 'double operation', clearly, the 'other dialectic' underpinning Didi-Huberman's method hinges on an exceeding potency simultaneously accorded to both image and language: 'to the visual consistency of the image beyond its strictly representative function, as well as to the imaginative power of language beyond its strictly argumentative function' (DH 2018b: 19). Situated beyond the principle of imitation - representative function of the image, thus beyond the schematism - and beyond the epistemological limits of language, the method advocated for with the simple co-belonging of 'image, language' opens up a vision at the limit for which to 'see' only really happens at the limits of language and on the edges of vision. While Ranciére's critique of Didi-Huberman's 'taking position' is grounded on a thinking of limitation which constantly marks out and separates 'one' from the 'other' - the visual and the figural, words and images, activity of language and passivity of the image -, Didi-Huberman's response aims to emphasise how, in thinking the relationality at stake only in terms of privation, or according to the either/or of delimitation, Ranciére falls victim to - and therefore does not emancipate from - the same

'circular dialectic' he so vehemently criticises[250]. Replacing the thinking of limitation with a 'vision of and at the limit', Didi-Huberman's 'image, language' returns to a pivotal theoretical anchor of his entire oeuvre, namely the insight that thinking the image beyond any principle of imitation means necessarily to think the image according to the 'potency of the threshold' - 'comme une puissance du *seuil*' (DH 2000: 115). One could say: the image, namely the liminal site where 'form' harbours the potential to give body and life to a forming qua de-shaping other than its own shape - a word, a gesture, an emotion, a thought. Neither an image become thought nor a thought become image, the 'relation' depicted in the proposition 'image, language' is not one of mere assimilation but of receptive implication - implexity, '*implexité*'. Image and language, as Benjamin intuited as early as 1929, clearly 'take precedence' (SW 2: 208); yet, we could ask, why does Didi-Huberman write 'Image, language' and not 'Language, image'? Is there anything to infer from the fact that image is, literally, before language? Perhaps exactly this: image comes not only before 'meaning' and before the 'self' but before language, to the extent that the image is the site, the place, in which language, in its not-yet-being there, is called for, and becomes implicated in, itself renewed.

Ranciére's critique of Didi-Huberman's method, despite leaning on a shaky and highly questionable grounding, has at least one merit inasmuch as it implicitly raises the question of how implication - the experience of *partage* between image and gaze, the receptive experience of being-affected as no subject by the image's displacing potential - can refrain from translating into a demonstration, illumination or mere explication of the image's operativity, when put into words. Indeed, a constructive criticism can be levelled at Didi-Huberman's method which nevertheless rejects Ranciére's argument: if we accept, contra Ranciére, that the receptive process of 'implexity' vouches for 'another dialectic' and another relationality, one which does not pretend to clarify anything by means of meaning but which only does justice to the obscurity of the non-knowledge raised by the image, then why is there a need for 'explication' - certainly a dangerous term in light of the non-knowledge issue at stake? Could we challenge the premises on which Didi-Huberman justifies the need for explication after implication, namely the presumption that the image, if looked properly, would show something along the lines of a 'secret sign' - '*signe secret*' (2013: 356)? Rather than secrecy, would it not be more appropriate to talk about the nude irreducibility of experience? What would be a mode of giving form and body to the implication experienced by the gaze's displacement before the image that does not register on the order of knowledge, explication, description, demonstration?

It is not coincidental that the material analysed in the context of this chapter is predominantly made up of those relatively marginal texts[251] which, within the vast literature of Didi-Huberman's corpus, are less concerned with underscoring the epistemological function of images and more inclined to look at the excesses *qua* margins of language, whether literary or visual images, where what is at stake is not so much the

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[250] A similar critique of Ranciére's adherence to Hegelian dialectic is advanced by Alloa in 'The Strange Resurgence', p. 386

[251] As contentious as this may be, it is at the margins of Didi-Huberman's scholarly output, I argue, that one finds the most precious glimpses opened up by his mode of thinking with images: 'From being an experience lived in the time of pure passing, the glimpse thus becomes an intermittent writing practice, my 'minor' literary genre - quick-scattered, mercurial and undirected - marginal to or cutting across my 'major' stubborn-patient research projects' (DH 2018: 109).

act of giving body to a 'new' knowledge that did not exist before, which the experience of the gaze should elicit. The material heretofore discussed does not add anything to the knowledge (theory) of the image but sees the image as the locus par excellence where the thinking act - *savoir* - manages to emancipate, depart and displace itself from the bounds of knowledge - *connaissance* - towards the open arms of experience. In light of this, I propose a different interpretation of Didi-Huberman's gesture from the one he himself ascribes to his own practice: rather that turning the gaze into an 'occasion for knowledge' - '*faire du regard une occasion de connaissance*' (DH 2018: 257) -, the experience of the gaze is turned into a chance for thinking to dislodge once and for all from the task of producing something of the order of knowledge. In this stretching of the gaze, there is nothing to be known, but all to be sensed.

We are now in a better position to attempt an answer to the set of questions posed at the outset - how can Didi-Huberman's critical gesture situate itself directly at the edging of 'many fronts'? How can this gesture - a critique *of* images and a critique *by* images - exist only in and as passage? From the centre to the margins, from the anchoring paradigms of a theory of the image to the unsettling experience of seeing and writing 'lived in the time of pure passing' (DH 2018: 109): a practice of the threshold and simultaneously an 'ethics of the border' that abjures systematic closure and normative character by means of its liminal constitution, or its existence only at the limits-of, at the margins, cutting-across, moving transversally on 'many fronts', not 'directly' from means to ends but from image to images - from glimpse-seeing to image-writing - operating a very different critical act of 'construction' from the Kantian gesture. Didi-Huberman's method places the efficacy of the image at the epicentre of a different, unproductive and non-instrumental envisioning of the world as the site of an endless passing-by where seeing and thinking the image becomes an occasion not for knowledge, I argue, but for the nudity of experience: a question of the senses and the sensuous. A vision at the limit: it is perhaps only in the intermittent rhythm of an experience of the image constantly lived at the threshold - a liminal experience 'cutting across' all subject-object, form-matter dichotomies, sensitive to the solicitation of fleeting gestures by which we are briefly touched at our limits - that one can see the opening of a non-normative 'ethics of the border'. An alternative gesture, a strong act of critical resistance, a proper counter-move to both the *absence of limits*, or a-critical relativism, and to the *absolute limits,* or the mythic presuppositions of completion and systematic closure - the suppression of that which is outside the limit, of the limit's other - which still underpin so much of our thinking of the border as framed through a 'politics of the enemy'.

In those scattered glimpses, thoughts, sentences and lines, in those liminal images at the margins of Didi-Huberman's 'major projects' - the '*caresse*-method', the 'night that moves', the 'spatiality without things' -, the *process* of implication does not give in to the *paradigms* of an explication, but stands itself for an existential mode of inhabiting the sensible which openly embraces both the 'fatal' relativity of experience, namely its ineluctable finitude - the time of pure passing, existence only in passage - and the simultaneous impossibility of any systematic completion, infinite progress or final act - the desire, urge and impulse to give new linguistic life, new body, to a 'matter' outliving our own.

Conclusion

5.1 Liminal Images, or the Finite Inconclusiveness of Clouds

In a 1919 fragment titled *Analogie und Verwandtshaft,* Benjamin writes that 'the essence of affinity [*Verwandtschaft*] is enigmatic [*rätselhaft*]' (GS 6: 43, fr 24). The topic of the fragment was probably elicited by a discussion on the concept of intuition [*Anschauung*], which Benjamin and Scholem held during a hike from Biel to Neuchâtel between the 31st of May and the 1st of June, 1919[252]. In the fragment, Benjamin disputes the position which situates the rational principle of analogy as the conceptual grounding of affinity, arguing that the latter is 'sensed' - and not determined - as an immediate feeling able to reveal the 'similar' without degrading it to the sphere of analogy. Benjamin's argument moves from the claim that the gesture of sensing affinities has less to do with the recognition of a conceptual grounding informed by intentionality, than with a foreboding for which feeling anticipates, guides and grounds the thinking act. Paradoxically, in its departure from the realm of analogy, the act of sensing affinities means also, for Benjamin, sensing and rescuing difference[253]: the essence of affinity is 'enigmatic' precisely because the relationality it invokes is not fixed by similar conceptual paradigms and therefore cannot be reduced to the mere objective identification of similar *qua* identical features. Nearly twenty years later, reviewing an exhibition of paintings held at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in October 1937, Benjamin writes once again about an 'enigmatic' essence, or substance this time around, to describe the intricate atmosphere of 'virtual resemblances' (WB 2008: 259) which the paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties give body to. Confronted with these paintings, Benjamin writes that

> Although the signs have a fixed connection and form on the paper, the many 'resemblances' they contain set them moving […] An essential feature of the image is that it incorporates something eternal. This eternal quality expresses itself in the fixity and stability of the stroke, but it is also manifest, more subtly, thanks to the fact that the image embodies something that is fluid and ever-changing […] Moreover, just as resemblance always appears to us like a flash of lightning (since nothing is

[252] See GS 6, p. 660 *Anmerkungen zu Seite* 43-45 [fr 24], pp. 192-193.

[253] Commenting on fragment 24, Fabrizio Desideri inscribes Benjamin's critique of analogy into the epistemological trajectory which aims to rescue truth-presentation from the grasps of *intentio.* In other words, the opposition of *Verwandtschaft* to analogy partakes to Benjamin's epsitemo-critical countermovement to the key tenets of Husserlian phenomenology and its emphasis on the projection of intentionality onto the object of perception. Benjamin's basic manoeuvre against phenomenology was already anticipated in fr.3, where the relation between concept and object is defined trough the prism of *Verwandtschaft,* as opposed to intentional: 'the relation of the concept with the object is not intentional, but derivational; the concept descends from the object; object and concept are related' (GS 6: 13-14). As Desideri underscores, the nexus of the relation is, for Benjamin, not one of causation but 'of filiation': 'While the logic of analogy is for Benjamin a logic of the similar, the logic of affinity expresses a love for differences, a desire to save differences as such' (2018: 13).

> more transient than the appearance of a resemblance), the fleeting and changeful character of these paintings merges with their penetration of the real. That which they fix is no more immutable than a cloud. And this is their true and enigmatic substance it consists of mutability, like life. (WB 2008: 259-60, trans. Mod. FM)

Sensing the affinity between the image's liminal potential for mutability and life's ungraspable matter - its transience, or its declining existence as passage and passing-away - means to sense the rhythmic pulsation of linguistic life right at the heart of fixation, or finitude: neither the absence of limits - the absolute, the un-limited per se - nor solely the limitation of form, but the heterodox and ungraspable 'blending of the fixed and the mutable' (WB 2008: 259) is what confers to the image its liminal efficacy, its ability to act upon thinking at its own margins, without sacrificing difference - without becoming subsumed by it, or equivalent to it. The coterminous blending of the 'fixed' and the 'mutable' calls for parallels with the kinetic transience of the cloud, whose mode of existence is determined by the unceasing mutability of its outlines. What is a cloud? The finite inconclusiveness of a potential to 'form' which constantly de-shapes what it shapes. A lively limit, itself epitomising the fundamental instability, vulnerability and trembling of any limit-action, a liminal image par excellence, the cloud's existence can only be 'caught' on the fly. Throughout this research, and via a critical examination of the point of difference between images of the limit *qua* representations of limitation and liminal images, or images that challenge the limits of representation, I have demonstrated that Benjamin's insights on the liminal efficacy of the image concur to validate the following point: the more we strive to fix the ungraspable, the more we try to ignore - or to sublimate - the paradoxical evidence that a finite outline can harbour the potential to open up a different, un-masterable vision of the world, without ever taking leave from it, the more we risk to lose sight of the fleeting mutability which affords access to - 'penetration of' - the real, the world itself. The resurgence of the image's liminal potential, which Benjamin captured as early as his first sketches on picture theory vis-à-vis cubist paintings, as it has been remarked by Ch. 2, and which continued to shape his confrontation with images up until the 1938 review, within Didi-Huberman's method-gesture of 'sketching the glimpse', is a testament to the fact that, in spite of the relentless proliferation of visual information which reduces the image to a mere vehicle of signification, in spite of our epoch of 'ripped imagination' (DH 2013: 364), and despite our*selves*, or despite the worrisome resurgence of the presuppositions underpinning the fiction of an autonomous, hermetically enclosed self, art's creative gesturing can still play a vital role in showing that we are nothing but heterogenous, anonymous and unclosed '*implexities*': liminal, sensuous and finite complexes who inhabit space by means of constant mediation and implication. Far from being the static backdrop of our existence, the mutability of space and images, of life itself, inhabits our body, stripping the senses away from the fiction of permanent, imperturbable fixation.

Artists like James Turrell and Tacita Dean, for example, have confronted, in different ways, this peculiar liminal efficacy of the image, and of clouds: their unmasterable, unfixable character. James Turrell's *Skyspace* [Fig. 15] radically upsets the space-time conditions that would enable us to fix and to grasp the

object, since the 'object' in question consists of pure mutability, or the constant de-shaping at play in the formation of clouds in the sky[254]. Such an experience of looking at the sky through the outlined frame traced by the artist also coincides with the impossibility to predict, or to foresee: each time anyone will pose their gaze on the *Skyspace,* their experience and vision will be uniquely and unpredictably different, due to the mutability of sky.

Tacita Dean's installation for the Marian Goodman Gallery (New York, 2016) titled … *My English Breath in Foreign Clouds* [Fig. 16] is another example of the paradoxical enterprise to transform our experience of seeing, via image, into an experience of liminal unsettling and uncertainty. The piece which gives the title to the entire installation arguably plays with the idea that the limitation fixed by language - the distinction, which is only readable on the level of signification and meaning, between 'English breath' and 'foreign clouds' - fails to register within the material, sensuous immanence of the image: what is 'English' breath and what is 'foreign' clouds, in the image? Where is this false opposition captured? Is it not the case that this image presents us with the coterminous blending of breath and clouds, especially if looking at the detail of the writing merging and penetrating within the cloud, therefore undoing all oppositional logics for the sake of liminal oscillation?

It is worth noting, in light of the argument pursued here, that the drawings made with charcoal, spray chalk, white charcoal pencil and gouache on blackboards are presented without the use of *fixative*, and therefore they are exposed to their own vulnerability, to the tangible possibility of erasure and mutability. These cloud-images are presented through the finite inconclusiveness that coincides with their mode of existence. Finite inconclusiveness in both senses of being vulnerable to erasure, decline and disturbance, and in their material potential to upset and to irritate the fixations imposed by the logic of representation. A vision at - and not of - the limit, a vision capable of being unhinged from the anchoring points of provenance and progress, meaning and signification, must necessarily account for the fundamental heteronomy and ambivalence of the liminal un-graspability that is captured in these images. Tacita Dean's and James Turrell's respective 'visions' of clouds are a timeless reminder that art's gesturing, of which the image is a trace, places us before the unmasterable finitude of our existence by ways of implication with a creative potential for endless de-shaping. Saving phenomena, or rescuing the marginal, here amounts to exposing one's gaze, and submitting oneself, to a liminal experience of fundamental vulnerability which points to the exact opposite of the stable posturing fuelling the contemporary resurgence of self-sufficiency and ontological security.

Against the backdrop of the worrisome renewal of thoughts of delimitation - 'politics of the enemy' - hinged on the limit imposed by the logic of sameness - *identĭtas* a derivative of "*idem",* "same", "sameness" -, the experience of looking modelled on the fleeting mutability of clouds invites us to expose our gaze, our body, towards someone and something else, where something other is, at the margins of: here and now, namely elsewhere.

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[254] Didi-Huberman makes a similar point when discussing the liminal character of Turrell's *Skyspace* in a short text: see Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2017. *The Man who Walked in Color,* trans. by Drew S. Burk (Minnapolis: Univocal Publishing), see esp. pp. 66-68.

5.2 Liminal Images, or Philosophy's 'other' Other.

The aim of this thesis is to answer the following set of questions, posed in the introduction, which have justified and underscored my critical engagement with different liminal images throughout the research: can the liminal potency of the image act as an oscillating and unfixable point of collision which, despite not being *analogous* with thinking or philosophy, is able to touch upon - and to irritate - its limits? How can the potential for sensing the *affinity* between the image's capacity to elicit philosophical questioning and philosophy's potential to question the limits of language via image bypass the risk of downgrading into an operation of analogy which would erase their respective differences? Can we rethink the relation between the philosophical and the visual, between writing and image, between image and thought, by situating the image at the liminal, tangent point of philosophy's 'other' other, to rephrase Derrida's invitation[255]? What insights can be learnt from Benjamin's own engagement with the liminal efficacy of images? And how can revisiting this efficacy, via Didi-Huberman's method, be relevant for rethinking the fragile interstice between image and gaze at a time of relentless visual proliferation? Every chapter has contributed, in its own way and within its limits, to shed more light on the aforementioned questions, by taking Benjamin's work as an anchoring point to critically examine the nexus and the point of difference between images of the limit and liminal images, while also charting the resurgence of the latter in Didi-Huberman's method-gesture. In what follows, I will summarise the aims of each chapter, while simultaneously outlining the originality and significance of the results so far obtained, in order to finally answer the set of questions posed at the outset of this thesis.

Ch. 1 examined Benjamin's unique response to the issue of the purported 'imperturbability' of the 'boundary-posts' introduced by the power of judgment in the third *Critique*, by engaging with the liminal images of Melencolia, Niobe and Hamlet, as they detach from Neo-Kantian (Panofsky and Saxl) and post-Kantian (Heidegger) respective images of limitation - *Melencolia's* portrait of a limited being unable to access the transcendence of individual genius (Panofsky and Saxl); Heidegger's depiction of Athena's glance to the border stone as the delimitation of another beginning, or the provenance and destiny of Being. The results of the analysis have shown that, in the first case (Panofsky and Saxl), the image's potential to irritate clear-cut (conceptual) limitations is sabotaged by the closure of a transcendental beyond which reiterates and radicalises the mythic split and hierarchy, of Renaissance reminiscence, between the immanent realm of construction qua practical handwork and, on the other hand, the intellectual cypher of genius. In Heidegger's case, the liminal efficacy of the image is obfuscated by the positing of yet another hierarchical delimitation between the beginning and the 'other beginning', exposing a limit in philosophy's missed opportunity to emancipate from myths of provenance, or of Being as the thinking of provenance.

The liminal images (*Liminal Images* I; II) of Melencolia, Niobe and Hamlet have exposed, in different yet interrelated ways, the potential for inconclusive finitude that characterises the interstice between the

[255] See Derrida, *Margins*, p. xiv.

image's liminality and mere representations of the limit. Far from presenting a mere image of the limit, Melencolia and her 'siblings' - Hamlet and Niobe -, as seen through Benjamin's eyes, offer an occasion to complicate the idea that the thinking act amounts to a mere binary play of delimitation alongside un-limitation, whose otherworldly destination is a transcendence closure; Melencolia's gesture offers a rescuing, redemptive possibility within the - more precisely at the - limits of the world of things, provided that what is redeemed is only the image's - and the world's - material, sensuous yet ungraspable, liminal immanence. Similarly, the unfolding of Hamlet's death and of Niobe's tears complicate clear-cut delimitations between death and life, the finite and the infinite, image and language, by inscribing an exceeding, liminal potential for inconclusiveness right at the heart of - not beyond, nor outside - the sensuous spacetime of the finite form - Melencolia's rescuing gaze, Hamlet's speaking of his death and Niobe's enduring tears display a temporal, liminal efficacy that radically undoes any attempt, on behalf of the thinking act, to fix these oscillating motifs on one side: the side of life *or* death, image *or* thought, language *or* silence, past *or* present.

Contrasting both synthetic closure/idealistic sublation and productive *poiesis*, Benjamin's anti-*telos* and unproductive thinking of the limit underscoring the images of Melencolia, Hamlet and Niobe, as 'that' which holds within itself the potential for inconclusiveness, goes back to Kant's image of the imperturbable *Grenzstein* and radically exacerbates its tensive knot, declaring the limit's mutability and irritability right at the heart of finitude. No longer shielding the limit from the perturbations of a 'transcendental point of view', and no longer relying upon transcendental closure, Benjamin's early repertoire of liminal images inexorably problematises the fracturing and yet connecting line at the basis of Kant's sensible-supersensible hierarchical distinction. The non-irritability of the 'border posts' proclaimed for the sake of continuity and systematic closure in the third *Critique* becomes supplanted with and exacerbated by the kinetic, discontinuous spacetime potential for 'cutting across' the purported fixity of the limit, displacing the image and the gaze, the visual and the philosophical, the visible and the thinkable, as ch. 2 has repeatedly tried to demonstrate.

Building on and further expanding upon these early prototypes of the image's liminal efficacy, Ch. 2 has offered evidence that the kinesis of 'cutting across', as it appears in the context of Benjamin's attempts at picture theory, presents the potential to unmask what he considered to be the mythic presuppositions grounding the thought of origin in art, as they resurface in Kantian aesthetics and Neo-Kantian philosophies of art (Cassirer). Casting the 'transverse section' [*Querschnitt*] as the coordinate to an alternative mode of non-image-beholding that problematises the presumption of an originally vertical posture towards the picture plane, Benjamin's sketches on the bodily traction towards the plane offer an occasion to challenge and to rethink the hierarchical splits - *hylē-morphē,* inside-outside, content-form, material-ideational, representational-symbolic, vertical-horizontal, original-copy - that have conditioned the history of aesthetics. In its refusal to resolve and to sublimate, as Cassirer does, the aforementioned splits under the guise of a newly-found 'unity' granted by a spiritual act of mediation, Benjamin's attention towards the 'transverse section' also signals a way to recognise and to overcome the 'mythic origins' of art in the possibility - enabled by contemporary revisitations of space in relativity theories through the lens of simultaneity and the paradigm of the curvature - of rooting picture theory within the sensuous reality of perceptual-physical relation to the plane that

complicate the subject-object contemplative posture and privilege. As I have attempted to show, the kinesis of cutting across, modelled on the bodily tension towards the picture plane, also lends itself to rethinking the configuration of ethics, life and art in non-hierarchical, sensuous and gestural terms, a reconfiguration of limits which takes place by being-acted-upon, and by submitting oneself to the image's enactive agency. To this extent, ch. 2 further reinforces Benjamin's unique positioning with respect to the non-sensuous destination of Kantian aesthetics by tracing a peculiarly Benjaminian, aphoristic and imagistic trajectory out of myth, from moral uprightness to receptive transversality, which hinges on and keeps alive the liminal 'gap' that the third *Critique* so vehemently wanted to fill. What bursts through the exposition - and not the purported imperturbability - of the fracture *qua* frontier is the rescuing of what Kant had sacrificed for the sake of the system's (transcendental) closure: non-normative and reflexive impulses, non-self-sufficiency, natural inclinations, discontinuity, incommunicability.

The liminal image at the centre of chapter 2 (*Liminal Images* III), namely my own revisitation of Carazan's dream-image, has provided a new interpretative key that enables us to challenge Kant's instrumental understanding of the image's threshold, and offers an original account of the other sense - literally, touch - by which we can read the liminality of the image in question. By turning my attention to the one gesture by which Carazan crosses the dream's limit and is awaken to sociability and moral purposes - 'I stretched my hands out [*Ich streckte darauf meine Hände*] to actual objects [*nach den Gegenden der Wirklichkeit*] (Kant 2011: 17)' - I have exposed a blind spot ignored by Kant which rebukes the entire premises of his interpretation. I have argued, contra Kant, that Carazan's impulsive and reflexive hands cutting across, reaching out towards 'actual objects', embody the oblique potential of a transversal, sensuous and pragmatic kinesis that radically problematises the idea that the dream-image's function would be to somehow issue morality from an inscrutable, unlimited and abstract 'outside'. By linking the striving of Carazan's bodily tension towards 'actual objects' with Benjamin's cryptic re-reading of Kantian ethics through the coordinate of inclination, and in light of a broader discussion on the motif of the transverse section and the body's traction towards the picture plane, I have exposed, via image, a non-instrumental and non-normative understanding of the image's liminal threshold with respect to Kant's. If, like Benjamin claims, 'inclination is to be transformed through a change of meaning into one of the supreme concepts of morality in which it is perhaps called upon to take the position that 'love' held' (WB 2019: 71), then this 'taking of position' cannot be but liminal, at the margins of: non-legislative and non-coercive, love's oblique position eschews the constraints of duty to occupy the un-circumscribable, fleeting space of an interval, of a traction in-between the human and, also, the non-human - it is significant, in this sense, that Carazan's gesture aims at the 'realms' [*Gegenden*] of objective reality, a plural, sensuous disposition not necessarily limited to the sole 'realm' of people. The liminal positioning of love is also at the centre of Benjamin's later rethinking of the relation between critique and art, gaze and image: 'love of the object limits itself to the recognition of the radical uniqueness of the artwork and moves from that point of creative indifference [*schöpferischen Indifferenzpunkt*] in which the intellective insight into the essence of 'beauty' and 'art' intertwines with and permeates through the singular uniqueness of the work' (GS 3: 51). Significantly, the mode of presence which defines the 'essence' of

beauty and art, according to this excerpt, is not that of an inaccessible outside but is issued from the matter of the object, as it encounters the oblique disposition of a loving *qua* non-mastering, non-possessive, gaze: it 'permeates through' and 'intertwines with' the gaze, suggesting an inextricable, material and sensuous interlacing which prevents fixation and closure - the purported fixity of form - and does justice to the liminal kinesis at stake.

The results obtained from ch. 2 have raised the following set of questions: how can the experience of submitting oneself to the image's command, or the praxis of being-acted-upon, facilitated by receptive transversality and the kinesis of cutting across, contribute to rethinking the interstice between body, life, ethics and art? What kind of non-normative, unaccomplished and unproductive gestures of construction - of time and of thought - can be raised by confronting the liminal efficacy of the image, namely by glimpsing its ability to set the limits of language into motion? Chapter 3 has been designed to provide an answer to these by confronting with an under-investigated lithograph from the *Passagenwerk*, depicting the intersections and clash between the gestures of composition - vertical uprightness/self-containment (kaleidoscope) - and construction - transversal inclination/fragmentation (tangram). By locating the tangram's potential for construction as the site of a haptic-optic, plural possibility - to construct a figure but also to displace it, leaving the fragments loose -, denied by kaleidoscopic visual imagery, and by engaging in a close reading of Benjamin's cryptic remarks on the lithograph, the chapter has uncovered and exposed an important link between the under-investigated liminal motifs of the tangram's construct-ability, as well as the cloudy-spot's un-graspability, and the 'praxis of the (k)not' advocated by Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as the gesture of *struere* (accumulation), or non-construction.

The first liminal image confronted in Chapter 3, namely the under-investigated motif of the tangram and the peculiar gesture(s) of construction and non-construction, or construction by displacement, it calls for, builds on and expands upon the link between the principle of construction at the forefront of cubist picture theory and a mode of envisioning the world unhinged from the task of composing the 'image of an order'. Using the lithograph as a visual source to elicit and explore philosophical questions on the possibility, opened up by the tangram's loose fragments depicted in the picture, to occupy a liminal space where no order or hierarchy takes over, I have traced an important link between the 'nowhere' signalled by the loose fragments and the 'nothing' at the basis of yet another liminal motif in Benjamin's repertoire, namely the cloudy-spot. Examining the question of construction through the lens of the tangram's de-shaping and displacing potential, as well as the cloudy-spot's lack of grasp, has enabled me to trace the contours of a liminal spacing at the margins of all oppositional logics: beyond the mere alternative between form and the formless, presence and absence, vision and touch, the 'nothing' and 'nowhere' underscoring the tangram and the cloudy spot coincide with what Nancy, more than fifty years after Benjamin, would define as the place wherein 'ties have come untied, or are not yet tied' (2008: 90), where infinite 'recasting' and 'retying' takes place. Both liminal motifs signal Benjamin's dislodging of 'construction' from the progressive myth of infinite completion (kaleidoscopic imagery), pointing instead to the contingent reality of finite inconclusiveness.

Taking the gesture of construction - and non-construction - as a leitmotiv throughout the chapter has also enabled to revisit and to challenge some of the presuppositions underpinning the sustained trend in scholarship to bind Benjamin's method of construction via image with Aby Warburg's. As I have demonstrated, to identify an affinity between the two is not merely to proceed by way of analogy and to dismiss difference: on the contrary, the chapter has articulated Benjamin's and Warburg's respective methods of working with images as different yet interrelated solutions to the same problem - to undo the 'rigid partitions' (SW 2: 78) between disciplinary domaines, and the 'territorial character of art' (SW 2: 78). The results of the Benjamin-Warburg confrontation have shown that the point at which Benjamin's method of image-based construction both collides with and glances off from Warburg's is a methodological one and also, importantly, a philosophical one. At the level of method, Benjamin's 'imagistic insurgence' and the correlated state of receptive undoing, or being-acted-upon, opens up to the possibility of losing oneself within the image, and therefore of interrupting - without possibility of reinstating - pre-existing, hierarchical relations of order between seeing subject and seen object, while Warburg's 'emphatic binding', instead, keeps alive the possibility of reinstating the preconditions for acting-upon (mastering, grasping) the image, and the world. The philosophical implications of this methodological point of difference are of considerable significance: thinking with the image, for Warburg, cannot amount to undoing the self-sufficiency of thinking 'I', and therefore cannot emancipate method, or construction, from the human 'ends' of infinite progress; on the other hand, Benjamin's method of 'making things present' makes itself vulnerable to the receptive possibility, for the body, to become matter, image, and for the 'I' to become nothing, saving not the ends of humanity but the world of things. By insisting upon the interstice which both connects and separates Benjamin's gesture from Warburg's, chapter 3 has also uncovered a limit inherent in Didi-Huberman's seamless weaving of the two methods in question, which is to be found in the reluctance to accept that Warburg's construction-gesture ascribes to the image a predominantly binding function, rather than an interrupting-destructive one (Benjamin).

It has been left to ch. 4 to demonstrate why and how the method of working and thinking with images defined by the ungraspable kinesis of cutting-across and being-acted-upon, as it is evinced from Benjamin's variations of the liminal image, finds a resurgence in contemporary image theory, specifically in the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, lending itself as a valuable pragmatical tool to rethink our contemporary relation with images, as well as philosophy's relation with the liminal image's un-graspability. Notwithstanding the significant historical gap that separates Benjamin's time from the time of Didi-Huberman's writing, the contemporary relevance of Benjamin's nuanced insights on the liminal efficacy of the image, seen through the lens of Didi-Huberman's method, is reinforced by the very fact that the 'politics of the enemy' (DH 2018: 165), or the limit-attitude fuelling the political-philosophical enclosure of the Thirties, which the liminality of the image tried to counteract, is far from being a thing of the past. On the contrary, the resurgence of Benjamin's *Schwelle*-potential within Didi-Huberman's liminal praxis of 'sketching the glimpse' must be contextualised within the the worrisome upheaval of self-sufficiency. The purpose of Chapter 4 was to trace the resurgence of the image's liminal efficacy diagnosed by Benjamin within Didi-Huberman's method-

gesture, or the heterogeneous praxis of looking at, thinking with and writing about images. Where and how does Didi-Huberman retrieve the liminal efficacy of the image, which was at the heart of Benjamin's countermove to the limit-attitude pervading 20th century's aesthetics and politics, in order to elicit a contemporary thinking of the limit which eschews both alternatives of mere delimitation and transcendental un-limitation, and how can this newly-revived thinking at the limits of image and thought be articulated by language, if such a liminal kinesis is by default defined by its own un-graspability? By placing the question of method at the epicentre of a broader reflection upon what it means to look at and to write about the liminal efficacy of images, chapter 4 has the argued for the importance of rethinking the interstice between image and thought. A critical scrutiny of two liminal images underpinning Didi-Huberman's method of 'sketching the glimpse', namely 'the night that moves' and the 'spatiality without things', has provided access to the key questions of how can a praxis of the gaze, and of writing, rise to the (critical) challenge of discerning the difference between images that are merely reproduction of the visible subject to the logic of representation - images of the limit - and images that present the potential to elicit a philosophical questioning which is not reducible to the order of knowledge, signification or meaning - liminal images. By closely engaging with the question of method and by insisting on teasing out the philosophical stakes that such a method-gesture yields for the practices of looking at and writing about the liminal efficacy of images, chapter 4 has addressed at least two significant gaps in scholarship. First, it offered a critical scrutiny of Didi-Huberman's method by engaging with those primary sources at the margins of his theoretical output that have been so far largely ignored in the context of English language scholarship; Second, the chapter has underscored the critical potential of Didi-Huberman's rethinking of the intricate nexus of looking, writing and thinking about the image's liminality while also exposing its limitation, providing a different interpretation of the method in question than the one argued for by Didi-Huberman. I have argued that the most promising potential of Didi-Huberman's method-gesture of confronting images is to be found, paradoxically, in those marginal instances, within his oeuvre, which do not produce anything along the lines of a theory of the image, but instead strive to think the image uniquely through the lens of its fundamental un-graspability, or non-congruence with theoretical thought.

The excursus on Didi-Huberman's method has not only traced the resurgence of Benjamin's insights on the limit-like potential of the image, but it also exposed the survival and the modification of a Kantian residue within Didi-Huberman's gesture towards images - the 'vibration [*Erschütterung*]' mentioned in §27 of the *Analytic of the Sublime*. Keeping alive the intuition that what exceeds our ability to grasp necessarily entails movement, Didi-Huberman's method nevertheless rejects the non-sensuous destination - 'inscrutability'- that was ascribed to it by Kant, and paints the contours of a 'nothing' that acts as a catalyst for the very possibility of envisioning something, of sensing and seeing into - and not beyond - the un-graspable. In this manoeuvre, Didi-Huberman's method takes up the invitation, advanced by Jean-Luc Nancy, to repurpose the project of a transcendental aesthetics to the 'here and now', to the inconclusive and ecstatic finitude of sense and of the senses. To this extent, chapter 4 presents the logical culmination of the entire architecture of the project, inasmuch as it articulates and justifies the contemporary relevance of the arguments sketched at the outset of

the research. It identifies another possibility, beyond the purported (Kantian) imperturbability of the 'border posts', with which this research began, in the sensuous 'vibration', or the interplay at the limits of presentation opened up with the experience of the sublime, and further problematises it by retrieving the *Schwelle*-potential that has shaped Benjamin's repertoire of liminal images. It eventually holds this liminal potential up to a contemporary light: specifically, the chapter situates the argument to a contemporary setting, with and beyond Benjamin, by asking whether and how such efficacy can still be glimpsed in the aftermath of the most brutal radicalisation of the image of limit - the Final Solution. Witnessing the Holocaust, humanity stood before the limit experience of the end, as shot No. 281 unforgivingly shows. Nazism, as Derrida notoriously remarked re-reading Benjamin[256], concludes with the reaching of its ineluctable limit, the Holocaust. It finishes with the end: extermination of existence, annihilation of the body. It radicalises the limits of representation - 'aestheticization of the political' (Derrida 1993: 59) - to the point where it can no longer see or think its other - the spacing at the limits of representation, the margin. If one accepts Derrida's proposition that the image of the limit marked by the Holocaust must be thought from outside its limits, from the place of the other - from what it strove to erase: the name, the body, the singular existence[257] - then this 'other' which cannot be fathomed as a philosophical system or doctrine, for Didi-Huberman, is nothing but the image's liminality inasmuch as it offers the possibility to speak, act, look and think from a place of non-belonging to the order of representation, beyond any principle of imitation, signification, communication. A place which, as ch. 4 has repeatedly tried to show, is not reducible to the invisible of an imageless un-presentability and yet cannot give itself to the clarity of reason, precisely because the premises of such an enterprise towards the light of reason - Enlightenment -, with the Holocaust, reached their limit. I argue that the liminal image should not be understood, however, as the mere opposite of the image of the limit brought about by the aestheticization of the political - i.e. the liminal image does not find its destination in the politicization of aesthetics aspired to by Benjamin. The liminal image, precisely because it relentlessly questions and challenges the very idea of an image of an order, cannot be a mere means to the articulation of a political programme able to emancipate humanity or to produce a collective. The liminal image means nothing: abandoning the grammar of communicability altogether, and rejecting the productive purpose of a collective overtaking the singular, the liminal experience afforded by images able to irritate the limits of representation and signification can only be characterised as an experience of breaking off which paradoxically elicits the very possibility of sharing, or as the mark of a difference that complicates and rebukes the projects of completion, the politics of enclosure, the myth of self-sufficiency.

To think the liminal efficacy of certain images, to glimpse the image's potential to irritate the limits of representation after the final solution means to do away with the non-sensuous refuges of un-presentability and infinite completion, and to 'to *begin* [*commencer*] *with the end* [*fin*]' (DH 1992: 196). Thinking the liminal efficacy of the image after Benjamin, after the Holocaust, after the project of 'finishing off' existence, means

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[256] See Derrida, Jacques. 1993. 'Force of Law. The Mystical Foundation of Authority', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice ,* ed. by Drucilla Cornell and others (London: Routledge) pp. 3-67, p. 58.

[257] See Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 60

to retrieve the other of the 'end', that which the limit can never do away with, namely the ineluctable incompletability and impermanence of existence.

This project began with the possibility of completion: it began with the completion of the system, or the mastery qua appropriation of the limit's other via the transcendental closure and non-sensuous destination of Kantian aesthetics. It then proceeded to question the premises of such a limit-enterprise via Benjamin's variations on the liminal efficacy of the image, and by subsequently tracing a trajectory that binds his insights on the imagistic, aphoristic potential to disrupt the limits of representation, against the backdrop of the 20th century's politics of enclosure, with a constellation of gestures - Nancy's, Derrida's, Blanchot's and, of course, Didi-Huberman's - that today acquire renewed significance in light of the current reiteration of a sense of agency built upon the negation of difference. Benjamin's understanding of the image's liminality captured a shift of paradigm which radically problematises a mode of envisioning the world uniquely grounded on the exclusive complicity between vision and intellectual insight. By locating the painterly picture as a liminal place which blurs the haptic-optic opposition and envelops the body in a non-hierarchical, non-appropriable and multi-sensorial experience of displacement unhinged from the limits of grasping, mastering or even comprehending, Benjamin sketches the contours of a praxis which invites to 'submit' one's body to the image's 'command', therefore opening up the possibility to begin thinking from the standpoint of the limit's 'other', from the space of difference that cuts across and breaks off the purported autonomy and uprightness of the contemplating subject.

One could easily argue, nearly a century after Benjamin, that we live in an age where we regularly, if not exclusively, submit ourselves, our lives, to the image's command. Henri Lefebvre's words on social space, written long before the advent of social media in *The Production of space*, first published in French in 1974, are now more relevant than ever:

> People *look*, and take sight, take seeing, for life itself. Sight and seeing, which in the Western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap: the means whereby, in social space, diversity may be simulated and a travesty of enlightenment and intelligibility ensconced under the sign of transparency (Lefebvre 1991: 75-76).

Fifty years later, these words still stand and should be taken seriously in light of the current proliferation of visual information enabled by virtual social networks. The hegemony that was once granted to the perceptual-conceptual juncture of sight and intellectual insight has not been replaced by a non-hierarchical and multi-sensory experience of a liminal, heterogenous space but space is now more than ever exclusively saturated with homogeneous, non-sensuous hyper-visibility. Living in an epoch of 'ripped imagination' (DH 2000: 364), as Didi-Huberman remarks, means exactly to fall into the trap of an enlightenment parody: that is, to convince our eyes that everything is already visible, transparent and clear,

and to only see what we already recognise, understand and grasp. Taking sight and seeing for life itself means exactly the opposite of the bodily experience of being-acted-upon that Benjamin counterposed to the posture of contemplating from distance. To take sight and seeing for life means, as Lefebvre rightly intuited, to cover up difference by means of a predominant 'visualization' that only serves to disguise a 'conceal repetitiveness' (Lefebvre 1991: 75) under the name of diversity, when in fact all is left is the homogeneity of the same gesture: scrolling down. In light of this - and I mean this literally: in this hyper visible dominance of artificial light, emitted by countless technical images, that progressively undermines our ability to glimpse the obscure non-transparency of the liminal image - this project has identified, starting with Benjamin and ending with Didi-Huberman, a research trajectory worth pursuing: the future direction is, I argue, not one which should aim at producing more theories of the image but one which interrogates, instead, what it really means to see, and to look at images, in a world of absolute transparency and in an age where looking seemingly means everything to us. Finally decoupling seeing from intellectual insight or intelligibility, this questioning should specifically investigate the obscurity of what it means to see when our eyes fail, when our certitudes tremble, following Benjamin's invitation to think how a painter might see with his hands, through to Derrida's reflections on the non-oppositional nexus of the invisible-visible and Daniel Arasse's invitation to learn to see nothing, up to Didi-Huberman's stimulus to sense the opaque non-knowledge of images, in spite of all, in order to trace the coordinates of a space of resistance at the margins of our world picture.

After this journey that cuts across modern aesthetics and contemporary visual cultures, I can now finally spell out a direct answer to the following question, which has both fuelled and justified the contemporary relevance of this project: can we rethink the limit *qua* interstice between philosophy and art, between writing and image, between image and thought, by postulating the liminal image as the non-appropriable, non-masterable and ungraspable space of an 'other' from which thought begins again - where to 'begin' is to certainly to question but to do so only at the margins of meaning and of signification and in spite of the saturating closure operated by the current proliferation of visual information, which seems today not only to revive but to dramatically exacerbate the logic of representation - after touching the end, at philosophy's limit? Can the liminal efficacy inherent in the material immanence of certain images help us to begin thinking the end - finitude, the senses, the body, the world, the other of representation - and its finite inconclusiveness not by ways of sublimation into an infinite beyond but through the kinetic potential for sensuous touching, crossing, passage, mediation, cutting across that comes alongside - and not in opposition to - vision? Contrasting the hegemony of vision, or the ocular-centric tendency[258] that has accompanied much of Western philosophy, from Plato to Husserl and beyond, and which surely echoed in post-Kantian aesthetics, the liminal image cannot be defined as a mere object of vision given to a contemplating subject, as the heterodox nature of the images - visions, sounds, literary motifs, dreams - analysed in the context of this project demonstrates. To a certain extent, the liminal images discussed in the context of this research can be considered as paradigmatic blind spots in the history of post-Kantian aesthetics: images that resist closure and

[258] For an overview of the role of vision in relation to philosophical discourse see Kleinberg-Levin, David M. 1997. *Sites of Vision The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press).

transparency, images that still, to this day, give us to think beyond our purported knowledge of them. Not simply images of the limit - whereby vision is structured as a limit that only dominates and excludes - but images at the limits of, images that open up our gaze to the visionary possibility of thinking beyond the invisible-visible false opposition, where the invisible does not clash with or is converted into the visible, but comes along with it - not beyond - as 'that' which touches us, unexpectedly, at the margins of our ability to see, to speak and to comprehend, and which radically disrupts the illusion of limitless transparency and universal communicability.

The liminal images examined in the context of this project have all contributed to sustain and to reinforce the argument that the image bears the potential to present the gaze and the act of thinking with a double opportunity: to either close in on itself, being bounded by the tendency to encapsulate and digest the image's non-congruence with logos within its own coordinates, or, quite differently, to expose itself, to open itself up to the possibility of losing everything - no meaning, no community, no destination, no origin, no knowledge or certainty to grasp - and, in this inexorable loss and displacement, in this nothing which it summons the courage to face, to touch its limit and end, that is, to begin looking, thinking and writing again, anew.

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