Thinking Images. Enactively

Abstract:

The article offers an enactivist phenomenology of images. While drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of "Denkbilder" (thinking images), it is argued that images should be understood as a threshold between a thing to be acted out and a thing to be mentally represented. This approach argues for an image theory that also embraces non-visual images, but nonetheless can be brought in line with current image theory.

Walter Benjamin's concept of "Denkbilder", convincingly translated as "thinking images" by Henry Sussman, presents thoughts in symbiosis with sensual experience. Abstraction and sensation, thought and bodily practices, are understood as intrinsic to one another; attitudes and atmospheres are exposed on the verge of reflection and abstraction; insights emerge from the experienced environment like a gecko suddenly appearing in a stone wall.

My paper therefore traces "Denkbilder" as migrating between lived experience and analytical thought. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, I argue that Benjamin made a gesture towards cultural analysis similar to what Edmund Husserl's famous "going back to the things themselves"1 entailed for philosophy: namely, taking experience as seriously as knowledge, and leading knowledge back to its intrinsic experience.

First, I explore the act of thinking, understood as an intellectual and sensual practice of molding to an environment -- what I posit as an alternative to the practice of referring to objects (be they sensual or objects of thought). As early as in Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, Benjamin pointed out that the processes of reference entails the 'allegorical' productiveness of signification – in contrast to the 'symbolic' stability of an ideal totality – yet concurrently lacks sensual immediacy. Benjamin attempted to recover non-referential immediacy through concepts like "innervation,"2 "messianic violence,"3 or "profane illumination"4, and tried to recover this non-referential immediacy as epistemic; I argue that the same endeavor underlies his Denkbilder, at least as far as the practice of molding to an environment is concerned, as non-referential immediacy of experience.

Second, this paper addresses the iconic dimension of a 'Denkbild'. In a close and less metaphorical examination, the question of why "thinking images" are called "Bilder" is far from clear. Denkbilder are written, not depicted; there are no pictures involved in Benjamin's

---

1 „Wir wollen auf die 'Sachen selbst' zurückgehen" (E. Husserl, Logische Untersuchungen 2. Band, 1. Teil (Den Haag, 1984), 10).

2 W. Benjamin, „Der Sürrealismus", in Gesammelte Schriften Bd. II,1, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M., 1977), 295-310, 310.

3 W. Benjamin: „Zur Kritik der Gewalt, in Gesammelte Schriften" in Buch Bd. II,1, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M., 1977), 179-204.

4 Benjamin, „Der Sürrealismus", Ibid., 295-310, 297.

texts. Further, his Denkbilder are not intended to invite comparison to description or ekphrasis; rather, any description is already impregnated by what cannot possibly be seen. On the other hand, Denkbilder neither represent nor illustrate thoughts, nor can they be considered as mere metaphors pointing at ideas -- and even less as some kind of Rorschach-like site for projecting thoughts on descriptions. On the contrary, sensual experience, in Benjamin's short texts, must instead be considered a condensed and intricate part of the act of thinking itself. As such, I argue that this very symbiosis of thought and sensing activity leads Benjamin to refer to these short texts as thinking 'images'.

These considerations serve as starting point for opening up Benjamin's Denkbilder to a broader discussion. I believe that recent debate about the 'image', mostly taking place in Visual Studies and 'Bildwissenschaft', might not only contribute to understanding Benjamin's Denkbilder, but also profit from his approach. In saying this, I am well aware that Benjamin's images are something quite different from what is usually studied by those disciplines concerned with what images are: Denkbilder are texts rather than pictures, and not even focused primarily on the visual dimension. They include all the senses and emotions, and carry a practical, hands-on component. However, while this might seem an argument for considering 'Denkbilder' irrelevant to image theory, I suggest that, paradoxically, the opposite is true.

In current image theory, only a few scholars (such as Georges Didi-Huberman, Lambert Wiesing and Gottfried Boehm) argue for a concept of the image as defined by the visual; many other accounts take a broader approach. Horst Bredekamp, for example, sets forth a theory of 'image acts' focusing on the sensual and enactive impact of artworks;[5] David Freedberg ponders the power of images, relating it to a broad kind of bodily simulation;[6] and W.J.T. Mitchell defines images as "any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other"[7]. But even with these broader definitions, would it be a mistake to leave the discussion about (what an) image(s) (is) to Visual Studies and Bildwissenschaft alone. As the term 'image' carries with it a considerable philosophical tradition (starting with Plato's famous *eidos* and *idea*) in which the term is used much more expansively, I take the highly advanced discussion of visual studies and Bildwissenschaft only as a backdrop for a broader discussion about 'images', in which, drawing on Benjamin's essay *Das mimetische Vermögen*[8], I attempt to describe images as a practice rather than an entity: the act of merging lived experience with thinking.

I start with a potentially unsettling observation for a discussion about images. Images are usually conceived of as something to be observed or beheld from outside; Benjamin's Denkbilder, though, frequently describe phenomena as characterized by the act of merging with the environment: there is no beholder and nothing observed, no subject and no object, but rather an action or dynamic activity that makes no such distinction, and rather takes subjective experience and environment as one – it takes place inside the world and is not

---

[5] H. Bredekamp, Theorie des Bildakts – Über das Lebensrecht des Bildes (Frankfurt/M., 2011).

[6] D. Freedberg, The Power of Images – Studies in the History and Theory of Response (Chicago/London, 1989).

[7] W.J.T. Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want? (Chicago/London, 2005) xiii-xiv.

[8] W. Benjamin, „Über das mimetische Vermögen", in Gesammelte Schriften Bd. II,1, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M., 1977), 204-13.

about the world. These phenomena are proposed as a form of understanding that is neither representational nor content-based.

The thinking image about hiding places (in the *Berliner Kindheit*) offers a stark example: Benjamin writes that "only one who is hanged will grow aware of what is a rope and what is wood."[9] It is the sensual relation with things, the bodily exposure to them, that allows people to grow aware of things. Benjamin calls this involved way of developing awareness 'innewerden'. The prefix "in(ne)-", also present in words like "innehaben", "innerlich", or "innig", carries the meaning of "into" ("hinein") and alludes to an intimate relationship. One can think of human infants constantly grasping, smelling, handling, tasting things, in the process of becoming aware of or intimate with them; indeed, 'growing intimate' (rather than 'growing aware') may be a more accurate translation in this case.

In his focus on hiding places, Benjamin seems to conceive of a transitional phase between an intimately participatory way of relating to the world and the individualized human being. The Denkbilder of the *Berliner Kindheit* especially manifests a young and insecure subjectivity, always at risk of reversion to an earlier phase of more intimate but less subjective awareness. In this vein, the quote about growing aware as "innewerden"continues: " (…) hidden behind the curtain the child becomes something streaming and white himself, he becomes a specter."[10] Mingling with the world of non-human – yet in some way very animate – objects can result in actually merging with them and become part of the synergy between human being and curtain, between animate and inanimate: a specter.

Long before Donald Winnicott's theory of "transitional objects" and "transitional phenomena",[11] Benjamin here conceives of the transition between a consciousness that is part of the phenomena to a subjective consciousness having the phenomena as its content. Unlike Winnicott, however, Benjamin focuses less on transitional *objects* (like teddy bears) or transitional *practices* (like child's play), but rather on the singular events and transitional experiences they go along with. Moreover, Benjamin is very concerned with a reversal of this transition as well, the experience of *being* played back into mere ego-less experiencing. For Benjamin's child, any transitional experience carries the threat of losing independence from the world of things. The quote goes on further: " (…) whoever spotted me was able to root me to the spot and turn me into an idol, could weave me forever into the curtain and turn me into a specter, banish me into the heavy door for a lifetime."[12]

This experience of immobilizing or freezing , objectifying the subject, holds further implications about innewerden as a way of consorting intimately with the world of the things. The power of Medusa's petrifying gaze, turning subjects into objects, reverberates in this. Merging with the surrounding world takes away the option of thinking – like the rope does to

---

[9] "[…] erst einer, den man aufhängt, [wird] inne, was Strick und Holz sind", W. Benjamin, Berliner Kindheit um 1900 (Frankfurt/M., 1987) 61.

[10] "Das Kind, das hinter der Portiere steht, wird selbst zu etwas Wehendem und Weißem, zum Gespenst." Ibid.

[11] D.W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality (London/New York, 2005).

[12] "Wer mich entdeckte, konnte mich als Götzen unterm Tisch erstarren machen, für immer als Gespenst in die Gardine mich verweben, auf Lebenszeit mich in die schwere Tür bannen" Benjamin, „Berliner Kindheit um 1900", Ibid., 61.

the hanged man. However, there is another dimension to petrification as well, which has a lot to do with being turned into an instinct-led animal, giving the mythological figuration a biological underpinning. Benjamin, as this "Denkbild" displays, was very aware that the freeze reflex is common to most complex animals, human or not; ceasing all motion upon being spotted by a potential enemy, aimed at intermingling the visible self with the environment, at becoming part of what the enemy will perceive as background rather than focus, is a behavior rewarded highly in evolutionary terms. Therefore, the mythical experience of medusa's gaze is not only about becoming an object; not is it about being played back into the existence of an animal merging with the environment – it is about being played back into an inanimate existence, in which the human loses not only their humanity, but also their animality. Petrification is – an experience completely opposed to subjective reflection and ego-awareness: 'innewerden' instead is an intermediate experience precisely because it takes place without being subjectified and without being objectified, it is an intermediate stance, always at risk of death as a mere absence of thinking, while at the same time, in avoiding death, it becomes the very essence of thinking, since it is the only way of awareness that is not just about things, but rather grasps things from the inside.

Benjamin's thinking images therefore seem to hold a kind of awareness (innewerden) that thinking itself cannot convey. Here lies the second threshold, the threshold between thinking in and thinking about, of thinking as 'innewerden' and thinking as a subjective and reflexive act. This leaves me with the hypothesis that this Denkbild exists to establish the impossible unity of two different forms of awareness which exclude each other: One takes place in the act of mingling with the inanimate objects and becoming part of the environment; the other takes place in the act of distinguishing between subject and objects, the conscious self and the world. What is important about this threshold, however, is that petrification is linked to the event of being spotted, i.e. of being turned into an object by the gaze of a subject – which means that the threshold between petrifying subjective objectification (having objects of though) and being played back into an inanimate existence (becoming inanimate) is the only way of being alive.

The threshold experience, which I have defined as thinking in or 'innewerden' is crucial not only for understanding this particular Denkbild, but for understanding what Denkbilder are in general. To further define 'thinking in' as an intermediate stance between petrification on the one hand and subjective thinking on the other, we can call this threshold mimetic. In evolutionary terms, indeed, freezing constitutes an act of mimicry, establishing a mimetic relation within the surrounding world; and more than this it resembles what Benjamin has reflected in his essay on the mimetic faculty ("mimetisches Vermögen") – a title that can also be read as 'faculty of mimicry'. Here Benjamin describes humans as having an animalistic compulsion to assimilate, and to behave ("ehemals gewaltige[r] Zwang[], ähnlich zu werden und sich zu verhalten").[13] The phrase seems incomplete, "sich zu verhalten", "to behave" calls for a specification of "how" to behave – yet the point appears to rely on the distinction between "sich verhalten" (behave, denoting non-reflexive activity) and "handeln" (acting, denoting reflexive and decision-based activity), i.e. between animal-like instinctive behavior and subjective, conscious action. The mimetic faculty is a threshold between the two of them; and here, too, Benjamin's argument is concerned with merging with one's environment. Mimetism, in Benjamin's eyes, is not about producing similes or mimetic objects; it is about dynamic assimilation and adaptation. Therefore, the compulsive or

---

[13] Benjamin, „Über das mimetische Vermögen", Ibid., 204-13, 210.

instinctive origin of this faculty is about becoming one with an environment—assimilation is above all an act of molding to the surroundings.

Benjamin proceeds to state that mimetism also governs micro-macro-cosmological world views; human rituals of dancing for instance, were, in his eyes, apt for getting a hand on this mimetic cosmos, through what he calls "unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit" – non-sensual or even abstract similarity. In characteristic fashion, Benjamin does not really explain or conclude this thought, but leaves the reader wondering why seeking similarity is a compulsion, why dance is abstract, and how the mimetic powers might work on the universe. However, there is something to it, when e.g. thinking about children's play: The child playing with a locomotive does not want to represent one, but also seeks to become one and experience what it is like to be one – play is about the threshold between thinking in (molding to a locomotive and experience its movement from inside), and thinking about (taking an observational stance). Or take, as another example ritual dance, bearing in mind that the mimetic faculty is not about producing mimetic objects or representations, but assimilation of one's self to the environment: In the case of dancing, it becomes apparent that mimetic assimilation is neither about the production of concrete mimetic objects – let alone mimetic representations – nor a matter of mere imitation of music, nor does the dancer produce concrete copies of either a musical rhythm or their fellow dancers. Rather the dancer merges with the music, and with the collective in a participatory interaction, which becomes the kinaesthetic extension of an acoustic structure.

Against this backdrop, what leads Benjamin to speak about something "unsinnlich,", something abstract? It is precisely the fact that thinking in lacks concrete objects to think about and therefore does not rely on representational concreteness and representational operations of thinking. Take the act of comparison as an example for a basic and concrete act of representational thinking. The dance lacks this concretions – its analogies are not graspable in a concrete way: when searching for the *tertium comparationis* between music and dance in a bottom-up approach, it can only be found in abstraction. Of course, the fact that the similarity (Ähnlichkeit) in question is abstract does not mean that it be disembodied – rather the opposite. When enacting the dance and merging with the sound, everything is embodied; the abstraction however, reveals itself painstakingly to an observer searching for concrete similarities. The mimetic faculty therefore unites abstraction and embodiment – in a similar way like, in Benjamin's time, abstract art tried to unite the abstract and the sensual. Understood as a threshold, indeed, the mimetic faculty is as open for analytical interpretation on the one hand as it is for enaction on the other.

To sum up, the mimetic faculty thus results in some kind of ambiguous image allowing for enacted experience as well as abstraction, and therefore it mediates between an understanding that takes place in a state of absorption and immersion, and an understanding that takes place in a state of observation; between disclosing experience to a consciousness that is embedded in an activity and disclosing experience to a consciousness that reflects upon this activity. Put this way, the mimetic faculty embodies the same oscillation between abstraction and concretion, between reflective analysis and non-reflective lived experience, as observed in the Denkbild about the hiding place.

Unfortunately, however, Benjamin's analysis of the immersive mimetic state also leads to a terminological conundrum: calling the mimetism in question "vollendete Anbildung" leaves many questions open if read according to a dictionary. The term 'Anbildung' stands for the incomplete formation of something, e.g. in logopedia – where one

tries to teach the formation of the German phoneme 'ch' in the word 'noch' via the Anbildung of auxiliary sounds like gargling. A 'vollendete Anbildung', the paradoxical process of 'completed incomplete formation', therefore does not make much sense. However, Benjamin seems rather to read the prefix 'an-' in 'Anbildung' as it is used in 'Anverwandlung' (the act of merging with something by becoming similar with it) or 'Anschmiegen' (the act of molding to something) – that is, using the term transitively, as "Anbildung an". Anbildung, read this way, connotes a figuration relating to something else, a dynamic integration of two entities into what Daniel Stern would call a "form of vitality"[14] – a dynamic constitution of form that leads to participation, empathy and enaction rather than reference and aboutness. When read this way, Anbildung in a mimetic process does not entail the production of a mimetic object of something, but instead carries the idea of becoming part of something or molding oneself to something. Defining the mimetic faculty of adaptation as an act of molding within the environment allows for the distinction of the mimetic faculty from subjective experiencing. And so, becoming mimetically intimate means to mold to things and thereby be played back in a non-human form of existence.

The Denkbild on the "Schmetterlingsjagd" can be read exactly this way and thus displays the neat connection between thinking images and the mimetic faculty. Benjamin writes about the butterfly-hunting child and the hunted butterfly:

> The hunting law began to rule upon us. The more with every fiber I molded to the animal, the more butterfly-like I became in my innermost self; the more on the other hand this butterfly in its actions and non-actions took over the color of human resolution; and finally, it appeared as if its death were the price for my return to the human existence.[15]

Benjamin's metaphor of the "*color* of human resolution [Entschließung]" goes so far as to equate the act of human "Anbildung" and "innewerden" with animal mimetism: the hunter's experience behaves like a chameleon. In hunting, even the agonistic activity can occur as merging. The hunter and the hunted execute actions engaging *into* each other. Each of these actions makes sense only in relation to the action it responds to; child and butterfly merge in a joint complementary activity. And only the death of the animal – its petrification and hence re-objectification - can end the shared enaction: The act of killing the like-minded or, even better, like-*bodied* antagonist brings the child back to human existence, superseding the shared enaction and mutual blending.

At this point, I leave Benjamin for a moment to turn my attention to the question of why the outlined thoughts about mimetism as a phenomenon of sharedness and merging with the environment holds interests for image theory. First, I wish to avoid a simple misunderstanding: Natural mimetism as such is not about the production of mimetic objects, let alone images; it has nothing to do with anything that could be called an image – unless it

---

[14] Daniel Stern, *Forms of Vitality* - Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development, Oxford UP, Oxford and New York 2010.

[15] "Es begann die alte Jägersatzung zwischen uns zu herrschen: Je mehr ich selbst in allen Fibern mich dem Tier anschmiegte, je falterhafter ich im Inneren wurde, desto mehr nahm dieser Schmetterling in Tun und Lassen die Farbe menschlicher Entschließung an, und endlich war es, als ob sein Fang der Preis sei, um den einzig ich meines Menschendaseins wieder habhaft werden konnte." Benjamin, „Berliner Kindheit um 1900", ibid., 20f. [my translation].

comes into contact with a special type of observation. Arguably, it is only in the eyes and ears of a human beholder that the skin of a chameleon holds the image of its surroundings, that the Sonoran mountain snake takes the image of the coral snake, or, when shifting to acoustic mimetism. that a mynah's call mimics the alarm cry of a gibbon. Seeing something as an image depends on a very special kind of perception completely separate from the functionality of mimetism. Mimetism works to influence actions, while images are about observation: the 'eyes' on a butterfly's wings are there to keep birds away, whereas the eyes depicted on a canvas are to be looked at.

The 'image' here is distinct from camouflage, which is only significant insofar as it is successful. For the predator fooled by the plaice's camouflage, the experience does not involve 'thinking about' (perception, not building concepts) or 'seeing something as this very something' (perception as part of an activity, not as beholding). Indeed, this difference between mimicry on the one hand and image perception on the other has led Vladimir Nabokov to consider the wonders of natural mimicry as intended for the human eye alone.[16] So, it is safe to say that the existence of images hinges on a special way of seeing that, in humans, is extremely elaborate. It is easy for a human to see the *image* of the sand in a plaice's skin. A human can appreciate the play between visibility and invisibility, between the animal itself and the animal or surrounding, whose mimetic representation it now appears to be. The aesthetic of images that becomes graspable in similar phenomena entails a kind of doubling in perception:[17] Seeing becomes a way of sensually relating to the plaice and to the 'sand' on its skin. This doubling is clearly distinct from the function of mimicry.

So, in order to understand how the mimetic faculty related to 'Denkbilder' and image theory, mimesis must be understood as a threshold leading in both directions – it can entail thinking in ('innewerden') by making a subject mold to an environment and thereby leaving behinf the observational stance of an ego; but it also paves the ground into the very formation of this observational stance. So, the question is: What turns mimicry into an image? First, the issue is not representation; seeing the skin of a plaice as the representation of its surrounding is of course possible, but the reference to that ground is not what defines the experience of an image. Vice versa, image-perception does not afford representation either; seeing a Mondrian as a representation of a tiled wall is possible, but this reference certainly does not define the experience Mondrian himself aimed at creating. The difference between mimicry and an image raises the question of signification too – especially what C. S. Peirce would have called the 'iconic', i.e. the reference to an object by *similarity* (as opposed to the 'indexical' reference implying an actual connection to an object, and the 'symbolic' based on convention). The major problem here lies in the fact that Peirce's notion of the 'iconic' does not define images, but *signs*. That being said, the Peircian backdrop makes it easier to see why mimetism itself cannot be described in terms of signification: it holds a different, non-referential kind of similarity. The hiding child does not *refer to* the curtain, but becomes the flowing of the curtain; the dance does not refer to musical rhythm, but becomes a kinetic prolongation of it; the butterfly hunter does not refer to a butterfly, but shares the agonistic act of hunting with it; the plaice does not refer to the sand but hides in it.

---

[16] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, transl. by Dimitri Nabokov, Penguin: London 2017, S. 108.

[17] Cf. K. Sachs-Hornbach, "Das Bild in der Philosophie – Interview mit Bernhard Waldenfels", in Wege zur Bildwissenschaft – Interviews, ed. K. Sachs-Hombach (Cologne, 2004), 53-68, 58-9.

So, mimetism is an easy example to understand why signification is not enough to describe images. If the function of images is to refer to something else by similarity, they would not need any immersive dimension; they would exist to be observed and interpreted; any sensual relation to them would turn into something to be made transparent onto something else. However, sensual immediacy is not only *opposed* to image perception (insofar as image perception needs a doubling in perception), it is *necessary* for image perception; otherwise images were nothing but a special kind of sign. This double impasse appears to outline the purpose of an image, at least in Benjamin: Images allow for an oscillation between immersion and interpretation, lived sensual experience and thought.

The validity of this argument for image theory may be elaborated through a psychological experiment. The visual threshold of iconicism, in my view, becomes plastic in phenomena such as the "Ebbinghaus-Titchener-Illusion."
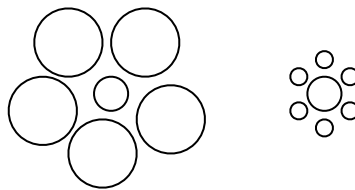
The experiment presents viewers with a pair of identical discs. An observational stance treats the discs as visual -- circles – and thus allows for assessing one centrally placed circle as larger than the other. However, when reaching for and taking hold of the discs as objects, this is no longer the case, as some recent psychological experiments have shown; when acted upon, the discs are perceived as physically existing, and approached with physical accuracy.[18] That the illusion takes place in the interpreting stance only makes for a huge divergence between this iconic illusion and optical illusions in the narrow sense of the term, such as with objects appearing to be bent by the surface of water. With the latter phenomena, people tend to move in a disoriented manner. The Ebbinghaus-Titchener-Illusion, however, dupes the perception of Peircian iconicity (discs interpreted as circles), not visuality; that is, the kind of perception that can be fooled by the Ebbinghaus-Titchener-Illusion is referential perception, because it is a fact of seeing *circles* in plastic discs. Enactive perception, however, remains accurate when faced with the identical discs, simply because it is not iconic: it does not go for the 'circles', but for a good hold on the discs.

This illusion can be seen as the counterpart to the functionality of mimetism. Indeed, mimetism fools the enactive perception, whereas the image-perception remains intact. Finding aesthetic pleasure in seeing a coral snake in the Sonoran mountain snake is something different than jumping away from an innocuous snake. Being tricked into seeing the surrounding background in a chameleon, or the ocean floor in the skin of a plaice, is what turns embedded perception into image perception. The threshold displayed in these two phenomena is what I would like to propose as the constituent of images. Or, to put it more clearly: An image – and, as we will see: also a thinking image – is the effect of the mimetic threshold. It oscillates between observational and enactive perception.

_____

[18] S. M. Aglioti, M. A. Goodale and J. F.X. De Sousa, "Size-Contrast-Illusions Deceive the Eye But Not the Hand", in Current Biology 5, ed. (, 1995) 6, 679-85.

This threshold draws on the perception of what James Jerôme Gibson calls affordances.[19] Gibson claims that objects will be perceived as what they will be if used in an embodied activity. A chair will be perceived according to its potential for being sat on rather than its form, the ground according to its potential for being stood on, an abyss for its potential to be fallen into – and the circles of the Ebbinghaus-Titchener-Illusion will be perceived according to their graspability. What counts for an affordance is always a specific, often learned way of molding against the object in question, interacting with it, becoming its counterpart — i.e. according to the immersive experiences outlined by Benjamin.

To find one's way into referential perception and e.g. see circles in plastic discs, something else than just affordances must be at stake. To point out the difference, I turn to Richard Wollheim's concept of "seeing-in," and describe it in two different ways.[20] Wollheim understands seeing beyond sensual data: as a process of making visible that which extends or even transcends vision by seeing something else inside the visual stimulus. The faculty of perceiving something else in a given thing is, for him, what defines an object as an image. From this perspective, the Ebbinghaus-Titchener-Illusion would consist of something *invisible* (circles) being discerned in something visible (discs), i.e. something is perceived in something else; this provides for a rare unity of thinking and perceiving, in which contemplation is embedded in the act of perception. Thoughts are literally "seen in" the visual data. Wollheim's "seeing-in" therefore entails a kind of interpretation which goes beyond the simple referential interpretation of e.g. Peirce's iconic sign. The act of 'going beyond' the visual data occurs as an act of perception or appresentation, as Edmund Husserl called it;[21] either way, it does *not* occur as an act of referring to something else in its sensual absence.

By focusing on "seeing-in" in a way that is similar to seeing the ocean floor in a plaice or seeing circles in discs, however, Wollheim dismisses a second way of "seeing-in" that I consider important for the immersive side of images. According to his theory, the act of seeing something else in this surface occurs as an act of beholding, distancing oneself from the object first seen. Gibson, on the other hand, (allows for) turns(ing) the whole argument around, in so far as "seeing-in" does occur in affordances as well, while at the same time receiving and understanding them in a very different way: enactively, as an aspect of immersed bodily activity rather than beholding. Indeed, the good hold on the discs is not part of the sensual data in the Ebbinghaus-Titchener-Illusion. But seeing the grasping-affordance in the discs or seeing the hunting-affordance in a plaice is something that occurs as a phenomenon of enactive immersion, rather than as a product of the distanced way of (first) seeing a surface and then seeing something else insides this surface. In my eyes, images are about both these kinds of "seeing-in": The threshold that defines images *can* be understood as a threshold towards beholding (as in Wollheim), but it *also* should be understood as a threshold towards enacting which allows us to understand and perceive graspability in discs or huntability in plaices.

---

[19] J. J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances", in Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing – Toward an Ecological Psychology, ed. R. Shaw and J. Bransford (Hillsdale, 1977).

[20] R. Wollheim, Art and its Objects (2nd ed. with six supplementary essays) (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[21] E. Husserl, Cartesianische Meditationen, ed. E. Ströker (Hamburg, 1987), 111-123.

The latter, *enactive* 'innewerden' – perceptible in sensual data without being part of them – holds a strong similarity to Benjamin's concept of the "unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit". Something abstract can at the same time be embodied, and, vice versa, an embodied action can be drawing on something extremely abstract. Take the chair's ability to be sat on: this is not part of the visual data when seeing a chair; but it is the most important feature of what makes a chair a chair. We can consider this ability as an abstract principle (something Plato called the *ergon*, meaning 'function'; or *eidos*, meaning 'image') exceeding the visual data – which would be a fact of seeing-in rather than an affordance (here Wollheim corrects Gibson). If we focus on embedded enaction, though, we will sense it as an enactive orientation for our actions. In this kind of perception, neither is seeing-in taking place, nor is there any abstraction going on (here Gibson corrects Wollheim). The first option would be referential (an object *refers to* something else then the sensual data), while the second would be enactive (we relate to an object through a specific way of handling it). Focusing on the observational seeing-in only would mean to lose seeing itself as an embedded sensual activity. So, at least in the way I define it, observational seeing-in is undeniably essential to image perception, albeit not enough to exclusively define it. The power of images rather draws on their oscillation between observation and immersion. Any image is, one might also say, an ambiguous image, switching between interpretation and (at least subliminal) enaction.

Drawing on Benjamin's concept of "Unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit", we can hence state that image perception of a given similarity (or assimilation in behaviour rather than reflective action) is based on a kind of seeing-in, which in turn is always on the verge of being lost in either mere immersion or mere interpretation. Benjamin's Denkbilder and considerations about the mimetic faculty point in both directions and encompass both ways of "seeing-in". They are about the immersive power of images, as well as they are about their referential interpretation. Bilder in general and Denkbilder in particular are occurring at (or even as) the threshold between immersion and thinking.

This gives Denkbilder an interesting iconic status. Evidently, image-perception does not arise from contemplative perception alone; the iconic threshold of perceiving an "unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit" is not all there is to what makes for a thinking image. It would probably be impossible to perceive this "unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit" without at least partially and subliminally molding to the event and merging with the music as well. This is what makes the "mimetisches Vermögen" decisive for Benjamin too — the act of seeing-in by itself lacks the very experiential knowledge disclosed in molding to things. As opposed as immersion is to thought, it remains indispensable for thinking. This is especially true for the sensual dimension of knowledge, at which Benjamin's Denkbilder are often aimed. The sense of visual composition of or emotional engagement with an object in an image must be hunted down as Benjamin's butterfly was hunted: it cannot be found in contemplative observation alone; rather, it requires some "Anbildung" in Benjamin's sense of the word.

Current image theory therefore renders more and more obvious that the sensual experience of images is utterly different from what one explicitly thinks of their meaning. As mentioned, Horst Bredekamp similarly focuses on what he calls image acts – looking for what pictures do with bodies, how they mingle with the embodied activities of the beholders. Nevertheless, it is also impossible to think of images without allowing them to at least be potentially opened to a contemplative stance of "seeing-in". Otherwise, the difference between mimicry and image-perception would be lost.

Hence, it is indeed fair to say that images are not the effect of passing the iconic threshold – but neither can images do without this threshold, instead staging it in manifold ways. I believe – taking up W.J.T. Mitchell's distinction between the *picture*, i.e. the object or visual artifact and the *image*, i.e. the iconic experience it conveys – that Benjamin's Denkbilder are much more about the actions of *images*. There is no given artifact acting upon the beholder in the Denkbilder. The image can instead be equated to the act of making thinking occur as molding to a given environment, and at the same time stepping back and thereby turning this environment into an image.

I wish to conclude this essay with examples of Benjamin's thinking images as a writing practice. The beginning of Benjamin's Denkbild "San Gimignano" points out:

To find words for that, which one has before one's eyes – how difficult can that be. But as soon as the words come, they begin to hammer against reality, until they have formed the image as if engraved in a copperplate. "In the evening the women gather at the well in front of the town gate, to carry home water in huge jars" — as soon as I had finally found these words, the image occurred to me out of the all-too radiant experience, with hard bulges and deep shades.[22]

What is so interesting about this little passage is, first, the usage of the term "Bild". We are dealing with nothing but words; there is no picture, nor will there be one. Benjamin's "Bild" exceeds what Visual Studies or Bildwissenschaft would outline as an image. I do not want to negate the difference between text and picture, but it is necessary to understand that, following Benjamin, the visual is not the realm where an image is constituted. Secondly, the words do not 'depict' the "Bild" either. A Denkbild has nothing to do with a description (or Ekphrasis), nor do the words evoke a visual experience. Rather, thoughts in this passage slowly turn into lived experience – and they do so by a nearly magical evocation of words, which, while seemingly only describing scenery, are transforming a lived experience into an image.

In this, a chiastic process is taking place. While for the reader the words turn an abstract contemplation into a scene, the words awaken the narrator's faculty of "seeing-in". For this double-sided process, Benjamin uses the metaphor of an engraving – making the image of an image. Accordingly, what follows in the (marvelous) "San Gimignano" is not an alternation between thoughts and descriptions; indeed, it is quite impossible to tell one from the other, because the alternation is between molding to a sensation and seeing something in that sensation.

If this observation can be generalized, it would mean that Denkbilder are not about thoughts arising from lived experience, but about a constant transmutation of both into one another – they morph enactive perception into knowledge and, vice versa, morph getting to know things as objects into getting to know things by touching, smelling and handling them, mingling with them, molding to them. Denkbilder focus on the ambiguous image of immersed thinking, on the threshold between thinking about something and thinking inside it

---

[22] "Worte zu finden zu dem, was man vor Augen hat – wie schwer kann das sein. Wenn sie dann aber kommen, dann stoßen sie mit kleinen Hämmern gegen das Wirkliche, bis sie das Bild aus ihm wie aus einer kupfernen Platte getrieben haben. 'Abends versammeln sich die Frauen am Brunnen vorm Stadttor, um in großen Krügen Wasser zu holen' – erst als ich diese Worte gefunden hatte, trat aus dem allzublendenden Erlebten mit harten Beulen und mit tiefen Schatten das Bild." (W. Benjamin, Denkbilder (Frankfurt/M., 1994), 64).

(molding to its dynamic). Such a process, of course, can never be concluded, nor can it come to any stable (thinking) judgment about the (external to thought) reality. But on the other hand, such judgments face an epistemological impasse as well: They lack knowledge of getting a firm grip on things, the feeling of handling them, becoming part of them.

This conception of Denkbilder places the image as an in-between mediating between analytical distance and embedded experience. The advantage it has over observation-based definitions of the image is that it finds its sensuality not only in a kind of aesthetic distance, but – as in Bredekamp's notion of the 'image act' – in its bodily immediacy too. Therefore, it allows not just for understanding things, but also for growing intimate with them. This aspect feels crucial for a time in which pictures, by means of technical (re)production, are becoming so ubiquitous as to turn the handling of images into a primary (and perhaps dominant) perceptual process in everyday life. Benjamin was one of the first thinkers to acknowledge this trend, perhaps even foreshadowing a time in which the view from an aircraft would resemble the maps on Google Earth — with the unsettling difference, though, that the things down there are not just a picture.

Indeed, one passage in his *Einbahnstraße* about "Chinawaren" (Chinese Curious) reads:

> The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of day-dreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command. The Chinese practice of copying books was thus an incomparable guarantee of literary culture, and the transcript a key to China's enigmas.[23]

The difference here too lies in thinking in versus thinking about. Benjamin opposes growing intimate with things (feeling the coercions and affordances they entail) to an

---

[23] "Die Kraft der Landstraße ist eine andere, ob einer sie geht oder im Aeroplan drüber hinfliegt. So ist auch die Kraft eines Textes eine andere, ob einer ihn liest oder abschreibt. Wer fliegt, sieht nur, wie sich die Straße durch die Landschaft schiebt, ihm rollt sie nach den gleichen Gesetzen ab wie das Terrain, das herum liegt. Nur wer die Straße geht, erfährt von ihrer Herrschaft und wie aus eben jenem Gelände, das für den Flieger nur die aufgerollte Ebene ist, sie Fernen, Belvederes, Lichtungen, Prospekte mit jeder ihrer Wendungen so herauskommandiert, wie der Ruf des Befehlshabers Soldaten aus einer Front. So kommandiert allein der abgeschriebene Text die Seele dessen, der mit ihm beschäftigt ist, während der bloße Leser die neuen Ansichten seines Innern nie kennen lernt, wie der Text, jene Straße durch den immer wieder sich verdichtenden inneren Urwald, sie bahnt: weil der Leser der Bewegung seines Ich im freien Luftbereich der Träumerei gehorcht, der Abschreiber aber sie kommandieren läßt. Das chinesische Bücherkopieren war daher die unvergleichliche Bürgschaft literarischer Kultur und die Abschrift ein Schlüssel zu Chinas Rätseln." (W. Benjamin, Einbahnstraße (Frankfurt/M, 2001), 61. Translation: W. Benjamin, One-Way Street and Other Writings, translated by E. Jephcott and K. Shorter (London, 1979), 50).

observational kind of understanding them by thinking about them. And what Benjamin describes as the 'Chinese' experience (as opposed to Western) is the focus on growing intimate with knowledge instead of interpreting it.

Denkbilder are open to both experiences. They achieve a certain openness to letting things expose their thing-ness — and not only their aesthetic form. Perhaps it is this very openness that makes Benjamin's images so important for a culture that is growing very intimate with digital pictures, their informational content and their merely aesthetic effects, but losing the threshold between observation on the one hand and immersion on the other, and thereby losing thinking in as an intermediate stance.