

The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History

Sigrid Weigel

Translated by Chadwick Truscott Smith and Christine Kutschbach

In the contemporary boom of an interdisciplinary image science (*Bildwissenschaft*) Walter Benjamin is conspicuously absent even though the image is one of his key concepts and his theoretical work is famously characterized as thinking-in-images. His marginal role in this field is all the more striking since *Bildwissenschaft* (in contrast to visual studies) does not deal specifically with visual phenomena but with all sorts of images (in accordance with the word *Bild* in German, which does not distinguish between image and picture)¹ and because Benjamin's use of the word refers to a meaning of *Bild* that precedes the distinctions among mental, visual, and material images as well as the differentiation of scripture and pictures and the separation of concept (*Begriff*) and metaphor.² In his epistemology the image is linked not to representation but to a simultaneous, instantane-

This essay builds on observations on Benjamin's perception of art made in the third part of Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith (Stanford, Calif., 2013), in order to systematically reconstruct the genesis of an imagelike epistemology in Benjamin's writings, that is, an epistemology based on images. Portions of this essay have been slightly revised from that book.

1. See W. J. T. Mitchell, "Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science," *Visual Literacy*, ed. James Elkins (New York, 2009), pp. 14–30.

2. As regards the prehistory of the distinction between metaphor and concept, see Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History* 6 (Autumn 1974): 5–74.

Critical Inquiry 41 (Winter 2015)

English translation © 2015 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/15/4102-0020\$10.00. All rights reserved.

neous cognition (*Erkenntnis*)³ or *insight* (*Einsicht*). The importance of the image in Benjamin's theory attests to a way of thinking and writing that favors simultaneity and constellation over continuity, similitude over representation or sign, and the detail or fractionary (*Bruchstück*) over the whole.⁴ Although Benjamin's image refers to a wide range of meanings, pictures, paintings, and other visual media have been of crucial importance for the development of his specific concept of the image and its relevance for an epistemological access to history, memory, and culture. Apparently the famous Benjaminian figures—especially the dialectical image, thought-image, and memory-image—have concealed the great degree to which his epistemology is grounded in an intensive engagement with visual images and how indebted it is to the contemplation of the relationship among pictures, language/writing, and time; in fact, his thinking-in-images developed from a detour through considerations of painting and investigations into photography and film.

Benjamin's epistemology can be understood as a constellation based on the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous (which appertains to a representation similar to images) in which the what-has-been and the now come together in an instant—as image. This image, however, can only be transferred into knowledge when it is articulated in language. Instead of suggesting the impossible, a definition of Benjamin's concept of image, I will undertake a reconstruction of its emergence and shaping within Benjamin's writings. His use of the word *image* and his imagelike (*bildliche*) epistemology owe their existence to a twofold genesis: first, they inherit a perspective trained through the direct viewing of art, in which elements of perception survive within a contemplation that can recall scenes of revelation or epiphany; second, they are the product of his

3. The German *Erkenntnis* is difficult to translate; it emphasizes the act and moment of grasping an intellectual insight, cognition, or knowledge.

4. From a historical perspective, his concept of *Bild* can be related to the system of similitudes that precedes the era of representation and exists after the development of the latter in modified forms as a kind of palimpsest, as described in Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses: Une Archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966). W. J. T. Mitchell's definition of image refers to this Foucauldian idea of similitude: "The image is the general notion, ramified in various specific similitudes (*convenientia, aemulatio, analogy, sympathy*) that holds the world together with 'figures of knowledge'" (Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* [Chicago 1986], p. 11). For the relation between Benjamin and Foucault see Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl, and Jeremy Gaines (London, 1996).

SIGRID WEIGEL is director of the Center for Literacy and Cultural Research in Berlin.

engagement with the history of media technologies in the context of his ur-history of modernity.

While there has been much critical attention paid to Benjamin's discussions of photography and film (of photographs by David Octavius Hill, Félix Nadar, Eugène Atget, August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt, and Man Ray, for example), as well as to the passage on Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia* in *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* and the references to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in "On the Concept of History," the dense network of references to and citations of paintings that pervade his entire corpus has hardly been observed.⁵ And only recently were the numerous notes of the young Benjamin on painting, color, and imagination discovered.⁶ The countless, often rather short but tremendously dense, at other times extensive, considerations of pictures from contemporary painting and art history have gone as yet unheeded. These include remarks on the Viennese *Genesis* from Giotto, Andrea Pisano, Conrad Witz, Matthias Grünewald, Hieronymus Bosch, Raphael, Rembrandt, Hans Holbein the Elder, Katsushika Hokusai, Charles Méryon, Hans von Marées, Antoine Wirtz, Gustave Courbet, Arnold Böcklin, Odilon Redon, Constantin Guys, Honoré Daumier, J. J. Grandville, and James Ensor, to Paul Cézanne, Otto Gross, Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, Klee, and many others.⁷

My main thesis is that Benjamin's reflections on painting in his early writings form a type of palimpsest, a sort of hidden grounding for the subsequent development of a stratum of epistemology in which thinking-in-images is predominant. Reports of visits to exhibitions and commentaries on individual artists and pictures occupy a fair share of space in his extensive correspondence. Additionally, there exist numerous notes on painting, imagination, and color along with commentary on artistic schools or programs written by the young student. In his early work, he formulated a philosophy of art that attributes a specific possibility for cognition (*Erkenntnis*) and expression that can't be translated into the terms of either philosophy or art criticism. Thus it is neither the image nor the word as such, neither painting nor literature (*Dichtung*) as such, to which he ascribes a specific mode of knowledge. It is rather the elements of

5. There are exceptions; see Brigid Doherty's brilliant analysis of Benjamin's footnote on Raphael's Sistine Madonna in "Between the Artwork and Its 'Actualization': A Footnote to Art History in Benjamin's 'Work of Art' Essay," *Paragraph* 32 (Nov. 2009): 331–58.

6. See especially the first systematic analysis of these notes in Heinz Brüggemann *Walter Benjamin über Spiel, Farbe, und Phantasie* (Würzburg, 2007). See also Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, Calif., 2011), pp. 79–80.

7. A more detailed discussion of this appears in the eighth and ninth chapters of Weigel, *Walter Benjamin*.

imagination and color in painting and literature's specific mode of presenting a problem that establish a genuine mode of perception; Benjamin sees the latter as the "virtual possibility of formulating" the truth content of a problem that in its multiplicity finds expression only in art.⁸ Because this cannot be transposed to a discursive language or to philosophical concepts, he developed a specific language of thinking-in-images. Later this was elaborated as an epistemology, namely, in his writings from the 1930s, in which the temporality of images appears in conjunction with the study of photography and film in the form of a temporally organized structure of perception significant for these media: for example, variable exposure times, slow motion, and the speed of moving pictures. As a counterpart to the poetic principle of shock found in Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin conceptualized his thinking-in-images as the epistemological principle of modernity.

Flash and Image

Among the best-known and most cited passages from Benjamin's writings is the first fragment in Konvolut N of the *Arcades Project*, in which he negotiates questions of epistemology: "In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only flashlike [*blitzhaft*]. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows."⁹ Although images are not the explicit topic of this passage, Benjamin's figure of speech expresses the imagelike character of perception. This is revealed through a foil that follows shortly thereafter: his statement on the image as a constellation of the what-has-been and the now that come together in a flash. In it, both Benjamin's theory of history and the key figure of his thought, the dialectical image, are expressed *in nuce*: "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present. . . . Rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill" (*AP*, p. 462).¹⁰ Although the first of the two cited sentences is a figurative counterpart to the subsequent one, with its condensed version of his theory of history, it is not metaphorical, at least not in the sense of indirect phrasing. Just as the flash indicates an imagelike mode of insight in the first passage quoted, the flashlike nature of a constellation is marked as an image in the second. The flash and the image thus explain and substitute for each other; they are deployed by turns to articulate a specific epistemology. The flashlike image—a

8. Walter Benjamin, "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89), 1:1:173.

9. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 456; trans. mod; hereafter abbreviated *AP*.

10. For the German version, see Benjamin, "N," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:1:578.

sudden, ephemeral coming-to-appearance —becomes a mode of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) that operates outside of the linear temporality of historiography and narration. In other words, the mode of thinking- and speaking-in-images leads to a way of knowing figured as a sudden flash that solidifies into thought-images and linguistic images. Here, the image of lightning predominates. It stands for a way of knowing that in an instant can illuminate an entire situation.

Yet Benjamin's flash-image has nothing to do with the iconography of a coup d'oeil, as exemplified at the end of the eighteenth century in the famous panel *Coup d'oeil du théâtre de Besançon* by French architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.¹¹ As a "symbol of modern reason,"¹² the coup d'oeil presents a sovereign gaze, one that had traditionally been represented as the iconographic eye of god, but as a human gaze it has a profane, military context:¹³ "COUP-D'OEIL (*le*) dans l'art militaire, est selon M. le chevalier Folard, l'art de connaître la nature & les différentes situations du pays, où l'on fait & où l'on veut porter la guerre."¹⁴ Benjamin's flash-image stands diametrically opposed to such a sovereign gaze. As Caroline Pross has shown, the coup d'oeil's symbolic guarantee and affirmation of objective knowledge has replaced the authority of the eye of God, which, in the iconographic tradition, alone can vouch for truth.¹⁵ In contrast, Benjamin's image-based knowledge as perceived in a flash-image can perhaps be best characterized as a faculty in which an "enhanced presence of mind" (*gesteigerte Geistesgegenwart*)¹⁶ is coupled with an involuntary mode of seeing. The flashlike cognition is something that befalls the person unintentionally. It does not at all claim to take the empty space of God's eye but is situated precisely opposite to it, in the complementary position, namely, in the line of succession of he who receives it or to whom it is revealed.

From the perspective of philosophical metaphors one could discuss this

11. See Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L'Architecture: Considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs, et de la législation* (1804; Paris 1997), p. 2. See also Caroline Pross, "Coup d'oeil: Nachbemerungen zu einem Bild von Claude-Nicolas Ledoux," in *Szenographien: Theatralität als Kategorie der Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Gerhard Neumann, Pross, and Gerald Wildgruber (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2000), pp. 453–65.

12. Pross, "Coup d'oeil," p. 453.

13. Or from Frederick the Great. See Horst Bredekamp, "Die Erkenntniskraft der Plötzlichkeit: Hogrebes Szenenblick und die Tradition des Coup d'Oeil," in *Was sich nicht sagen lässt: Das Nicht-Begriffliche in Wissenschaft, Kunst, und Religion*, ed. Joachim Bromand and Guido Kreis (Berlin, 2010), pp. 456–68.

14. "Coup-d'oeil," *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, 36 vols. (Paris, 1713–1784), 4:345.

15. See Pross, "Coup d'oeil," p. 455.

16. Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:503; hereafter abbreviated "DK."

flash-image as a superimposition of two famous scenarios of flash within European intellectual history, namely, the flash as the light of an epiphany-like perception of revelation at the end of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* and the flashlike suddenness of the appearance of a "new world" in G. W. F. Hegel's introduction to *Phenomenology of Mind*. With the lines "*la mia mente fu percossa / da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne*" ("my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it") at the end of *Paradiso*,¹⁷ Dante finally—after the passage through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and after having experienced the limits of the common human gaze and words in his search for a higher divine truth—experiences a sort of perception that exceeds the existing repertoire of visual and verbal expressions.¹⁸ This flashlike epiphany can be regarded as an emblematic scene of a higher or divine truth that one receives but does not grasp. It finds its modern counterpart in the Hegelian transposition of the Christian tenet into the idea of an "Ansichsein des Geistes."¹⁹ In Hegel's philosophy the flash repeatedly functions as a metaphor of the penetrating mind (*Geist*) that overcomes the naturalness of man. One could say that by means of this operation man reaches a higher truth through his own capacities. From a strong philosophical viewpoint—that is, according to the demands of coherence and unambiguousness—European thinkers tend to interpret the image of the flash as a metaphor or as a poetic image that is liberated from the necessity of philosophical language. Bernhard Taureck, for example, speaks of a poetic use of images as being "grenzbefreit"²⁰ or freed from the limits of a philosophical truth. In opposition to such a perspective (in which literature and art are regarded as a surplus to cognition), I argue that Benjamin's writing cannot be understood as poetic language liberated from any philosophical meaning but rather should be understood as a fascinating epistemology that expands the very limits of philosophical language. At the core of this construct of ideas stands his thinking-in-images.²¹

There is however one passage in Hegel's work where he does not use the image of the flash as a metaphor for the mind overcoming nature but

17. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, vol. 3 of *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J., 1975), pp. 380, 381.

18. For Dante's role within a discussion of the philosophical metaphor of flash, see Bernhard H. F. Taureck, *Metaphern und Gleichnisse in der Philosophie: Versuch einer kritischen Ikonologie der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), pp. 390–407. (In his chapter on the flash both Hegel and Benjamin are missing.)

19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 12:404.

20. Taureck, *Metaphern und Gleichnisse in der Philosophie*, p. 400.

21. For a more detailed analysis of the use of images in his writing and the problem of his thinking-in-images disappearing in translation, see chapter 7 of Weigel, *Walter Benjamin*.

rather in a different way: to express the phenomenon of the sudden visibility of a new era, whose harbingers went unnoticed for a long time. In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel depicts the birth and transition of a new period as a “qualitative leap”; the decay of the previous world is indicated during transition only by symptoms such as ennui and levity, harbingers of the arrival of something different. “The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the physiognomy of the whole is cut short,” he writes “by the ascent which, in one flash, all at once, presents the features of the new world.”²² This passage attracted Benjamin’s attention when, after initially keeping his distance from Hegel,²³ he began to study his works intensely during the 1930s in the course of his engagement with dialectical materialism and his project on modernity.²⁴ It seems that Benjamin refers to this Hegelian idea of epochal transition in the final paragraph of “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (a kind of dense introduction to the *Arcades Project*). Referring to Hegel, he rewrites his version of the scenario completely, interpreting the arcades and other phenomena as residues of a dream world; for him they are materialized wish symbols of the crumbling bourgeois epoch:

The development of the productive forces shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the monuments representing them had collapsed. . . . Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, pushes towards awakening [*träumend drängt sie auf das Erwachen hin*]. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning. With the destabilizing of the commodity economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled. [*AP*, p. 13; trans. mod.]

In his radical reconceptualization of the constellation of historical transition Benjamin thus reads the *symptoms* of decay in a Freudian sense, in that he relates them to dreams and the unconscious. In addition, the flashlike visibility of the new world is not the product of the ascent’s force or activity itself but rather the effect of a certain gaze, a gaze that is related to a specific state of consciousness: “The utilization [*Verwertung*] of dream elements in

22. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York, 1977), pp. 6, 7; trans. mod. And see Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke*: 3:18.

23. “Hegel seems to be dreadful,” the twenty-five-year-old PhD student wrote (Benjamin, letter to Ernst Schoen, 28 Feb. 1918, Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 6 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1995–2000], 1:438).

24. You will find traces of Benjamin’s reading of Hegel in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in the notes of the *Arcades Project*, and in the correspondence with Horkheimer and Adorno during these years.

the moment of awakening is the textbook case [*Schulfall*] of dialectical thinking” (AP, p. 13; trans. mod.). Benjamin relates the flashlike appearance of an image to the figure of awakening, which he comprehends not only as an experience of the individual but also as a historical conscious state. In one of the entries of the *Pariser Passagen I*, he situates such a flashlike appearance at the site of “the transitional space of awakening in which we now are living” (AP, p. 843). Also, in this context, the divine origin of a sudden perception of an image (as in Dante) is echoed in Benjamin’s reflections by restoring a trace of the premodern provenance of this kind of appearance (that Hegel has sublated into the historical process itself) in his own scenario of transition: “The transitional space in which we are now living is likely to be traversed by gods. This traversal of space by gods is to be understood as lightning-like” (AP, p. 843; trans. mod.).²⁵ But in contrast to Dante, Benjamin’s engagement with a *Nachleben* of epiphanic moments within the modern gaze is linked not to the Christian God but to the Greek gods in modernity. His whole ur-history of modernity still bears, in contrast to Hegel, traces of the inferno that Dante had passed, although in the modern shape of Baudelaire’s *enfer*. For Benjamin the flash of cognition is bound to the *now of cognizability* or the *now of readability* that is assigned to the role that revelation owned in religion. But in his modern site of epistemology it is not the *Geist* that has taken the place of epiphany (*Erleuchtung*) but the flashlike lighting (*Beleuchtung*) whereby the concept of an objective truth in effect also falls away.

It is important to bear in mind that this Benjaminian figuration has developed neither by way of studying philosophy in general and Hegel in particular nor by studying the metaphor of flash within European thought. Rather, it is the result of his intense engagement with an a-chronological approach to history and culture that goes back to his very early fascination with pictures and was later informed by his analysis of media technology. Therefore the following examination of Benjamin’s image-based epistemology concentrates on his own work to illuminate the traces of how his thinking-in-images developed. I will unfold the scenes and various images Benjamin contemplated on the path to Konvolut N, where the flash is the image and the image is a flashlike cognition.

Latency of Images

“In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only flashlike. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.” This passage can also be taken as a motto for the place visual images have in Benjamin’s

25. See Benjamin, “Pariser Passagen I,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:2:1011–1012.

thinking. The seen image, or a citation of an artwork, functions in his work not uncommonly like lightning, supporting his theory that itself developed like a “long roll of thunder.” The span of time between the moment the image is encountered and that of Benjamin’s writings in which it gains its place and meaning is noteworthy. It is the time of latency, the time between a flash of insight and conscious reflection, that raises the question of the state of consciousness in which the pictures have an active role. It pertains to the latency of knowledge that for a long time remains unconscious or preconscious before the cultural and historico-theoretical implications of what has been seen are unfolded and configured. One could describe this latency as the work of memory between the exposure and the development of a visible image.

The trace of many images in this way inscribes comparable figurations in Benjamin’s writings: *first encounter*—fascinated contemplation of the image and impression, or being touched; *latency*—the image in one’s head, as an imaginary vis-à-vis the reflection; *thought-image*—the discussion of the image and the generation of a dialectical image within theory. For example, Dürer’s *Melencolia* had already made the “greatest and most perfect impression” on the twenty-year-old Benjamin: “Only now do I have an idea of Dürer’s power and above all the *Melancholy* is an immensely deep, highly expressive piece,” he wrote of a visit to a museum in Basel in July 1913.²⁶ Yet the first appearance of the engraving in Benjamin’s work came more than a decade later in his habilitation, *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*, written in 1925, whose conception began in 1916. In the case of Klee, it took more than two decades. As early as October 1917, as he commented to Gershom Scholem on his own notes “Über die Malerei” (“On Painting”), Benjamin used Klee to argue the irreconcilability of great art and such “scholastic concepts” (*Schulbegriffen*) as cubism.²⁷ From then on, Klee’s name—and chiefly the *Angelus Novus*—leaves a permanent trace in the letters and poems sent back and forth between Benjamin and friends until, in 1940, Benjamin transfers the *Angelus Novus* into a thought-image in order to discuss the concept of history rather than the central scholastic concept of art history.

In the case of Grünewald, there is a much shorter interval. In the same letter in which he recounts his visit to the museum in Basel and his encounter with Dürer’s *Melencolia*, Benjamin also reports how impressed he was by Grünewald: “Finally, the largest of the paintings there, Grünewald’s *Christ on the Cross*, seized me much more strongly this time than last

26. Benjamin, letter to Franz Sachs, 11 July 1913, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 1:143.

27. Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 22 Oct. 1917, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 1:394.

year.”²⁸ “Seized” (*ergriff*) here is not meant in the sense of being “overcome with emotion” (*Ergriffenheit*), as the beloved phrase for museal enjoyment of art would have it. It instead articulates the way in which the image had seized his mind and thought. This time it took three years until the impression left by Grünewald’s painting emerged in one of his texts, “Socrates” (1916), which concerns the relationship between eros and knowledge. In the context of a polemic against a pedagogical principle of eros wherein eros is utilized as a means to the end of knowledge, Benjamin juxtaposes the “saintly question” to the Socratic one.²⁹ The second section of the text begins with the citation of a painting: “Grünewald painted the saints with such grandeur because *their halos loomed [tauchte] out of the greenest black*. The radiant is true only where it is refracted in the nocturnal; only there is it great, only there is it *expressionless*, only there is it asexual and yet of supramundane sexuality.”³⁰ It is only one sentence in which Grünewald’s painting is present. At that time, Benjamin would have been thinking of pictures from the *Isenheim Altar*, of which he hung a reproduction in his study and for which Scholem recounts “in 1913 as a student he had made a special trip to Colmar to see the original.”³¹ This short passage concerns an aesthetic practice of semantification—qua colors—that calls forth the sacred directly from the materiality of the painting. These are reflections that represent a kind of leitmotif in the notes from his university years. In them, one may study the way in which Benjamin developed a mode of perception based on viewing images that inherits elements of revelation or epiphany.

The Image as the Third

In one of the notes, in which the young Benjamin was occupied theoretically with questions of dramatic arts, painting, color, imagination, “Sign and Mark” (*Zeichen und Mal*), and the like, namely, in a fragment on “Imagination” (*Phantasie*), there is—just as erratic as the passage on Grünewald—a sentence about paintings by Hans von Marées. According to Benjamin, Marées’s paintings show “the grey Elysium.” He interpreted this as a third type of “pure appearance” along with those of decay/sunset and becoming/dawn. Considerations of eternal transience (*Vergängnis*) and unending disintegration lead him to reflect on these phenomena in the image of the sunset. Eternal transience is “like the dusk above the deserted arena of the world with its deciphered ruins,” he writes. “It is the infinite

28. Benjamin, letter to Sachs, 1:143.

29. Benjamin, “Sokrates,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:131.

30. *Ibid.*, 2:1:130; my emphasis.

31. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), p. 51.

dissolution of the purged beautiful semblance, bereft of all temptation.”³² In the extension of the comparison between decay and sunset, dawn is then taken up as the image for becoming, which Benjamin would also like to understand as a type of pure appearance: “Thus there is a pure appearance, a burgeoning one, at the dawn of the world. This is the radiance that surrounds things in Paradise.” However, the paintings by Marées do not appear until Benjamin introduces a third mode of pure appearance with which he transcends conventional metaphors of becoming and decay: “Last, there is a *third*, pure appearance: the reduced, extinguished, or muted one. It is the grey Elysium we see in pictures by Marées. These are the three worlds of pure appearance that belong to the imagination.”³³

Here, the image is provided as a supplement to the established natural symbolism in order to introduce a third. This third is situated outside of both concept (becoming and decay) and metaphor (dawn and sunset). Later, Benjamin will explicitly describe the image itself as a third, in the essay “On the Image of Proust” (1929) and the book *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. In the latter, he locates the image beyond the opposition of content to form using the same allegory as in the Proust essay: the rolled-up stocking that serves as the pocket (*Tasche*) and the gift (*Mitgebrachtes*) at the same time. Benjamin’s concept of the image thus emerges beyond the oppositions between both content and form and concept (*Begriff*) and metaphor. Informed by meditations on the preconditions of painting and the history of visual images, in the 1930s the image becomes for him the armature for an imagelike mode of thinking. Benjamin thus used paintings as a medium with which to reflect on the mode of perception and knowledge and, later, in the context of his studies on modern culture, developed an epistemology that itself bears the signature of modernity.

This concept of the image is not a descendant of aesthetic theory but rather of Benjamin’s reflections on the philosophies of language and of history. However, this does not mean that the visual image is derived from the linguistic image; it is rather the case that the receiving aspect in contrast to the denoting dimension is privileged, as it appertains to a biblical language. This is the domain of a genuine pictoriality of script (*Schriftbildlichkeit*), to which the art-historical paradigm of the opposition between picture and text is as irrelevant as the discourse of *Paragone* (competition of the arts). In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin even describes Leonardo’s comparison of music

32. Benjamin, “Phantasie,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:115.

33. *Ibid*; my emphasis.

and painting by a measure of their duration (fleeting versus eternal) as an example of a “crude mode of observation” (“plumpe Betrachtungsweise”) (“DK,” p. 498 n. 23). The elaboration of the concept of image in Benjamin’s work does not stand in the Western tradition of aesthetics or theory of art; it goes back neither to Platonic ideas nor to the canon of treatises on painting amassed since Leonardo, Alberti, and others.³⁴ It is rather a genuine product of modernity, generated out of the context of “Jewish Thinking in a World without God.”³⁵ In it, perception and knowledge are shaped by a receptive, receiving stance. In Benjamin’s early writings, the prototype of the receiver is the listener (*Hörende*). So it is in “The Conversation” (“Das Gespräch,” 1914) that the speaker receives the meaning of his own speaking from the listener.³⁶ Similarly, in the essay on language from 1916, a fundamental work for Benjamin’s entire theory, the earliest form of speaking by humans is not considered as a sovereign act of denotation but rather as a recognition of the mute language of things and nature that translates it into the verbal language of humans. It is out of this nexus of thoughts that the young Benjamin developed his reflections on painting, imagination, and color. The latter may be seen as a transposition of the figure of the listener into the realm of the visual—and thus as a specifically Jewish contribution to *Bildwissenschaft*.

In the fragment on imagination, the rainbow assumes a central role, an image in which appearance and visual perception are indistinguishable. For the young Benjamin, the rainbow became a preeminent image with which he could discuss the question of the truth of painting—a question in which the problem of representation of revelation reverberates. Here, in the image of the rainbow, the theme of color conjoins with that of imagination, and the latter provides Benjamin with an alternate dimension of the image that stands in contrast to its being a likeness. Additionally, imagination indicates the specific mediality of a painted image in which representation and unrepresentability penetrate each other. In his notes on painting, written in parallel to his dissertation “The Concept of Criticism in Romanticism,” he thematizes painting as a medium of reflection in

34. In the early notebooks, for example, Leonardo da Vinci plays no role, even if his treatise on painting appears in a list of titles to be consulted for the theme “color” (Benjamin, “Anmerkungen zu Seite,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:699 n.119). It seems as if Benjamin is first properly familiar with da Vinci’s ideas through his engagement with Paul Valéry’s *Introduction à la méthode de Leonardo da Vinci* (1894), yet even then not to have intensely studied them, as indicated by the indirect citation found in, for example, “DK,” 1:1:498 n. 23 and 499 n. 24.

35. I take this phrase from the title of the commemorative publication for Stéphane Mosès; see *Jüdisches Denken in einer Welt ohne Gott: Festschrift für Stéphane Mosès*, ed. Jens Mattern, Gabriel Motzkin, and Shimon Sandbank (Berlin, 2000).

36. Benjamin, “Das Gespräch,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:1:89–96.

which something else at the same time finds expression in conjunction with representation: “the light of ideas struggles with the darkness of the creative soil [*schöpferischen Grundes*] and in this struggle it engenders the imagination’s play of color.”³⁷

Benjamin had already used the rainbow—in its characteristics as both a medium and a pure quality without substance—as an image for the colors of imagination in an early dialogic text, “The Rainbow: A Conversation on Imagination,” presumably written in 1915. Here the rainbow ends up being for him an “Urbild,” a primordial image of art: “And the rainbow is to me the purest manifestation of this color which animates nature and fills it with spirit (*durchgeistigt*), returns its origin to imagination, and makes it into a mute, seen ur-image of art. Finally, religion transposes its *holy realm* into the clouds and its *blessed realm* into Paradise.”³⁸ As an ephemeral, colored appearance—one explicitly not stemming from the oil paints of the artist but rather from an atmospheric reflection—the rainbow becomes the image of an immaterial painting. Due to its colorfulness, this appearance becomes the prototype of art. With the last sentence of the cited passage, Benjamin interprets it as the effect of a history in which heaven—formerly the seat of the Gods—is transformed into a formation of clouds. Although secularized and profane, there the afterglow of a perception, which was previously at home in religion, is active. In Benjamin’s reflections the rainbow is situated on the threshold between the visible and the invisible; at the same time it functions as a transitional image between Benjamin’s reflections on painting and his epistemology.

Transitional Images: Vortex and Flames

The flash-image—both the image *of* a flash and the image *as* flash—was set up by other images, namely, images of natural phenomena in motion from other realms, such as the vortex or eddy. With these images a temporal dimension enters the stage; they serve to enable Benjamin to formulate an a-chronological figuration of history. For example, among the entries of the first period of his *Arcades Project*, “Pariser Passagen I” (1928–1929), one comes across the note: “All true insight forms an eddy. To swim in time against the direction of the swirling stream” (*AP*, p. 843). And in his diary from 1931, at a time when he contemplated suicide, one finds a passage that prefigures the criticism of progress elaborated later in his theory of history. Here it is condensed into the image of an eddy:

37. Benjamin, “Gedanken über Phantasie,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:114.

38. Benjamin, “Der Regenbogen,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7:25.

My attempt is to express a conception of history in which the concept of progress would be completely displaced by that of the origin. The historical, understood in this way, can no longer be sought in the riverbed of a course of progress. Here, as I have already observed elsewhere, the image of an eddy replaces that of the riverbed. In such a vortex, the earlier and the later circulate—the pre- and post-history of an occurrence or, better yet, a status of it.³⁹

Already in this passage we see the concern with a specific temporal structure from which Benjamin develops a specific view of history distinct from historicism by means of a counterimage to the conventional metaphor of the flow of time: the eddy as an image of the interaction of pre- and post-history, of the past and the present, and of eternity and the instant. These reflections on time also go back to his early notes on painting. In 1920, as he was occupied with expressionism in the context of a review of Ernst Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), he read, among other things, Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911). In a note that reflects upon the mediality of the artwork's aftermath, Benjamin grapples with Kandinsky's differentiation between the eternal and contemporary values (*Zeitwert*) of a work of art. The medium through which an artwork affects later eras invariably differs from that through which it has an effect in its own time:

Kandinsky expresses this by saying that the eternal value [*Ewigkeitswert*] of works of art appears more vividly to later generations, since they are less receptive toward their contemporary value [*Zeitwert*]. Yet the concept of "Ewigkeitswert" is perhaps not the best expression of the relation. We ought to investigate which aspect of the work (quite apart from the aspect of value) really seems more evident to later generations than to contemporaries.⁴⁰

These notes show how Benjamin extracted the differentiation central to his reading of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, namely, the distinction between the artwork's material content (*Sachgehalt*) and truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) and between commentary (*Kommentar*) and criticism (*Kritik*) from his critical discussion of Kandinsky's conception of the temporality of art: "If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash

39. Benjamin, "Autobiographische Schriften," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:442–43.

40. Benjamin, "The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, trans. Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 1:235; trans. mod.

remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive."⁴¹

In this way, the simile of the burning pyre, which appears in the opening emblem to Benjamin's essay on Goethe, is recognizable as a transitional image (*Übergangsbild*)—located at the threshold between the reflections on painting during his university years and the imagelike epistemology developed in his later writings. It is a transitional image both in terms of its character (a simile) as well as content (flames between rainbow and lightning). Wood/ash and flames form an opposition that is due to two different forms of knowledge: on one hand, the chemist's knowledge and on the other, the critic's. In contrast to this, lightning and thunder are figured in the *Arcades Project* as joined modes of *one* epistemology. In an instantaneous flashlike cognition the material-content and meaning-content coincide with one another, similar to what transpires in a visual image, and the succeeding text reflects upon their interrelation and interaction.

Iconography and Technology

The genesis of the flash as image for perception and of the epistemological image itself may be studied in an entry found in "Pariser Passagen II," which focuses on the introduction of the electric light. Using the example of the "Passage des Panoramas," Benjamin reads the shift from oil lamps and gaslights to electric lighting as a transition from a mythical to a modern setting. While one who entered the passage in 1817 was still lured by the "sirens of gaslight" and the odalisques of oil flames, the scenery abruptly changed in electric light:

With the flashing of electric lights, the fair glow was extinguished in these galleries, which suddenly became more difficult to find, plied a black magic at entranceways, and peered from blind windows into their interior. It was not decline but transformation. All at once they were the hollow mold from which the image of "modernity" was cast.⁴²

Here the lighting of electric light can be regarded as a modern flash of Apelles; in its illumination the image of modernity emerges "from dark to light," just as it had in the work of the Hellenistic painter.⁴³ This emanation of modernity from the flash of the electric light forms a key scene for the way in which images from mythology and the history of

41. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," *Selected Writings*, 1:298.

42. Benjamin, "Pariser Passagen II," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:2:1045. And see *AP*, p. 874.

43. E. H. Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), p. 16.

art are for Benjamin, in light of technology, transformed into genuine imagelike perception.

In many notes for the *Arcades Project*, he outlines scenarios that appear to be images of modern painting; on the other hand, there are sections in which he speaks not only in images but also with pictures—more specifically, with citations of specific paintings. In this way, individual paintings he has seen are summoned to stand in as snapshots of modernity. Using the example of scenes one may observe at the St. Lazare train station, Benjamin describes, for example, how the train station becomes a stage:

Once again we see performed the timeworn Greek melodrama: Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes at the station. In the mountain of luggage under which she stands arches the rocky path, the crypt into which she sinks when the Hermaic conductor with the signal disc, watching for the moist eye of Orpheus, gives the sign for departure. Scars of departure which zigzag, like the crack in a Greek vase, across the presented bodies of the Gods.⁴⁴

This perspective that discovers scenes from mythology within images from the metropolis is prefigured by paintings of classical modernity. This is evident in a variant of the entry from “Pariser Passagen I” in which Benjamin characterizes motifs such as “Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes at the station” or “the Hermaic conductor with the signal disc” as neoclassical and continues: “With the neoclassicism of Cocteau, Stravinsky, Picasso, Chirico and others, the case is as follows: the *transitional space of awakening* in which we are now living is likely to be traversed by gods. *This traversal of space by gods is to be understood as flashlike.*”⁴⁵ While the first cited scenario thematizes correspondences between mythology and modernity, the second variant reflects a perspective in which central concepts of Benjamin’s epistemology are condensed—namely, the awakening that he views as the “paradigm of dialectical thinking” and a flashlike appearance (*AP*, p. 898). Benjamin privileges the threshold between dreaming and waking as a setting to articulate a simultaneity of nonsimultaneous faculties of consciousness, which demonstrates the psychoanalytic basis of his epistemology. But with the ephemeral appearance of gods he adds an important aspect to the psychoanalytical constellation of a transitional space. It is evident in the motif of the Gods crossing through space in a flash that aspects of a mode of knowledge survive in his flash-image, recalling a notion of epiphany or revelation. In this way, Benjamin uses

44. Benjamin, “Konvolut L,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:1:512. And see *AP*, p. 406.

45. Benjamin, “*Pariser Passagen I*,” pp. 1010, 1011; my emphasis. And see *AP*, p. 843.

images that come from the iconography of art history, yet he wrests them from iconographic convention and, in his *Urgeschichte der Moderne*, transforms them into thought-images of a certain knowledge educated by visual images.

Whereas in traditional iconography lightning usually represents the wrathful God, against the backdrop of industrialization it became the lightning of cognition. "The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe," a fragment composed during Benjamin's years at university, is one of the preliminary studies for the "Critique of Violence"; the fact that retributive violence reaches into categories of older forms of law is already reflected. Here, he had already cited the image of lightning and, remaining at that time completely within the frame of traditional iconography, decoded it without problems. That is to say, he then could still translate it into a verbally articulated insight:

As the purifying hurricane speeds ahead of the tempest, God's fury roars through history in the storm of forgiveness, in order to sweep away everything that would be consumed forever in the lightning bolts of the divine uproar. What is expressed metaphorically in this image needs to be formulated clearly and distinctly in conceptual form: the meaning of time in the economy of the moral universe. In this, time not only extinguishes the traces of all misdeeds, but also by virtue of its duration—beyond all remembering or forgetting—fosters, in ways that are wholly mysterious, the process of forgiveness, though never of reconciliation.⁴⁶

By contrast, within the context of the *Arcades Project*, the same image (that of lightning) is transformed from a symbol of godly wrath within biblical iconography into an epistemic figure. This transformation takes place from the viewpoint of a cultural development coined by technology, as Benjamin's examinations on the history of media and technology serve to shift images to a mode of thinking beyond iconography.

An abrupt, shocklike "sudden exposure" of memory and a "flashlike insight" were already mentioned in "A Berlin Chronicle,"⁴⁷ where Benjamin writes: "I think of an afternoon in Paris to which I owe insights into my life that came in a flash, with the force of an illumination."⁴⁸ Also in his book on Baudelaire, he states that in the novels of Victor Hugo "the phys-

46. Benjamin, "Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der Moalischen Welt," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:98. And see Benjamin, "The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe," trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, 1:287.

47. Benjamin, "Berliner Chronik," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:516.

48. Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," trans. Jephcott, *Selected Writings*, 2:614.

iogonomy of a métropole flashes at moments.”⁴⁹ When the image itself has become a flash in those places in the *Arcades Project* where the dialectical image is conceived as “a flash of lightning” (*AP*, p. 21), then it seems as if technology’s flash of lightning had literally struck into painting. In nineteenth-century Paris (which was, for Benjamin, the capital of modernity) it was the railroad that pulled full steam into the iconography, as it were—just as the same breach occurred in William Turner’s paintings (whose work Benjamin, however, never mentions). In Konvolut F of the *Arcades*, which is dedicated to the theme of the railroad’s construction, Benjamin refers to Karl Gutzkow’s *Paris Letters II* (1842) and reads the flash of lightning as an emblem of the technical age. He comments on a quotation from Gutzkow about a lightning bolt over the Austerlitz Bridge in the following manner: “The Austerlitz Bridge was one of the first iron structures in Paris. With the flash of lightning in the sky above, it becomes an emblem of the dawning technical age” (*AP*, p. 151; trans. mod.).

Shock and the Temporality of Images

The development of Benjamin’s imagelike epistemology bears a signature of modernity for which the technical history of images themselves plays a prominent role. Following his early reflections on painting and art, Benjamin’s nascent engagement with photography and film around 1930 was a decisive step toward the concept of a flashlike cognition. His reflections on the temporality of images come primarily from his readings of photographic and cinematic images. It is remarkable that his intention to discuss film as *aesthetic*—that is, in light of the historical index of perception—is based on, of all things, Franz Wickhoff’s work on medieval miniatures and on Alois Riegl’s interpretation of late Roman art. He thus bases his thesis on two authors who, he stresses, were the first to employ their respective (art) objects of study, objects that had lain buried in the classical tradition, in order to gain insights into historically specific perceptions: “The era of migration of peoples, an era which saw the rise of the late-Roman art industry and the Vienna *Genesis*, developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a different perception” (“*DK*,” p. 478). In this way, Benjamin consults the “*Strenge Kunstwissenschaft*” (the title of one of his reviews)⁵⁰ for his studies of the culture of modernity.

He discusses the temporality of photographic and cinematic images first of all alongside their technical development. Thus it is—in his

49. Benjamin, “Der Flâneur,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:564.

50. See Benjamin, “*Strenge Kunstwissenschaft*,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:363–74. For a detailed discussion, see the eighth chapter of Weigel, *Walter Benjamin*.

“Little History of Photography,” for example—mainly through the specific technical development of apparatuses that allow for variable exposure time that the “incunabula of photography” are differentiated from the photography of his own time.⁵¹ The former radiates more of the aura that vanishes with the later, technically motivated “control over works of art.”⁵² Or Benjamin condenses the effect of slow motion and the temporal structure of film’s moving pictures⁵³ in the figure of the “dynamite of the tenth of a second” (“DK,” p. 461).⁵⁴ Modes of perception altered by fleeting images furthermore become for Benjamin the matrix of a radically transformed culture of memory and perception and a modern epistemology. At this point shock comes into play—as a mode of perception that arises from the temporal structure of modernity insofar as it is owed to suddenness. Benjamin’s engagement with shock plays a significant role in the elaboration of the flash-image into a central epistemological figure. The shock mediates between psychoanalysis/theory of memory and media technology/cultural history respectively; it forms the background against which he develops his unique epistemology. Let me thus briefly address the theory of shock, whose development in Benjamin’s thought we can trace clearly in three steps: (1) its foundations in a theory of memory, (2) its technical reformulation, and (3) its extension into cultural history.

In the context of the autobiographical “A Berlin Chronicle” (1932), Benjamin discovers shock to be at play in operations of memory that produce images. The question as to the origin of particularly resilient memory-images is answered here by the fact that shock isolates these images from ordinary memories. While this idea of isolation remains in Freudian trauma theory, in Benjamin’s text the image of a memory-plate (*Erinnerungsplatte*) takes the place of Sigmund Freud’s paradigm of the traumatic shock, which, due to the strength of the impression, breaches the psyche’s protective shield. In “A Berlin Chronicle” the memory-plate is already associated with the figure of lighting. Benjamin writes of a flaring light (*aufschießende Licht*) and of “moments of sudden lighting” (*Augenblicke plötzlicher Beleuchtung*) that are “at the

51. Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” trans. Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, *Selected Writings*, 2:517.

52. *Ibid.*, 2:523. For a detailed analysis of the ambivalent position of aura and the loss of aura in history, see Rodolphe Gasché, “Objektive Diversionen: Zu einigen Themen Kants in Benjamins ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,’” in *Walter Benjamin: Moderne und Gesetz*, ed. Ashraf Noor (Munich, 2011), pp. 239–66.

53. In the 1920s, it was 240 frames per second.

54. Jimena Canales describes the time unit of a tenth of a second as a trope of modernity in Jimena Canales, *A Tenth of a Second: A History* (Chicago, 2009).

same time moments when we are separated from ourselves [*Außer-Uns-Seins*]: “While our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is a little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its indelible images.”⁵⁵ Here, Benjamin reformulates Freud’s conception of trauma, based in a theory of memory, with an eye toward the technical side of the process (the production of images). This perspective is less concerned with the event that caused a trauma than with the process of isolating memory-images, which he reflects upon with the help of images of lighting and the flames of a match. Thus the concept of shock is introduced as a quasi-technical counterpart to Freud’s concept of trauma. In Benjamin the aspect of lighting replaces the breaking-through of the protective shield; the foundations for a cultural-theoretical elaboration of shock are now in place. As is well known, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935–39), Benjamin uncovers in the equipment and apparatuses of film a mode of viewing that corresponds to the isolation of images due to shock. In this case, however, the effect is produced by the technology itself. What makes film unique for him is the “force of its technical structure” that film produces as a physical shock effect.

Subsequently, in his book on Baudelaire (1938–39), Benjamin describes the culture of modernity as being a mode of perception structured regularly through exposure to shock. The temporal motif of “the second” is here the central theme of altered time. Thus, it is highly significant that in Baudelaire the second hand of the clock—“la Seconde”—appears as the gambler’s partner:

Souviens-toi que le Temps est un joueur avide
Qui gagne sans tricher, à tout coup! c’est la loi.
[*Keep in mind* that time is an avid gambler
Who wins without cheating—every time! It’s the Law!]⁵⁶

In an engagement with Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which occurs here for the first time explicitly (in the third section of the second edition of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in 1939), Benjamin discusses the memory-theoretical consequences of an experience for which the “exposure to shock [*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm.”⁵⁷

55. Benjamin, “Berliner Chronik,” p. 516. And see Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle,” 2:633.

56. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings*, 4:331.

57. *Ibid.*, 4:318.

He thus updates Freud's theory of trauma, which describes trauma as a state of exception in the mechanisms of memory, in case the threat to the protective shield by external influences should gain normalcy and, as an effect, produce a habitualized mode of behaving.⁵⁸ Benjamin describes this as parrying shock by the presence of mind. Proust, Valéry, and Baudelaire (among others) are, for him, guarantors for the possibility of reacting to modernity's altered ways of perception in a creative manner. On these grounds, Baudelaire emerges as Benjamin's protagonist for modernity; he is the one who turned shock into a poetic principle.

Epistemological Profit of His Studies of Modernity

The possibility of not just an altered poetry but an epistemology is also due to the lesson of this mode of perception. Parallel to the work on shock, Benjamin worked on a theory of knowledge that may be viewed as an epistemological counterpart to shock. Starting in 1935, he writes in letters of a specific epistemology proper to modernity⁵⁹ whose crucial condition he identified as the "'destiny' of art in the nineteenth century."⁶⁰ His epistemology should, as he writes in a letter to Gretel Adorno in 1935, "be crystallized around the concept of the 'now of recognizability,' handled by me in a very esoteric manner."⁶¹ The theoretical implementations thereof are found in Konvolut N of the *Arcades Project*, which begins with the already-cited passage on flashlike cognition and the long-rolling text that follows. We can trace quite a period of latency for the role this image will eventually take in Benjamin's epistemology, for it emerges first as a metaphor in January 1928, when he informs his friend Scholem in Jerusalem that soon a package with *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *One-Way Street* will arrive at his doorstep. He asks Scholem to "regard this probably indefinitely meandering letter as the chain lightning which is followed after a few days, corresponding to the distance between the eye of the storm and the Holy Land, by a long roll of thunder in the shape of an enormous box of books. May it resonate powerfully within the steep walls of your magnificence's mountainous headspace."⁶² Later, during Benjamin's work on his modern-era project *Arcades*, this linguistic figure

58. For more on the cultural and historical implications, see the tenth chapter of Weigel, *Walter Benjamin*.

59. See Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 20 May 1935, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 5:83.

60. Benjamin, letter to Gretel Karplus, 9 Oct. 1935, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 5:171.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 30 Jan. 1928, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 3:321.

falls into its central place as an image for his new epistemology, which is marked by the now of recognizability.

In light of this specific configuration of cognizability, the “relation of the present to the past,” structured traditionally by temporality, is rewritten into an imagelike structure. This however marks the qualitative turnover brought about by accelerated time into a constellation “in which the has-been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (*AP*, p. 462; trans. mod.). A vision trained in the observation of paintings and a consciousness shaped by media historically motivated shock combine in Benjamin’s theory of perception to elaborate an imagelike epistemology of a flashlike cognition.

As he hints in the same context, this way of knowing, however, also involves a “dangerous moment”: “The read image, by which is meant the image in the now of recognizability, bears to the highest degree the stamp of the critical, dangerous moment which is at the basis of all reading.”⁶³ Especially from the perspective of a theory of history, he reflects on the price of an ephemeral kind of knowledge, namely, the fact that the image that flashes up describes not only sudden recognition but also an equally sudden disappearance. When, in the thesis “On the Concept of History” (1940), he stresses the disappearance of the image that flashes up (and thereby also discusses the precarious aspect of an imagelike knowledge), then the concomitant unstable nature of this way of perception is only here brought to expression in its full meaning: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its cognizability, and is never to be seen again.”⁶⁴ This indeed means precisely that the image *cannot* be captured or grasped. At this point it is once again understandable why the lightning in the emblematic passage on the flashlike cognition must be followed by the long-rolling peal of thunder. It requires the subsequent text in order to grant the status of knowledge to an image that suddenly comes into appearance like a flash. The image is always in danger of disappearing, especially when it concerns a nonmaterialized image, which cannot depend on a durable medium for its survival. Language—as the long-rolling thunder of a flashlike cognition—would thereby become another, alternative mode to the material image—at the same time an indispensable element and condition of possibility to allow the involuntary status of flashlike cognition to become fruitful for thinking. In Benjamin’s work, the concept of the dialectical image stands for this precipitation of imagelike perception into conscious

63. Benjamin, “Konvolut N,” 5:1:578. And see *AP*, p. 463.

64. Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2:695.

thought: "Thinking consists of the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought" (*AP*, p. 475; trans. mod.). The a posteriori character of reflection in relation to the image is likewise expressed in the image of the long-rolling thunder, which represents the linguistically constituted reflection, literally in the German word *nachdenken* (which means to "think afterward" and to "reflect") and in the characterization of Benjamin's epistemology as *Bilddenken*.