The dialectical image as the critical inner mirror

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to outline a possible approach to Benjamin's figure of the *dialectical image* from the perspective of neither its content nor the philosophical issues it is supposed to represent but from the very dialectical tension immanent in it. I believe it is precisely due to that inner tension that the dialectical image conveys truth content as the eternal glimmer of transiency.

Key Words Benjamin; dialectical image; dialectical tension; difference.

This paper deals with Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image with special reference to its critical significance as it has been emphasized in Adorno's critical interpretation of Benjamin writings. The concept itself carries the inevitable veil of an ambiguity programmed or coded into it by Benjamin himself; although this has already been discussed by several scholars no resolution has yet appeared[i]. Admittedly, even if the notion of the dialectical image presents an immense challenge, I believe it is not unresolvable and

that it may be approached in a different manner than suggested by some critics. This very problematical subject requires an adjustment of the methodological approach, amounting, in the case of Benjamin writings, to its degradation; thus methodology would abandon its illusory certitude in order to trace whatever escapes its identifying powers. Buck-Morss for instance claims that in order to unveil the hidden meaning of his fragmented works Benjamin's own method of making present (*Aktualisierung*) should be applied, which in fact consists in *utilizing* it. In *The Dialectics of Seeing* Buck-Morss asserts that the reading of Benjamin's oeuvre requires a *materialist pedagogy*[ii] .

Already in his dissertation Benjamin declares his philosophical stance as diverging from the Kantian and post-Kantian narrative by refuting its very axiom – the scientific idea of experience derived from Newton's physics[iii]. Thereby releasing his discourse from the methodological dogma of subjectivity Benjamin enabled himself to wander into the philosophically unfamiliar and uncomfortable sphere of concrete things, while aware of the constantly lurking peril of ambiguity and the danger of academic abandonment. In other words, Benjamin undertakes the hazardous intellectual path of, as Peter Burger indicates, thinking "against himself" (Burger 2003: 147) or as Adorno would put it: presenting a "philosophy directed against philosophy" (Adorno 1983: 235). Hence Benjamin's writings present a constellation of images bound together by the law of tension produced either by attraction or by distraction, which in fact denotes the same rule of interpretation – a delicate and complex matrix which is balanced and maintained by the inner coherence of Benjamin's philosophical project. This coherence, I believe, is founded upon the law of the mirror resembling reflection – the complexity of an object or subject is indeed reflected in the complexity of the method. The tension appears to be the dialectic as such, as in his letter to Adorno Benjamin compares the forging of dialectics to the stretching of a bow (Benjamin 2001: 119). This metaphor illustrates why Benjamin refuses to deliver any definition or a

thorough explanation of the dialectical image as a binding concept, emphasizing that its "question remains open" until it proves its "value in the material itself"(89).

Benjamin's statement implies that his persistent philosophical aim is to follow the trace of things just as one who, while looking into the mirror, struggles to catch the glimpses of the world lurking behind his shoulder without falling into the abyssmal gaze of his own reflection. These characteristics of Benjamin's project place him further from philosophy and closer to literature[iv] and offer essential insight into the revolutionary and negative nature of literature itself.

The dream image - tension and difference

The mentioned ambiguity of Benjamin's project is by nature difficult to pinpoint as it seems to be connected with an epistemological confusion emanating from the very figure of the dialectical image; the image refutes epistemological presuppositions. However, that does not mean that Benjamin naively claims that Kant's critique has never taken place and that philosophy should carry on with no further regard to it. On the contrary, Benjamin recognizes that there is something prior to meaning and the self, and that is the image.

Image and language take precedence … Not only before meaning. Also before the self. (Benjamin 2005: 208)

It seems to be the same epistemological confusion that is also a characteristic of the debate on the cognitive value of a dream. Perhaps that is why Benjamin initially thought of the dialectical image in terms of a dream image.

Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill. This standstill is Utopia, and the dialectical image therefore a dream image. (Benjamin 1999: 171)

In the above passage from *The Arcades Project* the German philosopher indicates that the instant the dialectics is forced to a standstill it precipitates a reflecting image. As the image is filled with adequate inner tension it in turn produces ambiguity. However, I believe the notion of a *dream* image directly refers to Utopia, because 'image' is something other than thought. The standstill can only be represented by a picture, or a photograph; it cannot be seized or maintained otherwise than momentarily due to its origin in the purely dialectical movement of thought. Hence Benjamin continues:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions - there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. (475)

Here, in the light of Benjamin's claim a natural question arises: whether the arrest of thought is possible at all. It is rather difficult to consider thinking in a static manner; it seems that the dialectical image as a standstill is in fact Utopia, a dream image which belongs to the artificial sphere of thinking about thinking. However, this conclusion does not imply that Benjamin's critique of idealism is defective. On the contrary, it proves Benjamin's great awareness of the German philosophical tradition and his careful approach to its problematics; even though the dialectical image is momentary and fleeting by nature it comprises the critical

insight of the waking consciousness. Admittedly, it is impossible to discontinue the flow of thought, but it is in fact possible to differentiate it by realizing and conceptualizing the flow as flow. This mindfulness is only momentary in its nature, however.

In his correspondence with Adorno Benjamin reveals significant aspects of his concept of the dialectical image:

The dialectical image does not simply copy the dream(…). But it certainly does seem to me that the former contains within itself the exemplary instances, the interruptions of waking consciousness, and that indeed it is precisely from such places that the figure of the dialectical image first produces itself like that of a star composed of many glittering points. Here too, therefore, the bow needs to be stretched, and a dialectic forged: that between the image and the act of waking. (Benjamin 2001: 119)

In addressing Adorno's doubts on defining the dialectical image as a dream image Benjamin appears to emphasize that while neither the content of the image, nor what it reflects are crucial; the very tension it conveys and the irreducibility of its components are. The irreducibility is that which glimmers through the image's delicate texture. In the transitory moment of awaking it is impossible to tell the dream and reality apart as this would mean denoting one as the dominant (real) one, and yet it seems equally impossible to reduce one to the other. Awaking is the exact instant when illusory subjectivity is collapsing, why no structure of the real is yet constituted. That is the precise *now of knowability*.

The emergent mode of thinking through difference may cause one to consider Benjamin's reflections in close proximity with the discourse of Jacques Derrida on *différance*.

This affinity has already been suggested by some scholars in the context of the deconstructive aspects of Benjamin's conclusions on allegory[v]. Nevertheless, there seem to be crucial factors to argue against this suggestion, as I will do in the following.

I believe the essential characteristic of the dialectical image that flashes through the momentary critical arrest of thought resides in the fact that it provides insight into the reverse side of the cognitive act in reflecting its purely negative component. In this regard Benjamin contradicts the affirmative epistemological conclusions of Kant and especially Fichte in order to contradict Hegel's restrictions and enter "houses of ill repute" (Adorno 1992: 221).

Is awaking perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the "now of knowability" in which things put on their true – Surrealist - face. Thus in Proust, the importance of staking an entire life on life's supremely dialectical point of rupture: awakening. (Benjamin 1999: 463-464)

The *Surrealist face* understood as the true face of things, apart from facilitating a different cognitive perspective on German philosophy[vi], essentially appears to imply that it is impossible to determine the difference between the real and the illusory, since the real dissolves into dream. Even if Benjamin rejects the naïve metaphysical claim to the phenomenal sphere of reality, he also discards the presupposition of subjectivity's direct correspondence with that sphere.

We may therefore ask: what is left of de-mythologized awareness and knowledge in Benjamin's cognitive act? How can the cognitive act escape relative invariability? In his

essay on Surrealism Benjamin seems to connect the revolutionary authenticity of the surrealist movement with the central concept of experience as a "loosening of the self" (Benjamin 2005: 208) for which poetry is only a medium. The concept reveals the cognitive presupposition that "language takes precedence" emphasized at the beginning of this article.

In the same essay Benjamin claims that, unlike Proust mentioned in the above passage from *The Arcades Project*, for surrealists life "seemed worth living only where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away" (208), which - although it defines the Surrealist face of things - is in fact devoid of any critical element as well as reference to the past.

Remembrance and Recognizability.

Thus, if following the trace of Proust's *memoire involontaire* (involuntary memory) we should hold on to the idea of the dream as a content of the dialectical image, the dream would be about the past, or rather what has been.

> *It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an 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. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical… (463)*

The moment of 'now' carries the weight of *recognizability* and its reference to the past. However, past content is not a simple recollection as it is in an involuntary memory. As Marc de Wilde states, Benjamin's aim is not to "restore the past in its original state" but instead he "juxtaposes it with the present, seeking to activate its critical potential" (Wilde 2009: 189). What is the nature of the dialectical image's reference to the past and the present?

The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability— bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (Benjamin 1999: 463)

It seems there is one condition under which it is possible to *read* the dialectical image, that is it needs to be recognized in the present following the rule of *displaced similarity*. Thereby the dialectical image appears to be a form of *déja vu* where, just as previously subjectivity collapsed in the cognitive aspect of the image, the present collapses and reveals what has been as its origin or premise. Yet, both of these moments – the past and the present in the dialectical image simply lose their grip, or their power over each other. They are neither different nor the same but form a constellation as did previously the dream and the real. The truth resides in neither of them. Rather, it glitters through the collapse of their illusory supremacy.

Mark de Wilde continues, stating that "the dialectical image is grounded in a theological responsibility to save the past from forces of forgetting - and ultimately, to save it from history itself" (Wilde 2009: 189). The interpretation emphasizing a "silent call for justice" is in close affinity with Adorno's reflections in his work on Kierkegaard's aesthetics, where he considers truth in its inherent relation to *transparentness* and judgment: "truth is

'transparentness' and the profound gaze that without any resistance penetrates the transparent." (Adorno 1999:72) The presented figure of truth carries an immanent reference to the eternal[vii] and thereby corresponds with Benjamin's idea of the messianic; and only through remembrance which unveils the constellation of past and present may one reach the elusive truth. Adorno argues that:

Benjamin's images are not linked with nature as moments of a self-identical ontology but rather in the name of death, of transience as the supreme category of natural existence, the category toward which Benjamin's thought advances. What is eternal in them is only the transient. (Adorno 1992: 226)

In the passage from *Introduction to Benjamin's Shriften* Adorno reveals that Benjamin's method captured in the images essentially consists in forging a reversed dialectics which internal dynamic aims at mapping out the irreducible component of things – its *transience*. Paradoxically this transience constitutes a mark of the *eternal* conceived as not an abstract emptiness but as a concrete, non-identical trace of substantial world.

The Dialectical Image and Language.

In order to further elucidate the figure of the dialectical image it essential to follow the hint of another tension intrinsic in language, a tension in and by which Benjamin claims the dialectical image exists. In his article on the conception of the dialectical image in terms of its relation to language Eli Friedlander implies a universality of language comparable to that asserted by philosophical hermeneutics - Gadamer in particular[viii] :

(…) the distinction between what we say by means of, or through, language, and what can be revealed in language is at the same time a distinction between what we say and what communicates itself in language.

At first glance it seems like an important suggestion if one considers language as a constellation with a double meaning, i.e. as a configuration of fixed stars or, given its astrological connotations, a formation of heavens as spheres in a particular moment[ix] that allows the 'letter', language, to manifest itself. However, the reference unintentionally conveyed through language emerges from within, not from the universality of the system but from the particular, concrete strain that founds the system. Benjamin puts great emphasis upon the smallest element of language:

Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found in a word, where the tension between the dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The letter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of the historical process. (Benjamin 1999: 475)

The dialectical *tension* of a word and the *violent expulsion* of the dialectical image from the historical process are bound together essentially by their negativity. Language as an "archive of nonsensous similarities" (Benjamin 2005: 697) seems to be a constellation itself originating in our magical mimetic capacity, including the mimetic genius from which astrological practices arise. Hence language represents mimetic power in its purest meaning, and it represents tension built upon the dynamics of its forces in the effort to maintain wholeness of meaning.

The greater the difference between the opposites, the greater the tension issuing from the inner forces of language struggling to sustain meaning. And yet, in the smallest components of language, i.e. words, the nonsensousness of forced similarity is most visible. In a profound sense, words fail to grasp things in themselves; yet by merely naming things words convey a tension which ironically indicates and manifests the existence of things in themselves. This tension contradicts and negates idealism. Thus, Adrono claims in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* in the dialectical image nature is sustained.

For it is not as the continuously living and present that nature prevails in the dialectic. Dialectics comes to a stop in the image and cites the mythical in the historically most recent as the distant past: nature as proto-history (Adorno 1999: 54).

From the above passage the conclusion may be drawn that in dialectics nature is preserved, and in the dialectical image it is recognized as though in a mirror. Thereby the image constitutes a critical inner mirror within the enchanted reality. In a flash it captures a reversed dialectics, as to force the dialectics into standstill means to reverse it. Similarly if we gaze into the mirror the reflection we observe is indeed reversed. Hence Adorno states that in order "to reach truth one must pierce through every negativity […] the piece of music must be played backwards; otherwise the enchantment is not broken." (84) The enchantment is history itself and it prevails, and yet only within and through history are we able to reach the truth as "history decays into images not into stories" (Benjamin 1999: 476).

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Notes:

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[i] In fact, the opinions of Benjamin's interpreters vary greatly as to whether it is possible and legitimate in the light of Benjamin's critique to define the concept of the 'dialectical image' at all. Rolf Tiedemann asserts it "never achieved terminological consistency" (Rolf Tiedemann, *Dialectics at a Standstill* in *The Arcades Project*, by Walter Benjamin, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999], 942; whereas Susan Buck-Morss argues it is "overdetermined in Benjamin's thought " and its logic is " rich in philosophical implications" (Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989], 67).

[ii] See Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dilectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin's and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 1989, 287-330.

[iii] See Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings: 1913-1926*, edited by Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, USA: Harvard University Press, 2005, 101.

[iv] See Adorno 1992: 225.

[v] See S. Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, Cambridge, MA., & London: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 122.

[vi] See Benjamin 2005: 207.

[vii] Compare Wide 2009: 190.

[viii] Gadamer discusses the universality of language in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Trans. David E. Linge. California: University of California Press, 1977, p. 67.

[ix] See also Anthony Auerbach *Imagine no Metaphors: the Dialectical Image of Walter Benjamin* in *Image and Narrative,* issue 18 (2007), available at http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/auerbach.htm