The International Journal of Psychoanalysis

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ripa20

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To cite this article: Anat Tzur Mahalel (2023) The visual image and the Denkbild: Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin on history and remembrance, The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 104:3, 527-545, DOI: 10.1080/00207578.2023.2204921

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2023.2204921

Published online: 06 Jul 2023.

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INT J PSYCHOANAL
2023, VOL. 104, NO. 3, 527–545
https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2023.2204921

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

The visual image and the Denkbild: Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin on history and remembrance

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ABSTRACT

The present paper offers a comparative reading of Sigmund Freud's and Walter Benjamin's thoughts on remembrance and history. Freud's dream thought, constructed from visual images, and Benjamin's dialectical image, and the Denkbild as its literary form, are presented as intriguingly intertwined concepts. They both refer to residues of regressive thought expressed through the medium of the German *Bild*, which can be translated as image, picture or figure. The visual image (visuelles *Bild*) and the Denkbild are presented as crucial to the construction of history because they present a dialectic between a condensed experience of the past (beyond the scope of words and representation) and the inevitable transformation of experience into language. Freud's and Benjamin's late writings are read in the historical context of European Jewish intellectuals facing the rise of the Nazi regime. The images discussed comparatively here are Freud's last Moorish king and Benjamin's angel of history. These condensed images are presented as lamenting figures, images of despair and struggle. They serve as examples of the visual image's ability to represent the unrepresentable and capture hidden mnemic traces at traumatic times.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Accepted 17 April 2023

KEYWORDS
Visual image; Sigmund Freud; Walter Benjamin

> For an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it.
>
> (Walter Benjamin, *The Image of Proust*)

> We must finally make up our minds to adopt the hypothesis that the psychical precipitates of the primaeval period became inherited property which, in each fresh generation, called not for acquisition but only for awakening.
>
> (Sigmund Freud 1939, "Moses and Monotheism")

> Perhaps the redemption of the imagination lies in accepting the fact that we create much of our world out of the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations.
>
> (W.J.T. Mitchell 1984, "What Is an Image?")

The creation of history becomes most crucial in times of crisis. At these times of rapid and frightening change, the ability to create history as an accumulated body of knowledge narrows significantly. Traumatic history often stays in the form of alienated and

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dissociated events, with no connecting story. Tracing momentary experiences, which can be captured through visual images, becomes a way to hold on to an authentic residue of historical experience.

A comparative reading of the writings of Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin reveals intriguing similarities and intertextual connections between the psychoanalyst and the philosopher concerning concepts and processes involving the hidden and unrepresented aspects of experience. Freud and Benjamin are both central thinkers of modernity who were deeply invested in questions of history and remembrance. Their writings offer a rich matrix of ideas and images for rethinking the complexity and allusiveness of the processes involved in remembering (Anderson 2014; Ferber 2013; Ley Roff 2004; Nägele 1991; Rickels 2002; Weigel 1996; Werner 2019). Nevertheless, the rich comparative readings of the two thinkers that have been offered have generally been proposed by humanities scholars rather than practising psychoanalysts. Within my work as a candidate in psychoanalytic training, I have found reading Walter Benjamin's writing alongside psychoanalytic literature to be fruitful and to contribute to my clinical thinking (Tzur Mahalel 2019, 2021). I also believe that the field comprising the comparative reading of these two thinkers can be enriched by research that stems from psychoanalytic theory and technique.

The conceptualization of the visual image, or figurability, created in dream-like thought beyond the scope of words and organized thinking, is developed in intriguing ways in the writings of Freud and Benjamin. Although Benjamin, in his writings, refers to Freud only minimally, and in a scattered way, a comparative reading of Freud and Benjamin reveals a rich matrix of allusions and intertextualities. I agree with those scholars who argue that the investigation of the mutual influences between Freud and Benjamin should focus not on explicit citations (Ley Roff 2004, 116; Nägele 1991, 57; Weigel 1996, xi) but rather on the manifold and dynamic intertextuality of these two great modern thinkers.

The historical context in which these ideas of Freud's and Benjamin's were formed and developed is worth taking into account: the rise of modernity and democracy at the beginning of the twentieth century in Western Europe and the devastating destruction of World War II a few decades later, most tragically for Jews. In spite of the age difference between the two thinkers and the different disciplines from which they originate, it is interesting to think about the threads that dialectically intertwine the ideas and concepts with which they were both occupied during that distinctive historical period. This comparative reading is presented, among other things, as an opportunity to think about developments in European Jewish thought at that very specific moment. My aim in this paper is to capture the primary roots of the visual image in psychoanalysis and culture within the singular Zeitgeist in which it was created. The present reading is also influenced and inspired by post-Freudian concepts, such as Bion's ideographs (1984), Aulagnier's pictograms (2001), Botella and Botella's psychic figurability (2005) and Scarfone's traces (2013).

The threads that bind these two thinkers will be examined through the lens of Freud's dream thought, constructed from visual images (visuelle Bilder), and of Benjamin's Denkbild, as the literary form of the dialectical image. These concepts were not necessarily developed in their late writings, but those writings rely heavily on the concept of the Bild, in both cases. The German word Bild, most commonly translated as "image", appears in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin 2014 [2004]) as a word that cannot be easily translated. This is because the set of words that are modelled on Bild and

systematically related to it is an especially complex one: words such as Urbild (archetype), Abbild (copy), Bildung (education) and Einbildungskraft (imagination). The starting point for thinking about the multiple meanings of Bild is provided by the biblical verse that says God created man "in his own image [betzelem]" (Genesis 1:27) (Cassin 2014 [2004], 107–111).

In spite of the important distinctions between Freud's and Benjamin's theories on the connection between visual image and remembrance, which I will address later, I would at this point like to draw attention to a couple of pivotal similarities between them. First, an important aspect of the model of memory purposed by both thinkers is non-synchronicity. Freud proposes that mnemic traces flash out of the unconscious and can be only partially captured, and that only in Nachträglichkeit. Benjamin offers remembrance as a momentary non-synchronicity in the flow of time. A Denkbild, or thought-image, is an interruption in the linear chain of events that cannot be translated into conceptual terminology or a historical continuum (Weigel 1996, 49–60). Second, both of these thinkers are occupied by issues concerning trauma and memory. They agree that overwhelming events, beyond the ability to be experienced explicitly and consciously, become a component of mémoire involontaire and demand to be translated from primeval languages. Hence, although Benjamin did not tend to refer to Freud in his writing, in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" Benjamin is intrigued with the reliving of traumatic experiences, especially in dreams, that Freud describes in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". Benjamin uses these ideas as a theoretical foundation on which to base his theory of shock regarding modernism and the individual's confrontation with the modernist city (Benjamin 2003 [1940a], 316–318).

Through the dual configurations of Freud's dream thought and Benjamin's Denkbild, I want to draw special attention to two specific images that appear in Freud's and Benjamin's late writings, namely Freud's last Moorish king and Benjamin's angel of history. This comparative reading of the pivotal images offered by each of these thinkers will allow me to ask questions about the importance of the visual image for creating a space for remembrance, which is especially crucial in traumatic times.

Freud's dream thought

From the outset, Freud's thinking about the language of the unconscious, as emphatically expressed in the dream-work, leans on visual images. The visual image is an archaic residue of regressive thought that captures experience in its primary, infantile, preverbal essence. Freud understood dreams as a manifold and enigmatic experience delivered to the dreamer in a language close to the allegorical language of the unconscious. Furthermore, the dream is remembered at the moment of awakening only through a process of translation that transforms the dreaming experience into conscious reminiscences. The distinct quality of the dream arises from its relatively close connection to sensory experience, most prominently in the visual images that it offers. The dream is therefore kept alive on awakening mainly through its visual images and their affective implications.

In addition, Freud thought that the analytic setting encouraged the return of the repressed, mainly through the arousal of visual images. This idea is expressed at the very outset of the analytic process, in Freud's initial recommendations to the patient as

the patient lies on the couch for the first time. He presented the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis to his patients in the following words, "So say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveller sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside" (Freud 1913, 135). Psychoanalysis strives to encourage retrospective abilities, and here Freud presents these abilities as developing through the visual sphere of experience: describing to someone else what you see through the window of a moving railway car.

From the very beginning, Freud's theory of the interpretation of dreams leans on visual images. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he introduces the dominance of visual images in dream language and the meaning of that dominance, talking about:

> *considerations of representability in the peculiar psychical material of which dreams make use*—for the most part, that is, representability in visual images [visuellen Bildern]. Of the various subsidiary thoughts attached to the essential dream-thoughts, those will be preferred which admit of visual representation [eine visuelle Darstellung]; and the dream-work does not shrink from the effort of recasting unadaptable thoughts into a new verbal form—even into a less usual one—provided that that process facilitates representation and so relieves the psychological pressure caused by constricted thinking. (Freud 1900, 344, original emphasis)

Thinking in pictures holds the potential to set the mind free by allowing it to regress and expand beyond constricted rational and verbal thinking. Freud develops these ideas further:

> A thing that is pictorial is, from the point of view of a dream, a thing that is *capable of being represented* [das Bildliche ist für den Traum darstellungsfähig]: . . . A dream-thought is unusable so long as it is expressed in an abstract form; but when once it has been transformed into pictorial language [eine bildliche Sprache], contrasts and identifications of the kind which the dream-work requires, and which it creates if they are not already present, can be established more easily than before between the new form of expression and the remainder of the material underlying the dream. This is so because in every language concrete terms, in consequence of the history of their development, are richer in associations than conceptual ones. (339–340, original emphasis)

Later, in his "Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis", Freud emphasized the importance of visual images as the most significant achievement of the dream-work, one that contributes to the rich and manifold quality of the language of the unconscious:

> in this way it becomes possible in regard to a large number of abstract thoughts to create pictures to act as substitutes for them in the manifest dream while at the same time serving the purpose of concealment. This is the technique of the familiar picture-puzzles [Bilderrätsel]. (Freud 1916, 121–122)

For Freud, therefore, the dream embodies a regression to the language of pictures, which is an archaic form of sensing, thinking and interpreting. Thinking in pictures forms a language that reveals and conceals at the same time, a picture-puzzle that demands reassembling and deciphering. A dream can be thought of as a collection of pictures that embody a condensed array of experiences and representations: "visual images . . . comprise the essence of the formation of dreams" [visuelle Bilder . . . sind doch das Wesentliche an der Traumbildung] (Freud 1916, 175).

Freud presents the idea that every dream offers a central point, or navel. The dream's navel can be thought of in terms of visual images: a condensed visual image that mysteriously draws the attention of the dreamer.[1] The dream embodies a regression to infantile thought processes that have a hallucinatory quality. Dreaming offers a path to one's sensation in the world before entering the social order. It captures the rich layers of sensual and emotional experience that are gradually repressed in the process of acquiring language. The dream's navel is most often a visual image that the dreamer finds striking, while simultaneously lacking the means to explain its effect.

Freud (1933) describes the way in which dream thought pushes further away from verbal language and breaks down into visual and sensory language:

> All the linguistic instruments by which we express the subtler relations of thought—the conjunctions and prepositions, the changes in declension and conjugation—are dropped, because there are no means of representing them; just as in a primitive language without any grammar, only the raw material of thought is expressed and abstract terms are taken back to the concrete ones that are at their basis. (20)

This regression into visual image thought "enable[s] this wished-for instinctual satisfaction to be experienced in a hallucinatory manner as occurring in the present" (19).

Entering the realm of dreams provides a fascinating opportunity to retrieve a live piece of history, similar to an archeological residue. The dreamer is faced with a visual image that mysteriously alludes to past times. The conceptualization of past events that relate to this present visual image allows one to think of one's past, yet only in a constrained form. It is not just their content and conceptualization that provide the framework for the internalization of these significant past events; even if we add in their emotional implications, there is still one important piece missing. The sensual aspects of the experience play a significant role in the formation of these events and their psychic imprinting. The sensual aspects of past events – and mainly their visual aspects – construct the form that memory traces take, and therefore cannot be separated from the content in the total process of the return of the repressed:

> a dream might be described as *a substitute for an infantile scene modified by being transferred on to a recent experience*. The infantile scene is unable to bring about its own revival and has to be content with returning as a dream. (1900, 546, original emphasis)

Freud is concerned with the regressed quality of the dream, and with its ability to retrieve infantile experience and early memories, both in content and in form. He recognizes the complexity of retrieving the past per se, in its actual material embodiment, and discusses potential gaps and distortions between actual past events and their inner imprint. In order to interpret the dream, a free association with the regressed thinking in pictures is crucial:

> The dream-process consequently enters on a regressive path, which lies open to it precisely owing to the peculiar nature of the state of sleep, and it is led along that path by the attraction exercised on it by groups of memories; some of these memories themselves exist only in the form of visual cathexes and not as translations into the terminology of the later systems.

[1]The dream's navel in "Irma's Injection", for example, can be thought of as the visual image revealed to Freud as he is looking into Irma's throat. The effort he puts into describing what he sees is an expression of his fascination: "on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose" (Freud 1900, 107).

> In the course of its regressive path the dream-process acquires the attribute of representability. (Freud 1900, 573–574)

Benjamin's Denkbild

"Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show," writes Walter Benjamin in his monumental *Arcades Project* (1999 [1982], 460, original emphasis). Articulating the dialectic between the "then" and the "now", Benjamin suggests that images related to the past find their existence in the present in the form of an image:

> For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intimated in that image. . . . Every dialectical presentation of history is paid for by a renunciation of the contemplativeness which characterizes historicism. (2002 [1937], 262)[2]

The dialectical image is presented as a constellation, a construction whose essence lies more in its spatial configuration than in the specific content of its elements (Didi-Huberman 2005; Nägele 2002).

Like Freud's language of dreams, Benjamin's dialectical image refers to a distinct set of meanings, or language, that is not submitted to a simple obvious interpretation. It is an image or set of images that is created in the dialectic between dreaming and awakening and between the inability to present experience in language and the inevitability of this transformation. For Freud, dream interpretation involves the shattering of dream images into their smallest elements in order to eventually form new constellations and contexts in which the dream thoughts are reconstructed. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the image forms a constellation that is merely figural or spatial. The spatial setting of the image is further underlined in the repetition of the word Stelle, marking the creation of the dialectical image at a certain point or position. The dialectical image is thus created at a Stelle where something irrupts, interrupts or breaks in (Nägele 2002). Benjamin uses the concept of the dialectical image to present the remembered event as an image in which the past is created as a new experience in the present: the "then" becomes "now" in the flashing moment of awakening (das Erwachen). Benjamin constructs an innovative conception of historical time based on the relationship between the "then" and the "now" (more than the past and the present), as brought together in images. Each historically specific "now" is understood to correspond to a particular "then". Benjamin writes:

> It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash (*ein aufblitzendes*) 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 a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. —Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. Awakening. (1999 [1982], 462)

Benjamin's perspective on history differs from Freud's in that, for Benjamin, the past only exists in what he calls now-time (Jetztzeit); for Benjamin, there is no archaeological past to

[2]In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin writes, "What is original [ursprunglich] never allows itself to be recognized in the naked, obvious existence of the factical; its rhythm is accessible only to a dual insight. This insight . . . concerns the fore-history and after-history of the original" (1977 [1928], 45–46).

be discovered. The only way to grasp a sense of the past, Benjamin argues, is by constructing it from images carved out of the experiences of dreaming and awakening. As already mentioned, this is not a return of memories in the sense of actual past events or something close to them, but rather a potential presentation of experiences that are merely attributed to the "then" in the "now".

In a letter to Gretel Adorno dated 16 August 1935, Benjamin wrote:

> The dialectical image [Das dialektische Bild] does not replicate the dream—it was never my intention to make that claim. But it does seem to me that it contains the instances, the ingresses of awakening consciousness, that it is in fact only through those very points that it can assemble its figure in the same way that many gleaming stars form a constellation [Sternbild]. Here too, then, a connection still needs to be developed, a dialectic conquered: that between the image and awakening. (Benjamin and Adorno 2008, 155)

A remembered event exists merely in the now, and the time of experience remains an enigma. The crystallization of history in the present is what Benjamin calls the dialectical image. Benjamin presents this dialectic in the framework of dreaming and awakening:

> the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the carpet of lived existence, as woven into us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering, each day unravels the web, the ornaments of forgetting. (1999 [1929], 238)

Benjamin's writing, and especially his late autobiographical writing, is structured according to the Denkbild, which is the literary form of the dialectical image, and is variously rendered in English as "thought-images" (Richter 2007) or "figures of thought" (Eiland and Jennings 2014). The Denkbild is a visual image of a quotidian object or seemingly negligible phenomenon that, when placed at the centre of attention, enables that object or phenomenon to be read and evaluated as a sign in a larger cultural semiotics. It is an aphoristic prose form combining philosophical analysis with concrete imagery to yield a signature critical mimesis (Eiland and Jennings 2014, 3).

Instead of clarifying a thought by means of an image in linear fashion, the Denkbild presents an image of an integral, albeit not immediately recognizable, part of the thought. Neither the image nor the thought is clear without the other, and insight into their relation is arrived at through a process of critically rethinking the apparent incongruence between them. This interdependence of parts is characteristic of the baroque emblem. As in the baroque emblem, title, narrated image and interpretive thought interact in Benjamin's Denkbild, attempting to provide "information about the hidden signatures of reality. . . . The objects in Benjamin's *Denkbilder* become signs for the hidden fabricated human meaning of the world and human history" (Kirst 1994, 515). The Denkbild is a literary attempt to decipher profane existence as the enigmatic form of something beyond existence. In the paradoxical formulation of "dialectics at a standstill", Benjamin suggests an approach that seeks not to assimilate itself into the temporal course of history through understanding but rather to gain its meaning from the sensual, the separated and the particular: "Cognition—as released by the freezing of movement—is something that 'flashes up'" (Tiedemann 1989, 185).

Walter Benjamin's writing about the structure of the Denkbild centres on the striving to reconceptualize history, which "involves a rejection of historicist linearity, a strategic exploding of the teleology of progress, and a rupture of temporality that results in a

revolutionarily charred moment of 'now-time'" (Richter 2007, 9). This form of writing offers a text that strives to create a montage of visual images, a complex matrix of picture-puzzles (Bilderrätsel), rather than a coherent and integrated narrative. In Benjamin's writing, the Denkbild is expressed through its fragmented structure, and these fragments contain personal dreams and visual reminiscences of a condensed character that carry enigmatic and allusive meanings.[3] The very act of placing these experiences at the centre of attention transforms the common notions of space and time, history and narrative: "Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears" (Benjamin 1999 [1982], 475). In 1932, Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem:

> It is . . . written in small sections, a form I am repeatedly led to adopt. . . . The subject matter seems absolutely to demand this form. In short, I am working on a series of sketches I will entitle 'Berliner Kindheit um 1900' (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 19)

Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (2002 [1938]) is constructed from a montage of thought-images (Denkbilder) from his childhood. These early reminiscences are presented as a collection of pictures, leaning on the visual aspect of mnemic residues, each perhaps attached to some minor association or fragmented thought. We could see in his writing, as an explicit attempt to treat his homesickness, his childhood recollections of the public sphere and the living relics of the city of Berlin, at a time when he had been forced to go into exile. Saliently absent from this autobiographical text is any contextualization of these reminiscences in a psychoanalytically oriented framework. What is empathically offered instead is a persistent striving to relive past experiences, but without the ambition to grasp them accurately and fully – they can only be apprehended as a fragmented allusion.[4]

Even an actual object from the past, a material residue, is subjected to the distortion and convulsion of memory. In the chapter entitled "The Reading Box", for example, Benjamin describes a box that he had as a child learning to read, a box made out of little tablets with the alphabet inscribed on them. He reminisces about the visual image of this box and offers his present retrospective emotional response to this reminiscence: "because—so far as my own life is concerned—it was reading and writing that were decisive, none of the things that surrounded me in my early years arouses greater longing than the reading box" (2002 [1938], 396).[5] He concludes this chapter with his distinctive point of view on history and remembrance—that in the process of remembering, one is obliged to face one's basic inability to retrieve the past as such. The only possibility is to create an experience *attributed* to the past, as a new experience in the

[3]Friedlander (2012) emphasizes the non-mimetic quality of the dialectical image: "the dialectical image is not the image *of* anything already given otherwise. On the contrary, the work Benjamin engages in prepares for the recognition of reality as a totality. The image is the configuration revealed in the nature of things" (38, original emphasis).

[4]It has been argued that this text, constructed like a mosaic from short prose texts, consists not so much of historical documents as of prophecies projected backwards. In his fortieth year, Benjamin sought to locate the seeds of the destruction that was to bring the world of the nineteenth century to an end in war. In this text, Benjamin is concerned less with portraying his own personal development than with showing the social construction of an individual growing up among the Jewish upper bourgeoisie before the turn of the century (Witte 1991, 11–14).

[5]The significance Benjamin gives to his childhood textual instrument somewhat echoes Freud's essay on the magical writing pad, Der Wunderblock (Freud 1925). In both texts, the childhood instrument is implicitly presented as a medium for remembrance.

present, and this is done by intuitively recreating the sensual experience, visual or other, of that reminiscence. The chapter ends with these words:

> The longing which the reading box arouses in me proves how thoroughly bound up it was with my childhood. Indeed, what I seek in it is just that: my entire childhood, as concentrated in the movement [Griff] by which my hand slid the letters into the groove, where they would be arranged to form words. My hand can still dream of this movement, but it can no longer awaken so as actually to perform it. By the same token, I can dream of the way I once learned to walk. But that doesn't help. I now know how to walk; there is no more learning to walk. (369)

Both Freud and Benjamin consider visual images to be an important way to approach the past as a live experience. This is most significant in the specific case of the repressed past. Freud articulates the primary aim of psychoanalysis as filling gaps in memory. These gaps represent lacunas in linear memory, in one's personal history. The mere existence of these gaps as such embodies the unrepresentable aspects of experience and remembrance. These are experiences beyond the scope of recognition or language. The realm of dreams and free associations appears in the writing of both Benjamin and Freud as embodied in the language of images. The image challenges the boundaries of time and space and provides a gateway through which to recapture lost meanings and fragmented memories. The ability to live an experience that is attributed to the past as a new experience in the present transforms this experience into an experience beyond time, into what can be called timelessness (Author's name2, year).

Nevertheless, and this is a pivotal point in both Freud and Benjamin's thought on the matter, the non-representable aspect of the visual image is in a constant dialectic with its representable aspect. This dialectic is expressed in the German distinction between Darstellung and Vorstellung: Darstellung is related to the appearance under which something is presented to perceptive consciousness, whereas Vorstellung refers to the process of opening out thanks to which the mind posits its own object of thought. Thus, Darstellung can be translated as "presentation" and the verb darstellen as "to perform", while Vorstellung can be translated as "representation" and the verb vorstellen as "to imagine" (Nägele 2002, 23; Reed, Levine, and Scarfone 2013, 7). The dialectic between these two forms of meaning draws complex connections between sensory impressions and language. Freud's expressions Sach-Vorstellung and Wort-Vorstellung, which Strachey translated as thing-presentation and word-presentation, respectively, express these connections between sensual mnemic traces and representation in language, and there is extensive psychoanalytic literature on the subject. Scarfone, for instance, argues that the sensory quality is what is required for a thing-presentation (which is by itself incapable of becoming conscious) to eventually be re-*presented* (presented again) in the mind, thanks to a word-*presentation* that the subject can use at will. The addition of a word-presentation is what ultimately creates a *representation* – that is, the most abstract sort of sign. The sensory presentation of words linked to the presentational traces active within the primordial mind will eventually yield abstract representations in the psychic field (Scarfone 2013, 85).

Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image expresses a somewhat similar dialectic between mnemic sensory traces and language. He refers not to a painterly representation but rather to a figure and constellation *to be read*. Benjamin regarded images in terms of

their property as writing rather than as representations. The image is described as a constellation of resemblances beyond a form–content relation (Nägele 2002, 23; Weigel 1996, 49). The image (Bild) invites one into an active engagement with the visual that involves the sensual, emotional and intellectual levels of experience.[6] This manifold experience can be partly interpreted and communicated as a message in language. This communication embodies a transformation, or translation, from the sensual experience offered by the image into words, and it is expressed, as Benjamin emphasizes, *in* language rather than *through* language (Benjamin 1997 [1916], 63).

Both Freud and Benjamin are intrigued by the metaphor of the archaic and its modern vicissitudes or, in other words, the challenge that modernism poses to the archaic in terms of history and memory. Freud and Benjamin differ in their quest for hidden truth mainly in that Freud believed in truth as an ontological entity that is located, in spite of its tangled paths, in our inner world (Groarke 2022, 163). Benjamin's framework offers a longing for truth while acknowledging the inherent impossibility of grasping it.

I find it intriguing that both Freud and Benjamin, as the atrocities of the war approached, were absorbed with history and remembrance, and thinking about these themes through images of ruined buildings and historic architecture. The German word Bild, used by both Freud and Benjamin, along with the etymological cognates that are still prevalent in its derivatives (such as Bildung, or "formation", and bilden, or "to form"), resonates as a construction. Freud found himself occupied with ancient buried cities, which he presented as an archeological image, and Benjamin was absorbed in the abandoned arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, which he presented as an image of bourgeois capitalist culture. I want to propose that at the specific moment in which these two great Jewish thinkers found themselves declared unwanted citizens, deported from their homes, and sent into exile because of their Judaism, drawing attention to glorified buildings of past times was a way for them to express their devastation at the upcoming ruin.

Freud and Benjamin's theories about history and remembrance were challenged by the tragic circumstances in which they both found themselves as Jews in Western Europe in the late 1930s. Although these life circumstances were not at the centre of their writings, those writings do offer traces of the repercussions of the traumatic times. Freud asked how one could remember or retrieve repressed memories, and in many ways Benjamin was occupied with the same question in his autobiographical writings. Their late writings offer an opportunity to identify possible efforts to remember traumatic history not of past events but of events occurring in the present. In many ways both of them were implicitly occupied with the question of how one can become a witness to traumatic events at the time of their occurrence, and how can one create memories of an overwhelming present. This kind of writing embodies the hope of collecting and constructing allusions to a person's home and homeland.

In this context, I would like to discuss Freud's image of the last Moorish king, taken from "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis" (1936), and Benjamin's image of the angel of history, taken from "On the Concept of History" (2003 [1940b]). These late

[6]This notion is developed by Benjamin in his concept of the "optical unconscious". He suggests that "photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful, yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams" (1991 [1931], 512).

texts of these two writers, written in a similar epoch, offer intriguing images that I find pivotal for deciphering that singular Zeitgeist in which they were created. These images have the potential to shed light on the importance of the image in times of crisis.

Images of lamenting figures

In "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis", Freud recalls a memory of an unexpected trip he had made to Athens with his brother three decades earlier. Following a peculiar chain of events, he remembers standing on the top of the Acropolis for the first and only time in his life and thinking, "So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt at school!" (1936, 241, original emphasis). Freud describes this experience carefully and attentively, concluding that the strange phenomenon he recalls was "a 'feeling of derealization' [Entfremdungsgefühl]. I made an attempt to ward that feeling off, and I succeeded, at the cost of making a false pronouncement about the past" (244).

He continues to analyse, retrospectively, what he now believes was the motivation for this distortion, and his explanation has to do with the guilt that he felt toward his father for having transcended him. Standing on the Acropolis and fully acknowledging this moment of greatness would have created "a feeling of *filial piety*" (1936, 248, original emphasis). The relationship between the son and his traditional father contributed to the son's ambition to become a hero and grasp "unattainable things of desire". Yet this ambition is ambivalent and intertwined with guilt, for "the essence of success was to have got further than one's father, and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden" (247). Freud writes beautifully about his fantasies as a young teenager, aspiring to exceed the "limitations and poverty of our conditions of life in my youth" (1936, 246–247), while his longing to travel, to "go such a long way" (1936, 246–247), seemed "beyond the realms of possibility". Thus Freud, in his retrospective writing and only then, is able to articulate the repressed sense of achievement he had experienced while standing on the Acropolis three decades earlier:

> I had long seen clearly that a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfilment of these early wishes—that it is rooted, that is, in dissatisfaction with home and family. When first one catches sight of the sea, crosses the ocean and experiences as realities cities and lands which for so long had been distant, unattainable things of desire—one feels oneself like a hero who has performed deeds of improbable greatness. (246)

Freud lives this memory as an experience newly occurring in the present of writing. This new experience is distinctly created, when Freud articulates in the present what he might have said to his brother at that moment on the Acropolis when he was challenged with this mental "derealization" and yet remained silent:

> I might that day on the Acropolis have said to my brother: "Do you still remember how, when we were young, we used day after day to walk along the same streets on our way to school, and how every Sunday we used to go to the Prater or on some excursion we knew so well? And now, here we are in Athens, and standing on the Acropolis! We really *have* gone a long way!" (1936, 247, original emphasis)

This vibrant textual moment of recommunicating with his brother about their muted and perhaps even denied childhood experiences stands in contrast to Freud's self-presentation of his existential condition at the time of writing. Freud presents himself as an

old man, writing to Romain Rolland in the accompanying letter that "my powers of production are at an end. All that I can find to offer you is the gift of an impoverished creature, who has 'seen better days'" (1936, 239); in the concluding words of the essay, he writes: "I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance and can travel no more" (248). Freud creates here an epic connection between the child and teenager that he was, growing up in a poor immigrant household with great aspirations to travel far; the middle-aged researcher, standing on the Acropolis; and, finally, the allegedly impoverished old man that he has become at the time of writing. Freud offers an implicit paradox here between the declaration of his present impoverishment and the creation of such a fine essay, one of Freud's most beautiful gems.

In the text itself, Freud alludes again to his present impoverished state when he reproduces the lament for the Spanish Moors by King Boabdil, the last Moorish king of Granada, after receiving the news of the fall of his city of Alhama:

> Cartas le fueron venidas
>
> que Alhama era ganada:
>
> las cartas echo en el fuego,
>
> y al mensajero matara. (1936, 246)

Freud presents the Spanish lament without any translation. (Freud's translator into English, James Strachey, provided an English translation of the lament: "Letters had reached him, telling that Alhama was taken. He threw the letters in the fire and killed the messenger" [246, n. 3].) The lament is presented as an example of a memory distortion that Freud calls non arrivé:

> You remember the famous lament of the Spanish Moors "*Ay de mi Alhama*" [Alas for my Alhama], which tells how King Boabdil received the news of the fall of his city of Alhama. He feels that this loss means the end of his rule. But he will not "let it be true," he determines to treat the news as "*non arrivé*". (246)[7]

Although Freud presents himself as an old man, depleted of resources, the image of the king of a fallen kingdom who cannot face that fall presents a different voice. This image may have crystallized Freud's own personal experience at the time of writing in a deep and profound way, in a way that transcends any analytic articulation drawn from the realm of conscious representation. Freud describes the king's behaviour as revealing "his need to combat a feeling of powerlessness. By burning the letters and having the messenger killed he was still trying to show his absolute power" (1936, 246). In this image of the ruler of the fallen kingdom, his powerlessness and despair are present but, paradoxically, they are shown along with his simultaneous competence and struggle. Freud draws attention to the ruler's acts of burning the letters and killing the messenger as manifestations of his desperate efforts to deploy his decaying resources. Yet these very acts implicitly express the deepest desolation, for he is destroying the letters, images of

[7]This condition of being non arrivé is first addressed by Freud in 1894, when he writes, "The task which the ego, in its defensive attitude, sets itself of treating the incompatible idea as '*non arrivée*' simply cannot be fulfilled by it. Both the memory-trace and the affect which is attached to the idea are there once and for all and cannot be eradicated" (1894, 48).

the textual, and killing the messenger, an image of future hope. Thus a profound dialectic is established between despair and struggle.

Benjamin's image also brings forth the theme of the messenger, yet not in the theological sense of the angel and the Messiah. The messenger is present in Benjamin's last essay, "On the Concept of History" (2003 [1940b]), where some of his pivotal ideas on history and remembrance are articulated for the first and only time. In this essay, which was not intended for publication, Benjamin tries to reconcile Marxism with Jewish theology, materialism with messianism. Theological and Marxist conceptions are reinterpreted, transformed and situated in a relation of reciprocal illumination that enables them to be articulated together in a coherent way (Hanssen 2002; Löwy 2005; Tiedemann 1989).

Benjamin's essay is divided into ten theses, the best-known of them being the ninth, in which an image named Angelus Novus is presented. This image refers to a picture by Paul Klee that Benjamin owned and cherished. He presents the "new angel" as an image of the angel of history. Although he refers to a pictorial image, what he essentially presents is a purely imagined image (Weigel 1996, 57), a projection of his own feelings and ideas onto the German artist's subtle and austere painting (Löwy 2005, 62; Ferris 1996; Scholem 1991 [1972]). The Denkbild dedicated to the image of the Angelus Novus is regarded as a condensed expression of the whole manuscript. In spite of its enigmatic quality, it has been quoted and interpreted countless times and in manifold contexts. Löwy argues that it touches upon something profound in the crisis of modern culture, and that the basis for this is its prophetic dimension (2005, 62). Here is Benjamin's presentation of the angel of history:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage [unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer] and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. (Benjamin 2003 [1940b], 392, original emphasis)

Benjamin's angel of history is completely absorbed in the tragic repercussions of the past. He cannot move towards the future because he is compelled to stay, repair what has been broken, and bring back to life whoever has died. The only force that pushes him forward is a divine force, a storm from Paradise. Thus, the angel's relationship with time is highly complex. The present exists merely as an opportunity to somewhat amend the ruin caused by past catastrophes; the future exists as a messianic potential. But if he is an angel, what is his message, his prophecy, his mission? How can he even deliver any message or carry out any mission if he is petrified by the destruction that he sees and mourns?

The complexity of Benjamin's figure of lamentation is located, as is the case with Freud's last Moorish king, in the dialectic between despair and struggle. Although the angel seems absorbed in a passive stance, shocked by desolation and unable to approach what lies ahead, he nevertheless also offers, in his singular stance, a message of transcendence. He has stripped himself of all illusions about human history. His mournful shock can be regarded as an interruption of the linear course of events, a brief instant of liberation, an act of revolt, an awakening in the now. The task of remembrance is embodied in

building constellations that link the “then” and the “now” through moments of eruptions into or interruptions of the chronological chain of events. Benjamin presents the concept of the image as a “flash” and the corresponding image of historical experience as the discharge of an explosive force of now-time, a force that blasts open “the continuum of history”. The dialectical image is situated in counterposition to the threat of preservation by virtue of the interruptive force because of the instantaneous temporality of the now.

Although redemption is not a psychoanalytic concept, one can rephrase it as the release from psychic pain, which can be regarded as the aspiration of the analytic process. For Benjamin, redemption is treated not on the individual level, in the context of his private history, but rather on a social or universal level. Inspired by the Jewish concept of tikkun and the Marxist ideology of classless social revolution, Benjamin delivers the message of a future society that can only be redeemed from destruction and ruin by the universal remembrance of all victims, without exception, which is the secular equivalent of the resurrection of the dead (Löwy 2005, 67).

Facing catastrophe in their homeland, both Freud and Benjamin offer memorable lamenting figures in their writings. Although their thoughts differ in manifold aspects, they both describe images that go beyond words in two main ways: the images offer condensed dialectical messages of despair and struggle that transcend language, and the images lean, pivotally, on sensual-emotional impressions. Their lamentation – whether verbal, in the case of the last Moorish king, or silenced, in the case of the angel of history – embodies a sorrow beyond words.

Late messages of lamentation

The images discussed above of the lamenting figures are presented by Freud and Benjamin, intriguingly, as enigmatic and ambivalently delivered messages. I suggest looking at the singular moment of the late 1930s in Europe as reflected by these pair of images. Freud’s concept of Nachträglichkeit and Benjamin’s notion of awakening (Erwachen) both indicate that the present can be approached only when it is contemplated through the prism of historical time that is not its own. The historical narrative therefore cannot be reconstructed as actual events, but only as condensed moments that allow us to experience the “then” in the “now”. The terror and desolation experienced by European Jews at that specific historical period could not have been internalized and worked through in the time of occurrence. Only from a retrospective point of view can we perhaps capture the intensity of that breaking point for European Jews, who found themselves persecuted only a couple of decades after they had decided to leave behind their traditional beliefs and identify with the larger German-speaking secular intellectual culture.

Benjamin’s and Freud’s lamenting figures can be thought of as an effort to translate sensory mnemic traces into words. These texts that present images seek to speak of what could not have been spoken at the time. They work to create an image (Bild) that delivers a forbidden message, a snapshot of the impossibility of its own rhetorical gestures. They offer the opportunity to think of the ways in which an image embodies not only content, but also a form, or rather a ghostly form of the “then”, the expression of the mystery of history and remembrance. The writing of both Freud and Benjamin, and

very particularly their late writing, profoundly expresses the idea that what is significant about thinking is not its teleological progression from one certain fact of knowledge to the next but, rather, an appreciation of the leap, crack, or hole – the blind spot without which conceptual thinking cannot occur.[8]

Intriguingly, Freud's Acropolis essay and Benjamin's theses of history essay were both emphatically presented by their authors as ambivalently written and doubtfully published texts (Benjamin never even intended to publish his essay). In the open letter to Romain Rolland that accompanies his essay on the Acropolis, Freud presents the mysterious inner motivation for reinterpreting his journey to the Acropolis:

> During the last few years, a phenomenon of this sort, which I myself had experienced a generation ago, in 1904, and which I had never understood, has kept on recurring to my mind. I did not at first see why; but at last I determined to analyse the incident—and I now present you with the results of that enquiry. (1936, 239)

In a letter to Gretel Adorno, approximately dated late April to early May 1940, accompanying what we now know to have been the essay "On the Concept of History", Benjamin expresses a complex matrix of ambivalent feelings towards the decision to deliver the ideas presented in this text:[9]

> The war and the constellation that brought it about led me to take down a few thoughts which I can say that I have kept with me, indeed kept for myself, for nigh on twenty years. . . . Even today, I am handing them to you more as a bouquet of whispering grasses, gathered on reflective walks, than a collection of theses. . . . These reflections . . . make me suspect that the problem of remembering (and of forgetting) . . . will continue to occupy me for a long time. (Benjamin and Adorno 2008, 286)

Freud, for his part, decides to inquire into an obscure incident that he had experienced "a generation ago", and this textual inquiry, evolving into the Acropolis essay, leads him to the image of the last Moorish king. At approximately the same time, Benjamin decides to send thoughts that he had kept to himself for "nigh on twenty years" and in them presents the enigmatic image of the angel of history. Following Benjamin's image of the "bouquet of whispering grasses" (Strauss flüsternder Gräser), which may perhaps allude to the myth of Midas where the reeds broadcast the secret that Midas had wanted to hide, one can ask: what forbidden messages was Benjamin secretly aiming to whisper at the time? And likewise, what messages was Sigmund Freud, the great researcher of the human psyche and its dark repressed aspects, hiding in his writing in those same years? More generally speaking, what kind of forbidden messages were obscurely whispered in the writing of these two European Jewish thinkers at that distinct historical time, and what do these messages whisper today about ideas that are written in times of crisis?

Freud's emphasis on the visual image and Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image and the Denkbild present the structural juncture, in both theories, of sensory impressions and representational forms. Alongside this shared foundation, there are also clear

[8]For an intriguing discussion of the Denkbild as a reflection on damaged life in Benjamin and other Frankfurt school writers, see Richter 2007.

[9]The letter was sent from Paris; later that year Benjamin was forced to flee the city, in an attempt to eventually reach the sanctuary of the United States. At the Spanish border, it appeared that he and the group he was with would be turned back, and Benjamin took his own life.

distinctions between the two theories: for Freud, the "psychical trace" of the idea appears to be lost, yet it "must be there". The archeological metaphor pertains on the grounds that there really is something there, a past to which we are accountable and whose meanings are legible (Groarke 2022, 163; Lev Kenaan 2019, 91–128). For Benjamin, the dialectical image never aims to represent the actual historical event but merely to create a constellation of ruptures in our present awareness.

Late developments in Freud's theory of trauma and mnemic traces address positive and negative reactions to trauma (Botella and Botella 2005, 2013). The positive aspect of trauma is embodied in psychoneurotic symptoms, whereas the negative aspect is embodied in an "unrepresentable 'residue' that cannot be repeated any more than it can constitute a neurotic symptom" (2005, 115). Although this theory refers to infantile trauma, I would like to refer to these notions as constituting part of the traumatic on both the individual and the social levels. By the traumatic I mean events beyond the ability to be grasped in sensory terms, captured in terms of memory, or represented mentally:

> There is a gaping hole in the perceptual realm doubled by a gaping hole in the representational realm: neither inside nor outside. There is a fracture, a gap in the tissue of representations, in the tissue of the investments of the infantile neurosis. (116)

The retrospective reading of the late writing of Freud and Benjamin allows what Groarke (2022) calls a reclamation of trauma:

> It is not possible, under traumatic conditions, to say what really happened in the past. Rather, as a reenacted on the site of a trauma, the act of seeing *too late* becomes a redescription, an act of remembering, in which the sense of the past is constructed and, thereby, reclaimed beyond the devitalized affect and general lifelessness of the repetition compulsion. (174–715, original emphasis)

Groarke presents Freud's notion of the "retrogressive movement" of memory and brings up the possibility of "dreaming back" something of the past that has yet to be experienced, suggesting that this process of dream-memory is directed towards the unrepresented "sensory remains" of the past, prior to the fixation of memories (2022, 170–171).[10]

The images presented in these late essays do not reach the threshold of metaphors; instead, they appear as sensorial-mnemic traces. They can be regarded as textual creations in times of trauma, and as such they embody the intensity of traumatization at the time of its occurrence. The retrospective reading of these texts sheds new light on the traumatic, a light that was not able to be shed at the dark time of writing. In the "now" of the present reading, these images reclaim the traumatic circumstances of the "then". The condensed images of the last Moorish king and the angel of history can be thought of as relics of lamentation.

Only in words that strive to communicate the incommunicable, and in the silence that is situated between and around the words, is the language of lamentation spoken.[11] As Benjamin profoundly articulates it:

[10]Nägele suggests that Freud's and Benjamin's work on history is different from conventional history in a double sense. First, it is different from the linear time and continuity of historicism; and second, it is marked and affected by otherness, in other words by the power of negativity. Forgetting (*Vergessenheit*) is claimed to be the negativity that is the trace of the Other, which is also the agent of its phantasmatic transformation (Nägele 1991, 54–77).

> Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath, and even when there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. . . . In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the knowable. (Benjamin 1997 [1916], 73)

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[11] In a letter to Martin Buber dated July 1916, Benjamin writes, "only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides. Only the intensive aiming of words into the core of intrinsic silence is truly effective" (Benjamin 1994, 80).

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