The Life of Forms
Art and Nature in Walter Benjamin and Henri Focillon

Cornelia Zumbusch

1. *Dialectical Image – Living Form*

In the 1930s Walter Benjamin conceptualises the image as a central category for a critique of history (See Tiedemann [1973]: 155-159; Buck-Morss [1993]; Weigel [1997]: 52-79; Hillach [2000]; Zumbusch [2004]). However, his various deliberations on what he calls the "dialectical image" are not easy to bring into alignment. Initially, Benjamin speaks of the dialectical image in relation to very specific phenomena of cultural history – amongst them architectural forms like the arcade, social types like the *flâneur* or cultural installations and events like panoramas or world exhibitions. As Benjamin writes in the first Arcades exposé, these things are to be characterised as images because they are ambiguous: they articulate – albeit distortedly – the unconscious and unfulfilled desires of an age. Inaccessible to the age itself, this knowledge – as Benjamin makes particularly clear in the second Arcades exposé – can only be grasped by the retrospective gaze of the historian. Ambiguous things or objects become dialectical images when viewed as symptoms of historical sensibilities. Thus, dialectical images are not already there as such; they only emerge through a specific perspective, one that Benjamin sought to refine in the Arcades project.

Benjamin circles in on the rules needed for this "dialectical optic" (Benjamin, *Der Sürrealismus*, GS, V.1, II.1, 307/SW, 2, 1, 216) in various configurations constructed while working on the Arcades project. Besides the conception of the dialectical image as a "dream image"[1] schooled on Freud's psychoanalysis, Benjamin also mentions a

[1] «These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production» (Benjamin, *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, SW 3, 33/*Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, GS V.1, 55).

«moment of its recognizability» [*Augenblick der Erkennbarkeit*] (Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, GS I.1, 695/*On the Concept of History*, SW 4, 390) which the past only gains when approached from the perspective of a very specific present: in this particular historical moment, the historian is to seize «the genuine historical image» (ivi, 696/ SW 4, 391) and undertake «the task of dream interpretation» (Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, GS V.1, 580/ AP, 464). An object of everyday culture or a historical event or phenomenon can become an image when it discloses a meaning yet to be discerned – and which indeed is only discernible in a specific historical constellation. The moment when meaning emerges is tied to what Benjamin describes as the messianic standstill, an arresting of time, in the *Theses On the Concept of History*. To characterise more precisely this disruptive moment when the object of historical study crystallises into an image, Benjamin draws on a passage from Henri Focillon's *La vie des formes* published in 1934. In his exploratory notes Benjamin writes (Benjamin, *Anmerkungen zu „Über den Begriff der Geschichte"*, GS I.3, 1229):

Zur messianischen Stillstellung des Geschehens könnte man die Definition des klassischen Stils heranziehen: brève minute de pleine possession des formes, il se présente --- comme un bonheur rapide, comme l'achmé des Grecs: le fléau de la balance n'oscille plus que faiblement. Ce que j'attends, ce n'est pas de la voir bientôt de nouveau pencher, encore moins le moment de la fixité absolue, mais, dans le miracle de cette immobilité hésitante, le tremblement léger, imperceptible, qui m'indique qu'elle vit. (Focillon (1934)[2]

Focillon's description of the classical style could hardly be more emphatic. While composure and balance are communicated in the classical style, there is no sign of monotony or even standstill. The classically composed mastering of form is not achieved by ponderously following principles and rules, but emerges spontaneously, as if of itself, like a fleeting moment of happiness. As *achmé/akmé* the classical form conveys to the viewer a moment of pure presence, which moves Focillon to evoke the title-giving concept of life: the classical form shows the viewer that it lives.

The fact that Benjamin adopts this excerpt into his late philosophy of history is extremely irritating, for there are a number of good reasons as to why such praise of the classical style must indeed be alien to him. Firstly, the Arcades project analyses the disintegration of an emphatic concept of art, one Focillon seems to adhere to. Secondly,

---

[2] A brief, perfectly balanced instant of complete possession of forms…a pure, quick delight, like the *akmé* of the Greeks, so delicate that the pointer of the scale scarcely trembles. I look at this scale not to see whether the pointer will presently dip down again, or even come to a moment of absolute rest. I look at it instead to see, within the miracle of that hesitant immobility, the slight, inappreciable tremor that indicates life.

in his reading of Baudelaire, Benjamin points out that art is no longer autonomous or timeless, but rather poised to enter the marketplace and so submit itself to the dictates of changing fashions. And – thirdly – already before the work on Baudelaire and the Arcades project, Benjamin had never really sought the classically balanced, but rather the extreme, for instance in his dissertation on the concept of art criticism in German Romanticism, and at times even the failed, as in the habilitation thesis on the Baroque tragic drama. In both studies Benjamin explicitly criticises the classical notion of art.

Whereas in the Romanticism dissertation it is Goethe who is assigned the position insisting that works of art form an organic whole and are beyond criticism, the conceptual heart of the study on tragic drama is a theory of allegory, contoured by Benjamin in contrast to the classical notion of the symbol. Benjamin reproaches the classical symbol for conjuring the phantasm of aesthetic vitality, thus attempting to cover over the mortifying character of representation. Here, so Benjamin, allegory is more honest, for it reveals not «the transfigured face of nature fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption» but human life's «subjection to death» (Benjamin, *Über den Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, GS I.1, 343/OG, 166). Benjamin formulates this objection to the alleged liveliness of the work of art in even clearer terms in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: «no work of art may appear completely alive without becoming mere semblance, and ceasing to be a work of art. The life quivering in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment» (Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften,* GS I.1, 181/*On Semblance*, SW 1, 224). Spellbound petrified life instead of the semblance of being alive: the reservations against superimposing art and life could not be clearer. Why then is Benjamin interested in Focillon's *The Life of Forms* and its claim that the classical style is capable of vividly representing life?

To find an answer I will first consider the work of Henri Focillon. Although Focillon's notion that forms have a life is influenced by vitalism, it is thoroughly historical in orientation. It is based on analogy and the distinction – just as decisive – between forms of art and organic forms (Focillon (1954): 10 (Focillon [1992]: 3):

Organic life designs spirals, orbs, meanders and stars, and if I wish to study this life, I must have recourse to form and to number. But the instant these shapes invade the space and the materials specific to art, they acquire an entirely new value and give rise to entirely new systems.

This generation of unprecedented systems is the achievement of an imagination that can first unfold its power in the range of forms. According to Focillon, every form is perpetuated in the imagination and is therefore «a kind of fissure through which crowds

of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm – a realm which is neither that of physical extant nor that of pure thought» (ivi, 11/3). The birth of life here means the transition from a state of potentiality into one of actuality. Focillon therefore considers the «mobility of form» to be its «ability to engender so great a diversity of shapes [figures]» (ivi, 15/6). The *dynamis* or the life of forms resides in its potential productivity and capacity to give birth to new types of images.

When Focillon speaks of the life of forms, then this has less to do with the impression of life an artwork is capable of conveying than with the self-reproduction of forms. Given this emphasis, every work of art appears to be a temporary stop in a chain of images: each image is «born of change and it leads on to other changes» (ibid.). For Focillon, this is the foundation for his conception of the four ages of style: the experimental, the classical, the age of refinement and the baroque. Reflecting on the status of this analogy between the evolution of style and human life, Focillon remarks (ivi, 24/10):

This does not mean that the ages of style and the ages of mankind are the same thing. The life of forms is not the result of chance. Nor is it a great cyclorama neatly fitted into the theatre of history and called into being by historical necessities. No. Forms obey their own rules – rules that are inherent in the forms themselves or better, in the regions of the mind where they are located and centred.

Here Focillon identifies an inherent logic to changes in style, meaning that such changes cannot be traced back simply to technological, social or political developments; instead, change feeds on the imagination, its own "region of the mind". If the classical form lives, then it does so because it is productive on its own terms: independent of historical dynamics it can bring forth other forms and translate into ever new forms.

Even before Walter Benjamin picks up Focillon's book while working on the Arcades project, he makes surprisingly similar use of a concept of life. In the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, he announces that his aim is to elaborate the "origin" – i.e. the "idea" – of the Baroque tragic drama out of its «past and subsequent history» (Benjamin, GS I.1, 227/ OG, 46-47). He understands the literary genre of the German tragic drama as a form type recognisable from its extremes, i.e. the «the weakest and clumsiest experiments» and the «overripe fruits of a period of decadence». Here Benjamin draws on a kind of doctrine of age [*Lebensalterlehre*], so that, like Focillon, the past and subsequent history of art forms possess a necessarily inherent dynamic. Any attempt to grasp the essence of Baroque tragic drama must

explore the «series of historical formulations» which unfold beyond the realm of empirical historical facts in the broader sense.

To emphasise this difference between a history of art forms and human history, Benjamin takes up the concept of life: «the life of the works and forms which […] unfold clearly and unclouded by human life is a natural life» (ivi, 227/46-47). Refraining from further explicating this formulation of "natural life", in a footnote Benjamin refers the reader to his essay *The Task of the Translator* from 1921. I would like to take up this reference and trace why – and in which way – Benjamin considers this concept of life to be potentially productive for how he thinks about images.

Beyond the recently discussed question as to how the concept of afterlife relates to models of cultural *memoria*,[3] I would like to pursue the nexus between life and image: just what status does Benjamin's argumentation assign to the life of forms? Which concepts of life and vitality does he refer to? And how does this life of forms prepare the way for the concept of the image that then figures so prominently in the Arcades project?

2. *Translation – the Continued Life of Works [Fortleben der Werke]*

The text on the "task of the translator" (Benjamin, GS IV.1, 9-21/SW 1, 253-263), written by Benjamin as a preface to his translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableau parisiens*, is not a manual giving instructions or setting out rules. The concern is of a more fundamental nature: are works translatable at all? Benjamin elicits, in the vein of transcendental philosophy, the conditions for the possibility of translation. His paradoxical answer states that genuine translation takes place precisely where the translation encounters the untranslatable of the original. At the same time, Benjamin describes translation as a gift. He speaks of a special, genuinely philosophical *ingenium* that a true philosopher must possess. This *ingenium* is philosophical because translations open up a perspective on a "pure language" of "truth" (ivi, 17/261-262). But because this can only ever be approached and approximated, the gift of ingenuity must

[3] For an overview of the research on Benjamin's idea of afterlife or continued life in the context of conceptions of cultural memory, quotability and reception history, see Weidner [2011]. Weidner is the first to approach Benjamin's use of *life* as a crucial figure of thought and attempt to embed it in the historical discourse. To Weidner's perspective, developed foremost from the Translator essay, and thus placing this usage in the context of life philosophy and religious studies, with Henri Focillon's *Life of Forms* I would like to add an argument gleaned from art theory, which is not only relevant with a view to the Translator essay but also – and in particular – for the Arcades project.

embrace the undertaking as a task. This shift is already prefigured in the title, and the text argues the case in a few extremely dense pages: translation is not some mere imitation of an original but is work in and on the medium of language. Benjamin arrives at this conclusion via a few rigid negative definitions, no less few apodictic statements and a crucial metaphor.

The text opens with the radical gesture of excluding the perspective of reception from art theory: «In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful» (ivi, 9/253). Translations catering for the reader necessarily fail to grasp the original because they are only capable of conveying the content, which Benjamin labels as the communicated. What a translation needs to translate instead is the *form* of the original, for the essence of the original resides solely in the form. Benjamin abbreviates this to the rule that "translation" itself is nothing other than "form". If the orientation on the recipient is unfruitful, then we need to ask: what can prove to be "fruitful" when considering the translatability of a work? Repeating the word fruitful here is intentional, because it is the entry point into a biological metaphoric that provides the text with its central argument. Benjamin describes the relationship between original and translation as a "natural" connection (ivi, 10/254):

We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital one. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomena of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife [*Überleben*].

A translation is, as defined by Benjamin, the original in a state of "continued life" [*Fortleben*]. Here Benjamin constructs a four-part analogy seemingly based on Aristotle's rules for creating metaphors: the translation relates to the original as the "manifestations of life" relate to "life". Following this analogy, the translation needs to be conceived as a vital or living sign of the original. The original issues forth translations, which are of no importance to it, but which owe their very existence to the vitality of the original.

What is surprising however is that Benjamin does not consider the use of life here to be a metaphor: «The idea of life and afterlife [*Fortleben*] in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphoric objectivity» (ivi, 11/254). Benjamin can insist on a non-figurative meaning because he does not understand life as something physiological, organic or vegetative. Not just "organic corporeality", Benjamin argues, but also mind, form and art have a life. As Benjamin conceptualises it, life is not solely

the organic life that breathing, consuming, perceiving and ultimately mortal biological species have. Life also encompasses more, it is a superordinate principle that outstrips dichotomies such as body and mind, matter and form, art and nature. Life would thus be a metaphysical concept[4] – one demanding however a key clarification, namely that for Benjamin life is not a concept of nature but rather one of history: «In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by the standpoint of history rather than that of nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul» (ivi, 11/255). Here a political dimension becomes discernible. On the one hand, with this concept of life Benjamin distances himself from the irrational strain of a biological metaphysics where the organic is conceived of as the locus of a soul which needs to be – as Ludwig Klages would have put it – liberated from the regimentation of the mind; on the other hand, Benjamin's use of the concept of life reveals an affinity to Dilthey's post-metaphysical revision of Hegel, according to which life is not the antithesis to mind/spirit [Geist] but is «that which is always there to sustain and embrace spirit and culture and also the individual consciousness» (Schnädelbach [1999]: 142). This represents a substitution: the old metaphysics of reason is replaced by a new metaphysics of life.

Just as subtly as he distances himself from the irrational variant of the contemporary philosophy of life, Benjamin conceals other salient links, for instance to the science of life that crystallised at the end of the eighteenth century parallel to the emergence of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. The notion of an organic autopoiesis of life is central to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. As Winfried Menninghaus has shown (Menninghaus [2009]: 82), Kant eschews the rhetorical figure of the vital or animated representation and replaces it with the substantive "life" that art is to foster.[5] Life is considered a principle of perpetual change, or with Kant (*Handschriftlicher Nachlaß Metaphysik*): «The life of creatures is a series of changes out of an inner principle» (ivi, 84). The idea of life as a force issuing a "series of changes" characterises the life of forms both Focillon and Benjamin envision. However, according to Kant, art promotes a life that is not only solely deducible from the biological concept of living species and their

[4] Referring to the concept of life evident in the *Elective Affinities* essay, Lindner ([2011]: 475) states: «Life is a metaphysical category that does not coincide with the natural *bios*. Mentioning the 'immortality' of a work is thus not simply meant metaphorically».

[5] Menninghaus observes that the «"life" discourse of the Third Critique» cannot be reduced to how it looks at biological theories, for it also «contains references to traditionally transmitted rhetorical-poetic semantics of life».

metamorphoses, but one that embraces a state of sensory-mental activity in the free interplay between imagination and intellect (ivi, 91).

A clear indication that the point of departure for Benjamin's transposition of the concept of life was not biology but *aisthesis* – a doctrine of art based on a theory of perception and the psychology of faculties – is evident in his considerations on the relationship between "life and purpose" (Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, GS IV.1, 11/ SW 1, p. 255):

The relationship between life and purposiveness, seemingly obvious yet almost beyond the grasp of the intellect, reveals itself only if the ultimate purpose toward which all the individual purposiveness of life tends is sought not in its own sphere but in a higher one. All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purpose, in the final analysis have their end not in life but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance.

Purpose here does not mean some kind of instrumental means-to-an-end relation, but rather the meaning revealing itself in purposive phenomena. This approach draws on sections 10 and 11 from the *Critique of Judgement*, where Kant connects the aesthetic judgement of taste to the perception of a "purposiveness without purpose" and thus separates a purpose appearing in aesthetic contemplation from pragmatic purposes.

Decisive for Benjamin – and this distinguishes him from Kant – is how the relationship between life and its purpose or meaning is «almost beyond the grasp of the intellect», but only almost. The expressed form of life should reveal its nature or essence. Whereas Kant transfers life into the apprehending subject so as to be able to describe the free play between faculties, Benjamin argues that the objective forms themselves have a life. Benjamin posits life as a simultaneously procreative and semantic concept: firstly, whatever can bring forth something else by transforming and translating itself into new forms has life; secondly, whatever expresses and thereby reveals itself. This dimension of meaning goes beyond everything that possesses an expressive dimension and thus becomes an articulating sign. What Benjamin calls an expression of life does not entail an arbitrary meaning attached to the form or anything intentionally communicated – it is rather the "representation of its nature".

Here Benjamin comes astonishingly close to Focillon's use of the concept of life. Focillon not only declares that «plastic forms» possess «the motion and breath of life», and are therefore «subjected to the principle of metamorphoses» (Focillon [1954]: 15, Focillon [1992]: 6); he, too, goes on to distinguish between two dimensions of meaning (ivi, 11/3):

Form has a meaning – but it is a meaning entirely its own, a personal and specific value that must not be confused with the attributes we impose on it. Form has a significance, and form is open to interpretation.

Benjamin's continued life of forms [*Fortleben der Formen*] is closely related to this aesthetic definition of forms. Translation is a metamorphosis of the original, and as such its task is not to seize and transpose the communicated content – which would amount to imposing meanings from the outside – but rather discern the poetical in the form, i.e. the meaning inherent to the form.

Benjamin's use of the word life reveals a peculiarity here. Although claiming conceptual status, Benjamin transports it through the text by way of various metaphors. The imagery ranges from the concept of a continued life of forms and their ripening and maturing to the characterisation of a work as a fruit and language as a seed. Here it is striking that Benjamin's elaboration of the nature metaphoric repeatedly transgresses the boundary to cultural processes. The concept of "maturing" for instance seamlessly follows on from the "afterlife" of the original: «for in its afterlife [*Fortleben*] – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change. Even words with a fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process» (Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, GS IV.1, 12/ SW 1, 256). Originals have a life in as far as they change their form through translation. Interestingly, Benjamin switches the register in the middle of the imagery. The maturing of works is part of a natural process of growth entailing "transformation and renewal", but it also presupposes cultural intervention. Not only a fruit picked too early, and thus unripe, but also carefully crafted products like cheese or wine are brought to maturity. Maturing is thus a process that is natural and yet also embedded in an artificial setting.

If translations artificially induce the natural maturing of the original, then this leads to a decisive difference between the original and its translation. Whereas the poem lives on qua its fame, its translation itself is bound to the changes its respective language undergoes. Or as Benjamin puts it: «while a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and perish with its renewal» (ivi, 13/256). While the original writing stands out and rises above the historical shifts of language, translations move within the changes of language. Benjamin sees this difference between the language of the writer and that of the translator as not some deficit but as a chance: the translation is «so far removed from being the sterile equation of the dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the

original language and the birth pangs [*Wehen*] of its own» (ibid.). If a translation is not the 'sterile' equation of two dead languages, then it is not 'sterile' in a double sense: it is not only keenly aware of the distance to the original and thus renders the shift in language audible; moreover, by making it audible the translation itself is fruitful and not without a kernel like some deaf nut. By raising awareness for the birth "pangs" of its own words while maturing those of the original, the translation allows the historical dynamic of language to step forward, literally *in statu nascendi*. What the translation brings forth is an awareness for the processual logic of language change. Translations, that is the point of the essay, do not move so much between language and cultural environments but rather between different levels of language. Produced later than the original, translations are thus always historical mediators: «For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks the stage of their continued life [*Fortleben*]» (ivi, 10-11/254).

This mediation is not concerned with making the foreign familiar, but with estranging the familiar. Here Benjamin takes the conventional image of the work of art as a fruit, thereby implicating that form and content are organically connected like the fruit and the skin. In the case of translation it is different, the connection is looser: form envelops the content like a robe with ample folds, decorating but at the same time veiling and alienating. With this textile metaphoric Benjamin undertakes a switch in register from nature into art that is far more pronounced than that of the maturing process. This switch marks the change of level from phenomena to their idea. The alienation performed by the translation elevates the original into a realm Benjamin characterises as «a higher and purer linguistic air», where however the work «cannot live […] permanently» (ivi, 14/257). The translation dislocates the original, placing it in a realm where it is cut off from the historical transformations of language. By withdrawing the original from the life impulse of linguistic development, and as it were mortifying it, the translation marks in the original what – to speak ontologically – is no longer exposed to becoming and passing away. What is revealed in the translation, at least rudimentarily, is the "true language" and thus a "language of truth". Whenever the translation points to what in all languages is only symbolised, i.e. what is non-communicable, it is no longer 'poem' [*Dichtung*] but philosophy.

By claiming a pure language of truth Benjamin places his doctrine of translation in the framework of a theology of history. The relationship of languages amongst themselves is to be understood as one of kinship, a kinship that is demonstrated

precisely in the difference between the languages and not in their resemblances. It is in the divergences from one another that it becomes clear that languages, each in itself a limited expression, group around the empty centre of a "pure language". The constellation of this grouping allows the ideal of a pure language to be adumbrated, an ideal fulfilled first at the end of history, as the reversal and redemptive corrective of the Babylonian confusion. This eschatological perspective, with which Benjamin concludes his considerations on translation, links into the idea of a dialectical image of history mentioned at the outset, the image revealing itself in a messianic standstill of events. And in fact, as I hope to show in the final section, the Translator essay contains a number of important figures of thought Benjamin draws on to contour his concept of the image in the Arcades project.

3. *Theory of History – the Afterlife of the Understood [Nachleben des Verstandenen]*

The Translator essay ends by describing the Scriptures as a book of the world that insists on its permanent translation. The Arcades project does not conceive of a sacred text as the world, but the reverse: it describes the world as a text: «The expression 'the book of nature' indicates that one can read the real like a text. And that is how the reality of the nineteenth century will be treated here. We open the book of what happened» (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk,* GS V.1, 585/ AP, 464). Methodologically, Benjamin draws significantly on the concept of afterlife formulated in the Translator essay. «Historical "understanding"», Benjamin notes programmatically, «is to be grasped in principle as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognised in the analysis of the 'afterlife of work", in the analysis of "fame", is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general» (ivi, 575/460). Understanding history thus does not mean understanding something that has come to an end, but rather something that, by issuing ever new meanings, reaches into the present day.

In the Arcades project Benjamin reproduces not only his own formulations of "afterlife" but also thinks systematically about the possibility of adopting concepts from the realm of nature and transposing them into that of history. Ultimately, the issue here is the methodological premises upon which it is even possible to speak of a life of forms or an afterlife of works. A self-reference initiates this reflection. Benjamin gives his own use of the term 'origin' in the prologue to *German Tragic Drama* as an example of a successful transposition of concepts gleaned from the natural sciences into the philosophy of history: «In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth», writes Benjamin, «I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin […] is a rigorous

and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history» (ivi, 577/462). Goethes alignement of the poetical symbol with the scientific concept of the primal phenomenon – whereby the general rule or respectively an idea in the particular is to become directly discernible – is not just another prominent example of the interconnection between aesthetics and biology at the end of the eighteenth century (see Breidbach [2006]).[6] It is moreover crucial for Benjamin's epistemological considerations, in both the early and late phase of his work.

Benjamin uses the idea of plant metamorphosis as the main comparative image not only for plotting, specifically, the historical evolution of the architecture of the arcades, but also for recognising the historical processes of form creation in general. The facts gathered for study in the Arcades project are seen as primal phenomena (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS V.1, 577/ AP, 462):

in their own individual development – 'unfolding' might be a better term – they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the rules of the empirical world of plants.

Benjamin's transposing of the concept of the primal phenomenon borrowed from Goethe reveals a twofold move: firstly, he transposes his notion of origin into that of primal phenomena; and secondly, in doing so he transplants a concept forged on the basis of observing nature into an instrument for historical investigation. Just like in the Translator essay, this «rigorous and decisive transposition» generates further metaphors in the Arcades project. Benjamin first ends his tentative, self-correcting transposition once he has mobilised the imagination for a vivid "as" comparison: just as the leaf contains und unfolds all stages of plant growth, the concrete historical forms of the arcades originate in and emerge from one another. In this note a twin current of translation is at work: Benjamin not only translates a concept of nature into history, but also covertly transposes the historical phenomenon of the arcade into an image of nature. By transforming the historical subject matter into an image in such a way, the historian of the nineteenth century is also its translator. And this translator reads and writes at the same time.

Here the Arcades project reintroduces – at a key point – the reader struck out of considerations in the Translator essay, namely there where the "readability" of phenomena is mentioned (ivi, 578/462-463):

[6] For the importance of Goethe for Benjamin's epistemological considerations, see Steiner [1986]; Zumbusch, [2004]: esp. 306-322.

The historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time, it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And indeed, this acceding 'to legibility' constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognisability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the intention, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth).

The space created for the reader here is marked by a suffix: Benjamin speaks not of the legible or the readable, but of legibility or readability. The question of the legibility of phenomena is a variation of that of translatability or, as in his essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, of communicability[7]. All the phenomena of the virtual broached by Benjamin, the translatability, communicability, recognisability and legibility, require a specific moment if they are to leave behind the status of the virtual and enter the state of the actualised. This actualisation in the moment of recognisability ushers in the "death" of every intentional recognition. Like translation, historical knowledge leads to the limits of life, the boundary where death and birth touch. At this boundary forms lose the meanings ascribed to them and reveal the truth enclosed in them.

This collision between death and birth, destruction and creation is traceable in how Benjamin "unfolds" the potential of another key metaphor previously used in the Translator essay. In the Arcades project truth is bound to a "nucleus of time". What figured as a kernel or seed in the Translator essay turns out to be the core of an atom in the Arcades project. His method, Benjamin notes, is comparable to a «splitting [of] the atom» that «liberates the enormous energies of history» (Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS V.1, 578./ AP, 463). In the image of splitting the atom Benjamin intensifies an aspect of the Translator essay: whereas every translation ultimately reveals a fracture or crack between itself and the original, the interpreter of history hones in on «life's supremely dialectic point of rupture» (ivi, 579/464) and, from here, blasts open the continuum of history. Benjamin calls this crack in the continuum "image". Here Benjamin switches from the order of language to that of the visual, i.e. to where he believes it is possible to attain the insight that ensues when functional relationships are interrupted. The image is destructive in so far as it brings processes unrolling linearly to a halt and cleaves the

[7] Weber [1999] has examined the '-bilities' as grammatical actualisations of the virtual in an instructive article.

continuous – and the image is productive in so far as it, as a medium of the simultaneous, gives rise to new significant and meaningful connections.

How are – to return to the beginning of my considerations – the life, continued life or afterlife of forms to be understood? Firstly, for Benjamin, life is not a biological but a historical-philosophical concept, a concept that attempts to apprehend the history of translation and appropriation of an original as the dynamic history of its own metamorphosis. Important is not the transportation of forms through different spaces but through different times. The afterlife of forms indicates the disposition to change inherent to poetry and writing as well as their medium, language. Secondly, continued life and afterlife are positioned in a unique way between life and death. When something inherent to the original comes to maturity in the translation, then the afterlife of forms is a kind of growth after death. What the concept of *after*life seeks to conceive of is, literally, a life *after* life. At the same time, as the maturing or ripening of what was once alive, this afterlife is by no means external – it is inherent in the process of generation.

In the Arcades project Benjamin forces this tension between vitality and mortification of the living to an extreme, superimposing the imagery of the fruitful kernel with that of splitting the atom and thus coupling a maximum of released energy with extreme destructiveness. Thirdly – and this is more pronounced in the Arcades project than in the Translator essay – a life continued after death is a process wherein meanings and significance are accumulated. By transposing and replacing one another, forms lead to a truth that is not present in any of their individual stages. It is only by recombining their progressive forms that the unity of seemingly disparate historical phenomena and the logic behind their changes becomes discernible. Benjamin's concept of an afterlife of forms is not a teleological, in the broadest sense, evolutionary process that at some point comes to an end or attains self-realisation. Instead, the historical-philosophical reflection marks out and paces a spectrum of forms, the elements of which, considered from a specific present, join together in new meaningful constellations.

Finally, when bringing together Focillon's description of an artworks vitality with Benjamin's moment of recognisability [*Moment der Erkennbarkeit*] and his use of Goethe's primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*], then these lines intersect at a point where the concepts of image and life come into contact. If the life of forms is the metamorphosis of forms into ever new ones, inherent to the process of history, then the dialectical image marks the perspective endowing historical meaning to the diverse forms of lived life: «The nourishing fruit of what is historically understood contains time

in its interior as a precious but tasteless seed» (Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, GS I.2, 703/ SW 4, 396). A historical fact can only become a fruit, a seed and, in Benjamin's metaphoric, something alive when it is impregnated conceptually and recognised in its significance for the present. What Benjamin is claiming for the historian is the very energy for appropriating forms which Focillon had reserved for artists, engineers and inventors in their creative endeavours. This is evident in an uncommented excerpt from Focillon's *Vie des Formes* Benjamin used to close the convolute "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress" (Benjamin, Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS V.1, 611/ AP, 488):

J'ai montré ailleurs ce qu'elle [l'évolution] avait de dangereux par son caractère faussement harmonique, par son parcours unilinéaire, par l'emploi dans les cas douteux ... de l'expédient des 'transitions', par l'incapacité de faire place à l'énergie révolutionnaire des inventeurs.[8]

Benjamin obviously draws on Focillon's doctrine of the *life of forms* to conceptualise disharmonious and sudden changes of form. Thus, surprisingly it is the art historian Henri Focillon who acts as the prompter, animating Benjamin to move towards a concept of the dialectical image used to harness the revolutionary energy of artistic and cultural forms.

Bibliography

Benjamin, W., 1972 ff.: *Gesammelte Schriften* [here quoted as GS], ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main. Eng. trans. *Selected Writings* [here quoted as SW], Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002.

Benjamin, W., 1998: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [here quoted as OG], Verso, London/New York.

Benjamin, W., 2002: *The Arcades Project* [here quoted as AP], Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) .

Breidbach, O., 2006: *Goethes Metamorphosenlehre*, Wilhelm Fink, Munich.

Buck-Morss, S., 1989: *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA). Germ. trans. *Dialektik des Sehens. Walter Benjamin und das Passagen-Werk*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1993.

[8] I have elsewhere pointed out the dangers of 'evolution': its deceptive orderliness, its single-minded directness, its use in those problematic cases […], of the expedient of 'transitions', its inability to make room for the revolutionary energy of inventors.

Focillon, H., 1934: *La Vie des Formes,* E. Leroux, Paris (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1947). Germ. trans. *Das Leben der Formen,* Lehen Verlag, Bern-München 1954. Eng. transs. *The Life of Forms in Art*, Wittenborn, Schultz, New York 1948; *The Life of Forms in Art*, Zone Books, New York 1992.

Hillach, A., 2000: *Dialektisches Bild*, in: Michael Opitz, Erdmut Wizisla (eds.), *Benjamins Begriffe*, 1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, pp. 186-229;

Lindner, B., 2011: *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, in: Id. (ed.): *Benjamin Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, J.B. Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, pp. 472-464.

Schnädelbach, H., 1984: *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Germ. trans. *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933,* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1999.

Steiner, U., 1986: *'Zarte Empirie'. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Urphänomen und Ursprung im Früh- und Spätwerk Walter Benjamins*, in N. Bolz, R. Faber (eds), *Antike und Moderne. Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, Verlag Königshausen & NeumannWürzburg, pp. 20-40.

Tiedemann, R., 1973: *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins,* Frankfurt/Main 1973.

Weber, S., 1999: *Virtualität der Medien*, in: Schade, S., Tholen G.C. (eds), *Konfigurationen. Zwischen Kunst und Medien*, Wilhelm Fink, Munich, pp. 35-49.

Weidner, D., 2011: *Fort- Über-, Nachleben. Zu einer Denkfigur bei Benjamin*, in "Benjamin-Studien" 2, pp. 161-178.

Weigel, S., 1997: *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main.

Zumbusch, C., 2004: *Wissenschaft in Bildern. Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk,* Oldenbourg Akademie Verlag, Berlin.