

Benjamin's Thought-Images in *Einbahnstraße*

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Superficially, Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* (1928) seems to be a random collection of obscure aphorisms and poetic fragments with strange titles such as "Nr. 113", "Achtung: Stufen!", "Fundbüro". Yet *Einbahnstraße* is more than a literary experiment, and it is much closer to a work of philosophy than one might think. When one examines Benjamin's text in depth one discovers a composite whole of sixty carefully written aphorisms that can best be described as thought-images or *Denkbilder*. Enigmatic in character as these thought-images are, the question arises what to make of them.

According to some commentators, however, it is confusing to approach the writing of *Einbahnstraße* as a collection of *Denkbilder*.¹ Benjamin himself used the term aphorism, although he was not satisfied with it. In a letter to Scholem he writes: "Ich arbeite (...) nur noch an dem Notizbuch, das ich nicht gern Aphorismenbuch nenne" (GB III, 161). After Adorno's review of *Einbahnstraße* it has become customary to view *Einbahnstraße* as a *Sammlung von Denkbildern* (Adorno 1970, 52). There are good reasons for using this term. First of all, one of Benjamin's other collections of aphorisms is called *Denkbilder*.² This collection strongly resembles the texts of *Einbahnstraße*. Secondly, Benjamin was acquainted with the notion of *Denkbild* because of his study of the Baroque emblem in his *Trauerspiel*-book.³ Thirdly, the word *Denkbild* strongly invokes the notion of image and thought and stresses the relation between both. As will be pointed out, one of the characteristics of

¹ See for example Schöttker 1999, 189.

² See Benjamin 1974, 308-312.

³ See also Kirst 1994.

the brief texts in *Einbahnstraße* is that they are written images that cannot be read in a straightforward way.

The aim of this paper is to give a philosophical determination of the thought-image. Starting from the problem of presentation in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*-book, it will first be made clear in what way Benjamin's description of the *Idee* can be compared to the concept of the thought-image. The second part of this paper focuses on Benjamin's thought-images confronting the shock experience of city life. I argue that, rather than being a literary novelty, the thought-image in *Einbahnstraße* is of ontological importance. The thought-image discloses a space for thought that makes it possible to cherish the worldly experience of things in a more differentiated manner. Addressing the nature of Benjamin's writing in *Einbahnstraße* sheds light on the general importance of form or style when it comes to critical reflection, but it also contributes to an understanding of the specific relation between the structure of Benjamin's writing and some of his 'figures', most notably the figure of the *flâneur*, as I will argue in the third part.

I The Thought-Image and the Problem of Presentation

One of the central themes in the introduction to the *Trauerspiel*-book (the "*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*") concerns the question of presentation. Benjamin writes: "*Es ist dem philosophischen Schrifttum eigen, mit jeder Wendung vor der Frage der Darstellung zu stehen*" (Benjamin 1974, 207). It is evident how important the question of presentation is for Benjamin. To understand why, one has to pay attention to Benjamin's distinction between knowledge and truth.

According to Benjamin, philosophical projects necessarily find themselves confronted with the problem of presentation because philosophy is about truth and not about knowledge. Knowledge is possession (*ein Haben*). Its object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of. It does not have prior existence as something presenting itself (*ein Sich-Darstellendes*). Consequently, for the object of knowledge presentation is secondary.

In the case of truth, however, presentation is essential. Truth, for Benjamin, is not a matter of correspondence, as is traditionally the criterion, but has the character of an event or revelation (*Offenbarung*). The thought-image "*Technische Nothilfe*" presents us with an example of this shift. Benjamin writes: "*Auch weigert sich die Wahrheit (...) vorm Objektiv der Schrift, wenn wir uns unters schwarze Tuch gekauert haben, still und recht*

freundlich zu blicken" (Benjamin 1955, 107). This passage problematizes the conception of truth as something that can be directly grasped and represented in factual descriptions. If truth appears at all, it will be abruptly. Our task is to adjust ourselves in the right way to make this manifestation possible. As Benjamin writes in the *Trauerspiel*-book, truth demands a non-intentional mode of being. The ideas out of which truth is made up are only given within the medium of contemplation (*Betrachtung*): "*Das der Wahrheit gemäße Verhalten ist nicht ein Meinen im Erkennen sondern ein Eingehen und Verschwinden*" (Benjamin 1974, 937).

Ideas are constellations of phenomena that transcend ordinary perception. Constellations do not consist of raw sense data; Benjamin calls them the objective interpretation of phenomena, their virtual arrangement. Here, the need for presentation makes itself felt. The presentation of the idea is necessary for the idea to become manifest. As Eli Friedlander clarifies: "... since nothing in experience would constitute the embodiment of the idea, it can become manifest only by using the phenomenal material not for what it is in fact, but so as to express something over and above it" (Friedlander 2008, 10). Consequently, presentation is of ontological importance.

In which way can the problem of presentation in the *Trauerspiel*-book shed light on the conception of the thought-image in *Einbahnstraße*?

The process of *Eingehen und Verschwinden* that Benjamin associates with a genuine philosophical attitude is set in motion by a prose-form that can account for a *kontemplative Darstellung*. What Benjamin has in mind is a prose-form which does not carry the reader away, but which forces the reader to pause regularly for the sake of contemplation. It is this prose-form that is best suited to philosophical research. One of the most important aspects of this kind of writing concerns its discontinuity. There is no straightforward argument in defense of a certain claim. Benjamin tries to deconstruct the discursive mode of thinking itself, in favor of an openness in which the idea can reveal itself.

The montage-technique in *Einbahnstraße* exemplifies this strategy. Reading, here, means to immerse oneself in a text that is built out of quotations, notes and aphorisms. The text enables the reader to enter it, without taking it as an object of knowledge. In the spatial frame that is disclosed by the discontinuity of the text one is offered the possibility to experience a connection between phenomena that reveals itself only from within. "*Methode ist Umweg*", writes Benjamin (Benjamin 1974, 208).

There are at least two ways in which the idea can be related to the notion of the thought-image. First of all one might say that the writing of *Einbahnstraße* in its entirety presents the idea of a street; in the sequence of thought-images we come to recognize a modern street. *Einbahnstraße*, then, is not just a description of the things one encounters during a city walk – the outward appearance of a street –, but a presentation of that which the street contains as a constellation. The unity of the text is thus not formed by individual thought-images, but by the collection as a whole.

On the other hand, one could say that each individual thought-image as such is a presentation of the idea. In the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin writes: “Die Idee ist Monade – das heißt in Kürze: jede Idee enthält das Bild der Welt” (Benjamin 1974, 228). The goal of the presentation of the idea is to produce an image of the world in a concentrated form. How? By interpolating the idea into the infinitely small, to borrow a phrase from *Einbahnstraße* (Benjamin 1955, 68). The meaning of the infinitely small is captured by Benjamin and given place in the structure of the thought-image, as if by doing so an image of a totality can unfold itself like a “fan”, as a miniature of a greater whole. The thought-image “Stebbierballe”, for example, gives an image of the world of the sailor.

It is useful to approach the thought-image in light of the problem of presentation, because this helps us to understand in what sense the thought-image can be viewed as a possible answer to the problem of presentation and how the thought-image is related to truth. Yet this approach in itself does not give us a clear insight into the distinctive features of the thought-image as such. To his end it is necessary to explain the way the thought-image in *Einbahnstraße* manifests itself.

II The Thought-Image and Shock Experience

An interesting characteristic of the thought-image is that it resists being paraphrased. What Benjamin says in *Einbahnstraße* cannot be isolated from how he says it. Apparently his style of writing and the substance of his thought-images are fundamentally interwoven. As Gerhard Richter writes: “Our attempt to extract the gift of a *Denkbild* from the language that carries it to us, always leads us to the discovery that the language is the gift” (Richter 2007, 10). In what sense could the language of the thought-image be understood as a gift? Before I try to answer this question, I will first focus on what kind of unity the thought-image displays.

When Benjamin worked on one of his first *Städtebilder*, three years before *Einbahnstraße* was published, he wrote in a letter to Martin Buber: “Ich will eine Darstellung der Stadt Moskau in diesem Augenblick geben, in der ‘alles Faktische schon Theorie’ ist” (GB III, 232). This passage expresses the desire to find a prose-form that goes beyond the distinction between the theoretical and the practical, a prose-form that can capture the moment. In his city landscapes and also in his thought-images, Benjamin wanted to give a voice to the concrete things of everyday life, in the knowledge that these things are already charged with meaning. The goal of the presentation is to unfold a world under the eye of the reader. Benjamin's preoccupation with the problem of presentation is connected to his concern with the modern city.

Especially in *Einbahnstraße* it becomes clear that the need for presentation is in large part motivated by Benjamin's experience of his time. A closer examination of his thought-images can show us why.

In the thought-image “*Diese Flächen sind zu vermieten*”, Benjamin writes:

Die Dinge sind indessen viel zu brennend der menschlichen Gesellschaft auf den Leib gerückt. Die “Unbefangenheit”, der “freie Blick” sind Lüge, wenn nicht der ganz naive Ausdruck planer Unzuständigkeit geworden. Der heute wesenhafteste, der merkantile Blick ins Herz der Dinge heißt Reklame. Sie reit den freien Spielraum der Betrachtung nieder und rückt die Dinge so gefährlich nah uns vor die Stirn, wie aus dem Kinorahmen ein Auto, riesig anwachsend, auf uns zu zittert (Benjamin 1955, 95).

It is immensely difficult to discern the various ways in which modern technology determines our contemporary life-world. In this thought-image Benjamin offers us an insight. Modern life, he suggests, is tied to the experience of shock. Things press too closely on human society. As a consequence, the space for contemplation is permanently occupied. Criticism, Benjamin states, has fallen into decay because of the power of advertising.

This thought-image offers a critical analysis of our present time. However, one should be aware of the fact that Benjamin simultaneously stresses the decay of criticism caused by the mercantile gaze of advertisement. This raises the question about the nature of Benjamin's own texts.

Strikingly, the question of literary form is continuously addressed in *Einbahnstraße* itself. With respect to leaflets, brochures, articles and placards, Benjamin writes: “Nur diese prompte Sprache zeigt sich dem Augenblick wirkend gewachsen” (Benjamin 1955, 8). There was a time, Benjamin writes in “Vereidigter Bücherrevisor”, when printing found its refuge in the book. Nowadays printing is pitilessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the “brutale(n) Heteronomien des wirtschaftlichen Chaos” (Benjamin 1955, 41).

Returning to the subject of the thought-image “*Diese Flächen sind zu vermieten*”, the real question seems to be how to transform the concept of critique in such a way that it can deal with modern experience. I think the form of the thought-image can be understood as an example of this transformation. The construction of the thought-image as a new literary form offers an alternative to traditional criticism by revealing a different perspective on the reality of shock. How is this done?

First of all, by means of the composition. The thought-image is composed of two parts: a text and a title. The titles almost form a collection in their own right. They refer to things that one encounters in the street: “Achtung Stufen!”, “Baustelle”, “Galanteriewaren”, “Optiker”. Reading *Einbahnstraße* is like walking through a street. However, in most cases the text of a thought-image does not refer unambiguously to the title. Although the titles in *Einbahnstraße* look like headlines, they do not directly inform the reader about the content of the aphorism. They seem to be randomly ordered, and as a result the titles create a virtual environment comparable to that of the disorientating experience one can have in a city street. Moreover, they invite the reader to meditate on a possible interconnection between the title and the text and between the different texts as such. Given the fact that Benjamin published his first thought-images in newspapers, and that he wrote extensively on the topic of journalism and information, one could consider the thought-image to be a composition both provocative and answering the difficulties he saw.

Secondly, the thought-image cannot be easily appropriated because of the language. The language of the thought-image is enigmatic and defiant. Thought-images lack the clarity of arguments and cannot be read in a single breath. In the process of reading *Einbahnstraße* one is continuously compelled to pause and contemplate Benjamin’s puzzling fragments. In this way the thought-image gets thought moving.

Thirdly, the thought-images in *Einbahnstraße* give us an insight into that which often threatens to be overlooked or repressed in everyday life, or transformed into an isolated *Erlebnis*.⁴ In *Einbahnstraße* one reads about children’s toys, stamps, waste products, Andrea Pisano’s *Spes* sculpted on a portal, dreams, the typical habits of city dwellers and their phraseology, but also about newspaper designs, commerce, advertisement, the typewriter and modern technique. Consequently, *Einbahnstraße* is not merely a depiction of modern city-life but also a confrontation. Reading *Einbahnstraße* means engaging with modern city-life in a new way.

I will illustrate some aspects of this confrontation by means of the thought-image “*Diese Flächen sind zu vermieten*”. In his concluding sentence Benjamin writes: “Was macht zuletzt Reklame der Kritik so überlegen? Nicht was die rote elektrische Laufschrift sagt – die Feuerlache, die auf dem Asphalt sie spiegelt” (Benjamin 1955, 96). The difficulty of this fragment lies in the fact that it is about the superiority of the advertisement, while we are simultaneously confronted with an enigmatic image. From what Benjamin states earlier in this aphorism, one would expect that it is the direct presence of the neon letters that makes the advertisement superior to traditional criticism and not the image of the fiery pool. What is at stake here?

Ultimately, the passage admits of different interpretations. In my view this fragment is not so much about the superiority of the advertisement as such, but rather about a different way in which the advertisement can be approached.

Benjamin evokes the image of a fiery pool reflected in the asphalt. This is not just a nice poetic phrase, but also a way of disclosing the advertisement in a different way. Normally we would be absorbed by the direct presence of the neon letters. Benjamin’s written image makes it possible to take some distance and reflect on the experience of the advertisement itself.

On the other hand it is clear that the image that Benjamin evokes appears against the background of the advertisement and cannot be detached from it. It is in confrontation with the power of advertising that the image of the fiery pool emerges. One could say that the experience of advertising, paradoxically, gives Benjamin the opportunity to point to an image, or rather: an image-space. This space is opened up within the thought-image. Consequently, what would make the advertisement superior is that it can

⁴ See Benjamin 1974, 609-616.

lead to the articulation of an image-space, whereas traditional criticism is tied to a fixed standpoint, a subject.

This is the ambiguity pointed out in "*Diese Flächen sind zu vermieten*". Without turning his back on the reality of shock-*Erlebnis*, Benjamin gives it a radical twist. This makes it possible for the image to emerge. The experience of shock is forced open.

Within the frame of the thought-image the objects of our everyday life experience are able to show themselves without the demand of immediate presence. Benjamin takes the things of everyday life out of the context of objectified experience and places them within a new experiential context. Crucial in this respect is Benjamin's concern with the dynamic relation between nearness and distance, which presupposes what I would like to call a sense of proportion.

In "*Frühstücksstube*", for example, Benjamin distinguishes between different attitudes towards the dream. He concludes: "...nur vom anderen Ufer, von dem hellen Tage aus, darf Traum aus überlegener Erinnerung angesprochen werden" (Benjamin 1955, 9). Benjamin makes it clear that a certain distance is necessary to be able to approach the dream. To be able to speak of something in a truthful way I need to enter it from a distance. As a result, we reach a state resembling that of the dream: "*Der Nüchterne spricht von Traum, als spräche er aus dem Schlaf*" (Benjamin 1955, 9).

The need for a sense of proportion is also made explicit in the thought-image "*Fundbüro*", a title that can be applied to the collection of *Denkbilder* as a whole. In this aphorism Benjamin makes an observation with regard to the first glimpse one catches of a village or a city ("*den allerersten Anblick eines Dorfs, einer Stadt in der Landschaft*"). He describes this image as an experience whereby "*die Ferne in der strengsten Bindung an die Nähe mitschwingt*". When we visit the city and walk the streets and habit has done its work, this first image, "*das früheste Bild*", can never be restored (Benjamin 1955, 72).

The reason why I elaborate on these two thought-images is that they very clearly address the question of proportion and spatiality: how to grasp the way we relate to things? When does the object of experience reveal itself and when does it withdraw? A great number of thought-images in *Einbahnstraße* reflect on this issue.⁵ Moreover, in "*Fundbüro*" the image that

⁵ See for example "*Frühstücksstube*" (our attitude towards the dream), "*Fundbüro*" (things), "*Kaiserpanorama*" (language in connection to things),

is lost is given a place within the thought-image after all. In that way the image is saved. The thought-image is not just a commentary, but it also evokes the experience of the image.

Coming back to the question concerning the nature and structure of Benjamin's thought-images, it is clear now that the construction of the thought-image enables us, in a very specific way, to reflect on the structure of our everyday experience, and that it offers a place to phenomena of contemporary life that are commonly forgotten or overlooked. That is to say, every thought-image in one way or another addresses the question of our attitude towards these phenomena. Most often this is done in an implicit way and in connection with the presentation of a specific attitude or way of relating as such. By this means a space is opened up that distinguishes itself from the mercantile gaze of shock-reality, in favor of the interplay between distance and nearness; a dimension that goes beyond the experience of shock. The thought-image makes it possible to dwell in a space that in everyday life is closed off. In the disclosure of this space, a more original perspective is unfolded which gives access to, and at the same time saves, a differentiated experience of things in the form of written images. This also means that within the thought-image a genuine encounter can take place between thought and things. In that sense the thought-image can be understood as an attempt to recapture and preserve in a new form "*den freien Spielraum der Betrachtung*", by means of the language it presents. That is the gift of the *Denkbild*.

III The Thought-Image and the Flâneur

Lastly, the critical function of the thought-image can be analyzed in terms of the way the thought-image is related to some of Benjamin's 'figures'. In particular I will go into the figure of the *flâneur*.

I have already pointed out that reading *Einbahnstraße* is like walking through a street. The composition of the text is city-like. In large part this is due to the titles of the thought-images. They do not just refer to objects that one encounters during a city walk; they bring these objects into the space of the text so that they become localities. The titles of the thought-images – "*Nr. 114*", "*Baustelle*", "*Kaiserpanorama*", etc. – confront the reader directly as localities. The reason for this is that there is no identifiable mediating

"*Handschube*" (animals), "*Loggia*" (the beloved), "*Diese Flächen sind zu vermieten*" (advertisement) and many others.

agent or narrator in *Einbahnstraße* who informs the reader about these objects of urban experience. The street signs, the shop windows, the placards, the advertisements: they strike the reader without the interpolation of an identifiable narrator-persona. Nevertheless, it is clear that the titles and the contents of Benjamin's thought-images are taken from or based on the lively experience of the modern metropolis. In other words, the agent that underwent these experiences has been removed from the text, and as a result the text becomes a street itself. There are several instances in *Einbahnstraße* where Benjamin compares a street to a text. In "Stückgut: Spedition und Verpackung", for example, Benjamin writes how the city becomes "ein Buch in meinen Händen, in das ich schnell noch ein paar Blicke warf" (Benjamin 1955, 98).

As the exponent of modernity, the *flâneur* is one of the key figures in Benjamin's writings. The *flâneur* is a historical figure that Benjamin conceptualizes in his studies of Baudelaire and Poe and which he links with the emergence of the nineteenth century shopping arcades of Paris. The *flâneur* is the observer who strolls along the streets: "Im Flaneur feiert die Schaulust ihren Triumph" (Benjamin 1974, 572). He is the man of the crowd. To him, the street is a dwelling-place:

Die Straße wird zur Wohnung für den Flaneur, der zwischen Häuserfronten so wie der Bürger in seinen vier Wänden zuhause ist. Ihm sind die glänzenden emaillierten Firmenschilder so gut und besser ein Wandschmuck wie im Salon dem Bürger ein Ölgemälde; Mauern sind das Schreibpult, gegen das er seinen Notizblock stemmt; Zeitungskioske sind seine Bibliotheken und die Caféterrassen Erker, von denen aus er nach getaner Arbeit auf sein Hauswesen heruntersieht (Benjamin 1974, 539).

As stated before, *Einbahnstraße* lacks an identifiable narrator-persona. Considering the subject of *Einbahnstraße* – the confrontation with modern city-life – it is remarkable that the figure of the *flâneur* is not represented in the text.⁶ Does this mean that *flânerie* does not play a role at all in *Einbahnstraße*?

⁶ In this respect I would like to note that it is questionable whether one could speak of a clear-cut definition of the *flâneur* in Benjamin. As Neumeyer points out, Benjamin is ambiguous in his descriptions. On the one hand he defines the *flâneur* as the *Mann der Menge*. On the other hand he states that the *flâneur* cannot be the man of the crowd because *in ihm hat der gelassene Habitus einen manischen Platz gemacht*. See Neumeyer 1999, 15-17. In my paper I do not attempt to give an exact definition

The text of *Einbahnstraße* remains the result of an encounter with the city, the metropolis of Berlin in the 1920s. A form of *flânerie* is presupposed. There are not many explicit references to the city of Berlin, but it is clear that the text is connected with this environment. In this respect it is striking that Benjamin speaks of the return of the *flâneur* in his review of Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929).⁷ However, the kind of *flâneur* that is presupposed in *Einbahnstraße* is not a *flâneur* in the strict sense of the word, precisely because this figure does not manifest itself like a narrator or an agent – an "I" – who roams the streets like Hessel. He is absent from the text, a disembodied voice. Consequently, the thought-images in *Einbahnstraße* are not stories. Moreover, the real *flâneur* looks for images, *die Bilder wo immer sie hausen*, whereas the images in *Einbahnstraße* emerge in confrontation with the city-experience and within the spatial frame of the text (GS III, 196). These puzzling images are wholly intertwined with the textual fragments out of which the thought-images are built. *Einbahnstraße* cannot be taken as a collection of instant snapshots.

The effect of removing the wandering, observing subject from the text is that the text becomes a street itself. A street to be read. The urban experience gets transformed into a text and this text is just as intense, disorientating and shock-like as the modern city. In short, the reader becomes a kind of *flâneur* himself.⁸ He reads the street and its images. He moves through the text like someone who walks along buildings and shops. He can go to the "Optiker" or to the "Kaiserpanaroma", the "Poliklinik" or the "Stebbierhalle". As I explained, these titles represent localities.

Reading *Einbahnstraße*, however, entails a confrontation, a confrontation with modern city-life. Equating the reader with the figure of the *flâneur* cannot be more than a metaphor. Although the reader of *Einbahnstraße* replaces, as it were, the absent stroller who walks the one-way street of modern life, he is not only an observer standing on the threshold. The reader reads the street. A thought-image challenges the reader to reflect on the phenomena of urban life. The writing of *Einbahnstraße* is not just

of Benjamin's conception of the *flâneur*. I use Benjamin's descriptions to shed light on the nature of the thought-image in *Einbahnstraße* and to explain the role played by some of his figures.

⁷ See GS III, 194-199.

⁸ See also Neumeyer 1999, 368 and Schöttker 1999, 184.

meant to intensify the reader's *Schaulust*. By reading these thought-images the reader sharpens his perception of things and develops a different attitude towards modern experience. He transcends the instrumentalist gaze that reduces every object of experience to a commodity.

In other words, by removing every reference to the *flâneur*, the writing of *Einbahnstraße* itself becomes a street for the reader, but on a deeper level the figure of the *flâneur* – the reader – also undergoes a transformation. The reader who is strolling through the text is actually led into a new space that is opened up within the thought-image. This is a space for contemplation. It is the construction of the thought-image that makes this dynamic possible. Thought-images do more than showing the reader another part of modern city-life and its hidden treasures. They offer an original medium for reflection.

Ultimately, I would like to stress that the construction of the thought-image does not only give shape to the figure of the *flâneur*. There are more voices and figures that appear in *Einbahnstraße*. These voices, like that of the collector (see "*Briefmarkenhandlung*"), are embedded in the thought-image. By letting different elements come into play, the thought-image functions as a "ground" for these figures. There is, for example, the figure of the child in "*Vergößerungen*" and "*Baustelle*", which is perhaps the most fascinating figure in Benjamin's writing. We read these two thought-images and are immediately transported into the world of the child. At the same time we are challenged to reflect on this other mode of experience – alien to the life of the adult molded by modern society – that Benjamin calls magical, and that is characterized by a way of looking as if one sees the world for the very first time.

Jeder Stein, den es findet, jede gepflückte Blume und jeder gefangene Schmetterling ist ihm schon Anfang einer Sammlung, und alles, was es überhaupt besitzt, macht ihm eine einzige Sammlung aus (Benjamin 1955, 64).

When reading sentences like these it is as if we are travelling through space and time. Because of the directness of Benjamin's language and the accuracy of his prose the thought-image becomes something like a passage leading the reader to other domains and other dimensions of life.

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