

Daniel Weidner · Sigrid Weigel (Hg.)  
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## The Painter through the Fourth Wall of China Benjamin and the Threshold of the Image\*

Walter Benjamin had a revealing fascination with the legend of a Chinese artist who entered his painting and disappeared in it. In his writings this character becomes an emblematic figure that enables the philosopher to discuss the nature of representation in its various inflections (in games and in painting, in theater and in cinema); to explore the status of the image and of the threshold that simultaneously separates and connects image and reality; to analyse the different bodily (i. e. »aesthetic«) attitudes of the beholder in his/her close or distant relationship to the image; to investigate the manifold implications of empathy (*Einfühlung*) toward the figurative world; and finally, to approach a peculiar kind of dialectics, namely the »Chinese«. My paper aims at considering such varied aspects in Benjamin's interpretation of the Chinese painter, understanding it as a true »dialectical image« that in its *non-coincidentia oppositorum* provokes not only significant hermeneutic oscillations, but even a radical inversion of its fundamental meaning.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. »Distance is the opposite of nearness«

»Distance is the opposite of nearness« (SW IV, 272): with this truism, in a footnote to § 4 of the essay on the work of art in its last 1939 version, Benjamin

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1 Abbreviations: »SW«, followed by the Roman numeral of the volume and the Arabic numeral of the page(s) = Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. by Marcus Bullock et al., Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press) 2004–2006; »AP« = *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland/Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press) 1999; »EW« = *Early Writings* (1910–1917), ed. by Howard Eiland, Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press) 2011; »WAWM« = *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings/Brigid Doherty/Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press) 2008; »C« = *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson/Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1994.

crystallized the polarity that, so crucial for his characterization of the notion of aura, had appeared some years before in the formula: »The unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be [*einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag*].« Presented for the first time in his *Little History of Photography* (1931: SW II, 518), and subsequently recalled in the various versions of *The Work of Art*, this formulation, if compared with further determinations of the concept proposed by Benjamin – aura as »shell« or »veil« (519; SW III, 105), »case« or »halo« (SW II, 328); aura as historical experience inscribed in the object (SW IV, 337); or aura as the capacity of the object to return the observer's gaze (338) – is peculiar for its emphasis on the aesthesiological dimension (the categorical couple »near/distant«, a fundamental articulation of the living body in spatial and temporal relationship to the object) and on the implications of what might be called an iconic pragmatics. For just as there are images that keep the beholder at a distance, commanding respect, there are also images that invite the observer to come close and to explore them in a tactile way. The first ones, charged with cult value (*Kultwert*),<sup>2</sup> are auratic images, which remain distant no matter how physically near I approach them; the second ones, inclining toward the pole of exhibition value (*Ausstellungswert*), offer themselves inversely to a close apprehension, no matter how far they are. Such a polarity is icastically formulated in the *Passagenarbeit* by the dialectical opposition between aura and trace (*Spur*): »Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us« (M 16a, 4: AP, 447).

Many of Benjamin's attempts to historically investigate the correlation between bodily-perceptual organization and the media that express it in each epoch (including that particular – if not exclusive – class of media that are works of art) are modelled after the etymological origin of »aesthetics« as »aesthesiology«, which he even recalls explicitly: »The theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics« (SW III, 120). Within this frame, the binary near/far represents one of the most elementary possibilities of the relation between body and world, which precisely because of such elementariness can become charged with increasingly complex cultural and symbolic meanings.

It is certainly not by chance that, in the very same paragraph of the essay on the work of art in which Benjamin exposes the keystone of his research program: »The era of the migration of peoples, an era which saw the rise of the late-Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, developed not only an art different from

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2 »Unapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image; true to its nature, the cult image remains »distant, however near it may be« (*The Work of Art* [1939], § 4, n. 11; SW IV, 272).

that of antiquity but also a different perception« (104)<sup>3</sup> – he evokes some of the most important sources for his understanding of the aesthesiological salience of the dyad near/far: the art historians of the Vienna School, Franz Wickhoff and above all the »prophetic« Alois Riegl (GS III, 170). One might add Heinrich Wölfflin to this list: while less beloved (Benjamin had been a disappointed student at his lectures in Munich in 1915: GB I, 289; 296–298), the Swiss art historian had notwithstanding left a significant mark on the elaboration of those same themes: indeed for both Riegl (in *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 1901) and for Wölfflin (in the *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 1915) the key issue lies in describing two major typologies of images, regardless of their iconographic contents. On the one hand they discuss images that draw the spectator in towards them, offering him/her their contours at a close view, for haptic exploration (the Egyptian visuality in Riegl) or linear-tactile (the Renaissance in Wölfflin); on the other hand there are those images that keep the beholder at a distance in order to let him/her perceive their chiaroscuro and chromatic dynamics (the »impressionistic« Late Roman style in Riegl, the »pictorial« Baroque in Wölfflin).<sup>4</sup>

Taking the polarity near vision/distant vision from the art historians, and at the same time inverting the *kunstgeschichtsphilosophisch* movement assumed by Riegl and Wölfflin (*from* near Egypt/Renaissance *to* far Late Roman/Baroque), Benjamin describes the complex of the art and wider media sphere of modernity (Baudelaire's poetry, Dada, Kitsch, Brecht's theater, newspapers, cinema) as a passage *from* the auratic modality of solitary and distant contemplation of the object imbued with cult value *to* the tactile, manipulatory, collective and close reception by the masses: »Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image [*Bild*], or, better, in a facsimile [*Abbild*], a reproduction« (SW III, 105).

It would be nevertheless reductive to consider the near/far polarity exclusively with reference to its significance for Benjamin's philosophy of art. *Nähe und Ferne* (GS VI, 83–87), a fragment devoted to precisely such a polarity, belongs to a

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3 In his 1939 review of Dolf Sternberger's *Panorama* Benjamin remarks: »The question of whether people's visual impressions are determined only by natural constants, or additionally by historical variables, is at the very leading edge of research. To move an inch closer to an answer is a hard-won advance« (SW IV, 146). Again in his 1940 review of Georges Salles' *Le regard*, Benjamin recalls the idea »de ce qu'on pourrait nommer l'histoire de la perception humaine« (GS III, 591).

4 The literature on the relationship between Benjamin and *Kunstwissenschaft* is very rich: among the many titles see the seminal essay by Wolfgang Kemp: »Fernbilder. Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft«, in: Burckhardt Lindner (eds.): *Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp) 1978, pp. 224–256, and Michael W. Jennings: »Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History«, in: Uwe Steiner (ed.): *Walter Benjamin 1892–1940, zum 100. Geburtstag*, Bern (Lang) 1992, pp. 77–102.

group of »psychophysical« meditations developed during the 1920s (hence after his encounter with Riegl and Wölfflin). Here Benjamin claims that nearness and farness decisively condition the whole configuration and existence of the human being in the same manner as the oppositions »high/low« and »left/right«; yet even more intensely than these, »near/far« exerts its effects in the domain of Eros and sexuality and in the oneiric dimension. On the basis of the erotic doctrine of Plato's *Symposium*, Benjamin formulates farness and nearness as the »type and originary phenomenon of connection«, which are specified in relation to the two sexes. It would be wrong to unilaterally associate nearness to bond and farness to liberty: it is precisely the love affair that reveals the spell cast by the distant beloved on one side and the dissolution risked by excessive proximity of the lovers on the other. The same constellations of motifs found a public expression in the prose pieces entitled *Short Shadows* (1929 and 1933).<sup>5</sup> Also from the same period, and touching upon an analogous motif, the Fragment 172 *The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together* (probably mid-1929) underlines »the mysterious power of memory [*Erinnerung*] – the power to generate nearness« (SW II, 248).

## 2. The legend of the Chinese painter

The polarity near/far traverses the entirety of Benjamin's reflections. But its dialectical force is perhaps best illustrated in his commentaries of the legend of the Chinese painter. The anecdote tells of a famous painter of the Tang dynasty, Wu Tao-tzu (680–740), who entered his landscape painting that had been commissioned by the emperor Xuánzong, and was never seen again. This ancient story, readapted by Sven Lindqvist in his 1967 book,<sup>6</sup> was well known in Europe since at least 1886, when the English surgeon and collector William Anderson reported it (without source) in his pioneering catalogue of Chinese and Japanese paintings.<sup>7</sup> Anderson's version was quoted and disseminated by the eminent

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5 Cf. »the love from afar« as the distinguishing mark of the »Platonic Love« (SW II, 268); the excessive proximity in the Notre-Dame dream commented in »Too Close« (268); the intimate connection distance-dream-image explored in »Distance and Images« (700–701). Benjamin has in mind entry n. 60 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882, <sup>2</sup>1887): »Women and their Action at a Distance«, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2007, p. 71.

6 Sven Lindqvist: *The Myth of Wu Tao-Tzu* (1967), London (Granta) 2012. Cf. Shieh Jhy-Wey: »Grenze wegen Öffnung geschlossen. Zur Legende vom chinesischen Maler, der in seinem Bild verschwindet«, in: Jürgen Wertheimer/Susanne Göße (eds.): *Zeichen lesen, Lese-Zeichen*, Tübingen (Stauffenburg) 1999, pp. 201–225.

7 William Anderson: *Descriptive and Historical Catalogue of a Collection of Japanese and Chinese Paintings in the British Museum*, London (Longmans) 1886, p. 484–485.



Cambridge sinologist Herbert Allen Giles, who had to confess: »I myself have failed to find the Chinese text.«<sup>8</sup>

In 1880 Giles had translated *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (1766) by Pu Songling under the title *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, a collection of tales that includes *The Painted Wall*. Here a Mr. Chu admires a wall painting representing a girl picking flowers and gently smiling: »Then, suddenly, he felt himself floating in the air, as if riding on a cloud, and found himself passing through the wall«. After a certain amount of time spent in the image with the girl »as man and wife«, called back to the real world by his friends, »immediately Mr. Chu descended from the wall, standing transfixed like a block of wood, with starting eyeballs and trembling legs.«<sup>9</sup>

The motif of the painter trespassing the threshold of his own picture was destined to become a central cross-cultural motif: as it has been suggested, Pu Songling's story might have inspired the Japanese writer Kôsai Ishikawa, whose legend concerning the final disappearance of Kwashin Koji, included in his *Yasô Kidan* (1889–1894), could possibly have led (through the mediation of Lafcadio Hearn) to Marguerite Yourcenar's oriental novel *How Wang-Fô was Saved*.<sup>10</sup>

But more than this Chinese-Japanese-American-French constellation, what interests us here is rather the Chinese-German connection. A German translation of Pu Songling's collection, under the title *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten*, appeared in 1911 with a preface by Martin Buber.<sup>11</sup> These tales were well known to Benjamin, as we know from the *Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften*

8 Herbert Allen Giles: *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*, London (Quaritch) 1905, 1918, p. 52. A few years later another famous British orientalist, Arthur Waley, remarked about Wu Tao-Tzu: »The Taoists have annexed him as one of their divinities and tell us that he disappeared into one of his own pictures. The story is, at any rate, as old as the 17th century, for it is told in the Shu Hua Fang« (id.: *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting*, London [Ernest Benn] 1923, p. 113).

9 Pu Songling: »The Painted Wall«, in: id.: *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, 2 vols., London (Thomas De La Rue), 1880, vol. 1, pp. 9–13.

10 Cf. Kôsai Ishikawa: *Yasô Kidan*, Tokyo (Azuma Kenzaburô) 1889 (vol. 1), 1894 (vol. 2); Lafcadio Hearn: »The Story of Kwashin Koji«, in: id.: *A Japanese Miscellany*, Boston (Little, Brown, and Co.) 1901, pp. 37–51; Marguerite Yourcenar: »How Wang-Fô was Saved« (1936), in: id.: *Oriental Tales*, trans. Alberto Manguel, New York (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) 1985, pp. 3–20. On this constellation cf.: Sukehiro Hirakawa: »Animistic Belief and Its Use in Japanese Literature. The Final Disappearance of Kwashin Koji«, in: Kin'ya Tsuruta (ed.): *Nature and Self-hood in Japanese Literature*, Josai International University and Department of Asian Studies (UBC), 1993, pp. 79–85; Shigemi Inaga: »The Painter Who Disappeared in the Novel: Images of an Oriental Artist in European Literature«, in: Martin Heusser et al. (eds.): *Text and Visuality (Word & Image Interactions 3)*, Amsterdam (Rodopi) 1999, pp. 117–127; Angelica Rieger: »Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé de Marguerite Yourcenar – ou le tableau qui sauve«, in: Jean-Pierre Guillerme (ed.): *Récits/tableaux*, Lille (Presses Universitaires de Lille) 1994, pp. 201–214.

11 Frankfurt a.M. (Rütten & Loening) 1911; the tale of the painted wall, »Das Wandbild«, is at pp. 1–5.

(GS VII, 439, n. 521).<sup>12</sup> But an even closer source might have been his friend Ernst Bloch, who referred to the legend of the Chinese painter without citing any source in his 1923 book *Durch die Wüste*, in the chapter »Motive des inneren Verschwindens«.<sup>13</sup> Almost the same words would be repeated seven years later in *Traces*, in the section »Motif of the Door«.<sup>14</sup> Bloch associates the legend with an analogous anecdote belonging to the collection *Sieben Märchen*, edited by Herbert Bauer alias Béla Balázs:<sup>15</sup> the writer Wan-Hu-Chen writes himself into his own book as a character so as to join his beloved Li-Fan, who was already living beyond the literary threshold.

As regards Benjamin, the case of the Chinese painter makes its first appearance in *The Mummerehlen*, published under the pseudonym Detlef Holz in the *Vossische Zeitung* in 1933 and intended as the first chapter of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Here Benjamin recalls the legend that

comes from China, and tells of an old painter who invited friends to see his newest picture. This picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter's friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he had left them – that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through the narrow opening. In the same way, I too, when occupied with my paintpots and brushes, would be suddenly displaced into the picture. I would resemble the porcelain which I had entered in a cloud of colors. (SW III, 393)<sup>16</sup>

12 Two other Chinese readings are registered at n. 520 and n. 522: respectively »Chinesische Abende. Chinesische Novellen« und »Geschichten« übertragen von Leo Greiner <Berlin 1914> and »Chinesische Novellen deutsch von Paul Kühnel <München 1914>«. The first was published by Erich Reiß, the second by Georg Müller.

13 Ernst Bloch: *Durch die Wüste*, Berlin (P. Cassirer) 1923, p. 140 (text not included in Bloch's *Werkausgabe*). About it Benjamin wrote to Scholem: »There is nothing to say about its content« (March 5, 1924; C, 239).

14 Ernst Bloch: *Traces* (1930), Stanford (Stanford University Press) 2006, pp. 113–119. On this cf. Bernhard Greiner: »Hinübergehen in das Bild und Errichten der Grenze«, in: Jürgen Wertheimer/Susanne Göße (eds.): *Zeichen lesen, Lese-Zeichen*, Tübingen (Stauffenburg) 1999, pp. 175–199.

15 »Das Buch des Wan-Hu-Tschen«, in: Herbert Bauer (ed.): *Sieben Märchen* (1917), Wien et al. (Rikola) 1921, pp. 177–192. Bauer/Balázs edited a second collection of Chinese stories: *Der Mantel der Träume. Chinesische Novellen*, München (D. & R. Bischoff) 1922. »The Book of Wan-Hu-Chen« is included in the English translation: *The Cloak of Dreams. Chinese Fairy Tales, Princeton and Oxford* (Princeton University Press) 2010, pp. 159–171. Benjamin met Balázs in 1929: »I felt at once that this man could produce nothing but false ideas« (SW II, 276–277).

16 Benjamin positively associates the legend to the micrological reduction of subjectivity in his 1933 review of Adorno's dissertation: *Kierkegaard: The End of Philosophical Idealism* (SW II, 704). There is however no trace of the Chinese tale in Adorno's book.

The legend reappears in a very synthesized form in the essay on the work of art, begun in September 1935. In § 18 of the first typescript (1935–1936) we read:

Distraction and concentration form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [*versenkt sich*]; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his completed painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves [*versenkt in sich*]. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide. (119)<sup>17</sup>

As we can see, within the space of a few years the meaning attributed by Benjamin to the legend has undergone a significant inversion. If in the *Mummerehlen* the painter disappearing into his own picture was a positive example of a bodily (i. e. *tactile*) identification with things and colors that precedes the gnoseological and ontological opposition of subject and object, in the essay on the work of art the anecdote becomes a negative paradigmatic case of the contemplative (i. e. *optical*) reception of works of visual art (exemplarily paintings), consisting in concentration and absorption, typical of the traditional bourgeois aesthetic attitude. As such, this modality is opposed to the attitude of the distracted masses, who on the contrary absorb the artwork (exemplarily movies) haptically into themselves.<sup>18</sup>

If we compare Benjamin's reading to that of other theorists like Béla Balázs and his friend Siegfried Kracauer, who would later both draw on the same legend of Wu Tao-tzu in order to illustrate the nature of cinematographic reception, we can observe some significant differences. Kracauer identifies the film spectator with the Chinese artist, remarking that both merge with and are incorporated into the image that they look at. In the cinematic experience, Kracauer writes, the spectator »drifts toward and into the objects – much like the legendary Chinese painter who, longing for the peace the landscape he had created, moved into it, walked toward the faraway mountains suggested by his brush strokes, and disappeared in them never to be seen again«.<sup>19</sup>

Balázs employs the anecdote of Wu Tao-tsu in the context of a comparison of Chinese, American and European mentalities: »Such tales could never have been

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17 The tale is present in all versions of the essay except the very first draft: cf. WuN XVI (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*), pp. 87 and 93 (*zweite Fassung*); p. 137 (*dritte Fassung*); p. 195 (French *vierte Fassung*), p. 245 (*fünfte Fassung*).

18 Both Greiner (id.: »Hinübergehen in das Bild« [note 14, pp. 186–189]) and Christopher Bush (id.: *Ideographic Modernism. China, Writing, Media*, Oxford [Oxford University Press] 2009, pp. 111–115) refer to the legend in the two texts, but they do not thematize Benjamin's interpretative inversion.

19 Siegfried Kracauer: *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1997, p. 165. For a comparison Benjamin-Kracauer cf. Miriam Bratu Hansen: *Cinema and Experience*, Berkeley (University of California Press) 2011.

born in the minds of men brought up in European ideas of art. The European spectator feels the internal space of a picture as inaccessible, guarded by its own self-sufficient composition. But such strange stories as those Chinese tales could easily have been born in the brain of a Hollywood American<sup>20</sup> for whom cinema produces the illusion of being in the middle of the fictional space.

For the position here expressed by both Kracauer and Balázs we might call to mind early films that perform the annulment of the screen barrier and the abrogation of the separation between representation and reality,<sup>21</sup> like *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (directed in 1901 by Robert W. Paul), *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902, director Edwin S. Porter), or Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924). But we could also mention later cases: Woody Allen pays homage to Buster Keaton in his *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). Two years earlier, David Cronenberg had thematized the interpenetration of the TV screen in his *Videodrome*. These are all examples of the fatal trespass from reality into fiction and vice versa; and we could include here the developments of 3-D technology as a further evolution of such a strategy aiming at tearing down the barriers between actor and spectator that Eisenstein in the 1940s had named *stereokino*.<sup>22</sup>

But was Balázs really right in claiming that such a »Chinese« move would never have occurred to the European mind? To say nothing of the avant-garde experimentations, we might evoke the founding myth of the origin of painting recounted by Alberti in his *De pictura* (II, 26), the story of Narcissus, in which the transgression of the boundaries between reality and representation is at stake. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (III, 339–510), after having tried in vain to catch hold of the beloved image, Narcissus lets himself perish on the riverbank. But in other versions (e. g., Plotinus' *Enn.* 1.6.8) he dives in and drowns: a destiny shared by the great Chinese poet Li Po (701–762), contemporary of Wu Tao-tsu, who died in the Yangtze River while attempting to grasp the moon reflected on the

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20 Béla Balázs: *Theory of Film. Character and Growth of a New Art* (1949), London (Dobson) 1952, p. 50.

21 On the filmological and philosophical implications of the annulment of the screen barrier cf. Francesco Casetti: *Eye of the Century. Film, Experience, Modernity* (2005), New York (Columbia University Press) 2008; Mauro Carbone: »O que é uma filosofia-cinema?«, in: *Aurora. Revista de Filosofia* 25 (2013) 37, pp. 343–360.

22 Stereoscopic cinema would offer »the ability to ›draw‹ the audience with unprecedented force into what used to be a flat surface and the ability to ›bring down‹ on the audience that which formerly spread over the surface of the screen« (Sergei M. Eisenstein: »Stereoscopic films« (1947), in: id.: *Notes of a Film Director*, Moscow (Foreign Languages Pub. House) 1958, p. 133). On 3-D cf. William Paul: »Breaking the Fourth Wall. ›Belascoism‹, Modernism, and a 3-D ›Kiss Me Kate‹«, in: *Film History* 16 (2004) 3, pp. 229–242; Ray Zone: *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film, 1838–1952*, Lexington (The University Press of Kentucky) 2007.

water.<sup>23</sup> One might object that by his death Narcissus proves *ab origine* the impossibility of the trespass. But we know that Western culture has widely explored this issue: let us only think of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) by Lewis Carroll<sup>24</sup> or of *Le sang d'un poète* (1930) directed by Jean Cocteau, just to mention two authors well known to Benjamin: GB V, 221–222; GS II, 625–628).

If we move from the comparison painting-cinema to that of cinema-theater, we find a similar annulment of the fictional barrier at the core of the non-Aristotelian dramaturgical doctrine advanced by Bertolt Brecht. He, too, understands the demolition of the so-called »fourth wall« – constructed by the imagination in order to isolate the scenic space from the audience, as prescribed in 1758 by Diderot in his *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* – as a major »Chinese« move (although not exclusively: let us only think of the *parabasis* of the chorus in Old Attic Comedy). In his essay *The Fourth Wall of China. An essay on the effect of disillusion in the Chinese Theatre*, first published in English in vol. 15, issue 6 of the journal *Life and Letters To-Day* (1936), he writes:

The Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. A whole elaborate European stage technique, which helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audience can view them in the easiest way, is thereby made unnecessary. The actors openly choose those positions which will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were *acrobats*.<sup>25</sup>

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23 For a comparison between Li Po and Wu Tao-tsu cf. François Cheng: *Empty and Full. The Language of Chinese Painting* (1979), Boston (Shambhala) 1994, p. 28–29. On the disappearance into the image, with reference to Chinese legends, cf. Dieter Wellershoff: *Das Verschwinden im Bild*, Köln (Kiepenheuer & Witsch) 1980.

24 Commenting Pu Songling's »The Painted Wall«, Herbert Allen Giles had already remarked that it is a story »which will doubtless remind the reader of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass, And What She Saw There*« (in: Songling: *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* [note 9], p. 10, note 1).

25 Bertolt Brecht: »Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting« (1936), in: id.: *Brecht On Theatre*, ed. by John Willlet, London (Methuen) 1964, p. 92. Benjamin knew both the English version (quoted in: *What Is the Epic Theater? (II)*, 1939: SW IV, 303) and the German original: *Bemerkungen über die chinesische Schauspielkunst* (cf. the letter to Margarete Steffin, October 1935: C, 511). On Brecht's *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the context of Chinese theater culture cf.: Antony Tatlow/Tak-Wai Wong (eds.): *Brecht and the East Asian Theatre*, Hong Kong (University Press) 1982; Adrian Hsia: »Bertolt Brecht in China and His Impact on Chinese Drama«, in: *Comparative Literature Studies* 20 (1983) 2, pp. 231–245; Hu Xingliang: »The Influence and Misreading of Brecht in China« (2007), in: *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 3 (2009) 3, pp. 381–399.

By stigmatising the attempt made by the Western theater to disguise the fact that the spectators are in front of a representation (and to thereby realize a sort of transparency of the theatrical medium), Brecht thus considers the Chinese way of acting as a paradigmatic example of a theater that must on the contrary produce in the public the awareness of »theatricality«, of being confronted with a scene that is constructed for a recipient.

### 3. Identification and mimicry

Let us recapitulate: as we have seen, in the first half of the 1930s, in the short lapse of time between *Berlin Childhood* and the essay on the work of art, Benjamin inverts his interpretation of the legend of the Chinese painter. In doing so, his point is diametrically opposed to those film theorists like Balázs and Kracauer: for them, the screen threshold is a passageway.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin takes the opposite position: the filmic image is exactly the kind of image in which the sinking (*Versenkung*) is impossible to achieve, because the screen is expressly *not* a canvas or painted wall. And yet he sides with Brecht, who theorizes the theatrical trespassing of the fourth wall of China.

Why should what is good for the theater (the cancellation of the threshold of representation between actor and audience) be bad in the cinema? A possible answer might be found in the negative attitude assumed by Benjamin toward the notion of empathy (*Einfühlung*) expressed in several occasions in the contexts of literary criticism,<sup>27</sup> of the philosophy of history<sup>28</sup> and politics<sup>29</sup> – an attitude shared with his friends Adorno and Brecht. The former polemicizes against the notion of reception as a subjective re-enactment of the emotions expressed by the

26 On the notion of threshold cf. Winfried Menninghaus: *Schwelkenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos*, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp) 1986.

27 In his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* Benjamin states that »the true view of the beautiful [...] will never open itself to so-called empathy« (SW I, 351). In the *Trauerspielbuch* empathy is defined as a »fatal, pathological suggestibility, by means of which the historian seeks through »substitution«, to insinuate himself into the place of the creator – as if the creator were, just because he created it, also the best interpreter of his work« (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London [Verso] 2003, p. 53–54). In: *Literary History and the Study of Literature* (1931), empathy is counted among the seven heads of the »hydra of scholastic aesthetics« (SW II, 461).

28 In the *Paralipomena to »On the Concept of History«* Benjamin claims that the empathetic identification of the historicist historiographer is with the victor rather than with the defeated: »The rulers at any time are the heirs of all those who have been victorious throughout history. Empathizing with the victor invariably benefits those currently ruling« (SW IV, 406–407).

29 Cf. the ironic entry G 16, 6 in the *Passagenarbeit*: »The world exhibitions were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value. »Look at everything; touch nothing« (AP, 201).

artist, and stresses on the contrary »the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work«. <sup>30</sup> The latter counts the struggle against empathic identification among the cornerstones of his dramaturgy. <sup>31</sup> We should keep in mind that, between the interpretation of the legend of the Chinese painter offered in *Berlin Childhood* and the one in the essay on the work of art, Benjamin visits Brecht for the first time (from July to September 1934) in Skovsbostrand – and here they play »Chinese«. <sup>32</sup>

What in the theater prevents the possibility of empathic identification between actors and audience (i. e. the breaking of the fourth wall that explicates the fictional nature of representation: SW IV, 302) becomes in the cinema the device that on the contrary enhances the identification, allowing the spectator to enter the fictional world of the actor and permitting the actor conversely to become embodied in the real world of the spectator. Thus, it must be avoided.

The major reason for such an antithesis resides in the radically different natures of theatrical and cinematographic acting, widely explored in the essay on the artwork: if the performance of the theatrical actor transpires each time in front of a casual audience, present in the flesh in a shared space, the performance of the cinema actor consists of a test in front of a measuring machine and a commission of experts (director, cameraman, sound and light technicians, producer etc.). Moreover:

The stage actor identifies himself with a role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His performance is by no means a unified whole, but is assembled from many individual performances. Apart from incidental concerns about

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30 Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), New York (Continuum) 2002, p. 244. Against Adorno, we might here remark that the disappearance into the artwork could still be considered a form of empathy: not in the intersubjective sense of an empathy receiver-producer (the type denounced by Adorno), but rather in the sense of an empathy subject-object, where the subject is the beholder and the object is the expressive *character* manifested by the formal and material features of the artwork experienced as a quasi-subject. For a characterological approach to objective empathy cf. A. Pinotti: »A Question of Character. The Empathic Life of Things«, in: Vanessa Lux/Sigrid Weigel (eds.): *Empathy. A Neurobiologically Based Capacity and its Cultural and Conceptual History* (forthcoming).

31 Bertolt Brecht: »Kritik der Einfühlung« (written around 1938, published in 1963), in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp) 1967, vol. 7, pp. 240–251. Brecht subsequently recognized the opportunity of a dialectical relationship between empathy and cognition: cf. in the same volume the »Gespräch über die Nötigung zur Einfühlung«, p. 899–900.

32 Cf. his *Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934* (SW, II, 783–791). In a letter to Brecht from Paris (21 May 1934: C, 443) Benjamin suggests to include a Chinese game among their Danish entertainments: »Are you familiar with Go, a very ancient Chinese board game? It is at least as interesting as chess – we should introduce it to Svendborg. You never move any pieces in Go, but only place them on the board, which is empty at the start of the game. It seems to me to be similar to your play in this regard.«



studio rental, availability of other actors, scenery, and so on, there are elementary necessities of the machinery that split the actor's performance into a series of episodes capable of being assembled. (SW III, 112–113)

We need not underline here Benjamin's positive evaluation of the new »field of action« (*Spielraum*; 117) produced by the transformation of acting that emerged with the development of recording media. Rather, we wish to verify whether he really emancipated himself from the controversial *Einfühlung* paradigm that he so vehemently criticized. In spite of his anti-empathic programmatic declarations, there are a number of contexts in which Benjamin actually employed argumentations drawn from the empathy-theory. An emblematic case concerns one characterization of the notion of aura in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*. Here photography is judged capable of promoting the decay of the aura because the camera is inhuman and cannot return the gaze of the observer:

Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met [...], there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness. [...] Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed [*Übertragung*] to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest [*belehnen*] it with the ability to look back at us. (SW IV, 338)

The *topos* »looking at-being looked at« – as we have seen in *Berlin Childhood*, the Chinese painter too »turned, smiled«, thus returning the gaze to the observers before disappearing – had already been a Romantic theme. In the Baudelaire essay Benjamin examines it with reference to Novalis, Proust and Valéry, linking it in the same page with a quotation of his own definition of the aura as a »unique apparition of a distance« from the artwork essay. In a footnote he elaborates that the bestowal of the power to return the gaze »is a wellspring of poetry. Whenever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance« (354, note 77).<sup>33</sup> Endowing the inanimate with a human capacity, treating the object *as if* it were a subject, having an intersubjective commerce with it: these are all classical procedures explored by the empathy-theories, variously inflected in terms of animation, humanization, transfer, transposition, projection.

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33 Jürgen Habermas remarks: »The auratic appearance can occur only in the intersubjective relationship of the I with its counterpart, the alter ego. Wherever nature gets so »invested« that it opens its eyes to look at us in return, the object is transformed into a counterpart« (»Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique« [1972], in: id.: *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, Cambridge/Mass. [MIT Press] 1983, p. 143).



If one understands the animation *of* the inanimate as endowment and investment (*Belehnung*), this means that the *of* is taken in the sense of the *objective* genitive: the inanimate is preliminarily conceived as literally soulless, and the soul is transferred to it by the human subject by means of a projective process (in the case of our legend, entering his painting the Chinese artist would endow the image with his own soul and life). Such an approach, exemplarily embraced by Benjamin in his *Baudelaire*, radically contrasts with the idea of the animation of the inanimate in the sense of the *subjective* genitive – in which the inanimate (the world of things) is not considered as such, but rather as in itself animate, capable of expression and autonomously endowed with its own character.

#### 4. Chinoiseries

The latter notion of animation inspires several of Benjamin's explorations of the annulment of the boundaries subject-object, ego-world, man-thing: from the early philosophical dialogue *The Rainbow* (1915: »I was not someone seeing. I was only the seeing itself. And what I saw was not things, Georg, but only colors. And I myself was something colored in this landscape«; EW, 215),<sup>34</sup> to the 1933 writings on mimicry (*Doctrine of the Similar* and *On the Mimetic Faculty*: SW II, 694–698; 720–722),<sup>35</sup> through to the meditations on childhood developed in the 1920s. We might here recall two texts in particular: the chapter »Child Hiding« in *One-Way Street*, which describes the magic-mimetic experience of assimilation (»Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes himself something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door he himself is the door«; SW I, 465). And the contemporaneous article *A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books* (1926), devoted to his own collection of illustrated books, in which the identification with the world of images typical of the child is explicitly characterized as a »Chinese« move:

The objects do not come to meet the picturing child from the pages of the book; instead, the gazing child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures. Sitting before his painted book,

34 On Benjamin's aesthetics of colors cf. Howard Caygill: *Walter Benjamin. The Colour of Experience*, London New York (Routledge) 1998; Heinz Brüggemann: *Walter Benjamin über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie*, Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) 2007.

35 On Benjamin's mimesis cf. Michael Taussig: *Mimesis and Alterity*, New York (Routledge) 1993; Sigrid Weigel: *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Frankfurt a. M. (Fischer) 1997; Doris M. Fittler: *Ein Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit. Frühe und späte Mimesis bei Walter Benjamin*, Bielefeld (Aisthesis) 2005.

he makes the Taoist vision of perfection come true: he transcends the illusory barrier of the book's surface and passes through colored textures and brightly painted partitions to enter a stage on which fairy tales spring to life. *Hoa*, the Chinese word for »painting,« is much like *kua*, meaning »attach«: you attach five colors to the objects. In German, the word used is *anlegen*: you »apply« colors. (435)<sup>36</sup>

The *Vermummen* (masking, camouflage, concealment) is a procedure frequently employed in children's literature, for instance when it personifies the letters in ABC learning: Benjamin remembers »a set of twenty-four sheets in which the letters were introduced in disguise [*vermummt*], as it were. F appears as a Franciscan, C as a Clerk, P as a Porter« (437). In *Berlin Childhood around 1900* such a masking refers precisely to China ink painting on china (in the sense of ceramics: *China-Porzellan*) – again a »Chinese« move, practiced as a child: »This would happen as I sat painting with watercolors. The colors I mixed would color me. Even before I applied them to the drawing, I found myself disguised [*vermummten*] by them« (*The Mummerehlen*: SW III, 392–393). In another chapter of his autobiographical memoirs, »The Fever«, animation through embodiment is evoked through the reference to the Chinese »shadow plays« projected onto the wall:

I myself rarely got beyond the jaws of a wolf. But, then, those jaws were so vast and so gaping that they must have denoted the wolf Fenrir, that world destroyer which I set prowling in the same room where a struggle was underway to wrest me from the grip of a childhood illness. (364)<sup>37</sup>

In other passages of Benjamin's oeuvre mimicry is intimately associated with a »Chinese« move. We shall hereafter list them briefly, in order to give a synthetic and overall glimpse of the pervasive presence of the Chinese motif in his writings. The chapter »Chinese Curios« in *One-Way Street* lauds the Chinese art of copying

36 On Benjamin's collection cf. Ingeborg Daube (ed.): *Die Kinderbuchsammlung Walter Benjamin*, Frankfurt a. M. (Die Universitätsbibliothek) 1987.

37 In a letter of August 4, 1919 (GB II, 40) Benjamin had asked Scholem to buy him a book on Chinese shadow plays: *Chinesische Schattenspiele*, trans. Wilhelm Grube, Abhandlungen der Königl. Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-philologische und -historische Klasse, Bd. 26, München (Verlag der Königl. Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 1917, pp. 1–XXIV, 1–442. The volume impressed him so deeply that a few years later he (unsuccessfully) proposed to write a contribution on this subject for Hofmannsthal's *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (cf. GB III, 117, 176). On this cf.: Gershom Scholem: *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (1975), Philadelphia (Jewish Publication Society of America) 1981, p. 47; Brüggemann: *Walter Benjamin über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie* (note 34), pp. 58–61. I thank Matthew Vollgraff for drawing my attention to this reference.

texts, since only through a passive submission to the text to be reproduced can the reader obtain its obedience: »The Chinese practice of copying books was thus an incomparable guarantee of literary culture, and the transcript a key to China's enigmas« (SW I, 447). The book is printed in 1928: in the same year »Die literarische Welt« publishes a curious interview by Benjamin with Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American movie star, significantly entitled »Eine Chinoiserie aus dem alten Westen« (GS IV, 523–527). During their conversation – which has recently been the inspiration for an installation by video artist Patty Chang: *The Product Love* (*Die Ware Liebe*, 2009) – Benjamin touches upon the issue of oriental »Mimik« brutalized by the American style of directing (GS IV, 525).<sup>38</sup>

Karl Kraus – depicted in *One-Way Street* as »wrathfully grinning, a Chinese idol« (SW I, 469) – is described in the eponymous 1931 essay as a man who reaches a Chinese perfection in his mimetic politeness: »Has courtesy here become the mimicry of hate, hate the mimicry of courtesy? However that may be, both have attained perfection, the Chinese pitch [*Stufe der Vollendung, der chinesischen*]« (SW II, 442 – translation slightly modified). In an annotation dealing with Kraus, Benjamin claims that »Chinese courtesy is a mimetic one: creeping into the other person [*chinesische Höflichkeit ist eine mimetische: in den andern hineinkriechen*]« (GS II, 1092). Scholem underlines that this was true for Benjamin himself, »whose Mandarin courtesy constituted the utmost that I could imagine«. <sup>39</sup>

In the 1930 radio broadcast *Bert Brecht*, two figures – Brecht's Herr Keuner and Valéry's Monsieur Teste – are compared because »both characters have Chinese features. They are infinitely cunning, infinitely discreet, infinitely polite, infinitely old, and infinitely adaptable« (SW II, 367); like mimetic animals they can adjust to their environment with agility. In the same talk Benjamin praises Chinese literature for its fundamental reliance on citation and on what in Western culture would be called plagiarism:

The study of the great canonical literatures, Chinese literature above all, has shown him that the supreme claim which can be made of the written word is

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38 Patty Chang: *The Product Love* (*Die Ware Liebe*), 2009 (42 min. two-channel digital video installation; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (online available at: [www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/26179](http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/26179); accessed March 20, 2014). Cf. Alexandra Chang: »The Art of Cosmopolitanism: Visual Potentialities in Ma Jun, Tomokazu Matsuyama, David Dia, and Patty Chang«, in: Christiane Brosius/Roland Wenzlhuemer (eds.): *Transcultural Turbulences*, Berlin-Heidelberg (Springer) 2011, pp. 133–150; Shirley Jennifer Lim: »Speaking German Like Nobody's Business: Anna May Wong, Walter Benjamin, and the Possibilities of Asian American Cosmopolitanism«, in: *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4 (2012) 1, pp. 1–17.

39 Scholem: *Walter Benjamin* (note 37), p. 33.

that of its quotability. This suggests that we may find here the beginnings of a theory of plagiarism that will speedily reduce the quipsters to silence. (SW II, 370).

If we consider the founding role played by quotations in the construction of the *Passagenwerk* – »This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks« (N 1, 10: AP, 458)<sup>40</sup> – we might say that the last titanic and unfinished work by Benjamin was an impressive »Chinese« move as well.

The year 1931 is particularly »radio-Chinese« for Benjamin: his talk on Kafka's posthumous collection *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (broadcast July, 3 by the *Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk* in Frankfurt) begins with a commentary to the parable *A Message From the Emperor*, inspired by a Chinese legend (SW II, 494–495).<sup>41</sup> In the lecture *Theaterbrand von Kanton* (broadcast November, 5) he underlines the great mimetic ductility of Chinese pantomime (GS VII, 227–228).

The interest for Chinese culture lasted until the end of his life. In the 1938 text *Chinese Paintings at the Bibliothèque Nationale* (a review of an exhibition of artworks from the collection of Jean-Pierre Dubosc), Benjamin analyses the differences between Western and Chinese visual culture, particularly as regards the relationship word-image, with the figure of a peculiar calligraphic mimicry: »Although the signs have a fixed connection and form on the paper, the many »resemblances« they contain set them moving. Expressed in every stroke of the brush, these virtual resemblances form a mirror where thought is reflected in this atmosphere of resemblance, or resonance« (WAWM, 259).

Benjamin's specific China syndrome – quite peculiar in the context of Western »sinomania«<sup>42</sup> – is thus quite complex, even oxymoronic: it increases whenever he feels the urge to stress the pole of nearness, the identification and mimetic assimilation. However it also manifests coupled with the opposing urge, underlining the pole of farness, the moment of distantiation. We know from Convolute N of the *Passagenarbeit* that Benjamin qualified as »dialectical« an image capable of synthetic power, expressing the conflicting co-presence of two poles »where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest« (N 10a, 3: AP, 475) without achieving any superior reconciliation: »The dialectical image is that form of the

40 Cf. the references to Chinese art and legends in G 8, 1 and F, 1 (AP, 187, 838).

41 Kafka was familiar with Pu Songling's *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten* (note 9), that he judged »wonderful, at least the ones I know« (*Letters to Felice* [1967], New York (Schocken Books) 1973, 16 January 1913). On this cf. Elias Canetti: »Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice« (1969), in: id.: *The Conscience of Words*, New York (Continuum) 1979, p. 121.

42 On the interest for Chinese culture in German modernist literature cf. Ingrid Schuster: *Vorbilder und Zerrbilder. China und Japan im Spiegel der deutschen Literatur 1890–1925*, Bern/München (Francke) 1977 (unfortunately, it does not mention either Wu Tao-tzu or Benjamin).

historical object which satisfies Goethe's requirements for the object of analysis: to exhibit a genuine synthesis. It is the primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*] of history« (N 9a, 4: AP, 474). In this sense we would suggest that the image presented by the legend of the Chinese painter be interpreted as one that is acutely, even exemplarily dialectical: as we have seen, he is actually able to convey both the nearest, most haptic identification with the artwork and the most distancing contemplation of its cult value. Between two almost contemporary, though quite different texts – *Berlin Childhood* and the essay on the work of art – Benjamin has shown what the legend brings together. In it we can grasp »a wholly unique experience of dialectic«: the kind of experience that can be seized in Chinese stories, where Benjamin saw »a highly pregnant expression« of a peculiar »dialectical reversal, eminently and thoroughly composed« (K 1, 3: AP, 389). He tried himself to compose a little Chinese tale (as short as it is dialectical, even homeopathic), published under the pseudonym Detlef Holz with the title *Chinoiserie* in the *Kölnische Zeitung* in July 1933 (GS IV, 757–758). It is the story of Mr Ming, owner of a restaurant near a romantic slope that was frequented by many lovers. But after one of these committed suicide there, Ming's business started to decline. So he decided to hang a signboard warning: »Danger of Death! High Voltage«. And his affairs began to improve again.

Analogously to the Parisian prostitutes (who are at the same time hunters of clients and prey to the police: SW IV, 340), or to the modern railway stations in the form of ancient chalets (combining old styles with new materials: AP, 16), the Chinese painter expresses a coincidence of opposites that do not coincide – a *non-coincidentia oppositorum*, as it were – but continue conflicting *im Stillstand*.