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**RECEPTION AND LEGACY OF ERNST CASSIRER'S THEORY OF
SYMBOLIC FORMS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF WALTER BENJAMIN**

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Abstract

The present work reconstructs biographical, bibliographical and theoretical aspects of Walter Benjamin's ideas in comparison to those of Ernst Cassirer. Its primary question asks: was Cassirer's notion of symbol, as embedded in the philosophical context of his milieu, a primary element of Benjamin's peculiar and lifelong investigation of the cultural and the perceptive, and of their mutual contamination? In answer, it constructs a historiographical survey of Benjamin's *Weltanschauung* prior to encountering Professor Cassirer at the University of Berlin in the early 1910s. It investigates the impact and influence of Cassirer's work on Benjamin, from his time as Cassirer's student until the last years of Benjamin's life. The form, role and development of the concept of symbol in Benjamin's research is analysed from the early project of an epistemology to the academic failure of the *Trauerspielbuch*. It pays particular attention to the dimensions of the linguistic and the mythical, two main areas to which Cassirerian analysis was also addressed at the same time. In the last section, some key concepts of Benjamin's philosophy are examined. Of particular interest is the relation between "choc", the "medium of perception". These are viewed through a theoretical analysis and comparison of several sources, and in the context of the configurative possibilities that Cassirer had previously ascribed to symbolization.

Note on Translation

Many of the translations from the German text by W. Benjamin and E. Cassirer, are the author's own. I want to thank M. Steinwurzels for the daily help and advice on German. Her support was invaluable. All other translations are indicated with publishing references in the notes.

Premise

*We're dancing among totems,
believing them trees.*

Anonymous

The present work seeks to trace the intellectual relationship that Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) entertained with the research of Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) dedicated to the concept of symbol and symbolic form. The literature available to date has already identified biographical and philosophical stages that linked these two authors. Yet, the state of the art refers above all to the first period of Cassirerian reflection, which stood out against the background of the Neokantian epistemology of Marburgian matrix, a period wherein Cassirer was still very close to the requests and methodologies of the mentor and founder Hermann Cohen. Building on these studies, this research shifts the focus on Benjamin's relationship with "the second" Cassirer, in the prelude to the publication of the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923). It is at this point that Cassirer puts into effect what is now codified as the "Cultural turn" of his philosophy: The investigation of linguistic, aesthetic and cultural practices.

The reasons behind this comparison are many and of different orders. Firstly, we welcome the need to connect two authors who are still unrelated in the current state of the art, especially with regard to their respective productions after the '10s. The investigations conducted in the past on Walter Benjamin's connection with neo-Kantian philosophy have already stressed his debt towards Cassirerian theory. Conversely, studies linking the research of both scholars in the following two decades are more rarefied and tangential. It is nonetheless easy to ascertain that Benjamin followed Cassirer's philosophical path from his university years up to the second half of the 1930s. The present research will thus try to shed light on this very period, positing that Ernst Cassirer was in fact a solid source for Walter

Benjamin. Their indirect encounter within critical literature largely revolves around the research carried out in the art-historical lead by Aby Warburg: the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek, with which Cassirer collaborated fruitfully throughout the 1920s, was for Benjamin a cultural reference point - as apparent from the clear Warburgian matrix of the *Trauerspielbuch* - and at the same time a longed-for landing place, an academic circle in which he unsuccessfully tried to enter in 1928. There have been important contributions that have gathered the views of these two authors on Warburgian research¹, yet no direct comparison has been attempted between Benjamin's and Cassirer's perspectives². It is supposed that this correlation could have been discouraged by Benjamin's severe accusation against the concept of symbol during his research on the Baroque: a heuristic notion that Benjamin rejects and undermines in the *Kunstwissenschaft's* field of investigation, defining it in terms of a convenient solution (*zum Komfort kunstwissenschaftlicher Untersuchungen*). But precisely in the text where this explicit condemnation is perpetuated, Benjamin also defends the notion of symbol in its epistemological role, placing it as a metaphysical and methodological task of philosophical investigation. It is precisely this manifest contradiction that has inspired the research proposed here.

The studies conducted on the relationship of the young Benjamin with Warburgian philosophy have in fact shown how the presence of Cassirer's thought is manifested above all in Benjamin's youthful project to renew Kantian epistemology: it is well attested that the concept of function, as it was developed by Cassirer in his *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910), laid the foundations for the general layout of *Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin* (1915). This is also related to a series of notions that recur in Benjamin's early fragments, which have

¹ The main text that has collected the contribution of Warburgian research on the thought of Cassirer and Benjamin (although not putting them in direct correlation) is certainly: C. D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2012

² An attempt of approach was made in the text S. Waldow, *Der Mythos der Sprache reinen. Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Hans Blumenberg. Allegorische Intertextualität als Erinnerungsschreiben der Moderne*, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2006. Even without a comparison between the authors, the researches on the symbol of Cassirer and Benjamin have also been collected in G. Raio, *Ermeneutica del simbolo*, Liguori, Napoli 1988. A direct (but not historiographical) comparison on the concept of *Werk-Phänomen* was proposed in a theoretical sense in the article by C. Metta, *A Critique of the Work. Cassirer and Benjamin*, in "Cassirer Studies", vol. 4, 2012, pp. 123-141.

rightly been traced back to Cassirer's theoretical and historiographical work: for instance, the treatment of the concept of *Urphänomen* by Goethe, the reworking of the concept of *Inbegriff* by Cohen, and the studies conducted by Cassirer on the relationship between ordinality and cardinality in mathematical epistemology. However, these are the main theoretical tools through which Cassirer reached the concept that became the cornerstone of his subsequent philosophy; in other words, these are the main tenets supporting his theory of *Symbolic Forms*. At the same time, as we have said, such concepts and findings were extensively featured in Benjamin's early investigations. It was therefore necessary to question to what extent the epistemological project proposed by Benjamin, which refers to a symbolic of knowledge informed by Cassirer's work (and which lasts until the *Vorrede* of the *Trauerspielbuch*), may have been affected by this Cassirerian influence. Following from this, it was interesting to ascertain what role it may have played in the later development of Benjaminian thought. To appreciate how this question can provide us with an original portrait of Benjamin's disciplinary eclecticism, it is necessary to summarize the role that the symbolic turning point had in founding the Cassirerian method of enquiry.

A somewhat rough formulation of the concept of "symbolic form" features for the first time in Cassirer's *Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie* (concluded in 1920)³. Only in the essay *Der Begriff der symbolischen Form* (1923) will it find a more thorough elaboration. This concept came to Cassirer's aid in answering three fundamental questions. The first is the one closest to Kantian criticism, wherein symbol marks the meeting point between the sensible and the intuition. The second is what has been correctly defined as the "syntacticism" of the different modes of spiritual productions (something which by today's standards could easily be gathered from the meshes of "medium specificity" theory). Cassirer faces the question in the introduction to the first volume of the *Symbolic Forms*: every human work, be it religious, artistic, linguistic or scientific, is capable of producing its own "condition of seeing", which in turn is capable of re-establishing its own

³ There was actually a previous occurrence: M. Ferrari reports the first use of the formula "symbolischen formen" to 1904, within the *Hauptschriften* of Leibniz. Cf. M. Ferrari, *Il giovane Cassirer e la scuola di Marburgo*, Milano 1988, p. 248.

“objectivity”. The third interrogative is then connected to the unity of knowledge, which looks at the *universalitas* of the set of diversified ways of spiritual production, and their ability to influence each other, participating in that question that Cassirer borrows from Descartes: *ingenii limites definire*. This triple purpose – which we must reduce to its own cornerstones – will lead Cassirer to probe a surprising heterogeneity of disciplinary fields. Following the tripartition just proposed (which seeks to be thematic and not chronological, and which is organized by the latest contributions left by J. M. Krois)⁴, Cassirer will exploit the theoretical biology of zoologist Jacob von Uexküll (1864-1944) to analyse how sensory stimuli can be discriminated and organized in a coherent environment by non-cultural animal species. He will untie the myth from narratological analysis, from the *fabula*, to interpret it, through Hermann Usener, as the first cultural and configurative response, capable of inducing the need to give shape to experience through artistic and linguistic practices. He will also welcome Wilhelm von Humboldt’s morphological approach to linguistics and Kurt Goldstein’s neurological studies to determine how linguistic structures shape the conceptualization, perception and overall articulation of experience.

Perhaps best crystallized in the famous Davos 1929 debate with Martin Heidegger, Cassirer’s philosophical project was clear: building on Kantian transcendental method, he wanted to challenge the ontological and naturalistic claims of human experience, stressing on the contrary its cultural, formative and functional character. At the centre of this method stands the notion of symbol, which is also the fruitful product of erudition and the systematic nature that marked Cassirer’s philosophical path. As Giulio Raio also had clarified, an exhaustive genealogy of this concept in Cassirer’s work is destined to remain always partial: sources can be divided into “logical-metaphysical (Cusano, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel), aesthetic sources (Goethe, Hegel, Humboldt, Vischer), scientific sources (Helmholtz, Hertz), mythological sources (Schelling, Usener, Vignoli),

⁴ In our opinion, the studies conducted by J. M. Krois in Cassirer’s interpretation, together with those of M. Ferrari, return an organic vision of the Cassirerian epistemological project which, precisely because of its interdisciplinary nature, opens the side to partial or sectorial interpretations. In this research, alongside the studies by Varene, Orth, and Ferrari, the interpretation of Krois will therefore be one of the main points of reference.

iconological sources (Warburg, Saxl, Panofsky, Croce)”⁵. Yet, many other names and disciplinary fields are added to this group (for instance neurology, ethnology, physiology, law, and psychiatry – but also technology and economics can be considered). From all these derivations, Cassirer’s concept of symbol expands the Kantian “Copernican revolution” in cultural morphology, questioning how human activity constantly reconfigures the basic conditions of experience: the symbol, as Cassirer specifies in the introduction to the first volume of its *Symbolic Forms*, is the common medium of this process of configuration, representation, and signification⁶.

If, as we intend to show here, we observe Benjamin’s philosophy from this perspective, what we see is a parallel urge. Benjamin questioned technical, artistic, religious, linguistic and literary production methods, to determine how these modify and structure the conditions of experience up to the perceptual dimension. Each of these declinations has now been widely probed by critics, giving life to “a series of Walter Benjamins”, each one confined to disciplinary areas that have become over time more and more specific and, inevitably, more and more autonomous: it is thus possible to speak of a media theorist Benjamin, or a Marxist Benjamin; he can be the historian of perception, or the anthropologist of metropolitan life; he is at once the literary critic, the kabbalist and platonic erudite, the allegorist, the morphologist and so on. However, what seems to hold this heterogeneous constellation together is precisely Benjamin’s peculiar method. His procedure can look fragmentarily at the unity and unitarily at the fragment, to search for its original configurative instant. At the same time, Benjamin’s philosophy is marked by a clear focus on reconfiguration through cultural practices: this is for instance the case with his reflection on the style and historicity of perception, a problematic ascribable to the Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte and to the studies of Heinrich Wölfflin. The same focus emerges throughout the analysis of life practices in the industrialized city, in relation to the reconfiguration of the *sensorium*. There is further evidence of it can be found in the creative abilities and

⁵ G. Raio, *Introduzione a Cassirer*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1991.

⁶ Cf. E. Cassirer, “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache” (1923), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 11, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2001.

the configurative power that he ascribed to language, as well as in the investigation of technology and artistic fruition in relation to new media. Here we do not intend to survey these individual areas; while each of these will always invariably offer a starting point for promising reflections, they have all been widely discussed. Instead, a somewhat more urgent question begs to be considered: whether, that is, Cassirer's philosophy of culture could have provided Benjamin with a systematic model and a bibliographic apparatus enabling him to formulate the very question underlying all these fields. Ours is therefore a first, tentative approach that will hopefully find more circumscribed declinations in the future. As of today, no study has attempted to describe the evolution of the symbol concept within Benjaminian thought, posing it as a centrepiece of the philosopher's theoretical tenets.

If a correlation is indeed to be established, it is necessary to start from a genealogy of the symbolic matrix of Benjamin's theory of knowledge. From this point of view, the Italian reader is particularly advantaged, thanks to the high-profile studies that have been carried out in the years: the research of Fabrizio Desideri, starting with the text *Walter Benjamin. Il Tempo e le Forme* (1980), has greatly contributed to clarify the Benjamin's peculiar brand of Kantism, reflected in the project of a symbolic of language and reverberating up to the theses on the concept of history. Further still, a tentative historiographical epitome of this question can be discerned in the new edition of the text by Tamara Tagliacozzo, *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (2017). This work has retraced the Kantian origins of early Benjamin with documentary abundance, suggesting the existence of a structured, conscious, unitary epistemological project. In Tagliacozzo, this system is rooted in an idealistic tradition heavily leaning on the symbolic matrix proper of some early Romanticism. The Italian panorama also adds the theoretical approach of Giorgio Agamben to this line of interpretation. Agamben contributed extensively to illuminate and update Benjamin's philosophy of language, in its political and theological connotations.

As for the genealogy of the concept of symbol, the studies conducted in past years around Benjamin's debt towards Goethean morphology provide further corroboration; considering the Benjamin of the *Trauerspielbuch*, they can help to

appreciate to what extent this notion was essential⁷. Somewhat evoked by these studies, which in the first place inspired the present work, a fundamental, latent question arises: the point to be determined remains the kind of stance that Benjamin may have had on Cassirerian research in general, and particularly on his theory of symbolic forms. Additionally, a somewhat intriguing internal problem of method surfaces here; as confirmed by the recently published, interesting volume edited by J. Nitsche and N. Werner, *Entwendungen. Walter Benjamin und seine Quellen* (2019), the forge of Benjaminian thought often tends to incorporate its own sources, in a process of re-discussion and rewriting that leads, in many cases, to outright appropriation. For this reason, historiographical research dealing with Benjamin and his sources always requires a hermeneutic effort. The present work undertakes this challenge: not only will it assess Cassirer's halo within the Benjaminian corpus with the help of selected confrontations and pairings; it will also bring to light Benjamin's unique way of employing his sources through processes of rewriting, reinterpretation and incorporation of different materials.

We chose to write this thesis in English for some specific reasons. Firstly, Cassirer's work has benefited from renewed interest in the United States from the postwar period until today, an academic trend in turn greatly enriched by the most notable German scholars' contributions. Noteworthy attempts to engage his philosophy in a dialogue with contemporary society and culture largely stem from anglophone academics. In the first section of this research this aspect will clearly emerge during the analysis of the attempts at periodization of Cassirerian thought. As for Benjamin, the English language was chosen in the hope that international studies could somehow meld: particularly, English and German works are paired with the precious contributions that Italy has been able to offer in the last fifty years of Benjaminian studies. Hence, while this research leans significantly on Anglo-American studies, its primary purpose is to find, via the English language, a point of intersection among the various perspectives that have been offered nationally and internationally. After all, the key to the concept of symbolization really lies in

⁷ We refer here especially to the contributions given by C. Cappelletto, M. Carbone, M. Ophälders and A. Pinotti, who have already addressed this question in various facets. This common line of research has been witnessed since the publication of the volume A. Pinotti (ed.), *Sull'Origine del Dramma Barocco Tedesco di Walter Benjamin*, Mimesis, Milano 2001.

its own transdisciplinarity; in our opinion, this pace can be imparted to research only through a selection and a comparison of these two authors' articulated legacies, precisely considered in their international and multi-faceted spectrum.

Programme

In the first section, “Benjamin and Cassirer. A Historical and Biographical Reconstruction”, is contextualized the meeting between the young Benjamin, a student at the University of Berlin, and Professor Cassirer. This meeting took place in 1915, at the dawn of First World War. It seemed advisable then to contextualize the atmosphere looming over German academic institutions, a scenario in which Benjamin actively participated, reaching the position of chief in the *Freiestudentenschaft*. Through the analysis of some of his letters to friends and confidants and some early writings, many of which published in “Der Anfang”, the journal directed by mentor Gustav Wyneken, this section tries to determine how the political and ideological position of the young Benjamin may have contributed to the ill-concealed intellectual opposition he had with some exponents of neo-Kantism (among others, Heinrich Rickert and Jonas Cohn); this intellectual opposition, as Scholem himself will confirm, was also partially directed towards Cassirer. Three main vectors are here considered: Benjamin’s historiographical research on the Neokantism, the philosophical-biographical research on Cassirer, and authors who have attempted to thematically periodize Cassirer’s thought. Thanks to their intersections, this research reconstructs those Cassirer’s courses in Berlin that Benjamin allegedly attended, identifying the main themes. The section ends with an analysis of the recurrences of Cassirer’s works in Benjamin’s own, up to the investigation of the essay *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* (1934). It is then remarked how the structure of the text, the themes and the set of sources trace the structure of the first three volumes of the *Symbolischen Formen*. From a historiographical point of view, this section shows how Benjamin’s association with Cassirer extends well beyond the university years and is manifest up until the drafting of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*.

The second section retraces “The Rise and Fall of the Notion of Symbol in Walter Benjamin’s Work”. Here the genealogy of this concept is traced, from the early essays and fragments dedicated to language and the *Erkenntnistheorie* (1916-

1925), up to the drafting of the *Trauerspielbuch*, which signals the exile of this notion (or at least its mention) from the philosophical *immaginario* of Benjamin. The section also discusses how Benjamin opposes from the beginning the medial aspect of language to the symbolic dimension, the latter being characterized by mystical and theological traits drawn from German Romanticism (especially Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder), from Jewish mysticism and from the studies on proto-Christianity conducted by Adolf von Harnack. It will be highlighted here how Benjamin and Cassirer assigned a performative capacity to language, that is, the ability of linguistic symbolization to modify cognitive and perceptive forms – in the field of study of *Wort- und Formenbildung* (a tradition recently codified by C. Taylor). At the same time, the closeness of Benjamin and Cassirer will be considered positing the symbol as an element of systematic unity of knowledge, while also re-reading their relationship with Goethe's morphological method. Considerations are drawn on how this connotation may have been decisive in Benjamin's reception (and his accusation against the theory of the symbol in the historical-artistic field) of the studies conducted by the Warburg Kreis. To this end, the relationship between Warburg and Cassirer is reviewed here, with particular attention to the role that Hermann Usener's research played in their respective studies on symbolization. Investigations inside the Kreis around the concept of symbol also find a thorough examination in this section: we will thus inspect the tradition of *Einfühlung*, inaugurated by R. Vischer; also in focus, the approach of T. Vignoli (who came to Warburg via Usener) and the positions of E. Wind and E. Panofsky. The idea is here to sketch a portrait of the symbolic function as it emerged from the reflections of the Hamburg circle, knowing that Benjamin was looking at the Kreis while drafting his *Trauerspielbuch*. An interesting entry here is represented by the study of astrology as a model of symbolization, which appears to link the research of Usener, Warburg, Benjamin and Cassirer. In the last chapter, building on recent interpretations of Sigrid Weigel, it is suggested that Benjamin's epistemological-symbolic project may be at the basis of the configurative capacities that he himself assigns to the concepts of trauma and *choc*. To do so, we consider Weigel's survey of the epistemological task that the image covers in Benjamin thought, sewing her observations with Benjamin's own contentions on symbol. It

will be here shown how Benjamin's concept of image shares, from an aesthetic and gnoseological point of view, the peculiarities that Benjamin had previously assigned to the concept of symbol.

In the third and last section, “The Reception and Legacy of Cassirer’s Philosophy in Benjamin’s Thought”, the work retraces the studies on the symbolic-configurative possibilities that Cassirer ascribed to mythical thought, a reflection that certainly appealed to Benjamin. The centrality of tautegory in *Sprache und Mythos* (1925) is thus discussed: within the general frame of the “symbolic question”, proof is given that this very issue was most pressing in the years leading to Benjamin’s *Trauerspielbuch*. A brief genealogy of the concept is proposed – a pattern unfolding from the appearance of the neologism in Schelling to the reception of the term in the 20th century, stressing the interest it aroused in both Benjamin and Cassirer. Thanks to this notion’s legacy (reconstructed by A. Altman) it becomes possible to analyse Benjamin’s blatant misunderstanding of Cassirerian work on myth, apparent in the far-fetched siding of Cassirer and Lévy-Bruhl in *Sprachsoziologie*. Here, our focus shifts to the nexus between Cassirer’s studies on myth and his incursion into the field of neurology, carried out in Frankfurt with his cousin Kurt Goldstein. Contemporary to such incursion is Cassirer’s personal reading of Usener’s work. In our research, these two instances point to a threefold relation involving trauma, hyperaesthesia and symbolic configuration. For this reason, this section also enhances the symbolic dynamic in Usener’s *Augenblicksgötter*. In this perspective, the neurologist’s work aligns with the research that Benjamin was conducting during the 30’s in the perceptive domain. In this sense, considering *L’analyse de l’aphasie et essence du langage* (1933) is of paramount relevance; it proves that Cassirer and Goldstein were working (and have already elaborated on) several conceptual lynchpins of Benjamin’s studies on perception. Object of particular attention is here the nexus that Goldstein posits between *choc* and “catastrophic reaction”, clearly distanced from Freudian trauma. The concept of *milieu* also redirects to Benjamin: this was a fundamental tenet in Goldstein’s clinical approach, aimed at the reconfiguration of the patient’s cognitive and perceptive space. What our work suggest here is that *milieu* might have come to Benjamin indirectly; leaning on Jacob von Uexküll’s research on the

subject, Benjamin might have looked both at Goldstein's texts and Cassirer's elaboration of the concept featuring the third volume of the *Symbolic Forms*. The research ends with a retrospective examination of the main threads hither to followed, gathering and rephrasing data, questions and tentative answers.

I. Benjamin and Cassirer. A Historical and Biographical
Reconstruction

1. Benjamin from Freiburg to Berlin. An Introduction to the Intellectual Landscape

*Where Cohen spoke in tongues
Cassirer sprang from the continuum
from Cantor to Cartesium.
[...] I never believe that Eucken
would have renewed philosophy.
If Euler was a strong eater,
the question seems to us infertile.*

W. Benjamin, *Teaching Poem*
Approved by the Faculty of Philosophy
(unknown date)⁸

1.1. An Einbahnstraße. A Brief Methodological Premise

It would be misleading to question the classic and legitimate interpretation that juxtaposes Walter Benjamin and Ernst Cassirer. The vision of religion, the political ideology, the philosophical methodology and the biographies of these two philosophers seem to clash to the extent that their distance has become somewhat crystallized, preventing therefore any chance to engage them in a dialogue. Yet, within their work, there is a long series of intertwining which, on the contrary, suggests the need to trigger an apparently impossible comparison.

If it is true that there was no direct intellectual confrontation between Benjamin and Cassirer, we have however evidence that the first was well aware of the second: a series of direct and indirect testimonies attest Walter Benjamin's lifelong – though often critical – interest in the work of Ernst Cassirer, an interest which seems to have been unrequited. We are therefore faced with a unilateral dialogue, with an

⁸ «Wo Cohen redete in Zungen / da ist Cassirer ihm entsprungen / creiert aus dem Continuum / von Cantor bis Cartesium [...] Dass Eucken die Philosophie /eneuert hätte, glaube nie. / Ob Euler starker Esser war / die Frage scheint uns unfruchtbar» [W. Benjamin, "Approbiertes Lehrgedicht der philosophischen Facultät", in *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, in *Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, (ed.) U. Steiner, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2008, p. 315].

Einbahnstraße, to use a Benjaminian expression. This crucial fact will have to be considered while attempting to shed light on the volatile encounters between the two philosophers. This “match that never was”, ultimately amounting to a univocal interest, is undeniably the first sign of two distinct philosophical universes. Certainly, these universes displayed a significant proximity in terms of common knowledge and common philosophical sources – to the point that they even present a similar approach to and development of certain themes and topics. A proper and explicit exchange, however, was never meant to be.

This said, their interesting similarity should not lead to hasty misconceptions: the fact that Benjamin mentioned Ernst Cassirer several times in his texts does not in any way demonstrate that he shared his philosophical principles. His interest was more likely to be – at least in part – a mandatory bow, a respect dictated by the disparity of their position and imparted by the international fame of the philosopher of Wrocław. Still, and perhaps more interestingly, Benjamin’s penchant for Cassirer also stems from theoretical interests that they had in common, interests that are however irreconcilable for their different methods and perhaps by virtue of divergent ideological assumptions. Before proceeding with this reconstruction, it is therefore essential to keep in mind that the material, political and academic conditions of the first half of the twentieth century allowed for Cassirer to feature in Benjamin’s texts, but not vice versa.

This general consideration and necessary premise clearly indicate the perspective that must be adopted to face a historical and comparative analysis between the two philosophers. Thus, instead of employing a horizontal methodology, which would lead to a scrutiny of the two philosophers from a neutral point of view, it is necessary to undertake the perspective prompted by documentary evidence: for this reason, the analysis must necessarily follow the point of view by Benjamin on Cassirer’s thinking and the sources shared with him.

It would also be a mistake not to consider other aspects – attaining perhaps more to biographical facts than philosophy itself – that may have concurred to Benjamin’s judgment on the intellectual figure of Cassirer: as detailed in the following pages, the meeting between the two took place in a crucial period for the intellectual formation of the young man Benjamin, a phase marked by his strong political

fervour and a neat questioning of the German academic horizon: in the first half of the '10s, Benjamin enrolled in university and gradually approached the philosophical disciplines; around the same time he personally took part with high hopes and great expectations in the lively contestation movements of the German youth. This experience ended abruptly with the outbreak of the First World War, but left a profound trace in the approach that, throughout his life, Benjamin had in dealing with academic institutions. Ernst Cassirer, at least during those years, was the perfect representation of that very academic, systematic and Kant-derived philosophy which was targeted in the contesting programs to which Benjamin adhered. Obviously, it is not possible to determine precisely what weight all this has had in the contradictory relationship that Benjamin had with the work of Cassirer, but it is an aspect that must be considered, at least through a brief but necessary contextualization.

1.2. Benjamin's Relationship with Academic Tradition: Wyneken's Influence

The intellectual life of the young Benjamin during the early 10's is extremely heterogeneous, piled up with contradictory stimuli and cultural tensions. Thanks to the collaborations with various university magazines, it is well known that Benjamin was divided between the reforming spirit of the German youth groups and a certain cultural elitism, well testified by the *Metaphysik der Jugend*. The dialectic between these two tensions will be the main cause of Benjamin's growing intellectual concerns about the role of youth, academic teaching and the philosophy of culture. Various commentators, including biographers H. Eiland and W. Jeggins, justify the enrolment of the young Benjamin at the Albert-Ludwig-Universität in Freiburg precisely with the need to touch the youthful ferment that was starting to find its own organization thanks to Gustav Wyneken's proposal to establish independent groups of students (*Freie Studentenschaften*), distant in terms of values and conformation from the classic associative formulas promoted by the other universities.

The critical stance that Benjamin developed in his university years towards the historical and specialist conception of education was certainly inspired by the direct meeting with Gustav Wyneken⁹, professor of literature at Haubinda's Landerziehungsheim, where Benjamin was transferred in 1904 after having attended for three years Kaiser-Friedrich-Schule in Berlin. Inspired by a Platonic idea of the educational institution, well rooted in German romantic culture (both philosophical and literary), the charismatic figure of Wyneken had been able to significantly influence the most active German youth movements, among which the *Jugendkulturbewegung* and the *Wandervogel* stood out.

Without going too far into the debate on merits and demerits of Wyneken's philosophical-pedagogical program¹⁰, some instances that will recur in the Benjaminian intellectual imagination can be traced. The most relevant is perhaps the epistemological role that the pedagogue assigned to youth: Wyneken claimed that youth should be freed from its momentary and tensive function. He was adamant that the idea of youth conceived as an intellectual and cultural moment of existence (that is, as an intermediate and functional stage proceeding a more productive and aware adult life) should be shelved and dismissed completely. Following from Plato, this *Jugendkultur* should have been ideally self-educating, with no interference from older generations. On this note, Wyneken's need to encourage a *pädagogischer Eros* among the communities of young people is also

⁹ «Für Hans Blüher ist Gustav Wyneken der einzige Mann, "der dazu geboren ist, Führer zu sein". Dieser ist selbst kein Wandervogel, wirkt jedoch sehr stark auf diesen ein. Geboren wurde Wyneken 1875 in Stade/Niedersachsen als Sohn eines promovierten, philosophisch gebildeten Pfarrers. Er studiert Philosophie, Nationalökonomie und Theologie in Berlin, Halle, Greifswald und Göttingen, promoviert über Hegel und schließt das Studium mit der Staatsprüfung für das Lehramt in den Fächern Germanistik und klassische Philologie ab. Von 1900 bis 1906 ist er Lehrer an den von Hermann Lietz gegründeten und geleiteten Landerziehungsheimen Ilsenburg und Gaubinda. 1906 gründet er mit seinem Kollegen Paul Geheeb die, Freie Schulgemeinde Wickersdorf". 1910 scheidet er von dieser, bleibt ihr aber konzeptionell verbunden und wirbt für sie. Bis 1918 ist Wyneken Vorsitzender des, Bundes für Freie Schulgemeinden und Herausgeber der Zeitschrift des Bundes. Er schreibt Bücher, plant Aktionsprogramme für die großen Tagungen der Jugendbewegung, darunter das für das Treffen auf dem Hohen Meißner 1913». [E. Strassner, *Zur Sprache der Wandervögel 1890 bis 1923*, in "Neuphilologische Mitteilungen", vol. 108, no. 2, 2007, pp. 399-421, here p. 407].

¹⁰ The trial that was advanced against Wynken in 1921 brought out the most controversial aspects of his pedagogical method, inseparably linked with the physical and sexual sphere. To retrace the foundations of his pedagogy, the debate that began with the Wyneken trial and his relative one-year incarceration, see the recent volume: P. Dudek, "*Körpermissbrauch und Seelenschändung*". *Der Prozess gegen den Reformpädagogen Gustav Wyneken*, Julius Klinkhardt, Bad Heilbrunn 2020.

clearly understood as aimed at promoting spiritual and intellectual growth¹¹ through erotic tension.

The influence of these theories on young Benjamin can be seen with extreme clarity in several youthful writings¹², many of which published in the magazine “Der Anfang”, of which Wyneken was editor in chief¹³. Among these, a quick and heartfelt accusation stands out, *The Youth was Silent (Die Jugend schwieg)* in 1913, published in the magazine “Die Aktion”, which clearly demonstrates how Benjamin understood the generational conflict as the result of a worn-out and institutionalized, “sclerotized” (*antworten*), pedagogical method, such as it will be termed in a letter to Herbert Blumenthal¹⁴. Albeit riotous, the lexicon of this text explicitly recalls Wyneken’s approach, offering a precious testimony of what Benjamin’s position was in 1913 with regards to German school and university institutions:

And it is here that the youthful spirit, the indignation must disclose itself: against the paternal house that dulls the minds, against the school that takes the spirit to the tread. Youth was silent. It has not yet had the intuition capable of bringing down the great old age complex. This powerful ideology:

¹¹ On this theme, a connection between the first Benjamin, still fascinated by Wyneken’s theories on eroticism, and the Parisian Benjamin, attentive to Baudelaire’s poetics and the *topos* of the sanctification of prostitution, can be found in this excerpt: «Until the students will continue to be pleased with a poem imbued with familiar feelings, until they dare to spiritually see the prostitute’s eroticism, to which they are very close (instead of fiddling with a pampered and small pleasure), they will remain prisoners of a stale poetry of the relationship, and not they will not be able to produce even a verse that has its intuitive clarity and form» [W. Benjamin, “Erotische Erziehung” (1914) in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 71-72, here p. 72].

¹² Many of these texts, together with some poetic works, were signed by Benjamin under the pseudonym “Ardor”.

¹³ «The progressive educator and pedagogic theorist Gustav Wyneken agreed to take the title of responsible editor of “Der Anfang”. Necessity for a journal written by minors to have an official adult editor, but Wyneken left the writers to their own devices». [J. A. Williams, *Ecstasies of the Young: Sexuality, the Youth Movement, and Moral Panic in Germany on the Eve of the First World War*, in “Central European History”, vol. 34, no. 2, 2001, pp. 163-189, here p. 170].

¹⁴ «Die Jugend möge einer politisch verkalkten Öffentlichkeit antworten. Wir sind tätig: Heinle hat seinen Artikel über das Festspiel bereits». [W. Benjamin to H. Blumenthal, Freiburg 23.6.1913, in *Briefe*, in W. Benjamin, *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 10, (eds.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, Br. 63].

experience – maturity – authority – reason – goodwill of adults – has not been identified and has not been torn down¹⁵.

Even more in the Wynekenian chords is the following passage: «Only a few understand the meaning of the word “youth” and the fact that only from it can a new spirit radiate, or rather *The Spirit*»¹⁶. Benjamin’s allusion to youth as a creative and independent epistemological model, capable of subverting the links of traditional culture, clearly reflects the aforementioned concept promoted by Wyneken – which could in turn be effortlessly traced back to the text *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben* (1874) by Nietzsche¹⁷. This excerpt shows the metaphysical impetus that young Benjamin had while taking youth as his object of analysis: an impetus that implicitly carried the demands of Wyneken, classical German culture (especially Schlegel, Hölderlin) and some suggestions of Jewish mysticism¹⁸. These were all issues that Benjamin was approaching in those years. Against the background of these considerations, however, the fluctuating position of Benjamin with regard to youth movements persisted: positive when it came to discuss ultimate aims and goals, it became negative when the ways to reach such purposes were at stake.

Obviously Wyneken is not the only one to inspire Benjamin in his youth, as there many personalities that have crossed the human and academical path of the young philosopher – many of which will be analysed in the following pages. Here we

¹⁵ W. Benjamin, “Die Jugend schwieg” (1913), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 67-71, here p. 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁷ This text, in addition to influencing Wyneken’s thinking, will return several times to Benjamin’s work and will open the twelfth paragraph of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* in exergue. A direct testimony of the role that Nietzschean thought would have played, according to Benjamin, in anticipating the “era of youth” can also be easily found in the text *Das Dornröschen* of 1911: «We live in the era of socialism, feminism, trafficking, of individualism. Are we not by chance heading towards the age of youth? However, we live in a period in which you cannot browse a newspaper without your eye falling on the word “school”, in a period in which the words “coeducation”, “state institution”, “childhood” and “art” are in the air. But youth is the sleeping beauty and does not know that the prince is approaching to free her. He wants to show young people the values and expressive results achieved by the youth of the great men: Schiller, Goethe, Nietzsche». *Das Dornröschen* has been published for the first time in the student magazine “Der Anfang. Vereinigte Zeitschriften der Jugend” in March 1911. [W. Benjamin, “Das Dornröschen” (1911), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (ed.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 9-12, here p. 9].

¹⁸ Crucial in these years was his association with Kurt Tüchler, with whom Benjamin weaved a dense correspondence that has been lost. Tüchler was the founder of the Blau-Weiß Zionist movement.

linger on the figure of Wyneken rightly to highlight the cultural and pedagogical attitude with which Benjamin confronted the academic culture of his period: his judgement on subsequent intellectuals was biased by the ongoing influence of such juvenile persuasions. On the other hand, the examination of the relationship between Benjamin and Wyneken, which illuminates several tenets in common, shows very well how the militancy in Benjamin's youth groups was driven by a theoretical concern which, in his opinion, should have been incorporated in the critical horizon of the new generations. This is precisely the relationship between tradition and personal experience: for the young Benjamin, the potential of youth could only have come to fruition by a reconfiguration of the concept of intellectual experience, intended as an independent, personal and pathic moment.

Under the surface of the various contingent opinions, which Benjamin may have assumed from time to time during his militancy in youth groups, the dialectic between personal experience and the traditional structure of knowledge appears to be constant. This tension, however abstract, is fundamental to understand many of the apparent contradictions seemingly marking Benjamin's disposition towards the classical methods of university teaching. Of course, among the various writings of the early 10's, *Metaphysik der Jugend* (1914) offers the most cohesive and extensive treatment of the matter at hand. This balance emerges in two different moments: firstly, it stems from relationship between expression and tradition; this is then declined in the paradoxical temporality in which youth is inscribed (a paradoxical temporality, which Benjamin will address with the famous expression "*die ewig gewesene Gegenwart*¹⁹").

This "countermovement", as Benjamin defines it, is well exemplified in the section *The Diary*: here the ego is forced to consider its origin, while giving space to the emblematic expression of the moment. The greatness private journal prose is crossed by a synchronic temporal concretion, which considers tradition as the constitutive instant of the expressive future: «And the fate is: this countermovement of things in the time of the ego. And that time of the ego when things happen to us is truly the greatness. All the future has passed. The past is the future

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, "Metaphysik der Jugend" (1914), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 91-105, here p. 93.

of the ego time. But the past will be in the future. They send the time of the ego again when they have entered the void»²⁰. This reversal of cultural temporality, which considers history and tradition as goals to be achieved through invention (and intellectual invention as a moment to be sought in the historicity of tradition) foreshadows some of the more mature Benjamin's positions on the idea of "ahistoricism", which, as will be seen, will significantly influence Benjamin's reception of Cassirer's and Panofsky's work²¹.

In the fifth paragraph of the *Metaphysics of Youth*, the same tension between past and present, tradition and expression, returns, but this time it is expressed through the metaphor of motherhood. In the fifth paragraph Benjamin proposes an allegorical dialogue between the character of the genius and that of a prostitute. Although metaphorical and esoteric, the excerpt follows once again the paradoxical temporal "countermovement" that the inventiveness of youth must face. Thus, the genius confides to the prostitute: «My mother has always looked at me, interrogated me, written me. In her I have forgotten all men. Everyone became my mother. All the women had given birth to me, no man had procreated me»²². Benjamin's paradoxical position towards tradition and education is well represented in this excerpt: the contrast between absolute motherhood and denied fatherhood should not be understood as a simple rhetorical device; it is in fact the emancipation from "the fathers" that is required by the wynekenian-inspired movements that Benjamin

²⁰ «Und Schicksal ist: diese Gegenbewegung der Dinge in der Zeit des Ich. Und jene Zeit des Ich, in der die Dinge uns widerfahren, das ist die Größe. Ihr ist alle Zukunft vergangen. Der Dinge Vergangenheit ist die Zukunft der Ich-Zeit. Aber die Vergangenen werden zukünftig. Von neuem entsenden sie die Zeit des Ich, wenn sie eingegangen sind in den Abstand» [*Ibid.*, p. 102].

²¹ «In einem Brief an Florens Christian Rang vom 9. Dezember 1923 schreibt Benjamin: "Mich beschäftigt [...] der Gedanke, wie Kunstwerke sich zum geschichtlichen Leben verhalten. Dabei gilt mir als ausgemacht, daß es Kunstgeschichte nicht gibt". [...] In Bezug auf die Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte, die der Gegenstand des zitierten Briefs Benjamins an Florens Christian Rang ist, scheint es, als ob Benjamin auf die Tatsache anspielen würde, dass das klassische Schema, dessen sich die Kunstgeschichte bedient, um ihre Gegenstände zu ordnen, auf ein Modell linearer oder zyklischer Zeitlichkeit gestützt ist, das zum evolutionären und teleologischen Historisieren führt. Demzufolge vollzieht sich die Kunstgeschichte innerhalb von Kontinuitätsmodellen, die dem Muster einer Nachfolge von Perioden oder Zeitaltern folgen: entweder im Sinne eines genealogischen Schemas – wie etwa den für Vasaris Künstlerbiographien charakteristischen ternären Zyklus (antike Periode oder Entstehen, fortgeschrittene Periode oder Jugend und Zeit der Perfektion oder Reife) – oder auch eines Modells, das mit Übergangsphasen operiert und dadurch die Kontinuität in der Kunstgeschichte betont (Panofsky)» [M. T. Costa, *Walter Benjamins Auseinandersetzung mit der Kunstwissenschaft seiner Zeit*, in "Weimarer Beiträge", no. 61, 2015, pp. 364-380, here p. 364].

²² W. Benjamin, *Metaphysik der Jugend* (1914), *op. cit.*, p. 94.

joined. The genius of Benjamin's dialogue rejects the paternal relationship: «No man had procreated me»²³, while, at the same time, he affirms the absolute and continuous generation of motherhood. The metaphorical juxtaposition between the father and the mother of the genius certainly takes up the attempt to reconfigure the concept of *Erlebnis* in his relation to the alternative notion *Erfahrung*, hints of which can be found in other coeval writings²⁴. On the back of Wyneken, Benjamin argued that one of the main tasks of youth should be precisely to claim for its own a new conception of experience: to escape the grids of a cumulative and diachronic model of experience, through which the older generations may have invoked intellectual supremacy, young people should have reconsidered their experience in the temporal and pathic sign of intellectual enlightenment. Thus, there stands on one side the normative tradition of fathers (expressed by the diachronic construction of tradition), whereas on the opposite side is placed the generative tension of that “romantic will” emerges, that «spontaneous, original, absolute and stormy»²⁵ model of life flourishing in the image of continuous generation and absolute motherhood²⁶.

Around the same time of the drafting of *Metaphysics of Youth*, Benjamin's commitment to youth organizations reached its climax, followed by a drastic detachment just a year later. It was in February 1914 that Benjamin assumed the role of leader within the group of Free Students, who gathered in a national assembly in Weimar in June of the same year. Benjamin's motions, in keeping with the theoretical and political intent reported so far – and inspired by his mentor, were rejected by a vote that saw him unquestionably in minority: the more conservative positions prevailed. They were perhaps more practical and less philosophical, but

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ «The term, in German at last, gives rise to a rich and confusing palette of meanings: *Erfahrung* (between travelling [*fahren*] and standing still), *Erlebnis* (between living [*leben*] and death), *Empfindung* (between finding [*finden*] and loss), *Gefühl* (between feeling [*fühlen*] and touch)» [T. Elsaesser, *Between Erlebnis and Erfahrung: Cinema Experience with Benjamin*, in “Paragraph”, vol. 32, no. 3, Nov. 2009, (*Passage-work: Walter Benjamin between the Disciplines*), pp. 292-312]. Benjamin's youth text dedicated to this theme is *Erfahrung* (1913). A broad reflection on the same topic can be found in the aforementioned *Romantik* (1913).

²⁵ W. Benjamin, “Romantik” (1913), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (ed.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 42-48, here p. 47.

²⁶ For an accurate reading of motherhood and the role of the mother in Benjamin (in relation to Bachofen's matriarchy, Goethe's Mothers and the bourgeois-prostitute mother dyad in Baudelaire), refer here to the work of S. Weigel, *Body and Image Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (1996), Routledge, London 2005.

certainly characterised by a progressive detachment of the movement from the influence of Gustav Wyneken. The failure of the Weimar national assembly coincided with Benjamin's withdrawal from youth movements and, subsequently, from Wyneken himself²⁷. However, it was thanks to the substantially aporetic and apparently contradictory nature of his positions that Benjamin managed, while maintaining a romantic²⁸ and idealistic spirit, not to fall into the orthodoxy of youth movements. It was mainly on these grounds that he was then able to approach with great fervour the German academic environment. The experience of those years will be preserved and present to him, albeit transfigured in a more disillusioned and more aware guise. The interest in the method of the philosophy of culture, the metaphysical instances inscribed within the youth esoteric essays and a conception of history capable of reconsidering and reversing the historicist diachrony, all these elements will all be constitutive features of the critical and philosophical method of Benjamin's university years.

²⁷ We have a letter from Benjamin to Wyneken dated March 1915. The bright tones and the contents testify to an open fracture with his mentor: the reason for this fracture was a speech held by Wyneken in November 1914 that urged young Germans to fight to defend the homeland. This was the last chapter of a partnership and reverence which, in addition to having survived for years, had unequivocally influenced Benjamin's intellectual development – as he himself recognizes in the letter: «The θεωρία in you has become blind, you have betrayed in the most terrible, monstrous way the women whom his disciples love. To the state, which took everything from you, you finally sacrificed youth. But youth belongs only to those who look, who love it, and love it, above all else, the idea. It has fallen from your hands that have not been able to hold it back and will continue to suffer anonymously. Living with it is the legacy that I tear from you». [W. Benjamin to G. Wynken, Berlin 9.3.1915, in *Briefe*, in *Walter Benjamin. Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 10, (eds.) K. L. Worm, InteLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, Br. 121].

²⁸ The Benjaminian romanticism of this period includes in itself, once again, a dialectical and apparently contradictory dyad. In the text of '13, *Romantik*, Benjamin contrasts, rereading the concept of *Erlebnis*, "a romanticism of truth», aimed at transforming knowledge into lived experience, to «"a Romantic will", the primary inspiration that can lead youth, to go up "the unfindable roots of all good, truth and beauty"» [Walter Benjamin, *Romantik*, *op. cit.*, p. 47].

1.3. The First University Contacts in Freiburg and Berlin. A first Contextualization of the Meeting with Cassirer

If Wyneken had a fundamental influence in the development of young Benjamin's critique of those institutions responsible for promoting and mediating knowledge, there were many other figures within the academic environment, which in the same years aroused his curiosity as well as – on certain circumstances – his indignation. A brief gallery of these personalities can be useful to understand in what cultural context and which way the meeting between Walter Benjamin and Ernst Cassirer came to be. As will be seen, there may have been more than one contact between the two at the University of Berlin, in the years spanning from 1912 to 1915. To get a clear overview, we are referring here only to those professors who in those years have been certified personally familiar with both philosophers.

As we will further detail, there are countless testimonies, textual and epistolary, of a prolonged contact between Benjamin and the neo-Kantian school: it is well known that during the Berlin years Benjamin, with his friend Gershom Scholem, attended the courses of Hermann Cohen, held at the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* by the founder of the Marburg school between 1912 and 1918, the year of his death. Benjamin's closeness to the neo-Kantian tradition also extended to the contacts he had with Heinrich Rickert at the seminar "Exercises of metaphysics with reference to the writings of Henri Bergson", which he attended in Freiburg in the summer semester of 1912/1913. Benjamin then attended another

seminar of a pupil of Rickert, Jonas Cohn²⁹, dedicated to the problem of aesthetics in Kant and Schiller³⁰.

In Berlin, Benjamin also had the opportunity to attend Georg Simmel's lectures, towards which he immediately felt sincere enthusiasm³¹. In addition to Simmel's peculiar method, much appreciated by both Benjamin and Scholem, and Neo-Kantian influences, he also had direct contact with one of the major exponents of *Lebensphilosophie*: Ludwig Klages was in fact one of the speakers contacted by Benjamin during the direction of the movement of the *Freistudentenschaft*; the philosopher and graphologist was invited by Benjamin to discuss the theme of dualism between spirit and intellect. Klages, together with Paul Natorp, had also sent a letter of encouragement to the youth movement on the occasion of the "Freideutsche Jugendtag", in which Benjamin participated between 10 and 12 October 1913, at Mount Meißner, near Kassel, in northern Hesse³².

The kind of intellectual relationship that Benjamin had with each of these thinkers will be analysed later in a theme-specific cluster. What matter here is the

²⁹ Jonas Cohn (1869-1947) began his academic career in the field of applied sciences, which led him to obtain a doctorate in Systematische Botanik in 1892. Subsequently he approached the neo-Kantian philosophy and, more generally, the humanistic disciplines of psychological-cognitive orientation. From 1897 to 1933 he was first assistant and then professor of the Psychological Institute of the University of Freiburg, where from 1916 he became assistant to Edmund Husserl. In 1933, due to his Jewish origins, he was forced to retire for racial reasons, despite Ernst Cassirer, Hermann Cohen and Edmund Husserl attempting to defend him from the choices of Martin Heidegger, who had become new rector. Emigrated to England in 1939, he attempted to be reinstated in 1946 in the University of Freiburg. His reintegration was denied him because of his philosophical positions, which cast doubt on the possibility of an objective philosophy, unrelated to the emotional reactions that are naturally inherent in any kind of terminology, see *Die Gefühlswirkung der Begriffe* of 1896. He died a year later in Birmingham in 1947. For a more detailed biography see H. Kautz, "Cohn, Jonas", in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 3, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1957.

³⁰ Here we rely on the very precise reconstruction offered by T. Tagliacozzo in *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2017.

³¹ «It is certain that his attention to detail and to what is historically and culturally on the margins fascinated Benjamin and fueled his nascent inclinations. Simmel's fundamental essay of 1903, *The Metropolis and the Life of the Spirit*, inspired in many respects Benjamin's subsequent "sociological turn" and the original analyses of the modern metropolis carried out by him and Siegfried Kracauer in the early 1920s. Despite some philosophical reservations, in the writings of the 1930s Benjamin will cite passages by Simmel on the phenomenology of urban life, and in elaborating his theory of experience he will approach his conception of the experience of the big city». [H. Eiland & M.W. Jeggins, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 117].

³² «Today considered the decisive event of the German youth movement, the congress took place on the weekend of 10-12 October on Mount Meißner (renamed for the occasion "Hohe Meißner", and the name remained) and on nearby Mount Hanstein. Many prominent intellectuals, such as the writer Gerhart Hauptmann and the philosophers Ludwig Klages and Paul Natorp, sent greetings and words of encouragement». [*Ibid.*, p. 118].

awareness that some of these thinkers will mark his career until the end: Ludwig Klages, for example, will feature heavily in Benjamin's work: apart from shared interests, such as graphology, Klages' work perfectly suited Benjamin's interest in comparative mythology, a disciplinary method which he approached thanks to his friend Felix Noeggerath³³, befriended during an ethnology seminar held in 1912 by Walter Lehmann. As will be seen, this method will be the basis of the works of Cassirer that most attracted the attention of Walter Benjamin.

A separate case is again that of Hermann Cohen, who immediately entered the exclusive arena of verbal and epistolary exchanges between Benjamin and Scholem. This is indeed a particular case because Cohen, despite being the greatest exponent of Neokantism and the founder of the School of Marburg, was particularly appreciated by the two young students especially for his ability to harmonize Kantian philosophy with a philosophy of religion rooted in Jewish mysticism. The discussion about the concept of origin, *Ursprung*, which Cohen led back to an eminently logical foundation (whereas Benjamin held it to be partly historical³⁴) will actually constitute the linchpin of Benjamin's speculations up to the writing of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (where reference appears directed to Cohen)³⁵. Further instances of this influence may be also detected in the *Konvolut* of notes drawn up for the *PassagenWerk*. Benjamin's appreciation for the Cohenian

³³ «Felix Noeggerath was a student of Indo-European philosophy and philology with whom Benjamin often conversed for hours in a cafe after the lesson of Lehmann, discussing problems of comparative mythology and “the concept of historical existence [...] that interests me and that forms the center of all matters relevant to us”. Through Noeggerath, a friend not only of Rilke but also of Stefan George and Ludwig Klages, Benjamin was introduced to what remained of the “Schwabinger Bohème”, one of the main embryonic cores of German modernism» [*Ibid.*].

³⁴ «The origin therefore does not emerge from the facts but concerns their prehistory and subsequent history. The guidelines of philosophical consideration are indicated in the dialectic which is intrinsic to the origin. It shows how uniqueness and repetition condition each other in every essential process. So the category of origin is not, as Cohen believes, a purely logical, but historical category». [W. Benjamin, “Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels” (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften I.1.*, (eds.), R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 203-430, here p. 226].

³⁵ This “appearance” of Hermann Cohen's thought within the *Gnoseological Premise* of the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is certainly fundamental for understanding what the long-term influence of the founder of the Marburg school on Walter Benjamin was. The question will be discussed later, in the paragraph dedicated to “the rise and the fall of symbol in Benjamin's work”, which will compare Benjamin's vision with that of Cassirer; in this comparison Cohen turns out to be the connective tissue between the apparently diverging visions of the two philosophers. Refer here, however, to an interesting article that critically discusses the presence of this Cohenian track within the *Trauerspielbuch*. Cf. P. Fiorato, *On the sidelines of the question of origin: A Cohenian track in the Introduction to Drama*, in “Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia”, vol. 62, no. 2/4, 2006, pp. 491-510.

reflections demonstrates, once again, how Benjamin's attention, in the wake of Wyneken, was mainly aimed at those philosophers capable of conceiving systematic thinking within a traditional composite track: capable, that is, of taking into account the religious, political and artistic repercussions within a universal theory.

What is certain is that Benjamin's quarrel with academic institutions emerged with more vigour when aimed at those characters who most expressed any kind of specialized and professional knowledge. This was a far cry from the philosophical and cultural holism – which today could be easily equated to interdisciplinarity – which Wyneken had indicated as the only way to reform education and, more generally, the intellectual approach. Starting from this assumption, it is perhaps clearer why, among the various names cited so far, the appreciation of the young Benjamin manifested itself towards multifaceted personalities such as those of Ludwig Klages, Georg Simmel and Hermann Cohen, while ruthless criticism was sometimes reserved for Rickert and Cohn³⁶.

If it is somewhat misleading to grant Wyneken with an excessive influence in the formation of Benjamin's cultural and philosophical imaginary, it is still inevitable to recognize that, as we have seen so far, Benjamin's opinions veered towards a certain harshness when addressed to those teachers or those institutions incapable of embodying the purposes and methodologies advocated by Wyneken. Beyond the theories and schools of thought, contents and philosophical methodologies, Benjamin seemed to consider and judge the intellectual and institutional "style" of the teachers with whom he came in contact. Far from being a simple psychological simplification, this consideration helps to better understand how the positions of the student Benjamin could be so ambivalent and contradictory towards philosophical

³⁶ «In fact, Benjamin's own philosophical and aesthetic investigations in the course of the next decade can be seen at telling junctures to weave in and out of orbit with the Neo-Kantianism of Rickert and Hermann Cohen, a professor of philosophy at Marburg. In the last year of his life, he could even write to Theodor Adorno, with whom he always made a point of downplaying the Romantic influences on his thought, that he was himself "a pupil of Rickert (as you are a pupil of) Cornelius"» [H. Eiland & M.W. Jeggins, *Walter Benjamin. A critical life, op. cit.*, p. 33]. This appreciation contrasts with the considerations contained in a Benjamin's letter to Blumenthal: «Cohn's seminar on the Critique of Judgment is chemically thoughtless. Nothing more is obtained than what is you can get by reading the texts. [...] After the seminar, Keller and I think we can better understand the issues than Rickert». [W. Benjamin to H. Blumenthal, Freiburg 7.6.1913, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), (eds.) Gödde & H Lonitz, vol.1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 62].

approaches that instead proved invaluable during his intellectual career. Benjamin's attitude towards Cassirerian philosophy, as will be seen, is perhaps one of the most blatant examples of such contradiction. The question to ask at this point is whether even the meeting with Cassirer, which took place at the university of Berlin in these years of stormy intellectual ferment, may have been affected by the more human and political assessments of the young Benjamin. Obviously, this is not a question that can be answered with certainty, yet this aspect must be taken into consideration. Gershom Scholem, looking back on the university years spent with Benjamin in Berlin, openly admits how their attitude was preconceived and openly hostile towards the "great luminaries" of German philosophy.

We [Benjamin and I] did not take the philosophy teachers very seriously; perhaps we were too presumptuous in this. I was very disappointed in Ernst Cassirer's course on Greek philosophy before Plato, which I took in the winter semester of 1916–17. [...] Benjamin said that he saw his future in a lectureship in philosophy. Under the impression of our conversations I made this notation: "If some day Benjamin lectures on philosophy in a substantial way, not a soul will understand him, but his course could be tremendous if there were true questioning instead of label-sticking." (This last remark was aimed at Cassirer's lectures)³⁷.

³⁷ G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. History of a Friendship*, New York Review Books, New York 2001, p. 101.

2. Ernst Cassirer in the Life and Work of Walter Benjamin. Courses and Readings

2.1. *The Courses Followed by Walter Benjamin within the Periodization of Cassirer's Work*

A curriculum vitae compiled by Walter Benjamin and dated 12 May 1925 has been preserved. In this text, attached to the application for the enabling to the philosophy faculty of the University of Frankfurt am Main³⁸, Benjamin lists the teachers with whom he had studied and the universities that had hosted him:

I studied at the universities of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Berlin, Munich, and Berne. My chief interests were philosophy, German literature, and the history of art. Accordingly, the lectures I attended included those of professors Cohn, Kluge, Rickert, and Witkop in Freiburg; Cassirer, Erdmann, Goldschmidt, Hermann, and Simmel in Berlin; Geiger, von der Leyen, and Wölfflin in Munich; and Häberlin, Herberz, and Maync in Berne.³⁹

Ernst Cassirer is here mentioned among some of the most illustrious names of the Neo-Kantian school (of Marburg and Baden). As will be seen below, despite having other material that testifies to Walter Benjamin's interest in the work of the philosopher from Wroclaw, this is the only official testimony left by Benjamin of their meeting. To briefly summarize what has been said so far: in 1912, enrolled at the University of Freiburg, where he paid much attention to his studies as well as to the associative activities of the youth groups, Benjamin decided to spend the winter semester of the academic year 1912/1913 at the University of Berlin. Here his

³⁸ «Der Text wurde von Benjamin als Beilage zum Habilitationsgesuch vom 12. S. 1925 der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Frankfurt a. M. eingereicht und befindet sich heute bei den Benjaminschen Habilitationsakten». [Curators' note to W. Benjamin, "Lebenslauf I" (1925) in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.), R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991. pp. 771-772, here p. 772].

³⁹ W. Benjamin, "Curriculum Vitae I", in *Selected Writings I. 1913-1926*, (eds.) M. Bullock and M. W. Jeggins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 1996, pp. 422-424, here p. 42; W. Benjamin, *Lebenslauf I* (1925), *op. cit.*, p. 771.

political commitment, which in Freiburg had been limited to sharing the *Jugendfrei*'s requests, further extended to the Zionist political ideology promoted by the Blau-Weiß⁴⁰ youth group. Alongside the political turmoil, as his curriculum briefly testifies, Benjamin also had a frenetic university activity. It is clear however – and here Scholem's words are unequivocal – that Benjamin's attitude towards the university environment was, in those years, extremely critical. It is equally well known that this critical approach was never completely dismissed: Benjamin «always had a rather detached relationship with the “academic philosophy”, not unlike the attitude of Schopenhauer. He considered the German university “a swamp”, in which the “brutality” of teaching thrived on the immaturity of the students; he did not believe he could achieve what to him was the life of the spirit within and with the university, but only against it»⁴¹.

Cassirer's case is different. The biography of this author, unlike that of Benjamin, is not intertwined with his work: unlike Benjamin, Cassirer did not leave autobiographical writings. His philosophical production does not comment on historical contingencies. Although he was forced into exile in 1933, he drew up and elaborated a complete reflection on National Socialism only in the 1940s, mainly in *The Myth of the State* (published posthumously in 1946). It is therefore unnecessary, as was done with Benjamin, to outline a biographical profile. It can certainly be more fruitful to contextualize the early 10's of Cassirerian philosophy, to better understand in which phase of its evolution it was.

⁴⁰ This is considered the fundamental moment for Walter Benjamin's approach to Judaism as a cultural, political and religious root: «This dialogue stimulated Benjamin's interest in his Jewish identity and forced him to confront for the first time “the Zionism and Zionist activity as a possibility, therefore perhaps as a duty”. But the “duty” talk turned out to be premature. Before meeting Tuchler, Benjamin's experience with Jewish issues had been negligible» [H. Eiland & M.W. Jeggins, *Walter Benjamin. A critical life, op. cit.*, p. 46]. This may have been a further obstacle in the relationship between Benjamin and Cassirer: despite his origins, the latter had famously disavowed the Jewish religious tradition, which appears marginally within his work. In this regard: H. Cambell, *The Philosophy of E. Cassirer and Fictional Religion*, in “The Tomist”, no. 33, 1969, pp. 737-754; W.E. Arnett, *Ernst Cassirer and the Epistemological Values of Religion*, in “Journal of Religion”, no. 35, 1955, pp. 160-167.

⁴¹ Curator's note on W. Benjamin, “Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik” (1919), in *Gesammelte Schriften I.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 7-171, (endnote p. 650).

Firstly, Cassirerian philosophy does not know a clear separation between historiographic and theoretical purposes⁴². Indeed, since the earliest Marburg works [*Descartes' Kritik der mathematischen und naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis* (1899) and *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (1902)], his thinking seeks, through a historiographical examination of western thought – well testified by the monumental *Erkenntnistheorie* project – new ways to analyse the conformation methods of scientific and cultural thought. Secondly, as will be seen, almost all attempts to periodise the Cassirerian work recognize a progressive evolution in his work which, although interdisciplinary and aimed at unifying knowledge, will always remain faithful to the project of an evolution, in the sense of a morphological⁴³ philosophy of culture.

Since the 1960s, tentative thematic and historiographical reconstructions have been suggested to account for the organic nature of Cassirer's philosophy as a whole. This project, started with the studies of Donald Phillip Verene, Ernst Wolfgang Orth and John Michael Krois⁴⁴ (the main editors of the Cassirerian corpus), was recently integrated by Skidelsky's text⁴⁵, which extended the focus to the philosophical anthropology project of the texts that Cassirer published in his last years in America [*An Essay on Man* (1944) and *The Myth of the State* (1946)], and to their fortunate contemporary reception. According to the scheme proposed by Verene, Krois and Orth, which was received and revised in Italy by Giulio Raio and Massimo Ferrari, the periodization of the Cassirerian work is divided according to the philosopher's changes of locations. Some of these movements, such as the

⁴² «In Cassirer the concept of philosophical history and philosophy is incorporated into the philosophy of knowledge itself, acting as a genealogical principle. The problematic connection of philosophical history and theory of the problem of knowledge configures, at the same time, a criterion of thematic structuring and thematic partitioning of Cassirer's work» [G. Raio, *Introduzione a Cassirer*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1991 (my translation)].

⁴³ Regarding the morphological method and the relationship between Cassirer's historiographic and theoretical researches, see E.H. Lenneberg, *Note on Cassirer's Philosophy of Language* in "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", vol. 15, no. 4, 1955, pp. 512-522.

⁴⁴ A great collection of these precious contributions is certainly the volume: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies. Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Culture*, (eds.) C. Hamlin & J.M. Krois, Yale University, New Heaven 2004.

⁴⁵ E. Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer. The Last Philosopher of Culture*, Princeton University Press, New York 2008. This text, unlike the previous ones, also discusses the contextualization of Cassirer's intellectual figure, comparing it with the evolution of geopolitical events that occurred during his life. For example, the practically total absence of any direct reference to National Socialism in the Cassirerian works, the omission of the technological and consumerist question in the American period is analysed.

definitive one to America in 1941, as is well known, were forced by the historical context, while others were dictated by didactic or research needs.

In any case, following the guidelines of these curators, periodization takes the following form: a first Marburg period, ended in 1902 with the text on Leibniz; «The Berlin period (1903-1919), the Hamburg period (1919-1935), the Swedish period (1935-1941) [and] the American period (1941-1945)»⁴⁶. This subdivision takes into account, albeit with some necessary reduction, not only of the different moments and shifts of Cassirer's life, but also the different approaches used by the philosopher, who has always been to some extent affected by the different academic contexts with which he cooperated over time⁴⁷. It is perhaps for this reason that in this quick calculation the English period is not reported, a period that refers to the two years in which Cassirer taught at the University of Oxford between 1933 and 1935. In respect to his research, these years do not show any type of thematic or methodological discontinuity with what commentators call the "Hamburg period"⁴⁸.

Considering this periodisation, in addition to the contacts between Benjamin and Cassirer in Berlin, Benjamin's attention to Cassirer's work will extend to the works of the Hamburg period – in other words, until the conclusion of the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1929). For this reason, it has been preferable for this writing to follow the interpretative path opened by Verene, pursued by Krois and then by Skidelsky: this path allows in fact to place in direct and progressive correlation two moments of the Cassirerian philosophy that find direct confirmation in the work and in the life of Walter Benjamin: such moments are commonly referred to as the "functionalistic turn" and the "cultural turn".

It has been certified by now that Benjamin has come into contact, precisely through Cassirer's university courses, with the functionalist instances of Cassirerian thought applied to logical-mathematical knowledge. Despite this, it is still doubtful whether the "linguistic turn" may have contaminated Benjamin's reflections on the

⁴⁶ G. Raio, *Introduzione a Cassirer*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴⁷ For an almost exclusively biographical periodization, see T. Cassirer, *Aus meinen Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* (1950), Gerstenberg, Hildesheim 1981; J. Seidengart (ed.) *De Marbourg à New York, Actes du colloque de Nanterre 12-14 octobre 1988*, Passages, Paris 1990 which contains a contribution by Eva Cassirer, *La vie d'Ernst Cassirer. Remarques et témoignage*, pp. 307-320.

⁴⁸ The Oxford period is well told by T. Cassirer, *Ernst Cassirer in England*, (tr. and eds.) G. & R. Pedrolini in "Philosophy", no.10, 1959, pp. 795-810.

philosophy of language and on the theory of perception. For this reason, it is useful to briefly summarize how these two fundamental steps took place within Cassirer's work.

The functionalistic turn, inaugurated with the publication of *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* in 1909, proposes an epistemological method aimed at investigating, to use Giulio Preti's words, «not simple relationships of implication from substance to substance (genus-species-individuals), but covariance relationships and correlations between constant and variable symbols of unsaturated forms – in other words, functions»⁴⁹. This perspective reversal, which complains a delay in the philosophical interpretative approach on scientific development⁵⁰, departs from the empirical question of the adherence of the concept to its object, according to a taxonomic conceptual pyramid⁵¹ and then reconsidered within the concept of function (i.e. through the analysis of the different relationship models between variables and symbolic constants).

Thus, with the functionalistic turn, Cassirer's epistemological reform project begins in the logical-mathematical context. At this moment Cassirer's attempt to extend the Kantian experience theory begins through a morphological method, aimed at founding, as Cassirer writes «a universal theory of experience invariants»⁵². The project of this universal theory will then be made explicit in the study of symbolic forms, which extends the functionalist theory of *Substance and function* [continued in *Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie* (1921) *Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik* (1937)]⁵³ from scientific method to

⁴⁹ (The terms covariance and correlation are used here in a mathematical sense, as approaches to determine the relationship between random variables in statistics and in the calculation of probabilities). G. Preti, "Introduzione" in E. Cassirer, *Sostanza e funzione - Sulla teoria della relatività di Einstein*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1973, p. 15, (my translation).

⁵⁰ A theme that will cross the entire Cassirerian philosophy, until it emerges at the end of the posthumous work *The Myth of the State* with the bitter metaphor of the Minerva's Owl.

⁵¹ «Functional covariances instead of mere, impossible and useless analytical implication from the genus to the species» [G. Preti, "Introduzione" in E. Cassirer, *Sostanza e funzione - Sulla teoria della relatività di Einstein*, *op. cit.*, p. 14].

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ G. Preti recognized a continuity between these three texts, a unique project dedicated to scientific gnoseology, calling them a "trilogy" [Cf. G. Preti, "Introduzione" in E. Cassirer, *Sostanza e funzione - Sulla teoria della relatività di Einstein*, *op. cit.*, p.10]. G. Raio, on the contrary, tends to consider the text of '37 as a moment in itself, certainly in continuity with previous scientific studies, but to be connected more to the instances of the Philosophy of symbolic forms [Cf. G. Raio, *Introduzione a Cassirer*, *op. cit.*, p. 11].

linguistic production, mythical, artistic and, more generally, cultural⁵⁴. This second step, which will begin with Cassirer's transfer to Hamburg, is conveniently indicated as "the cultural turn".

As noted before, at the basis of this theoretical effort, which proposes a restructuring of the epistemological parameters, Cassirer worked in parallel with works of the history of philosophy and philosophical historiography: it was precisely this historiographic attention that founded that comparison between cognitive, cultural and scientific basis of the morphological and comparative method of the philosophy of symbolic forms. Within this methodology, defined holistic by many commentators, there is also the project of the *Erkenntnistheorie* (1906-1920): in addition to the enormous historiographic contribution, this project attempted, as Krois argued, to overcome the epistemological method and reach a more extensive theory of knowledge, capable of questioning the methods of configuring knowledge and not the objects of scientific and philosophical knowledge⁵⁵.

The centrality and permanence of the functional aspect, as a privileged model for understanding the formation and modification of knowledge and sciences, will feature Cassirer's philosophy through a broad spectrum of variations: surely the issue was treated in matters of broader epistemological order, but it also found its places in other more restricted and specialized fields within the Cassirerian speculation. It can be found, for example, within the reflection on natural numbers among the models of Dedekind, Frege and Russel – and through a move that is still discussed today⁵⁶ – Cassirer promoted a concept of number based on the ordinal

⁵⁴ All the commentators mentioned so far (Verene, Krois, Orth and Raio) propose a reading of continuity, which connects the instances of *Substance and Function* with the methodological system of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. To these must be added the careful analysis of Ferrari, who in his *Cassirer, from the Marburg school to the philosophy of culture*, traces with extreme clarity the relationship between the Cassirer philosopher of science and the Cassirer philosopher of culture.

⁵⁵ «Cassirer contrasted his conception of philosophy in this quotation with the theory of knowledge because epistemology is only concerned with the world as an object of knowledge» [J.M. Krois, *The priority of 'symbolism' over language in Cassirer's philosophy*, in "Synthese", vol. 179, no. 1, 2011, pp. 9-20].

⁵⁶ L. Bellotti sums up the possible interpretative forcing of Cassirer and the debate connected to it: «We limit ourselves to observing that starting from the opposition of the ordinal foundation to the cardinal one of the concept of number Cassirer opposes Dedekind on the one hand to Frege, on the other to Russell. This is done in such a clear way that a problem of interpretation opens up: is it Cassirer who deliberately misunderstands Dedekind for its purposes, or rather the interpretation of

aspect and not on cardinality. Ordinality deals with order, and thus with the relationship between numbers, while cardinality considers numbers as units within a set. Cassirer considered the first way, the one proposed by Russell's paradox⁵⁷, as still marked by substantive and ontologizing legacies of the concept number. In this context too, Cassirer's reflection showed an «insistence on the primacy of the position in an order with respect to the “substantive” aspects in the concept of natural number»⁵⁸.

In the philosophical field, functionalist theory can be mostly retrieved in the reflection, spread over many works by Cassirer, on the epistemic value of nominalism⁵⁹, whose maxim *forma dat esse rei* is recognized by the philosopher as a fundamental basis for the birth of philosophy of language: this is also one of the opening themes of the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. This reflection by Cassirer, tended to emancipate language from its instrumental role: language, far from being a communication tool for pre-configured products, becomes functionally the primary tool for configuring and reconfiguring knowledge and perceptual experience. As Cassirer wrote in 1923:

Here too, that relationship between “being” [*Wesen*] and “form,” which is expressed in the old Scholastic dictum *forma dat esse rei* [form gives being to the thing], is also confirmed for language. As it is not possible for a critique of knowledge to extract the matter of cognition from its form so that both appear as independent contents that are only externally combined with one another; rather, here both elements can be thought and defined only in relation to one another. And

a Dedekind that would base the concept of number on the concept of whole must be questioned as philosophically and substantially “neutral”? » [L. Bellotti, *Note in margine a 'Kant und die moderne Mathematik' di Ernst Cassirer*, in “Studi Kantiani”, vol. 11, 1998, pp. 121-134, here p. 122 (my translation)].

⁵⁷ Here is a testimony of the debate from when Cassirer was still alive: «The contention of Kerry, Poincaré, and others, to the effect that Russell's attempted derivation of number from the ‘logical’ class involves him in a vicious circle, and is otherwise defective. In any case, so Cassirer maintains, logical priority retains, not to cardinal number, as Russell argues, but to ordinals» [H. R. Smart, *Cassirer versus Russell*, in “Philosophy of Science”, vol. 10, no. 3, 1943, pp. 167-193, here p. 167].

⁵⁸ L. Bellotti, *Note in margine a 'Kant und die moderne Mathematik' di Ernst Cassirer*, in “Studi Kantiani”, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁵⁹ Cassirer's opinion on the epistemic value of nominalism will be discussed later in the chapter dedicated to the philosophy of language has changed in the course of his work. It is however fair to point out that a real turnaround can be found from the Marburg text *Leibniz' System* (1902) to the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923-1929).

likewise in language, pure and naked matter is nothing more than an abstraction – as a boundary concept of method to which no immediate “reality,” no real and factual consistent existence corresponds.⁶⁰

Thus, to understand more clearly the different declinations that Cassirer’s functionalistic method assumed throughout his career, it is safe to say that, regardless of the discipline of competence, Cassirer was responsible for identifying and collecting in distinct disciplinary areas those authors who had (with or without philosophical awareness) extended the Kantian transcendental method to their disciplines. In his latest writings, Krois highlights three authors and three fundamental moments of this process: this is the case of Einstein and the work *Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie* (1921), of the theoretical biology of Jacob von Uexküll (1864-1944), and of the approach held by his cousin Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965) in the clinical study of diseases such as aphasia, prosopagnosia, apraxia and agnosia⁶¹.

The examples could be many, too many to be enumerated in a quick synoptic framework; we will try to consider them in a sequence, along with the development of this reflection. What is important to underline at this point is the methodological link established by Cassirer between the Kantian transcendental philosophy and the functional revolution proposed by *Substance and Function*. This articulation of

⁶⁰ «In alledem bestätigt sich auch für die Sprache jenes Verhältnis des “Wesens” zur “Form”, das sich in dem alten scholastischen Satze: “forma dat esse rei” ausspricht. Wie es der Erkenntniskritik nicht gelingt, den Stoff der Erkenntnis von ihrer Form derart abzuschneiden, daß beide als selbständige Inhalte erscheinen, die sich nur äußerlich miteinander verbinden, sondern wie hier beide Momente immer nur in Beziehung aufeinander gedacht und definiert werden können, so ist auch im Sprachlichen der bloße und nackte Stoff nichts als eine Abstraktion – als ein Grenzbegriff der Methode, dem keine unmittelbare “Wirklichkeit”, kein realer und faktischer Bestand entspricht» [E. Cassirer, “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache” (1923), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 11, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2001, p. 284]. See also E. Cassirer, “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis.” (1929), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 13, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2002, p. 238]. Here we adopt the translation by G. S. Lofts. In the last edition of *The Symbolic Forms* (2021) he translates “Erkenntnis” with “Cognition”, in the second occurrence we prefer here to use the word “knowledge” to stress the epistemological frame of this passage. (CF. E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language*, (tr.) S. G. Lofts, Routledge, London & New York 2021, p. 281).

⁶¹ J. M. Krois, “Philosophical anthropology and the embodied cognition paradigm: On the convergence of two research programs”, in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*, (eds.) J. M. Krois, M. Rosengren, A. Steidele, D. Westerkamp, John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 2007, pp. 273-291.

Cassirerian philosophy is crucial, fundamental for understanding Cassirer's particular Neo-Kantian project and very clearly summarized by the maxim, pronounced by Cassirer during the Davos debate «A mon avis, il n'y a pas de concept qui soit aussi peu clairement circonscrit que celui de néo-kantisme [...]. On ne doit pas déterminer le concept "néo-kantisme" de façon substantielle mais fonctionnelle»⁶².

The works of Verene, Ferrari, Oths, albeit with some substantial differences (such as Cassirer's relationship with the Neo-kantian tradition) propose a progressive and organic periodization of the Cassirerian work. This type of approach clearly insists on the functionalistic aspect of Cassirer's philosophy, questioning the different application disciplines *qua* different variations of the same theoretical need. This methodological focus also allows to merge historiographic and theoretical activities into a single project, combining the system of speculative works with the morphological one, derived from the enormous material collected by Cassirer for the preparation of his historiographic works. This crucial characteristic, in addition to being typical of the Cassirerian methodology, can also be traced in the work of Hermann Cohen. In this regard, Cassirer wrote the following about the founder of the Marburg school: «There is [...] no separation and no partition between the historian and the systematist of philosophy. The effect that Cohen's books on Kant have had is based above all on this inner connection»⁶³.

A further point of interest, perhaps the most important within the present research, is that by exploiting this historiographic-critical framework, it clearly emerges that the moment of encounter between Benjamin and Cassirer takes place in a crucial decade for Cassirerian philosophy. It is precisely that phase of extension from the project of *Substance and Function* (1909) to the critique of the culture of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923). The meeting took place in the decade preceding the linguistic turn. However, it should be remembered that in this period

⁶² E. Cassirer, *Débat sur le kantisme et la philosophie*, (1929), (tr.) P. Aubenque, J.-M. Fataud, P. Quillet, Beauchesne, Paris 1972, p. 28.

⁶³ «Zwischen dem Historiker und dem Systematiker der Philosophie besteht daher hier keine Trennung und keine Scheidewand. Die Wirkung, die Cohens Kant-Bücher geübt haben, beruht vor allem auf diesem inneren Zusammenhang» [E. Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie" (1912), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* (1902-1921), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 9, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2001, p. 119.

also witnessed the drafting of the most famous Cassirerian essay on the work of Kant, *Kants Leben und Lehre* (1918). Obviously, this is a general point of view, an interpretative framework in which to place the minor works of Cassirer which in those years appear mainly dedicated to a reconsideration of some neo-Kantian instances.

If an overall periodization can be useful to follow Cassirer's philosophical project in a general perspective, it is equally fundamental to take a more specific point of view, so as to identify, even in the minor works, on which themes Cassirer's philosophical effort was concentrated in his Berlin years. Except for the drafting of the volumes of the monumental *Erkenntnistheorie*, which occupied Cassirer from 1906 to 1923, during the early 1910s the Cassirerian production seems to scan the Neokantian *milieu* in search of consistency with his functionalist theories. In 1911 Cassirer published a review on the work of J. Cohn, *Voraussetzungen und Ziele des Erkennens*. Once again, in the wake of the studies of *Substance and Function*, the writing discussed extensively the problem of logical evidence, the relationship between mathematics and logic, and the epistemological difference inscribed within a numerical conception aimed at ordinality rather than cardinality. Even in this text, the extension of the categorical concept to the functional one persists.

Following from this text, a short review dedicated to the work of Charles Renouvier⁶⁴, the founder of French neocriticism, is published in 1914. The pretext for this review is the re-edition of the 1854 text *Essais de critique générale* (the first volume: *Analyse general de la connaissance. Bornes de la connaissance*) in Germany. Although this essay is very short, it is worth mentioning, in that it fits perfectly to the aforementioned Cassirerian layout which promotes, once again a relational, functionalistic and de-ontologizing way in the arena of Kantian criticism: «For Renouvier the concept of the phenomenon is founded in the concept of the law, while the latter finds its most general logical expression in the concept of the relation. The relation thus comes into the centre of the category system: it does not

⁶⁴ «Die Logik Renouviere, die zuerst im Jahre 1854 erschien und sodann in einer Neubearbeitung vom Jahre 1875 ihre endgültige Gestaltung erhalten hat, wird in der ausgezeichneten Neuausgabe, die sie nunmehr nach fast 40 Jahren erfährt, fast wie ein modernes Werk wirken». [E. Cassirer, "Das Problem des Unendlichen und Renouviere «Gesetz der Zahl»" (1912), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* (1902-1921), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 9, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2001, p. 484].

designate a single class of categories, as with Kant, but it is “the” category par excellence, from which all special ways of linking that knowledge possesses – especially the forms of space and time – are only individual subspecies»⁶⁵.

The insistence of this question, addressed both to logic and philosophy, returns once again in a 1912 essay, *Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie*, dedicated to the role of Hermann Cohen in the renewal of Neo-Kantian philosophy. In this short but very dense essay, Cassirer considers three questions posed by Cohenian philosophy: the first is historical-philosophical, that is, the reformative contribution that Cohen’s work has had in promoting and renewing Kantianism; the second discusses Cohen’s treatment of infinitesimal calculus, related to the descriptive categories of physics⁶⁶; the third, particularly interesting for Cassirer’s later works (especially for the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) discusses the relationship between natural sciences and logical-mathematical sciences, investigated through some dialectical dyads, including the relationship between physiology and phenomenology (between organism and scientific object).

The problem of objectivity within transcendental philosophy and, more precisely, within Cohenian neo-Kantianism, gets here a new treatment. It is considered in relation to the basic conditions of experience, understood in an anatomical-perceptual sense. The analysis of the *psychophysische Organization* is considered in this text as the ultimate and defining element, which must be placed within the relationship between natural sciences and transcendental philosophies – avoiding any kind of materialistic or naturalist reductionism: «The general methodical approach of Cohenian philosophy, electing as object of its reflection a factum of an intelligible character such as science (or law), presents a strong anti-

⁶⁵ «So gründet sich für Renouvier der Begriff des Phänomens im Begriff des Gesetzes, während dieser letztere seinen allgemeinsten logischen Ausdruck wiederum im Begriff der Relation findet. Die Relation tritt damit in den Mittelpunkt des Kategoriensystems: Sie bezeichnet nicht, wie bei Kant, eine einzelne Klasse von Kategorien, sondern sie ist “die” Kategorie schlechthin, von der alle besonderen Weisen der Verknüpfung, über die die Erkenntnis verfügt – insbesondere auch die Formen des Raumes und der Zeit – nur einzelne Unterarten sind». [*Ibid.*, p. 486].

⁶⁶ The same theme will explicitly return two years later in the essay “Erkenntnistheorie nebst den Grenzfragen der Logik und Denkpsychologie” (1927), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* (1927-1931), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 17, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004, pp. 1-59.

ontological value that can shelter from the misunderstandings of any form of naturalism»⁶⁷.

Only the correct placement of this level of objectivity, on which the possibility of a perceptual experience depends, allows not to fall into the «πρῶτον ψεῦδος»⁶⁸ at the basis of the naturalistic reductions. Cassirer therefore acknowledges Cohen with the merit of having brought the problem of objectivity back to a theoretical group free, from the positive lexicon of the naturalistic sciences. Cohen questioned the very idea of a phenomenal “product”, regardless of the tight contrast between physiology and transcendental philosophy: «No matter whether the phenomenal reality is explained as a “brain product” or in an apparently polished locution as a “product of the imagination”, everything is anticipated in the mere concept of the “product” that forms the real question from the point of view of the critique of knowledge»⁶⁹.

This text, as well argued by Krois⁷⁰, is part of a back and forth dance around the figure of Cohen, a series of shifts that Cassirer will indicate as fundamental in the development of his philosophical theory⁷¹: as much as he could be close to Cohen on ethical philosophy, Cassirer would invariably operate an equal, progressive overcoming in another area, rethinking transcendental philosophy within epistemology; as we have already seen, this task coincides with the questioning of the very concept of epistemology, or rather, of the theoretical objects it considers. Obviously, Krois’ interpretation is not the only one: not all commentators were keen to read the work of the mature Cassirer in discontinuity with the Marburg school,

⁶⁷ P. Fiorato, *Il ritorno di Hermann Cohen a Marburg*, in “Studi Kantiani”, Vol. 6, 1993, pp. 77-91, here p. 79.

⁶⁸ E. Cassirer, “Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie” (1912), *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁶⁹ «Gleichviel, ob die phänomenale Wirklichkeit als “Gehirnprodukt” oder in scheinbar verfeinerter Wendung als “Vorstellungsprodukt” erklärt wird, so ist doch – im bloßen Begriff des “Produkts” alles vorweggenommen, was vom Standpunkt der Erkenntniskritik die eigentliche Frage bildet» [*Ibid.*, p. 122]

⁷⁰ J. M. Krois, *Cassirer, Neo-Kantianism and Metaphysics* in “Revue De Métaphysique Et De Morale”, vol. 97, no. 4, 1992, pp. 437–453.

⁷¹ Krois also motivates this process through biographical elements, including a phrase that Ernst Cassirer would have said to his wife Toni, when he learned that he would have to compile his own biography for Library of Living Philosophers: «Nun werde ich mein Verhältnis zu Cohen endlich doch für die anderen klarmachen, und darauf freue ich mich. Meine Bind und meine spätere Loslösung von ihm, beides ist wichtig». [T. Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, Gerstenberg, Hildesheim 1981, in J. M. Krois, *Cassirer, Neo-Kantianism and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 438].

especially with the works of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp. This is in fact a crucial debate, originated in the '90s in conjunction with the publication of the Cassirerian *Nachlaß*. The controversy seems to present to two main interpretative keys: one that suggests a reading of continuity and the other of discontinuity. The first position, summarized here by Massimo Ferrari, is the one advocated by Krois:

Going through the critical literature that has flourished in recent years, it is not difficult to notice the emergence of two global but alternative interpretations of Cassirer, almost two “poles” that mark the fundamental (although not exclusive) lines of the current Cassirerian studies. On the one hand Cassirer – the Cassirer of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* not so much intended as a finished work, but rather as the foundation and articulation of an autonomous philosophical conception – is loosened from the links with the Neo-Kantian tradition of Marburg. Instead, he gets re-problematized in the light of a critique of meaning and of a semiotic approach understood as a sort of transcendental hermeneutics. In its turn, relying essentially on the notion of “symbolic pregnancy” elaborated by Cassirer in the third volume of the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, this hermeneutic is configured as a “transformation” [...] of the Kantian and Neo-Kantian tradition on the basis of suggestions coming from Peirce and, in general, from criticism to the *Bewusstseins-Philosophie* – often considered the problematic horizon of Cassirer⁷².

The second interpretation, especially advocated by Thomas Knoppe⁷³, sees the extension of the Cassirerian philosophy to the philosophy of culture perfectly reliable with the instances of the Marburg school:

In open contrast to [this] interpretative line, we have a claim for the transcendental status of Cassirer’s entire philosophy. In this view, his system would remain constantly faithful, even in the shift from the “criticism of reason” to the “criticism of culture”, to a neat type of enquiry: this is characterized by the application of the transcendental method to the various areas of spiritual objectification and by fidelity to the Kantian idea of a “scientificity” of philosophy in the wake of the underlying

⁷² M. Ferrari, *La ‘Cassirer-Renaissance’ in Europa*, in “Studi Kantiani”, vol. 7, 1994, Accademia Editoriale, pp. 111-139, here p. 117, (my translation).

⁷³ See T. Knoppe, *Die theoretische Philosophie Ernst Cassirers. Zu den Grundlagen transzendentaler Wissenschafts und Kulturtheorie*, Meiner, Hamburg 1992.

themes of Hermann Cohen's pure logical thought. Hence, also the mature philosophy of culture should not be considered as a surpassing of the initial theory of knowledge of the Marburg origin, but rather as its complete development⁷⁴.

It is worth noting that despite their radical verve, these clashing readings still consider Cassirer's philosophy as a cohesive and progressive project. There is then a wide spectrum of intermediate readings that discuss more specific aspects in the relationship between Cassirer and Neokantism. For the purposes of this study, in order to discuss the philosophical relationship between Walter Benjamin and Ernst Cassirer, the theoretical line traced by Krois seems to be the most suitable to settle some fundamental moments of Cassirerian philosophy that may have had a resonance with Benjamin's philosophy. The path traced by Krois, it has been said, insists on three fundamental points of Cassirerian philosophy: a first Marburg moment, marked by a transcendental approach, a second moment that sees the extension of transcendental philosophy to the relationship between logical-mathematical sciences and natural science; the extension of this method of "semiotic" approach from the world of science to the world of culture and, finally, the research, within the notion of "*symbolische Prägnanz*", for the correlations between meaning, culture and the anatomical-perceptive system (*psychophysische Organization* or *Bauplan*)⁷⁵.

If this tripartition is employed, it is possible to define three fundamental aspects of the notion of "symbol" used by Cassirer, which would be too complex to define in its general aspects. Obviously, more specific aspects pertain to the notion of symbol, and will be just as decisive here: one good example is the debt of Cassirer towards Goethe: the poet's notion of *original phenomenon* was used by Cassirer over and over again⁷⁶ to describe the main prerogatives of his concept of symbol

⁷⁴ M. Ferrari, "La 'Cassirer-Renaissance' in Europa", in "Studi Kantiani", *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁷⁵ Essential on this topic is the text by I. Randazzo, *Antropologia e biologia in Ernst Cassirer*, Stampadiretta, Catania 2011.

⁷⁶ «In his published works, Cassirer appeals to Goethe's notion of the *Urphänomen* again and again without, however, ever examining it from the standpoint of his own thought. We are told that the expressive function of meaning is an *Urphänomen* [...] that the experience of the living human body is an *Urphänomen* [...] and that the same is true of *symbolische Prägnanz*. The "person" is an *Urphänomen*. Time is an *Urphänomen* [...]. The list could be extended. Such phenomena cannot be explained by any method without thereby losing the phenomenon in question». [J. M. Krois, *Cassirer, Neo-Kantianism and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 439].

(Perceptual articulation through the involuntary assignment of signs; the voluntary modalities of configuration - mythical, linguistic, artistic and scientific; the relationship of the experience with the set of configuration possibilities). this same notion will give life to the main chapter of his unfinished *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, a text that had devised to ideally bring together the different paths that the three volumes of the philosophy of symbolic forms had previously separated. These, according to Krois' reading, correspond precisely to the three moments of the aforementioned tripartition.

2.2. *What Cassirer Courses Could Walter Benjamin Have Taken? The Documents and Hypotheses*

During the Berlin period Benjamin may have followed more than one Ernst Cassirer course. Thanks to a postcard sent to Fritz Radt⁷⁷ in May 1915, it is certain that Benjamin followed Cassirer's course during that semester: in fact, Benjamin takes care to write a postcard to his friend, in case they should not meet in the classroom: «Dear Fritz, in the unlikely event that you are not in the course (Cassirer), this postcard must tell you that [...]»⁷⁸.

In addition to this documentary evidence, which attests to the presence of Benjamin at the course of '15, Peter Fenves is inclined to think that young Benjamin also attended the course of the winter semester of 1912-1913⁷⁹. At the basis of this assumption, which also features Jeggins' biography, there is probably the curriculum compiled by Benjamin in 1925. The arrangement of the order of teachers seems to reflect the courses followed by Benjamin during his arrival in Berlin in 1912, but there is no evidence that incontestably proves Benjamin's participation that year.

From a critical point of view, this hypothesis is also based on some hints of Cassirerian thought in the early writing *Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin* (1915) which Fenves analysed in 2010 in his text *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*. As will be seen, the Cassirerian root that Fenves notes in this text would precisely consist in the application of the functionalist instances of *Substance and Function* to the notion of "poetized" and the intrinsic

⁷⁷ Fritz Radt was a chemist, friend and important intellectual referent of Benjamin in the early Berlin years, as well as brother of Benjamin's first girlfriend, Grete Radt. The relationship between the two became rather ambiguous after the '25 when Radt married Jula Cohn, for which Benjamin had a feeling that remained, at least in part, always unrequited.

⁷⁸ W. Benjamin to F. Radt, Berlin 14.5.1915, in *Gesammelte Briefe (1910-1940)*, (eds.) C. Gödde & H. Lonitz, vol.1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 266.

⁷⁹ «Cohen retired from teaching in 1912, and although Benjamin briefly attended the lectures of Cassirer in Berlin, he showed little interest in them. As a student in Freiburg, he came into contact with Heinrich Rickert, whose version of neo-Kantianism differed from the Marburg school, especially in its emphasis on the idea of value, but was similarly concerned with the methods by which the object of knowledge is constructed». [P. Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, p. 6].

problem of the relationship between form and content of a poetic text, addressed by Benjamin with a particular metaphysical and idealistic inspiration.

According to Fenves, Benjamin contrasts two different models of poetry in this text: one represented by the poem *Dichtermuth* (poetic courage) and the other by the other poem *Blödigkeit* (poetic timidity)⁸⁰. In the first poem, where the concepts are considered real and substantial elements, «disregarding all differences, the poet, who is unlike everything in the cosmos, discovers his own so-called courage»⁸¹. In the second poem, which instead uses a functional approach, «the poetized [...] resolves itself into a complex of infinite functions, the elements of which are all determined by the universal law of relationality that governs the whole»⁸². The contrast is therefore between a “courageous” and substantial poetic method, capable of directly and synthetically referring to concepts, and another “timid” method that lost itself in the maze of relationships that functionally connect one concept to another (or a word to the other). In the first method, the result will be a lyric that is concerned with what it expresses; in the second case, the poetic result will be guaranteed by the expression of the linguistic and conceptual relationships. From this interpretation, it follows that «when concepts are interpreted as substances, special cases are ignored or dismissed; when concepts are interpreted as functions, they themselves function as rules that expose the reason why special cases are indeed special»⁸³.

This opposition is laid out by Benjamin through some typical elements of the lexicon and thought of the Marburg school. However, Fenves recognizes in this discussion the same features of the Cassirerian functional turning point. This is obviously a hypothesis, because Benjamin never refers directly to Cassirer’s work:

⁸⁰ «Couched in language that at times was heavily coloured by neo-Kantianism, the essay was more than just a commentary on two of Hölderlin’s late odes “The Poet’s Courage [*Dichtermuth*]” (around 1800) and “Timidity [*Blödigkeit*]” (1802), published as part of the *Nachtgesänge* (1805). In his difficult methodological introduction, Benjamin defined new interpretive principles that were to serve as the foundation and justification of his aesthetic commentary. The program of the essay was to reveal the a priori of the poems in question, more precisely, what Benjamin called their inner-form or their *Gedichtete* (the poetized) » [B. Hanssen, “*Dichtermuth*” and “*Blödigkeit*”. *Two Poems by Hölderlin Interpreted by Walter Benjamin*, in “MLN”, vol. 112, no. 5, 1997, pp. 786-816, here p. 797].

⁸¹ P. Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

still, it is indisputable that Benjamin in this essay uses in this essay the very same polarity that Cassirer had structured and discussed. Benjamin could not have deduced this polarity from other exponents of the Marburg school. As previously said, it was precisely the functional turn of Cassirer that was destined to signal his emancipation from the Neo-Kantian tradition to which he previously belonged. For this reason it seems plausible that «Benjamin turns away from Cohen, who detects a certain relativism in the concept of function, and associates his program with the version of “epistemo-critique” that Ernst Cassirer had recently begun to elaborate in conjunction with his own “cognitive commentary” on the development of the modern mathematical sciences»⁸⁴.

From a chronological point of view, this assumption would suggest that Benjamin approached Cassirer’s work before the course that he certainly followed in ‘15. On this point, the date of the text on Hölderlin must not be misleading: despite having been completed in ‘15, Gershom Scholem testifies that text was written by Benjamin in the winter between 1914 and 1915, therefore in the months preceding the course held by Cassirer in the summer semester of 1915.

“On October 1 he spoke about Hölderlin and gave me a typewritten copy of his essay “Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin” [Two poems of Friedrich Hölderlin], which contained a profoundly metaphysical analysis, written in the first winter of the war, 1914–15, of the two poems “*Dichtermut*” [Poet’s courage] and “*Blödigkeit*” [Timidity]⁸⁵.

There is no reason to rule out that Benjamin may have attended other Cassirer courses between 1912 and 1915, in the years he spent in Berlin, after attending the University of Freiburg and before moving to Munich. Tamara Tagliacozzo, in her *Experience and Infinite Task in the Philosophy of the First Benjamin*, reconstructs very well the possible joints that would have allowed Benjamin and Cassirer to be in the same classroom. According to this reconstruction, Benjamin could also have attended the course held during the winter semester of the year 1913-1914.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. History of a Friendship*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Tagliacozzo supports her hypothesis with the research done by H. Paetzold⁸⁶ that managed to reconstruct at least the general themes of the Cassirer courses, some taken from the university hours contained in the archive of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität zu Berlin:

In lectures and seminars the free lecturer has often dealt with Kant's theoretical philosophy (summer semester 1907, winter semester 1910/1911, winter semester 1912/1913), then Leibniz and Descartes (winter semester 1907/1908, winter semester 1912/1913)⁸⁷.

To these courses must be added that of 1915. It is probably a seminar on «Plato and the history of Platonism»⁸⁸, a recurring theme, which was repeated in the «summer semester of 1914; summer semester of 1915; summer semester 1916»⁸⁹. It is also necessary to underline that in addition to the 1912 winter semester held by Cassirer on Kantian thought, another course should be added, a «historical overview [...] from the philosophy of the Renaissance in Kant»⁹⁰. Even during the winter semester of 1913-1914, in which Benjamin could have participated, «the history of idealism played a role»⁹¹, as it did in the lessons of the following years, which we know Benjamin could not attend. Briefly summarizing, thanks to the postcard sent to Radt it is certain that Benjamin attended the course of 1915, dedicated to Platonism, and it is very likely, as argued by Jeggins and Fenves, that Benjamin attended a course on the history of idealism or on Kantian thought. It is a particularly interesting thematic interlocking for two reasons. First of all, it biographically clarifies a consideration left by Benjamin in the curriculum following that of '25, drawn up in 1928, in which he states that during his studies he would have dealt with «ever renewed readings [...] of Plato and Kant, and as a

⁸⁶ H. Paetzold, *Ernst Cassirer; von Marburg nach New York. Eine philosophische Biographie*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1995, p. 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

consequence of Husserl's philosophy and the Marburg school»⁹². Secondly, it is important to remember that «the topics and objects of [Cassirer's] lectures and seminars were mostly parallel to his new publications»⁹³ therefore focused mainly on the history of rationalism and modern idealism and mainly dedicated to «Plato and Descartes, Leibniz and Kant»⁹⁴. The themes and authors treated were therefore those that will appear in *Freiheit und Form* (1916), which Cassirer was writing in those years. The correspondence between the didactic commitment and the scientific effort of Cassirer suggests therefore to use the texts published by him to shed light on which elements of the Cassirerian philosophy may have come into contact with Walter Benjamin – regardless of the readings that he will dedicate to the work of Cassirer in the years to come.

2.3. Mapping the Readings. Cassirer's Texts in Benjamin's Work

The presence of Cassirer within the Benjaminian corpus can be split into two different strands: one is dedicated to the philosopher's thought, while the other instead addresses his professional and academic figure. The intertwining of these two strands suggests that Benjamin's interest in Cassirer started from the meeting in Berlin courses and extended to the Hamburg years of Cassirer, which must have attracted Benjamin's attention also thanks to Cassirer's collaboration with the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, an institution which Benjamin will look upon with great interest in the following years. Excluding (at least for now) Benjamin's personal writings which refer merely to Cassirer's academic role, it is possible to sketch a tentative map of those Cassirer's texts that Benjamin was familiar with.

During the Berlin period, marked by a deep interest in Kantian and Neo-Kantian studies, Benjamin read Ernst Cassirer's *Substance and Function*: there is

⁹² W. Benjamin, "Lebenslauf III" (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.), R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 774.

⁹³ H. Paetzold, *Ernst Cassirer, von Marburg nach New York. Eine philosophische Biographie*, op., cit. p. 24.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

documentary evidence, kept at the Jerusalem library, which certifies that, together with Scholem, Benjamin devoted much attention to this work⁹⁵. This text does resurface in the writing of '15 dedicated to Hölderlin's two poems, and it could also be one of the main stimuli that prompted Benjamin to question himself on some logical-mathematical aspects. Some traces remain of such a shift remain, but they are fragmentary; a connection could of be his writing on to the solution of Russell's paradox, a topic widely discussed – as seen – by Cassirer in the discussion about the relationship between cardinality and ordinality in natural numbers precisely within *Substance and Function*.

Benjamin's approach to Frege's and Russell's logic has been discussed by L. Wiesenthal, who first dealt with the intellectual relationship between Benjamin and Cassirer during the Berlin years in her *Zur wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins* (1973). Wiesenthal does not relate Benjamin's interest in Fregean logic to Cassirer's influence. For the author, the origin of this interest would be the intellectual exchange with Scholem. Recently Fabrizio Desideri re-discussed Wiesenthal's thesis, showing how Scholem's interest in mathematical logic is subsequent to Benjamin's fragments dedicated to Fregean logic and to the solution of Russell's paradox about the cardinality of set theory⁹⁶.

If it is certainly true, as the above interpretations claim, that a Cassirerian echo can be found in these youthful fragments, it is also true that the direct references to Cassirer's philosophy in Benjamin's work seem to refer above all to later works and, therefore, to the declination of functionalistic instances in the field of myth and language. The first direct textual references to the works of Cassirer's linguistic turn (and therefore to the first two of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) seem to indicate the early 1930s. It is however possible, as can be deduced from a letter sent to Scholem in October 1925, that Benjamin's interest in these works could be placed already in the second half of the 1920s. In this letter, Benjamin, wondering if he

⁹⁵ «This book by Cassirer appears in the list of books of the Benjaminian manuscript, probably from the years 1917-1920, in which are present the texts of Husserl and the Linke-Elsehans discussion on the Kant-Studien of 1916-1917 (Cf. Benjamin-Archiv, Ms. 506 Varies)» [T. Tagliacozzo, "Introduzione", in T. Tagliacozzo, (ed.) *W. Benjamin, Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II*, Mimesis, Milano 2013, p. 59 (f.n. no. 140)].

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p., 30.

will be able to understand Scholem's considerations on Rabbi Gadiel's fable⁹⁷, admits that he does not yet know the Cassirerian text:

What I will do on my very modest part, and very tentatively, perhaps in an advertisement for Unger's book "Against Poetry" in the "Literary World". Is your writing against "Rabbi Gadiel" written in Hebrew? If not: could she keep it accessible to me? And if yes? - (I don't know Cassirer's "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms" yet)⁹⁸.

Strangely enough however, in December of the same year Benjamin wrote a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal⁹⁹, remembering that he had read Cassirer's *Begriffsform im mythischen Denken* (1922) some time before: this was a prodromal text for the drafting of the second volume of the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Das mythische Denken* (1925). In the same letter, Benjamin also questions the critical method of the text: he wonders whether the instances contained in it can be legitimately be brought forward to read mythical thinking not as a simple form of representation, but as a real cognitive formula capable of incorporating even contradictory elements:

I read [Ernst] Cassirer's work on "Begriffsform im mythischen Denken" a long time ago with great interest. But I was questioning whether the experiment can be carried out, the mythical thinking not only in terms – i.e. critical – to depict, but also to adequately illuminate contrasting concepts¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁷ The tale is contained within the short story collection *Die Erzählung vom Toraschreiber*, published by Samuel Joseph Agnon in 1923.

⁹⁸ «Was ich an meinem sehr bescheidenen Teil, und sehr vorläufig, vielleicht in einer Anzeige von Ungers Buch "Gegen die Dichtung" in der "Literarischen Welt" tun werde. Ist Deine Schrift gegen "Rabbi Gadiel" hebräisch verfaßt? Wenn nicht: könnte sie mir zugänglich wedern? Und wenn Ja? – (Cassirers "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" kenne ich noch nicht)» [W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Capri 17.10.1925, in *Gesammelte Briefe (1910-1940)*, (eds.) Gödde & H Lonitz, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 266].

⁹⁹ «It is a kind of logical explanation of the basic characteristic of myth, on Cassirer's view, to see everything in terms of expressive qualities. This means that seeing a lion as essentially courage is a preconscious fusing of the meaning of courage imagined in the mind with the percept of the lion» [W. Schultz, *Cassirer and Langer on Myth. An introduction*, Routledge, London 2016, p. 170].

¹⁰⁰ «[Ernst] Cassirers Arbeit über die "Begriffsform im mythischen Denken" habe ich vor längerer Zeit mit viel Interesse gelesen. Fraglich aber blieb mir, ob der Versuch durchführbar ist, das mythische Denken nicht nur in Begriffen – d.h. kritisch – darzustellen, sondern auch durch den

For Benjamin the centrality of the link between myth and language within Cassirer's work seems to be confirmed several times from now on, even when Benjamin will later deal with it in an oppositional fashion. Surely, the reading of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was achieved by Benjamin in the early 1930s: in fact, a resonance of these texts was beginning to emerge as early as in '33. It is certain that in this decade Cassirer, even to Benjamin's eyes, ceases to be a simple Neo-Kantian philosopher, or a historian of philosophy, to assume the role of a philosopher of language, capable of captivate the interest of the mature Benjamin with more force. If we read, for example, the short excerpt that Benjamin dedicates to Ernst Cassirer in a comment on the entry dedicated to Hermann Cohen in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica. Das Judentum in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1930)¹⁰¹, Cassirer's work is summarized with these words: «Ernst Cassirer (n. 1874), after some historical and philosophical works inspired by the Marburg school, has taken to philosophically approach the areas of myth and language»¹⁰². We must bear in mind that the drafting of this text (heavily reworked, as Scholem reminds us, «by Nachum Goldmann and Rabbi Benno Jakob»¹⁰³), took place during the winter of 1929, is cotemporary to the last of the three volumes of the philosophy of symbolic forms, dedicated to the problem of knowledge. It thus provides a testimony of the fact that Benjamin had dealt with the first two volumes of the Cassirerian work well before 1935, the year in which the most extensive reference to the studies made by Cassirer in the first two volumes of the Philosophy of symbolic forms can be found. A further clue, which indicates Benjamin's interest in this section of the Cassirerian work, can be found in a review compiled in 1933 to the text *Deutsche*

Kontrast gegen Begriffliche hinreichend zu erleuchten». [W. Benjamin to H. von Hofmannsthal, Berlin 28.12.1925, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), (eds.) Gödde & H Lonitz, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 106].

¹⁰¹ In a letter dated 1.11.1929 to Scholem Benjamin writes: «From the Encyclopaedia edited by Klatzkin, I was given the task of dealing with the theme "German Jews in the cultural life of the 19th and 20th centuries", to be drawn up as a subsection under the heading "Germany". November deadline. Until then all my time will be entirely devoted to this work» [W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Frankfurt a. M. 1.11.1929, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), (eds.) Gödde & H Lonitz, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 490].

¹⁰² W. Benjamin, "Juden in der deutschen Kultur" (1930), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.2*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 807-813, here p. 809.

¹⁰³ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, p. 627 (curators' note).

Sonderrenaissance in deutscher Prosa. Strukturanalyse deutscher Prosa im sechzehnten Jahrhundert published by Hermann Gumbel in 1930. This is a brief hint that combines the methodological approach used by Gumpel in approaching infantile language which, according to Benjamin, would follow the Cassirerian attempt to penetrate the mythical linguistic structure:

However, the influence of a magical linguistic life down to the most artistic products of the literature at that time always remains fundamental to him; a linguistic life into which he essentially followed Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (I)* and the *Conceptual Form in Mythical Thinking* by the same author¹⁰⁴.

This hint is particularly interesting both from a thematic and temporal point of view. It is noteworthy that a correlation is looming between the structuring of mythical thought and infantile thought (an approach that Benjamin will discuss directly in *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*). From a temporal point of view, on the other hand, it is relevant that, precisely during the same year, Benjamin started to write an essay, completed in 1935, on the philosophy of language: it is the only text by Benjamin that extensively deals with Cassirerian thought.

2.4. Cassirer in "Probleme der Sprachsoziologie" by Walter Benjamin

In 1933, Benjamin announced to Scholem that he was working on an article for the magazine "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung" dedicated to «the philosophy of contemporary language»¹⁰⁵. Benjamin's positions, at this point in his life, had been

¹⁰⁴ «Grundlegend aber bleibt ihm immer das Nachwirken eines magischen Sprachlebens bis in die kunstvollsten Erzeugnisse der damaligen Literatur; ein Sprachleben, in das er wesentlich im Anschluß an Cassirers "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" (I) und die "Begriffsform im mythischen Denken" des gleichen Autors» [W. Benjamin, "Hermann Gumbel. Deutsche Sonderrenaissance in deutscher Prosa. Strukturanalyse deutscher Prosa im sechzehnten Jahrhundert" in *Gesammelte Schriften III*, (ed.) H. Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 375-377, here p. 376].

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin writes to Scholem on December 30th: «For the "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung" I have to prepare a review of the philosophy of contemporary language; and also the great essay on Eduard Fuchs. But all this is in the creeping stage of preparation» [W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Skovsbostrand 30.12.1933 in *Gesammelte Briefe (1910-1940)*, (eds.) C. Göttsche & H. Lonitz, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 307].

enriched by new methods and new ideologies (in this period he also pens *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, pondering questions about changes in the “kollektive Wahrnehmung”¹⁰⁶). In fact, a Marxist structure is detectable, which is evident above all in the voice of Nikoalus Marr: and the questions about the relationship between language and class, language and technology are alive here. In this essay the two main texts dedicated by Cassirer to the problem of myth in relation to the philosophy of language are heavily quoted and – truly speaking – received rather harshly: they are of course the second volume of the philosophy of symbolic forms and *Sprache und Mythos. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen*. Benjamin’s article will finally see the light two years later with a rather misleading title (if we consider the content of the essay): *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*. Benjamin, in a letter to Scholem of 18 January 1934, to uses different definitions to describe the bibliography to which he would have referred first “philosophy of language” then “theory of language” and finally “sociology of language”¹⁰⁷. Although the term “sociology” figures in the title and returns immediately in the first lines, the article seems to address the linguistic problem from a sociological point of view only to a limited extent: rather, the social aspect of the language emerges, understood as intersubjective – and therefore collective – structuring. Much of the article is really dedicated to gathering the different lines of interpretation that, in the years immediately preceding it, had been proposed to explore the philosophy of language. This lexical progression may perhaps be telling of Benjamin’s subsequent considerations regarding the complete separation between the philosophy of language, developed within the transcendental school of neo-Kantian matrix, and the “reality” of common language, understood as social practice¹⁰⁸. An echo of this criticism, rooted in the method of “dialectical materialism”, can be found within the text: it can be detected in the many references that Benjamin makes to Nikoalus Marr’s writing (1864-

¹⁰⁶ Cf. A. Pinotti, *Sindrome Cinese. Benjamin e la Soglia Auratica dell’Immagine*, in “Rivista di Estetica”, no. 52 (Aura), 2013, pp. 161-180.

¹⁰⁷ W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Paris 18.01.1934, in *Gesammelte Briefe (1910-1940)*, (eds.) C. Göttsche & H. Lonitz, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, vol. 4, p. 120].

¹⁰⁸ We refer here to the review written by Benjamin in 1939 to the text by R. Höningwald, *Philosophie und Sprache. Problemkritik und System*, Haus zum Falken, Basel 1937, which will be analysed in the following pages.

1934), *Über die Entstehung der Sprache*, published in magazine “Unter dem Banner des Marxismus” in 1926. The references to Marr stress the apparent reality of an official language and underline how linguistic differences also extend to the different social classes within the same linguistic group.

The text *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*, as stated by Benjamin himself, is placed in an interrupted continuity with the short writing *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (1933), which Benjamin had written in Ibiza years before in the form of a quick programmatic note. The expression “interrupted continuity” is not used casually: it is Benjamin himself who complains the impossibility to foreshadow within the *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* not even a hint of his «more metaphysical» considerations on the theory of language¹⁰⁹; these would have included a relationship, defined by him as phylogenetic, between telepathy¹¹⁰ and verbal communication.

By postponing the analysis of the general linguistic theory proposed by Benjamin below, and sticking to Cassirer’s textual contextualization, it is possible to identify three fundamental aspects concerning the philosopher: the tradition in which Benjamin places the theory of language and myth of Cassirer, the critical point of view that Benjamin addresses to this tradition and, a particularly interesting point, the end of the text, enthusiastically dedicated by Benjamin to the studies of Kurt Goldstein, Cassirer’s cousin and, as will be seen, Walter Benjamin’s trusted doctor.

¹⁰⁹ This concern can be found in a letter from Benjamin to Benjamin to Werner Kraft of 30th January 1936: «In my essay on language theory [...] my opinions [...] find no space; for example, those that have points of contact with the Freudian idea of a link between telepathy and language and of the former as a means of communication and phylogenetic anticipator of the latter and in which I find thoughts treated decisively in On the mimetic faculty» [W. Benjamin to W. Kraft, Paris 30.01.1936, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), (eds.) C. Gödde & H. Lonitz, vol. 5, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 704].

¹¹⁰ Although Benjamin has dealt directly with the issue of telepathy, understood in *stricto sensu*, for his raids on the green tables of the Casinos (a fragment remains in this regard [fr.154] dated 1927/1928, where Benjamin tries to delimit the telepathic space in which the gambling winner acts. In the same fragment, he comes to propose the use of mediums by law enforcement agencies to defeat criminals, see: W. Benjamin, “(Tele)pathie” [fr.154] (1927-28), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 187-188. The term “telepathy” in this case must be traced back to the concept of “similarity” proposed in the notes *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (1933): the ability to intuitively and epiphanically understand the intentions of the interlocutor who, according to Benjamin, would have preceded the birth of language in its semiotic and conventional guise. The short text “Anja und Georg Mendelssohn. Der Mensch in der Handschrift” (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften III*, (ed.) H. Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 135-138] contains a treatment by Benjamin on the relationship between telepathy, language and graphology.

In the text, besides *Sprache und Mythos*, Benjamin refers in a note to the whole Philosophy of symbolic forms, and to the three volumes that compose it: this testifies that Benjamin was aware of the whole development of Cassirer's symbolic theory; he could appreciate the way it evolved from linguistic studies to the mythical and ethnological ones, only to reach the cognitive sphere in the third volume. Cassirer's work is cited side-to-side with Lévy-Bruhl's (1857-1939)¹¹¹ research on pre-logical thinking and with that of psychologist Karl Bülher (1879-1963)¹¹²: these works are consulted by Benjamin to refute the origin of language as the evolution – semiotically articulated – of the onomatopoeia. It is not surprising that Benjamin correlates these two authors with Cassirer, as they are two important sources within the second volume of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (especially the second volume) and, more generally, in all the texts dedicated by Cassirer to mythical thought¹¹³.

Looking at the set of authors that Benjamin cites to reconstruct the last decades of the debate on the origin of language, it is evident that many of the sources used – almost all of them – are structural sources within the Cassirerian corpus. To list a few names: the linguist Henri Delacroix (1873-1937), the anthropologist and criminologist Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960), the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967), the linguists neo-grammarians Karl Brugmann (1849-1919) and Hermann Paul (1846-1921), the psychologist of perception Heinz Werner (1890-1964), the founder of structuralism Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the logician Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), the jurist and linguist Raoul de la Grasserie (1839-1914), the linguist and celtist Joseph Vendryès (1875-1960), the physiologist and psychologist Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt (1832-1920) and the psychiatrist and neurologist Kurt Goldstein (1878- 1965).

¹¹¹ Benjamin refers more precisely to the research conducted by Lévy-Bruhl which discuss the difference between linguistic development, and which differentiate cognitive experiences in complex and primitive societies, which he defines as “prelogical”. The reference text for Benjamin is L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, Les Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1910.

¹¹² The text quoted by Benjamin is *L'onomatopée et la fonction représentative du langage*. Benjamin refers to the text of the same author *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* (1934).

¹¹³ This juxtaposition is not surprising, but it is certainly controversial, precisely because Cassirer had little opinion of Lévy-Bruhl's theoretical work. For an extensive reading of the bias of this juxtaposition, see pp. 194-196.

The presence of these authors, grouped in the few pages of *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*, testifies to Benjamin's active, documented and conscious participation in the interdisciplinary debate that Cassirer had contributed to outline. The very evolution of Benjamin's article seems to somehow follow the fundamental passages of the Cassirerian dissertation: a path that moves from the linguistic assumptions of the German tradition (Gryphius, Harsdörffer, Rist, Herder) it continues through the theories on myth and hypothesis of an iconic (and therefore prelogical) mind (Bühler, Geiger, Lévy-Bruhl, Westermann¹¹⁴) to underline the importance of new-born cognitive and neurological studies as a fundamental way to investigate the relationship between experience and language (Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt and Kurt Goldstein). It is a rather particular structure and, in hindsight, not mandatory. Obviously, it is not possible to demonstrate that Benjamin used the structure of the three tomes of the philosophy of symbolic forms as a canvas to structure his article and to reconstruct the contemporary debate on the philosophy of language, but the consonance of sources and the structure of the essay seem to refer with punctuality to the work of compilation and systematization at the basis of the Cassirerian dissertations. The only sources that appear in discontinuity with the Cassirerian approach are those pertaining to authors linked with Marxism and with a socialist – rather than sociological – reading of the philosophy of language, one that was completely alien to the sources and researches of Ernst Cassirer.

¹¹⁴ The reference to Westermann is particularly interesting from a comparative point of view: the summary that Benjamin makes of his thought follows, also terminologically, the one made by Cassirer. Benjamin's text reads: «Die Sprache der Ewe, sagt Westermann, verfügt über außerordentlich zahlreiche Mittel, einen Eindruck unmittelbar durch Töne wiederzugeben. Dieser Reichtum rührt von ihrer fast unwiderstehlichen Neigung, alles Hörbare nachzumachen» [W. Benjamin, "Probleme der Sprachsoziologie", in *Gesammelte Schriften III*, (ed.) H. Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 452-480, here p. 455]. While reading in Cassirer's minor text, *Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften* (1923): «So ist die Ewe-Sprache, wie Westermann in seiner Ewe-Grammatik betont, außerordentlich reich an Mitteln, um einen empfangenen Eindruck durch Laute wiederzugeben: ein Reichtum, der aus der fast unbezwinglichen Lust entspringt, jedes Gehörte, Gesehene, überhaupt irgendwie Empfundene nachzuahmen, durch einen oder mehrere Laute zu bezeichnen». [E. Cassirer, "Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften" (1923), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften [1922–1926]*, in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 16, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2003, p. 83]. Cassirer's text collected a lesson he had given at the Warburg library in 1921. Although the formula "symbolic form" appears already in 1903 in Cassirer's work, this is the first extensive discussion of the concept, which anticipated the first volume by two years.

If we exclude the aforementioned theories of Marr, which concern the reconfiguration of the philosophy of language based on the Marxist method of dialectical materialization, the only sources that integrate the Cassirerian path are Jean Piaget¹¹⁵, used by Benjamin to discuss infantile egocentric language¹¹⁶. About the same issues at stake, the considerations of the linguist and Celtic Johannes Leo Weisgerber¹¹⁷ (1899-1985) are cited by Benjamin to expand the debate related to Piaget's work on language learning in childhood.

The contrast proposed by Benjamin is presented and resolved very quickly and does not fully clarify where the gap between Piaget's and Cassirer's studies should be sought: contextualizing the paragraph in the general architecture of the essay, however, it seems clear that Benjamin wants to emphasize the existence of a socially undetermined language, disconnected from intersubjective communication needs; a language for language, not finalized, and disconnected from the symbolic-communicative realm. Indeed, within the texts of Cassirer that Benjamin certainly read, this question does not seem to feature extensively. In fact, it can be detected in a minor text of 1933, *Le langage et la construction du monde des objets*. In this essay Cassirer, although not naming Jean Piaget, discusses favourably the notion of an egocentric language, appealing to the studies of Clara and William Stern. It is important to remember these texts because the Sterns were Cassirer's main source to follow the evolution of the contemporary debate around child learning. The short

¹¹⁵ Indeed, Benjamin quotes J. Piaget, *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant*, Delauchaux & Niestlè, Neuchâtel 1923.

¹¹⁶ Cassirer does not quote Piaget but shares the notion of "infantile egocentrism" which however derives from the work of Clara and William Stern, referring to the works *Die Kindersprache* (1907) and *Psychologie der frühen Kindheit bis zum sechsten Lebensjahre* (1923). See E. Cassirer, "Le langage et la construction du monde des objets" (1933), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1932-1935], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 18, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004, p. 277.

¹¹⁷ Weisgerber appears sideways in the Cassirerian work. It is in fact mentioned in the proceedings of a conference held in Vienna in '32, to which Cassirer leaves a report, *Die Sprache und der Aufbau der Gegenstandswelt* (1932). *Sprachpsychologie Leitung: Karl Bühler (Wien)*. «Es müßte so möglich sein, von der Sphäre des Sprachlichen in eine tiefere Schicht zu dringen, die man als das Allgemein-Menschliche, das Psychische bezeichnen könnte. Ehe das aber geschehen ist, sind die psychologischen Erkenntnisse pseudopsychologische; denn sie sind bestimmt und determiniert durch einen festen Geleise, aus dem sie einfach nicht herauskönnen, nämlich die Muttersprache. Als Beleg für eine solche sprachliche Ordnung, die als psychisch bedingt angesehen wird, ist das System der Geschmacksqualitäten anzusehen, deren Vierzahl absolut sprachlich bestimmt ist (Weisgerber)» [E. Cassirer, "Die Sprache und der Aufbau der Gegenstandswelt" (1932), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1932-1935], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 18, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004, p. 125].

Benjaminian parenthesis around expressive mimic possibilities is then filtered through the controversial studies of the amateur Sir Richard Paget (1869-1955)¹¹⁸, to whom Benjamin turns to expand the analysis on the relationship between gesticulation and language. It is an equally recurrent theme in the Cassirerian work¹¹⁹, which found its most accurate treatment in the studies that Cassirer dedicated to “symbolic pathologies”, that set of cognitive disorders, such as aphasia and agnosia, which break the relationship between meaning and object, motor action and linguistic command, collected mainly within the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in a chapter titled *Zur Pathologie des Symbolbewußtseins*. Such disorders are also treated exhaustively in posthumous texts.

Cassirer’s empirical analysis of the links between perception, language, motor skills and symbolization, are mainly based on the studies of Kurt Goldstein who, in addition to being Cassirer’s cousin, was one of the pioneers in the experimental study of a series of pathologies (asymbolisms, agnosia, apraxia, prosopagnosia and aphasia). For obvious reasons Goldstein’s research had to make use of direct observation of linguistic and perceptual anomalies, which were correlated, again through direct observation, to brain areas compromised by wounds or infections (for this reason Goldstein also dealt with veterans with serious brain injuries and patients with meningitis). Thus, the neurologist had to deal with different disciplinary fields, such as the philosophy of language, which transcended the field of medical or psychiatric science.

This opening to new disciplinary horizons extension allowed Goldstein’s studies, which were based on an open and self-defined holistic approach, to integrate effortlessly into the Cassirerian theories. In fact, the neurologist stressed that these types of pathologies should not be considered as discrete disorders, but that they should instead be analysed as new models of an overall perceptual and experiential

¹¹⁸ Richard Paget was the inventor of the first sign language for the deaf that was used until the 1980s in England (Paget Gorman Sign System).

¹¹⁹ Particularly interesting is the confrontation undertaken by Cassirer with Heidegger on this issue. Some ideas on this topic can be found in the essay *Form und Technik* (1930), but Cassirer engages a debate with the philosopher of ontology in the notes left for the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*. See E. Cassirer, “Form und Technik” (1930), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften [1927-1931]*, in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 17, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004.

reconfiguration. According to Goldstein, the patient suffering from agnosia, for example, was forced, to reconfigure the set of modalities at the basis of one's experience, giving life to a new organic and cohesive perceptive, motor, and linguistic structure. This reconfiguration was called "catastrophic reaction". Goldstein was therefore of the opinion that medical treatment, as well as psychological treatment, should focus on understanding and managing the general cognitive and psychological reaction of the entire patient organism.

After critically contrasting Piaget with Cassirer via Weisgerber's studies, it is still curious that Benjamin should conclude the open debate by citing with confidence the work of Goldstein, whose intuitions he held to be «what – explicitly or silently – is at the beginning of the sociology of language»¹²⁰. The passage quoted by Benjamin insists on the ineffectiveness of considering language simply as a tool of finalized communication. The contradiction is in the fact that it is a consideration that can in no way be opposed to the Cassirerian theories, because it is a structural hypothesis that Cassirer borrowed directly from Goldstein's studies:

One could not find a better example to show how wrong it is to consider language as a tool. What we have seen is the birth of language in cases where it has only the value of an instrument. [...] As soon as man uses language to establish a living relationship with himself or the others, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means, but a manifestation, a revelation of our most intimate essence and psychic bond that unites us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings.¹²¹

Benjamin certainly came into contact with Kurt Goldstein's studies through the reading of the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which contains numerous and detailed references to his research, but, as can be deduced from some epistolary traces, Benjamin must also have had some direct contact with the doctor, when he practiced in Frankfurt. The contacts between the two may have occurred

¹²⁰ W. Benjamin, *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* (1935), *op. cit.*, p. 480.

¹²¹ K. Goldstein, *L'analyse de l'aphasie et l'étude de l'essence du langage*, quoted in W. Benjamin, *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* (1935), *op. cit.*, 480. The text was subsequently republished by Springer. See: K. Goldstein, *L'analyse de l'aphasie et essence du langage*, (1933) in *Selected Papers /Ausgewählte Schriften* (eds.) A. Gurwitsch, E.M.G Haudek, W. E. Haudek, *Phaenomenologica*, vol. 43, Springer, Dordrecht 1971.

between 1919 and 1933, the year in which Goldstein was captured and imprisoned by the Sturmabteilung. The doctor, after a year of mistreatment, began his escape which, after some passages between Switzerland and the Netherlands, took him to the USA, where he settled permanently until his death. Benjamin met Goldstein in 1919, as documented by a letter he sent to Scholem (who had already known the doctor since 1916¹²²). The document expresses full appreciation for the neurologist:

In Frankfurt, Mr. Heinle¹²³ was being treated by Prof. Goldstein, who stated that he knew you and even (probably through you) me, by name. Last time I wanted to ask you how if you know Prof. Goldstein. He should be a good person.¹²⁴

The fact that Benjamin trusted the doctor's abilities, as well as his intellectual prowess, is testified by another hint that emerges from his correspondence. Ten years after meeting Kurt Goldstein, Benjamin informs Scholem that he has contacted the neurologist to entrust Asja Lācis, victim of severe encephalitis, to his treatments. It was 1929, the year when Lācis moved to Berlin and lived for a few months with Benjamin, who was starting the process that led to his official divorce with Dora. Benjamin must have had other contacts with the doctor, because he reports that Lācis had already been treated by Goldstein other times:

I don't know if I once wrote to you that a friend, Ms. Lācis, has been in Germany for about a year. She was about to return to Moscow, the day before yesterday; apparently, she was hit by an acute attack by encephalitis and yesterday, because her condition allowed me to, I put her on the train to Frankfurt, where [Kurt] Goldstein, who knows and has already treated her, is waiting for her. Soon, if I succeed, I will

¹²² «Der Neurologe Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965), den Scholem 1916 in Heidelberg getroffen hatte, war Leiter des Neurologischen Instituts der Universität Frankfurt». [Curators' note to letter 229, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), (eds.) C. Gödde & H Lonitz, vol. 5, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000, p. 19-20].

¹²³ This is obviously Wolf Heinle, brother of Fritz Heinle, who committed suicide in '14 at the outbreak of the First World War. Benjamin and Fritz Heinle met in Freiburg in '13 in the circles of students who gathered around Gustav Wyneken and collaborated enthusiastically on "Anfang" magazine. Benjamin kept the literary works of the two brothers until his death, which he tried several times to have published. Wolf Heinle died four years after this letter, in 1923.

¹²⁴ W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Berna 15.3.1919, in *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

go there too, before my trip to Marseille, where I will embark. In the last few weeks, I have spoken there three or even four times on the radio.¹²⁵

After 1935, the year in which *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* was completed, no other extensive references can be found of Cassirer's work. Only a short comment remains, which somehow summarizes and clarifies the program of that essay, or at least one of its main purposes. Although it was published only two years later in 1937, Benjamin sent a review of the Neo-Kantian text by Richard Höningwald *Philosophie und Sprache. Problemkritik und System* to the magazine "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung", published in Basel the same year. Benjamin's review is in every respect a cut-off from Höningwald's studio and does not renounce overtly mocking tones¹²⁶, but it is interesting because it outlines the general framework within Benjamin inserted the neo-Kantian agenda on the philosophy on language. Höningwald is in fact described by Benjamin as the epigonal voice of an already decayed tradition: Benjamin points directly to the Marburg school as the beginning of this decadence, on a path that goes from Natorp, to Cassirer, up to Höningwald («Von Natorp führt der Weg über Cassirers "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" zu Höningwald»¹²⁷). This tradition, according to Benjamin, is now more attentive to its method than to the issues it deals with, it is of Alexandrian and

¹²⁵ «Ich weiß nicht, ob ich Dir einmal geschrieben habe, daß seit ungefähr einem Jahre eine Freundin, Frau Laxis, in Deutschland ist. Sie stand kurz vor ihrer Heimkehr nach Moskau, da ist sie vorgestern wieder, so scheint es wenigstens, von einem akuten Anfall von Enzephalitis befallen worden und gestern habe ich sie, da ihr Zustand es noch eben erlaubte, in den Zug nach Frankfurt gesetzt, wo [Kurt] Goldstein, der sie kennt und sie schon behandelt hat, sie erwartet. Ich werde ebenfalls bald, möglichst schon vor meiner Reise nach Marseille, wo ich mich einschiffe, herüberfahren. In den letzten Wochen habe ich dort dreimal oder sogar viermal im Rundfunk gesprochen». [W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Berlin 18.9.1929 in *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, pp. 484-485].

¹²⁶ Benjamin wasn't unusual in writing particularly harsh – if not insulting – reviews. An episode that has caused a real scandal, especially among the ranks of feminism, was a violent review that Benjamin wrote on the text of the scholar Eva Fiesel. The case is interesting, because Fiesel's text dealt with the philosophy of language and, to defend herself, she said she had the support of some great German professors, including Ernst Cassirer: «Among the articles and reviews published by Benjamin at the beginning of 1928, the review of Eva Fiesel's book *Die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik* [1927], published in February in the "Frankfurter Zeitung", which provoked an angry reply from the author to the newspaper. [...] He [Benjamin] writes to Scholem that in her "shameful" letter to the "Frankfurter Zeitung" this "ridiculous sissy" (*törichte Frauenzimmer*) mentioned as her supporters a lot of top brass, including Heinrich Wölfflin and Ernst Cassirer». [H. Eiland & W. Jeggins, *Walter Benjamin. A critical life*, *op. cit.*, p. 285].

¹²⁷ W. Benjamin, *Richard Höningwald. Philosophie und Sprache* (1939), in *Gesammelte Schriften III*, (ed.) H. Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp 564-569, here p. 566.

formalistic nature. Likewise, the philosophy of language which this tradition proposes is by that time incapable of considering the real (*konkreten*) issues of language, its praxis:

The path leads from Natorp through Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* to Hönigswald. Along the way, its development, the transcendental questioning has gradually been transformed into a ceremonial that no longer benefits any real intellectual achievement. [...] The book observes an astronomical distance (*astronomischen Abstand*) from all concrete linguistic questions [*konkreten sprachwissenschaftlichen Fragestellungen*]. Insofar as it contributes to any process of thought, it contributes to a thoroughly reified one.¹²⁸

This kind of criticism seems perfectly coherent with the considerations – previously analysed – put forward by Benjamin through Marr's work. From what we have seen so far, Benjamin does not seem to oppose the Cassirerian (or, by extension, transcendental) agenda, but appears instead he to want to integrate it. If this were not the case, it would be difficult to understand architecture, so allied to the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, of the essay on the sociology of language. Both essays, the review of the text by Hönigswald and *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*, show that Benjamin actually dealt extensively with the Cassirerian philosophy and the sources it used. It must be considered that in addition to having attended his courses, Benjamin has read and analysed all the major works of Cassirer, of which

¹²⁸ W. Benjamin, "Review of Hönigswald's *Philosophie und Sprache*", in *Selected Writings IV, 1938-1940*, (eds) J. M. Jeggins, M. Bullock, H. Eiland, G. Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 2006, pp. 139-145, here pp. 140-141 (slightly modified translation). This paragraph is very articulated, for clarity it is reported in its entirety: «Von Natorp führt der Weg über Cassirers "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" zu Hönigswald. In seinem Verlaufe hat die transzendente Fragestellung sich allmählich in ein Zeremonial verwandelt, das keinerlei realer Denkleistung mehr zugutekommt. Bei Hönigswald ist aus der transzendentalen Einheit der Apperzeption die Einheit des Kulturbewußtseins geworden, das seinen Niederschlag in der Sprache hat. Die magna charta dieser Anschauungsweise ist die Vorstellung von einem "Kontinuum" – eben dem der Sprache –, auf dem die Gegebenheiten sich sachte verflößen lassen. "Sie umfassen alles, woran trivial ausgedrückt und etwas flüchtig formuliert 'nun einmal nichts zu ändern', was eben 'so' ist ... Glaube und Staat, Recht, Sittlichkeit, Sprache, Natur, Innenleben usw. Sie alle sind schließlich 'Gegebenheiten'". "Kulturschaffend und kulturumhegt" bewegt sich die Menschheit auf diesem Strom dahin. Das Buch beobachtet einen astronomischen Abstand von allen konkreten sprachwissenschaftlichen Fragestellungen. Soweit es einen Prozeß des Denkens fördert, handelt es sich um ein gründlich» [*Ibid.*].

he has left a very detailed examination, one that seems to follow their main steps. This prompts one to wonder whether this “integration” actually took place.

II. The Rise and Fall of the Symbol in Benjamin's Philosophical Agenda

1. The Rise and Fall of the Symbol in Benjamin's Work

There is no content of the language; as a message, language shares a spiritual being, that is a communicability par excellence¹²⁹.

W. Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* [1916]

1.1. Defining the Question

The material collected in the previous section shows how Walter Benjamin's interest in Cassirer's work extends far beyond the university period. The fact that Benjamin dealt extensively with the Cassirerian work between the mid-1920s and the late 1930s (as could be deduced from the correspondence and, above all from the essay dedicated to the sociology of language) prompts an investigation on Cassirerian influences reaching far beyond Benjamin's well-documented youth interests in Kantian and Neo-Kantian philosophy.

It is clear from the essay *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* that Cassirer's thought could find applicability within Benjamin's work in some rather narrow disciplinary fields: the philosophy of language is the main node, but Benjamin's attention seems also addressed to studies on mythical thought and to the neurological perspectives opened up by Kurt Goldstein. Benjamin's interest turns here to the method of investigation used by Cassirer to structure his philosophy of culture, where instead there is no reference to Cassirer's works aimed at the philosophy of science and epistemology (excluding the aforementioned *Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin*, which embraces Cassirer's functionalistic method adopted in literary criticism). Despite these premises, it would be almost impossible to analyse some

¹²⁹ «Einen Inhalt der Sprache gibt es nicht; als Mitteilung teilt die Sprache ein geistiges Wesen, d.i. eine Mitteilbarkeit schlechthin mit» [W. Benjamin, "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" (1916), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 140-157].

theoretical consistencies between the two philosophers through a mere textual analysis. The terms *Symbol* and *symbolische Form* refer in Benjamin to the German Romantic tradition and art theory. Moreover, as will be seen, Benjamin had a sincere suspicion towards this vague and “comfortable” term, capable of giving immediate answers to complex and unsurpassed dialectics: a suspicion that, at least in part, Benjamin shares with Aby Warburg¹³⁰. The concept of symbol in fact opens the distinction that will appear explicit in the *German Baroque Drama*: «The perspective that Benjamin disclosed in the last pages of the book, thinking about the unbridgeable gap between *Wissenschaft* and *Erkenntnis*»¹³¹. And it is in the latter domain, that of knowledge, that Benjamin places the concept of symbol, removing it from the domain of cultural studies. This section analyses this placement of the concept in Benjamin’s philosophy, from the writings devoted to the philosophy of language to the *Trauerspielbuch*.

Certainly, the Romantic usage of the term *Symbol* can also be found in Cassirer, but this has little to do with the theoretical revolution of the philosophy of symbolic forms. On closer inspection, the Cassirerian use of the term has a rich variety of meanings (algebraic, perceptive, historical, logical, religious, etc.) and is connoted by a purely operational use: symbolization is the main tool utilised by humans to model their experience, their perception, science, and society. As pointed out at the beginning of this research, Krois’s interpretation was invaluable in addressing Cassirer. Krois tried to discuss the concept of symbol by reducing the distance between nature and culture, between corporeality and ideal schema. In fact, he brought forward an interpretation of the Cassirerian symbol in terms of an organ, thus abolishing *de facto* the boundary between corporeality and experience¹³². As Cassirer points out in the introduction of the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: «The sign is not a mere accidental shell of the thought, but its

¹³⁰ As regards Warburg’s progressive departure from Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, see the fourth chapter of the book by C. D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2012, p. 110-140.

¹³¹ G. Schiavoni, Introduction to W. Benjamin, *Il Dramma Barocco Tedesco* (1928), Einaudi, Torino 1999, p. IX (my translation).

¹³² This interpretation is summarized very well in the aforementioned: J. M. Krois, “Philosophical anthropology and the embodied cognition paradigm: On the convergence of two research programs”, in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*, (eds.) J. M. Krois, M. Rosengren, A. Steidele, D. Westerkamp, John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 2007, pp. 273-291.

necessary and essential organ. [...] The act of conceptually determining a content goes hand in hand with the act of fixing it in some characteristic sign»¹³³. On this point Verene has rightly observed, «Cassirer regards the ability to symbolize as the distinguishing feature of human thought and considers all-knowing as symbolic»¹³⁴. For Cassirer, landing on the conventional sign is the last step of a continuous expressive process, which founds and re-establishes the basic conditions of human experience through art, language, myth, religion, history, science and technology (the clearest explanation of this reflexive process, summarized in the Latin expression *reflexio*, was left by Cassirer in the notes for the drafting of the fourth volume of the *Symbolic Forms*).

The fundamental characteristics of the Cassirerian method is precisely the correspondence between the object of the experience and the conditions - cultural, physiological, and expressive - that allow its emergence. Objectivity corresponds to the laws of its configuration and the notion of symbol attempts to summarize the mutual belonging of these two planes. For this reason, in the previous chapter, many references were made to those authors who stressed the continuity between the functionalism of *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* and the theory of symbolic forms. This attests the extent to which Cassirer's theory of knowledge coincides with his morphological philosophy of culture, and how it gathers its elements from the natural and cultural domain. This is the prerogative of the symbolic *reflexio* in the Cassirerian perspective, compatible, according to many scholars, with the model of "feedback": «The constant feedback of the effect on the cause in the field of culture encourages us to compare the mode of being of symbolic forms with that of the self-organization of living forms, endowed with both structural stability and functional plasticity despite the disturbances inherent in their relationship to the

¹³³ «Denn das Zeichen ist keine bloß zufällige Hülle des Gedankens, sondern sein notwendiges und wesentliches Organ. [...] Der Akt der begrifflichen Bestimmung eines Inhalts geht mit dem Akt seiner Fixierung in irgendeinem charakteristischen Zeichen Hand in Hand». [E. Cassirer, "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache" (1923), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 11, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2001, p. 16].

¹³⁴ D. Verene, *Cassirer's View of Myth and Symbol* in "The Monist", vol. 50, no. 4, October 1966, (*Symbol and Myth*), pp. 553-564.

environment»¹³⁵. The theory of symbolic forms, taken as a whole, is therefore a theory of mutual plasticity between the cultural and the sensuous fields. It addresses both the theory of knowledge *and* the theory of perception. In fact, «Cassirer’s definition of a symbolic form is “every energy of spirit by which the content of spiritual signification is linked to a concrete and intrinsically appropriate sensuous sign”»¹³⁶, as he wrote to outline his research at the Warburg Library. Speaking of symbolic form therefore means understanding the link, or rather, the function, which allows this interchange, this leap of genus from historical forms to the invariants of experience. Cassirer himself indicates the process of symbolic forms as a continuous μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος – to quote the illustrious expression of the Stagirite¹³⁷. It indicates an evolution of historical forms, quantitatively so large as to change them in their expressive form; even further, it suggests the possibility of culture to transform and renew its own basic conditions of experience, which are only apparently immutable. So, what is described here as a symbol is a process, not an object, it is the description of a spiritual energy capable of producing its own specific objectivity and the laws that can articulate it. To continue with the Aristotelian lexicon, of which Cassirer makes extensive use, the symbolic process always describes the *ergon*, never the *energeia*. The latter can, if anything, belong to the “conventional sign”, to the apparent and specific quintessence of the the general ongoing process that leads the flow of “the symbolic construction of reality”.

Benjamin’s thought seems instead to instil a distinction between a symbolic theory of knowledge, not devoid of a certain mysticism, and a morphological theory of culture and aesthetics (understood in its double meaning, cultural and perceptual). In this chapter, the multifaceted relationship between these two philosophical fields will be analyzed. The comparison with Cassirer allows us to

¹³⁵ J. Lassègue, *Une réinterprétation de la notion de forme symbolique dans un scénario récent d'émergence de la culture* in “Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale”, no. 2 (Du Langage et du Symbole), 2007, pp. 221-237, here p. 229 (my translation).

¹³⁶ Foreword by P. E. Gordon to E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 3: Phenomenology of Cognition*, Routledge, London & New York 2021, p. ix.

¹³⁷ As a demonstration of what will be discussed in the following pages (i.e., that Benjamin's symbolic epistemology is anchored to a metaphysical "pseudo-Platonism"), Benjamin uses this expression to delineate the relationship between the profane and theological world within the Baroque tragedy. Cf. W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

understand more clearly how Benjamin intended the nexus between “symbol” and “fenomena”, between archetype and morphology. The role of the concept of symbol will be fundamental to understand this “mingling in the background”: it occurs takes place in a theory of knowledge, it reverberates in metaphysics – indeed, it has a profound impact on the concept of “insight”: it is in fact around the concept of symbolization that Benjamin tests the homeostatic relationship between knowledges and the absolute knowledge, understood as *Totalität*.

What is particularly remarkable here is that Benjamin’s path results interwoven with the stages and dates of Cassirer’s thought: from the early theories on the philosophy of language, the fracture widens through the analysis of the myth of the *Trauerspielbuch*, up to the writings of the ‘30 where this gap seems to be getting wider and wider. It is only through an analysis of how the symbol evolved in Benjamin’s philosophy that we can appreciate precisely how could we relate to contemporary symbolic theories of the day – including, of course, that of Cassirer’s.

1.2. A Reconnaissance of the Recurrences

The concept of symbol in Benjamin has received attention mainly in its contrast with allegory, historically contextualized within that complex of artistic production and general criticism that passes under the name of *Rehabilitierung der Allegorie*¹³⁸. The main treatment of the concept of Benjaminian symbol is therefore very often identified within the *Baroque Drama* and considered in a polarity with allegory. Despite this collateral role, this concept could independently reverberate its historical and theoretical roots. Historically his relationship with Kant’s criticism emerges, with Goethe’s morphology, up to the romantic interpretations of the concept, by Schelling, Herder, Görres and Creuzer. From a theoretical point of view, on the other hand, especially in the complex “Gnoseological Premise”, some

¹³⁸ The expression took on stardom with this with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic research, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). For a reconstruction of the process of the rehabilitation of allegory, which passes from Baudelaire’s symbolist poetry, through C.S. Lewis, Gadamer and Benjamin refer to: H. R. Jauss, “Il Ricorso di Baudelaire all’Allegoria”, in *Belfagor*, vol. 35, no. 5, 1980, pp. 501-516.

qualities of the symbolic emerge that are linked to Jewish and Christian mysticism and more generally to a hybrid model of the theory of knowledge that seems reabsorb in itself all of these theoretical derivations. For indicative and synthetic purposes, it can be said that the symbol within this work is located on the path of the critical theory of the doctoral thesis of Benjamin *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920) and is therefore mainly characterized by typical characteristics of the *Kulturwissenschaft*.

However, if we broaden our gaze to the entire Benjaminian corpus, the symbol has a certain number of direct recurrences and a series of theoretical reverberations. In early writings and fragments, the term seems to aim at structuring a theory of knowledge addressing Kant and Neokantism, especially building on the researches of Paul Natorp and Hermann Cohen¹³⁹. This is the case with fragments on perception such as *Über die Wahrnehmung* (1917), *Wahrnehmung ist lesen* (1917) *Über die Wahrnehmung in sich* (1917) *Notizen zur Wahrnehmungsfrage* (1917) *Schemata zur Habilitationsschrift* (1920/21), *Erkenntnistheorie* (1920/1921). These fragments will find their own declination in Benjamin's doctoral dissertation (1920), in which the notion of symbol appears several times, especially in the analyses, dedicated to Schlegel, tracing the characteristics of transcendental poetry. Unfortunately, the text that most could have illuminated this symbolic intention of early Benjamin's philosophy has been lost. A scholium to the text remains, some scattered and collateral notes, which however show very clearly how, at least in his early years, Benjamin tried to bring together in a single philosophical approach all the variegated declinations offered by the concept of symbol. This is the fragment *Zum verlorenen Abschluss der Notiz über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis* (1917/18). In these few traces Benjamin examines the possibility of abstraction and intuition

¹³⁹ However, it must be added that Benjamin incorporates in this trend studies and authors that transcend the Kantian *milieu*. This is for example the case of the logic of Frege and Russell. We refer to H. S. Wilberg, *The Forestial Interior: The Dislocation of Language in Walter Benjamin's Early Writings*, in "The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory", vol. 91, no. 2, May 2016, pp. 147-170, here pp. 154-160.

(*Anschaulichkeit*) within theoretical or natural sciences, and he does it through a Goethean morphology captured in its symbolic guise¹⁴⁰.

Through this general and diachronic perspective, it is inevitable to note that all direct treatment of the concept of symbol offered by Benjamin tends to remain unresolved – it remains, so to speak, in a nutshell. The symbol is placed as programmatic glosses on the margins of his major works, which only indirectly refract some aspects of the theme. In fact, there are no extensive treatments dedicated to the symbolic within the complete works, only some direct or indirect references to this constellation of thought. As for indirect references, the two main essays that Benjamin dedicated to language, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (1916) and *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923), make an exception, in which the idea of symbolization is also understood not as an erosion of the distance between the signified and the signifier (*Tautologie*), but as an ostension towards the incommunicable (*Symbol des Nicht-Mittelbaren*). As usual in Benjamin's work, even in these terms the symbol is used without a preliminary profiling of its philosophical and semantic characteristics, thus leaving the reader to understand its qualities through its use within the essay.

In *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920) the symbol recurs several times, even under Schlegel's term of "symbolic form" (*Symbolische Form*). Benjamin approaches this concept in accordance with two of Schlegel's main meanings. The first is the symbolic reflection between finite and infinite in the work of art: «The work of art can be defined as such only when it has ethical content, that is, when it represents the new harmonic humanity, when it is poetically "an anticipation of the end of history in symbolic form, an end that is one with the origin"»¹⁴¹. This is a fundamental step within the evolution of the concept, because in this text the symbol expands from an epistemological function, inscribed within

¹⁴⁰ This point is rather complex, since, as will be seen, from the early fragments to the *Trauerspielbuch*, Goethe's thought is conditioned by a profound mystical characterization. This occurs precisely in the notion of symbol, in relation to the concept of *Urphänomen*. As regards this mystical interpretation of Goethean thought, see the contribution of M. P. Bullock, "In ein fahles Licht': Walter Benjamin Misreads Goethe's Wahlverwandtschaften", in *Anschauung und Anschaulichkeit. Visualisierung im Wahrnehmen. Lesen und Denken*, (eds.) H. Adler and S. Gross, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2015, pp. 42-75.

¹⁴¹ S. F. Bertolotti, "Il Pensiero di F. Schlegel negli Studi Dell'ultimo Ventennio", in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Lettere e Filosofia*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1983, pp. 555-622, here p. 576.

the theory of knowledge, to a critical application, aimed at philosophy of art. The “idea of art” is the primary medium that allows the reflection of forms which, in a symbolic connection, carries out «an ongoing process that sees the process and the system as identical»¹⁴². The symbol in this work therefore rises to artistic and morphological dimension, albeit remaining anchored to the transcendental and pure¹⁴³ function in which it revealed itself in early writings.

From the study on Romanticism the idea of “dismemberment of the symbol” begins to emerge, which will give life to the treatment of the *German Baroque Drama* (written in 1925 and published in 1928) and will inaugurate the allegorical method of investigation. That “*torso*”, capable of reflecting in itself the ideal of art, becomes here the fragment and the piece of the allegorical mosaic. This elaboration that Benjamin leaves in *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (written between ‘21 and ‘22), will lead to the temporal and functional analysis of the symbol that will unfold in the *Baroque Drama*. The *torso*, which represents the dismemberment of the symbol in its substantial and temporal unity implies that: «The work is completed in its being fragmented» and «this means that what completes the work is integral to the work’s formal presence and not to the “content” of its narrative»¹⁴⁴. Yet, even the philosophy of the fragment, the micrology of the *Trauerspielbuch*, keeps the tension towards unity. In the *Gnoseological Premise* Benjamin refers programmatically to the symbolic content of language: it is in fact the task of the philosopher to rehabilitate the symbolic value, purging it of profane and communicative meaning¹⁴⁵. As U. Steiner pointed out: «According to Benjamin, language is not a system of symbols established by convention. It is an “order”

¹⁴² W. Benjamin, “Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik” (1920), in *Gesammelte Schriften I.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 7-171, here p. 61 [cf. also pp. 90-91].

¹⁴³ We refer to the “method of purity” of Marburgian origin and central in the philosophy of Hermann Cohen, which is at the basis of the transcendental structuring of the young Benjamin's thought. With this meaning, we refer to that idea of total knowledge, an integral [*Inbegriff*], which exceeds the set of inherent questions in its ideal power. Cf. T. Tagliacozzo, (ed.) *W. Benjamin, Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II*, Mimesis, Milano 2013, p. 55.

¹⁴⁴ A. Benjamin, *Benjamin's modernity*, in D. Ferris (ed.), “The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 97-114, here p. 99.

¹⁴⁵ We will deal extensively with this point, but here we refer to the reading of G. Gurisatti who interprets this tension through the contrast between *nomos* and *physis*. See: G. Gurisatti, “Il lutto delle cose. Sulla problematica ontologico-linguistica del ‘Dramma Barocco’ benjaminiano”, in *Giochi per melanconici. Sull'origine dramma barocco tedesco di Walter Benjamin*, pp. 149-178, here, pp. 153-155.

(*Ordnung*). Philosophy, by virtue of its insights into this order, is capable of penetrating through the surface of conceptual language to reveal “the forms of linguistic life locked within”»¹⁴⁶.

In the text, Benjamin tries to outline a tradition of the misunderstanding of the symbolic: its organic illusion, its representational role, its function within the history of art and its sapiential interpretation are contested – a view however overturned in the *Weltanschauung* of allegorical intention. On the other hand, some specific qualities survive its treatment: the momentary revelation, self-transparency, the intensive matrix and its intuitive ability, poised between the revelation of the mystical moment (*Mythischen Nu*) and intellectual intuition¹⁴⁷. These qualities of the symbolic are deduced by Benjamin above all through a literature that is attributable to the study of the myth of the romantic tradition, a thematic mixture and conceptual overlaps that prefigures some themes of the Benjamin to come, such as the differentiation between cultic value (*Kultwert*) and exhibition value (*Ausstellungswert*), and the dialectic between epiphanic apparition and auratic veiling¹⁴⁸.

After the academic failure of the *Baroque Drama*, the concept of symbol seems to evaporate from Benjamin’s theoretical imaginary. The few times the symbol reappears, it is used in its trivial sense, in its emblematic-representative connection, without a heuristic autonomy. If it can be accepted that Benjamin had dropped the study of the symbol and its philosophical purpose, it is difficult to imagine that the theoretical framework underlying it had simply dissolved. The trace left by this concept can be seen in some of its doubles, and by delegating the symbol’s prerogatives to other concepts, equally capable of covering its philosophical function: as for the momentary intuition, its domain will be covered by the concept of dialectical image and, more precisely by that “image-based epistemology” that

¹⁴⁶ U. Steiner, *Walter Benjamin. An Introduction to His Work and Thought*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2010, p. 42.

¹⁴⁷ As for the symbolic of the myth, which began with Schelling's tautegoric turn, and its evolution to the thought of Cassirer and Jung, see the article A. Altmann, *Symbol and Myth*, in “Philosophy” vol. 20, no. 76, July 1945, pp. 162-171.

¹⁴⁸ In this context, the relationship between auratic veiling and myth will be particularly useful if interpreted through the influence that Ludwig Klages had on Benjamin. Cf. M. Bratu Hansen, *Benjamin's Aura*, in “Critical Inquiry” vol. 34, no. 2, Winter 2008, pp. 336-375, here. pp. 362-366.

some recent studies are highlighting¹⁴⁹; from an aesthetic and morphological point of view, it will be absorbed by the notion of *Medium*. This fracture begins to show since the first appearances of the concept of symbol in Benjamin's studies, which will be presently considered.

1.3. *The Early Years. Symbol as Inbegriff*

The major philosophical elaboration of the concept of symbol is contained in a series of fragments collected under the title of fragments *Zur Sprachphilosophie und Erkenntniskritik*¹⁵⁰. It is a series of writings, often unfinished or sketched, ranging from the mid-10s to the early 20s. In addition to showing the persistence and precocity of Walter Benjamin's fragmented method, many of these fragments point to philosophical interests and methodologies parallel to those developed in his major works.

The philosophical purpose inscribed in this constellation of fragments, as well as its theoretical origins, have already been widely identified and are part of the general project for a reformation of the theory of knowledge stemming from Kantian and Neokantian tradition. It is a theory of knowledge in its most general sense, which aspires to completeness as *Inbegriff*¹⁵¹, and which therefore considers the theory of experience and knowledge as a whole, guided by the idea of "thinking

¹⁴⁹ We refer here to the studies by S. Weigel, *Body and Image Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (1996), Routledge, London 2005 and S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images. Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in "Critical Inquiry", vol. 41, no. 2, Winter 2015, pp. 344-366, here p. 344.

¹⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Fragmente vermischten Inhalts, Zur Sprachphilosophie und Erkenntniskritik", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 9-55.

¹⁵¹ The consideration of the Kantian transcendental method as "totality/epitome" of the various scientific knowledge, as elaborated by Hermann Cohen, is placed by M. Ferrari as one of the main cornerstones of Cassirer's epistemology: «Hier Zeigt sich am deutlichsten, inwieweit Cassirer auf dem Boden der "objektivierenden Wende" der neokantianischen Transzendentalphilosophie steht, die Cohen mit seiner Kant-Interpretation von der Einheit des Bewusstseins als Inbegriff der Prinzipien Wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis inauguriert hatte» [p. 117]. And again: «Cohens Idee der "transzendentalen Methode" als "Inbegriff der wissenschaftlichen Philosophie" und zugleich als methodischen Grundgedanken hinsichtlich der Kant Interpretation hat Cassirer immer wieder als "fruchtbar, produktiv und förderlich"» [M. Ferrari, "Ist Cassirer methodisch gesehen ein Neokantianer?", in *Der Neokantianismus und das Erbe des deutschen Idealismus: die philosophische Methode*, (eds.) D. Pätzold & C. Krijnen, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2002, pp. 103-123, here p. 106].

as a task” [*Denken als Aufgabe*]¹⁵² of Cohenian descent. T. Tagliacozzo, who analysed these fragments from a neo-Kantian point of view, reinterprets the “infinite task” of the young Benjamin as a derivation and rereading of Cohen’s concept of pure knowledge. As in the already reported P. Fiorato reading, she identifies an extension of the concept of experience in the fields of knowledge, which is «also linguistic, biological, historical, artistic, and religious»¹⁵³. However, there are many other legacies of Cohen’s thought that have been found at the root of Benjamin’s philosophical method: «His encounter with Cohen centres on three of Cohen’s motifs: first, an insistence on the philosophical system’s structure, and hence on a discontinuity between ethics, logic, and aesthetics; second, the orientation toward a Jewish philosophy legitimating its claim to universality through ethics and through a sympathy with life; and third, a fusion of cognitive critique, transcendence, and Judaism».¹⁵⁴ Even the Cassirerian echoes (those relating to *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*), which we have already reported in part in the previous chapter, have been extensively investigated from a historiographical point of view, also confirmed by a handwritten document preserved in the Benjamin-Archiv. Therefore, it would be completely superfluous to add anything to the Cassirerian origins of these fragments and their genesis, already widely identified and discussed. What can be highlighted, however, is the dual role that the symbol plays within these fragments: it is in fact posited by Benjamin both as the general model of the relationship between truth and reality, and as a model of interaction between language and perception. The distinction between these two research orders is placed by Benjamin in a note accompanying

¹⁵² For the interpretation of this general philosophical purpose, reference should be made to the writing by Cassirer *Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie* (1912). Here Cassirer specifies very well how at the basis of this need there is the need to eliminate the distance between rationalism and empiricism. Cf. E. Cassirer, *Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie, op. cit.*, p. 126-127.

¹⁵³ T. Tagliacozzo, “Walter Benjamin and Hermann Cohen on Experience and infinite Task”, in *Paradigmi. Rivista di Critica Filosofica* no. 1, 2017, pp. 79-96, here p. 79; Cf. P. Fiorato, *On the sidelines of the question of origin: A Cohenian track in the Introduction to Drama*, in “Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia”, vol. 62, no. 2/4, 2006, pp. 491-510.

¹⁵⁴ A. Deuber-Mankowsky, “The Ties Between Walter Benjamin and Hermann Cohen. A Generally Neglected Chapter in the History of the Impact of Cohen’s Philosophy”, in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2004, pp. 127-154, here p. 128.

the fragment on the theory of knowledge, *Nachträge zu: Über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis* (1917/1918):

The domain of philosophy and philosophical knowledge, which radically targets truth, and precisely its totality [*Totalität*], must be necessarily distinguished from the revelation of truths or a single truth.¹⁵⁵

Following the continuous refraction of some themes, Fabrizio Desideri rightly underlined the symbolic nature of the Benjaminian treatment, identifying as the main theme of these fragments «the web of relations between perception and language»¹⁵⁶ and «the medial nature of knowledge and the systemic character of truth»¹⁵⁷. Symbolic for Desideri is that relationship between “media of knowledge” and “systemic truth”, which is expressed only thanks to a relationship of «*affinitas* or of *Verwandtschaft*»¹⁵⁸. This relationship appears explicit in many fragments, but is deliberately expressed in the fragment on *Erkenntnistheorie*, in which Benjamin proposes the «limitation of knowledge in the symbol [*die Einschränkung der Erkenntnis im Symbol*]»¹⁵⁹ in its role of mediation between reality and truth, as the cardinal aim of the philosophical task. This symbolic concordance between “knowledge” and “truth” is however unattainable for Benjamin, since truth comes to experience «in fragments, in symbolic concepts [*Symbolischen Begriffe*]»¹⁶⁰. The idea of a symbol as a limit-concept (*Grenzbegriff*), which describes the mediation

¹⁵⁵ «Es ist vom Bereich der Philosophie und der philosophischen Erkenntnis, die radikal auf Wahrheit und zwar auf die Totalität derselben es absieht, grundsätzlich die Einsicht in die Wahrheiten oder in eine einzelne Wahrheit zu unterscheiden» [W. Benjamin, “Nachträge zu: Über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis” (1917-1918) [fr. 21], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 40].

¹⁵⁶ F. Desideri, introduction to W. Benjamin, *Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II*, (ed.) T. Tagliacozzo, *op. cit.*, p. 10 (my translation).

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁹ W. Benjamin, “Erkenntnistheorie” (1920/1921) [fr. 25], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (ed. by) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 45.

¹⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that in this fragment which, according to the dates, could not have been drawn up after 1921, the idea of “fragmentation”, which four years later will be one of the main characteristics that Benjamin will attribute to the allegorical, is here compared to the “Symbolic concepts”. In fact, as will be seen in the paragraph “Synchrony and diachrony of the symbol” Benjamin will reject a substantialistic distinction, proposed both by Goethe and by Schopenhauer in the wake of Kant, which differentiates allegory from symbol according to ideal or conceptual content.

between knowledge and truth, will later find its echo in the *German Baroque Drama*. Benjamin will argue in the *Vorrede* that it is the philosopher's task to bring language back to its symbolic essence, to the point of bringing it to its self-transparency (*Selbstverständigung*) and immediacy.

Although, as has been said, the Cassirerian influence is evident and well witnessed here, it is precisely in the broader vision of symbolization that the distance between Cassirer and Benjamin increases. Indeed, if Benjamin conceives the symbolic relationship between reality and truth as unattainable, as a mission destined for asymptotic tension, Cassirer instead understands this relationship as already realized, as *Inbegriff* (epitome, embodiment, quintessence)¹⁶¹. In other words, for Cassirer the truth depends on the modes of symbolic production of reality and coincides with them, as Cassirer will write in '25, summarizing the method of his previous research: «Instead of commensurate the content, the meaning or the truth of the spiritual forms, which would be reflected in them indirectly, we must discover in these the same forms the nature and criterion of their truth»¹⁶². Approaching the truth is nothing other than «seeking in each of them a spontaneous rule of production: a way, a perspective of configuring, which is much more than the simple reproduction of something previously given to us in a rigid configuration of being»¹⁶³. If on the functionalistic character of the set of knowledge the two philosophers are in continuity, Benjamin differs from Cassirer by contrasting absolute truth with the sum of particular truths. This aspect emerges from the reworking of Cassirerian *Inbegriff*, a concept that Benjamin proposes in the

¹⁶¹ For the evolution of the experience as *Inbegriff* in E. Cassirer, up to the arrival at the Verkörperungstheorie, please refer to the volume by J. M. Krois, *Bildkörper und Körperschema, Schriften zur Verkörperungstheorie ikonischer Formen*, in "Actus et Imago", vol. 2, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2011, here Chapters 1 & 2; and J. M. Krois, "Philosophical anthropology and the embodied cognition paradigm: On the convergence of two research programs", in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture, op. cit.*, p. 273-291.

¹⁶² «Statt den Gehalt, den Sinn, die Wahrheit der geistigen Formen an etwas anderem zu messen, das sich in ihnen mittelbar abspiegelt, müssen wir in diesen Formen selber den Maßstab und das Kriterium ihrer Wahrheit, ihrer inneren Bedeutsamkeit entdecken» [E. Cassirer, "Sprache und Mythos. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen" (1925), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1922–1926], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 16, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2003, p.233]

¹⁶³ «Statt sie als bloße Nachbilder zu verstehen, müssen wir in jeder von ihnen eine spontane Regel der Erzeugung erkennen; eine ursprüngliche Weise und Richtung des Gestaltens, die mehr ist als der bloße Abdruck von etwas, das uns von vornherein in fester Seinsgestaltung gegeben ist» [*Ibid.*].

fragment *Wahrheit und Wahrheiten. Erkenntnis und Erkenntnisse* [Truth and truths. Knowledge and Knowledge(s)]:

Knowledge in an objective sense is defined as the quintessence [*Inbegriff*] of all acts of knowing. If the word “all” in this definition is taken in its strict and absolute sense, if it extends to the totality [Totalität] of knowledges in general and not just to all that is known of a particular subject, then the concept of knowledge marks a chimeric place of union.¹⁶⁴

The relationship between particular truths and the ideal concept of truth is then defined as «the set of knowledge as a symbol»¹⁶⁵. Benjamin will identify works of art in the following lines as the only possibility of symbolic contact with truth in its broadest and most metaphysical sense. A truth that reverberates solipsistically from every fragment. These «fragments of the truth [...] offer no possibility of composition»¹⁶⁶ and above all «they must not be mutually integrated»¹⁶⁷, as they express in their monadic singularity a symbolic perspective on truth. Although the a-systemic vision of truth proposed here by Benjamin contrasts with the evolution of Cassirer's systematic and holistic project¹⁶⁸, a thematic continuity could be underlined with the Cassirer's courses that Benjamin had attended in Berlin. There is also a consistency with the commentary on Schiller's transcendental idealism

¹⁶⁴ W. Benjamin, “Truth and Truths / Knowledge and Elements of Knowledge”, in *Selected Writings 1. 1913-1926*, (eds.) M. Bullock and M. W. Jeggins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 1996, pp. 269-272, here p. 169 (slightly modified translation); «Erkenntnis im gegenständlichen Sinne wird als der Inbegriff aller Erkenntnisse definiert. Soll der Begriff dieser Allheit in dieser Definition stringent und absolut sein und sich auf die Totalität der Erkenntnisse überhaupt, nicht nur auf sämtliche Erkenntnisse eines bestimmten Gebietes beziehen, so bezeichnet der Begriff der Erkenntnis einen chimärischen Vereinigungsort» [W. Benjamin, “Wahrheit und Wahrheiten. Erkenntnis und Erkenntnisse” (1920-21) [fr 26], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 46-7, here p. 46.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ As well evidenced by the three essays on the theory of knowledge and the unfinished *Metaphysics* of symbolic forms, Cassirer's intent is to reunite in a single epistemological model the various areas that he had previously analysed in the volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. As for the “holism” of Cassirer's latest works up to (both *Metaphysik* and *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*), please refer to the researches of G. Raio, *L'io, il tu e l'Es. Saggio sulla Metafisica delle forme simboliche di Ernst Cassirer*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2005. As for the same tendency to holism from a more biological point of view: I. Randazzo, *Antropologia e biologia in Ernst Cassirer*, Stampadiretta, Catania 2011.

offered by Cassirer in *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Dritter Band. Die nachkantischen Systeme* (1920)¹⁶⁹. This is a text that Benjamin may have read, as this topic covers a central knot of the doctoral dissertation which he was writing in the same year.

Regardless of a possible theoretical precedent, this difference in considering the role of the symbolic will mark many of the differences between the two philosophers and will lead to different conformations of the concept. Certainly, this characterization of the symbol as a monadic fragment, illuminating and reflecting, but at the same time unrealized (*Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes*), will structure in his following works many of the classic Benjaminian polarities (e.g., allegory/symbol, collection/miracle, word/name), which for many commentators explore and reflect Benjamin's messianic nihilism. The symbol marks the ideal point of contact between the fragmentation of experience and the wholeness of knowledge. A contact that Benjamin can only accept in the metaphysical and monotheistic domain. Although this is not of any historiographical relevance, it is nonetheless explanatory in this sense to read a later Cassirer's text: here, the philosopher describes the price to pay for looking beyond the truth that the continuous process of symbolization returns. This passage sheds light both on the gap between the two thinkers and – albeit not about Benjamin himself – on some shadier aspects of his philosophy:

From this point it is but a single step to the conclusion which the modern skeptical critics of language have drawn: the complete dissolution of any alleged truth content of language and the realization that this content is nothing but a sort of phantasmagoria of the spirit. Moreover, from this standpoint, not only myth, art, and language, but even theoretical knowledge itself becomes a phantasmagoria.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Cf. E. Cassirer, "Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band. Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart (1832–1932)", vol. III (1957), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 5, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2000, p. 218, p. 234.

¹⁷⁰ E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, (tr.) S. K. Langer, Dover Publication, New York 1953, p. 7. «Von hier aus ist nur ein Schritt bis zu der Konsequenz, die moderne skeptische Sprachkritik gezogen hat: bis zur völligen Auflösung des angeblichen Wahrheitsgehalts der Sprache und bis zur

1.4. The Symbol between *Wahrsein* and *Wahrheit*

Before arriving at the concept of allegory, the hybrid expressive form par excellence, that consists in mixing image and word, profane world and mystical apotheosis, Benjamin seems to prioritize the symbol and the processes of symbolization. He includes here the notion that *reading is perceiving* (the most explanatory fragment in this regard is actually titled *Wahrnehmung ist lesen*). As we said, one of the main philosophical attempts that emerges from the fragments dedicated to the *Erkenntnistheorie* is to weave «the web of relationships between perception and language»¹⁷¹. The traces left in the fragments around this theme are much more extensive and heterogeneous than those contained in the two most well-known writings, *On the language of men* and *On the task of the translator*, and they show how Benjamin was approaching a problem from multiple theoretical and methodological views.

Apart from the already mentioned influence of the Marburg school, logical analyses converge (in direct comparison with Russell's paradox and set cardinality)¹⁷², in concerns with the concept of identity. The research on this

Einsicht, daß sich in ihr nichts anderes als eine Art Phantasmagorie des Geistes darstellt. Und Phantasmagorie wird, von diesem Standpunkt aus gesehen, nicht nur der Mythos, die Kunst, die Sprache, sondern zuletzt auch die theoretische Erkenntnis selbst» [E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen*, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-234]. The danger of opposing a stable ontological substratum to the morphological ensemble of formative powers of a transcendental nature is a recurring theme in Cassirer's philosophy. He already outlines the risks of this conflict in *Substance and Function*: «Was wir Wissenschaft nennen, erscheint [...] nicht als die Annäherung an irgendeine "stehende und bleibende" Wirklichkeit, sondern nur wie eine stets sich erneuernde Illusion, eine Phantasmagorie, in der jeweilig ein neues Bild alle früheren verdrängt, um selbst alsbald vor einem anderen zu verschwinden und zunichte zu werden» [E. Cassirer, "Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff. Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik" (1910), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 6, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2000, p. 287].

¹⁷¹ F. Desideri, introduction to *W. Benjamin, Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁷² Benjamin's encroachment on the logical method is not limited to Russell's antinomy on Cantor's set cardinality, but also extends to Frege's logic. On the influence of this author on Benjamin's research of this period, see E. Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2012, here pp. 231-233, and P. Fenves, *The messianic reduction. Walter Benjamin and the shape of time*, *op. cit.*, pp.126-130. It has already been noted that Cassirer was able to stimulate Benjamin's interest in this field of mathematical logic. It should be added here that Cantor's research on cardinality also recurs with constancy throughout Cassirer's production. Not being able to summarize all the recurrences here, see the volume: E. H. Reck, G. Schiemer (ed.), *The Prehistory of Mathematical Structuralism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, (esp. chapter 13 by E. H. Reck, "Cassirer's Reception of Dedekind and the Structuralist Transformation of Mathematics", pp. 329-351).

concept, which also engaged Benjamin in close correspondence with Scholem, will continue until 1918, when Benjamin excludes further theoretical probing of this path in the logical field (or “logical-transcendental”, as Benjamin defines it). This attempt by Benjamin was also aimed at «demonstrating how ideas converge in the supreme concept of knowledge»¹⁷³ by overcoming «the subject-object terminological couple [*Subjekt-Objekt-Terminologie*]»¹⁷⁴. The identity should have accounted for this perfect relationship, or rather, the reabsorption of this polarity in a *tertium*. It is probably from these reflections that the tautological attitude of Benjamin’s philosophy of language will emerge, which rejects the communicative purpose (*mitteilend*), thus bringing the word back to self-expression.

Even within these researches the concept of symbol returns as a descriptive term to reabsorb the relationship between subject and object, between reality and truth. Therefore, even with regard to the concept of identity, the symbol describes a tensive point, an ideal resolution – that of manifesting itself in the experience of the «supreme concept of knowledge»¹⁷⁵. But if we exclude the boldness of the general project of the Benjaminian theory of knowledge, the symbol begins to take shape as an instrument of mediation between the sensible and the intelligible, as a concept that does not represent an object, but which represents «the unity of the signs and the accomplished intention»¹⁷⁶. And this is the real question to be asked of symbolization: «We must not ask what a symbol means, but only how it arose, in the domain of what objective intention and from what sign»¹⁷⁷.

It is from the comparison of this type of considerations that a polysemy of the symbol in Benjamin’s research begins to emerge. On the one hand, we have the idea of a symbol as an ideal realization of knowledge, as a perfect correspondence between reality and truth; on the other hand, we have a concept of symbol as a

¹⁷³ «Die Konvergenz der Ideen auf den obersten Begriff der Erkenntnis ist nachzuweisen» [W. Benjamin, “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie” (1917-1918), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 157-168, here p. 167].

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ «Die Einheit der Zeichen und der ihren Gegenstand vollendenden Intention» [W. Benjamin, “Schemata zur Habilitationsschrift” (1920-1921) [fr. 10], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 21-23, here p. 22].

¹⁷⁷ «Man darf nicht fragen, was ein Symbol bedeutet, sondern allein wie, im Bereiche welcher objektiven Intention und welcher Zeichen es entstanden ist» [*Ibid.*, p. 21].

configurative function of experience and perception. The juxtaposition of perception and symbol returns in a series of fragments which, due to their brevity and their hermeticism, cannot restore a structured vision of Benjamin's intentions. In any case, this juxtaposition subsists and recurs, as does the unattainable dimension of symbolic mediation. Writes Benjamin: «Perception refers to symbols [*Wahrnehmung bezieht sich auf Symbole*]»¹⁷⁸ and that «perception is reading [*Wahrnehmung ist lesen*]»¹⁷⁹ and, in his notes on the question of perception, Benjamin considers that «the sign can be read or written. Perception can only be read. The symbol can neither be read nor written»¹⁸⁰. Hence, the symbol doesn't describe the contents of perception but the (unreadable and unwritable) way that perceptions come to be in the first place. To be more accurate: referring to the analysis made so far, for Benjamin the symbol represents «the unity of the signs [*Die Einheit der Zeichen*]»¹⁸¹, the very system within which the particular perception can articulate and discriminate itself. Like the act of reading, for Benjamin, perception is a system of discriminated signs, which are symbolically referred to the overall ensemble of perceptual experience. In addition to indicating the possibility of language to shape the perception, this assumption refers to a series of theories that are the basis of Cassirer's point of view. Like Benjamin, he recognizes the relationship between general unity and particular phenomenon as the main prerogative of the symbolic *routine*. He explains this aspect several times, (and very clearly here), from a perceptual point of view: «In normal perception, every particular aspect is always related to a comprehensive interconnection, an ordered and organized totality of aspects, and draws its interpretation and significance from this relation»¹⁸². This consideration unifies the different levels on which the theory of symbolic forms unravels: the heterogeneous unity of forms of

¹⁷⁸ W. Benjamin, "Wahrnehmung ist Lesen" (1917) [fr. 16], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 32.i

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ «Das Zeichen kann gelesen und geschrieben werden / die Wahrnehmung kann nur gelesen / das Symbol weder gelesen noch geschrieben werden» [W. Benjamin, *Notizen zur Wahrnehmungsfrage* (1917), *op. cit.*, p. 32].

¹⁸¹ W. Benjamin, "Schemata zur Habilitationsschrift" (1920-1921), *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23, here p. 22.

¹⁸² E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 3: Phenomenology of Cognition*, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

expression and the relational nature of all perceptive forms. Two levels that find their meeting point in the symbolic production process.

However, this layering of the concept of symbol in Benjamin will not remain unchanged: Benjamin will end up abandoning the notion of symbol as a heuristic term of mediation between the sensual and the intelligible, favouring the concept of medium which, already in these writings, accompanies that of symbol. This juxtaposition features in the fragment on the theory of knowledge, in which Benjamin argues that the preliminary question is precisely to define the general tool, the medium, which can guarantee a unification of being-true [*Wahrsein*] and truth [*Wahrheit*]. Thus, in answering the question «what is this neutral medium? [*neutrale Medium*]»¹⁸³, «in which being-true and truth are not separate»¹⁸⁴ Benjamin will identify the notion of symbol as an ideal model to indicate the relationship between «the root concept of experience in its totality [*der Stammbegriff der Erfahrung in deren Totalität*]»¹⁸⁵ and its «individual specifications [*in seine einzelnen Spezifikationen*]»¹⁸⁶. The importance of this relationship, between the immediacy of absolute experience and the mediation of various knowledges, is the basis of the final question of the text *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (1918). In fact, the text closes programmatically:

Whereby the meaning of this immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*] [is] in relation to that indirectness [*Mittelbarkeit*] still remains to be determined¹⁸⁷.

¹⁸³ W. Benjamin, *Erkenntnistheorie*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁸⁴ «Es ist aber nach dem Medium zu fragen, in welchem Wahrsein und Wahrheit im Zustande der Ungeschiedenheit sind» [*Ibid.*].

¹⁸⁵ W. Benjamin, *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, op. cit., p. 170.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ «Wobei der Sinn dieser *Unmittelbarkeit* gegenüber jener *Mittelbarkeit* noch zu bestimmen bleibt» [*Ibid.*].

1.5. Symbol and Name. The Neutral Medium

Although the question of the medium in Benjamin will be dealt with in the next chapters, the relationship that this concept has with the symbol in Benjamin's early writings needs to be defined. In fact, it is around the time of these fragments' drafting that the term "medium" begins to appear in Benjamin's production. Besides, there are two main points of interest: the first, which has already emerged in part from the previous paragraph, is that this concept seems to cover the operative function of mediation in the writings of the young Benjamin, whereas the symbol seems to represent the realization of this function. Secondly, by juxtaposing the concepts of symbol and medium, it appears clear that the point of convergence between the medial function and symbolic realization is to be placed, in these early writings, within the language and philosophy of language.

As it were, three years before the writing of the fragment on the *Erkenntnistheorie*, symbol was playing an accessory – and rather negative – role within Benjamin's philosophical program. In the fragment *Der Grund der intentionalen Unmittelbarkeit* (1916/17)¹⁸⁸, Benjamin posed the distinction between the communication «immediate and pure»¹⁸⁹ [*unmittelbar und rein*] of the name and a communication «immediate and impure»¹⁹⁰ [*unmittelbar und unrein*] of the word. In this draft (which could be seen as the schematic transposition of the contemporary essay *On the Language of Man*), it is precisely the name, in its biblical derivation, that welcomes and realizes the immediate and pure mediation, the perfect momentary and revelatory coincidence between experience, truth and knowledge¹⁹¹. The role of truth is covered by the pure name [*reine Name*], able to

¹⁸⁸ It has already been noted how this note is very close in terms of terminology and content to the writing *On Language* and how it fits fully within a phenomenological concern of Husserlian origin: «Der erste Teil der Aufzeichnung (II,9-H Der bis kann) ist durch Schriftduktus und größere Nähe zur Spracharbeit von 1916 vom zweiten unterschieden» [Curators' note, in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften VI, op. cit.*, p. 640].

¹⁸⁹ W. Benjamin, "Der Grund der intentionalen Unmittelbarkeit" [fr. 3] (1916-17), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 12.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ In addition to the texts already cited on the subject, refer also to: G. Agamben, *Signatura rerum. Sul metodo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2008; W. Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachemagie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1980; H. Schweppenhäuser, "Nome – Logos – Epressione. Elementi della teoria benjaminiana della lingua", in *Walter Benjamin. Tempo, storia e*

refer directly to the «*substantia* or to the essence [*substantia oder das Wesen*] ¹⁹², in the same role that a few years later the symbol will play in the fragment on the theory of knowledge. In this fragment, more than in the essay *On Language*, it is in the language that the mediation takes place, while the symbol remains relegated to its sign, heraldic and representative role – the role, that is, of the annexes [*Annexe*] “of second-order names”:

The symbols are not authentic, they do not even have to be designated as signs of names, but are annexes to names, second-order names. That is to say, such as do not exist in the spoken language in which the first-order names are to be found. (The faintest degeneration of symbols [*Abartung der Symbole*], of secondary names: heraldic coats of arms [*Wappen*]).¹⁹³

This negative connotation of the symbol, which nonetheless gives it a sign/ heraldic function, will not recur in subsequent or contemporary texts.¹⁹⁴ In fact, in the *Baroque Drama*, the symbol will emanate its heraldic, representative and graphic counterpart, in the Creuzerian concept of *Zeichenallegorie*, while in the text *On Language*, contemporary to this fragment, the symbol will begin to define the limit of knowledge, the «magical communion [*magische Gemeinschaft*]»¹⁹⁵ between materiality and intelligibility, between the essences of objects (placed

linguaggio, (eds.) L. Belloi e L. Lotti, Editori Riuniti, Roma, pp. 49-64; E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003 (esp. pp. 85-122).

¹⁹² W. Benjamin, *Der Grund der intentionalen Unmittelbarkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁹³ W. Benjamin, “The Ground of Intentional Immediacy”, in *Selected Writings 1. 1913-1926*, (eds.) M. Bullock and M. W. Jeggins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 1996, pp. 87-90, here p. 88 (slightly modified translation); «Symbole sind nicht echte Zeichen, sind nicht einmal als Zeichen von Namen sinnvoll zu bezeichnen, sondern sind Annexe zu Namen, Namen zweiter Ordnung, d.h. solche die nicht in der Lautsprache bestehen, in welcher die Namen erster Ordnung beruhen. (Schwächste Abartung der Symbole, der Namen zweiter Ordnung: Wappen)» [W. Benjamin, *Der Grund der intentionalen Unmittelbarkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 12].

¹⁹⁴ In this regard, even the fragment just analysed seems to paraphrase and trace some passages from *Verstand und Erfahrung, Vernunft und Sprache*, in which Herder accuses Kant of having wanted to distinguish between a pure and an impure reason [*reinen oder unreinen Vernunft*], opposing the concept to the word, his deputy, his herald [*seines Heroldes und Stellvertreters*]. Cassirer traces this passage back to the mysticism of Hamann's language in the 1923 article *Die Kantischen Elemente in Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachphilosophie*. Cf. E. Cassirer, “Die Kantischen Elemente in Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachphilosophie” (1923), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften [1922–1926]*, in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 16, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2003, p. 108.

¹⁹⁵ W. Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

beyond profane knowledge) and their sensual revelation. A communion that Benjamin finds not only in Hamann's texts, but also in the biblical tradition, in which the «symbolic fact» (*symbolische Faktum*) is realized when God gives life to man through the breath, blowing in the same instant «life, spirit and language [*Leben und Geist und Sprache*]»¹⁹⁶. Symbolic indicates here the naming-that-creates proper of the divine language, the community of matter and spirit; it indicates what cannot be communicated, what is beyond intelligibility and in its essence. In these pages, however, language also has a performative character: an ability to give shape to perceptual and cultural phenomena, to transform them into reality. The ideal prototype of this performative quality is the “*symbol as neutral medium*”, proposed by Benjamin in the fragment on the theory of knowledge: it points to mediation so perfect and instantaneous that it is not mediated, which for Benjamin can only be realized in the divine language, the original language [*Ursprache*]:

In any case, language is not only a communication of what can be communicated, but also, at the same time, a symbol of what cannot be communicated. This symbolic side of language is related to its relation to the sign, but extends more widely, for example, in certain relation to name and judgment. These not only have a communicative function, but most likely also a symbolic function strictly related to them.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ W. Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”, in *Selected Writings 1. 1913-1926*, (eds.) M. Bullock and M. W. Jeggins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 1996, pp. 62-74, here p. 74 (slightly modified translation); «Es ist nämlich Sprache in jedem Falle nicht allein Mitteilung des Mitteilbaren, sondern zugleich Symbol des Nicht-Mitteilbaren. Diese symbolische Seite der Sprache hängt mit ihrer Beziehung zum Zeichen zusammen, aber erstreckt sich zum Beispiel in gewisser Beziehung auch über Namen und Urteil. Diese haben nicht allein eine mitteilende, sondern höchstwahrscheinlich auch eine mit ihrer eng verbundenen symbolischen Funktion» [W. Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, *op. cit.*, p. 147].

1.6. *Symbol or Medium. Humboldt, a Common Source? The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*

Below the mystical and metaphysical level, Benjamin's theory considers language as the main model of structuring experience: the divine name, the “neutral medium”, is contrasted by the profane language, which is alternately indicated with the terms *Medium* or *Mittel*¹⁹⁸. It should be noted that in these early writings there is an inversion with respect to Benjamin's later texts: here the mediation model is eminently linguistic, whereas in later texts this prerogative of language will extend to other functions, such as figurative art, technology, drugs, cinema, and all those devices capable of reorganizing the “medium of perception”. Indeed, if it is true that in contemporary fragments, for example, Benjamin describes the symbolic and medial capacity of the stain of colour, in these texts dedicated to language, he traces any activity, including the artistic one, to the generative and configurative capacity of language:

It is possible to talk about a language of music and sculpture, of a language of jurisprudence [...] of a language of technology. [...] Every communication of spiritual contents is language, where communication through the word is only a particular case.¹⁹⁹

Each of these areas finds its own model, its own language that intrinsically possesses the ability to structure and shape its object (and the subject's own ability to configure his own experience). In a religious sense, Benjamin compares this

¹⁹⁸ On the genealogy of these two terms in Benjamin's early works and the philosophical derivation from the meaning of *Mittel* in the theory of colours, Somaini writes «In Goethe's color theory, “physical colors” (which are different from “physiological” and “chemical” colors) are presented as phenomena that appear in a “material,” “colorless,” and “opaque medium” – the term used by Goethe is *Mittel*, which appears to be here an equivalent of *Medium*—producing an endless series of manifestations that need to be studied phenomenologically rather than mathematically» [A. Somaini, *Walter Benjamin's Media Theory. The Medium and the Apparatus*, in “Grey Room”, no. 62, Winter 2016, pp. 6-41, here p. 14.

¹⁹⁹ W. Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”, *op. cit.*, p. 62 (slightly modified translation; «Man kann von einer Sprache der Musik und der Plastik reden, von einer Sprache der Justiz, [...] von einer Sprache der Technik [...] Mit einem Wort: jede Mitteilung geistiger Inhalte ist Sprache, wobei die Mitteilung durch das Wort nur ein besonderer Fall» [W. Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (1916), *op. cit.*, p. 140].

power to the divine one, to the intertwining of naming and creation narrated by *Bereshit*²⁰⁰:

In this “*fiat*” [*Es werde*] and in the “nominated” at the beginning and at the end of the acts, the clear relationship of the act of creation to the language appears each time. It begins with the creative omnipotence of language, and in the end the language incorporates itself, so to speak, the created object, names it. It is therefore what it creates and what it does²⁰¹.

These kinds of considerations are not limited to the religious sphere. The same relationship of mutual reciprocity between language and objectivity returns several times, always proposing a model in which language does not arise as a simple representation of objectivity, but as its configuration, in a continuous interweaving of correspondences between signification and materiality. Explanatory in this regard is the fragment dedicated to Duns Scotus, *Wenn nach der Theorie des Duns Scotus* (1920):

The sphere of language extends as a critical medium [*kritisches Medium*] between the sphere of the signifier and that of the signified. Thus it can be said that the signifier aims at the meaning and at the same time is based on it as regards its material determinateness²⁰².

The power of linguistic generation is therefore attributed in a sacred as well as a phenomenological sense and takes place in a continuous contamination between

²⁰⁰ Benjamin's passion for the first book of the Torah was much discussed. For a general picture of the participation of Genesis in Benjamin's theological and political thought, see the introduction (pp. 1-16) of the book by E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003.

²⁰¹ «In diesem “Es werde” und in dem “Er nannte” am Anfang und Ende der Akte erscheint jedesmal die tiefe deutliche Beziehung des Schöpfungsaktes auf die Sprache. Mit der schaffenden Allmacht der Sprache setzt er ein, und am Schluß einverleibt sich gleichsam die Sprache das Geschaffene, sie benennt es» [W. Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (1916), *op. cit.*, p. 148].

²⁰² «Der Sprachbereich erstreckt sich als kritisches Medium zwischen dem Bereich des Bedeutende(n) und dem des Bedeutete(n). So daß also gesagt werden kann: Das Bedeutende zielt hin auf das Bedeutete und gründet zugleich hinsichtlich seiner Materialbestimmtheit auf diesem» [W. Benjamin, “Wenn nach der Theorie des Duns Scotus” (1920) [fr. 11], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 44].

Jewish theological-linguistic theories as on the “Copernican turn” of Kantian descent. It is on this last aspect that we want to focus, suggesting that is in this incorporation of language within the transcendental task that Benjamin’s theory takes on a function very close to that marked by the well-known cultural turn of Cassirerian philosophy. It is in fact the symbolic character of language, capable of structuring experience up to its material and perceptive rootedness, which «allows Benjamin to radicalize the Kantian critique of knowledge to the point of converting his transcendental plane not simply into a theory of experience (not like Cohen) but in an absolute experience. An experience, therefore, capable of extending across the entire territory of language»²⁰³.

Extending the transcendental method to language means re-discussing the categorical structure proposed by the Kantian - and Neo-Kantian - doctrine to reread it in a historical sense. This methodological reconfiguration will be explicitly stabilized by Benjamin a few years later within the *Baroque Drama*, when he will recover Cohen’s notion of *Ursprung*, to reread it and reinterpret it in its historical root²⁰⁴. At the basis of what could be identified as the cultural turn of Benjamin’s philosophy, as will be seen shortly, some authors have identified the research of Wilhelm von Humboldt, towards whom Benjamin had a fluctuating position. As recently codified in James Underhill’s text²⁰⁵, Humboldt’s thought is mainly based on the relativistic idea of language: each linguistic structure, each different expressive possibility, corresponds to its own semantic domain, capable of giving back to the speaker a peculiar *Weltansicht*. In this way, even the lemmas that refer to the same object in different languages are able to articulate the way in which that object will present itself in the experience of the speaker of one or another language. Cassirer, who was among the authors who helped Humboldt’s thought to take root in the Anglo-American context, greatly emphasized the implications that this

²⁰³ F. Desideri, Introduction to *W. Benjamin, Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II, op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁰⁴ This aspect has already been discussed here. However, refer to the article P. Fiorato, *On the sidelines of the question of origin: A Cohenian track in the Introduction to Drama*, in “Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia”, vol. 62, no. 2/4, 2006, pp. 491-510.

²⁰⁵ This text has the purpose and quality of showing how Humboldt’s approach was also decisive in the development of the Anglo-American philosophy of the 20th century, in which Cassirer, as will be seen, actively participated in the last five years of his life between Yale and Columbia. See: J. Underhill, *Humboldt, Worldview and Language*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2009.

linguistic theory could have on extending the transcendental method to cultural dynamism. As he writes in the first volume of the *Symbolischen Formen* (1923):

With this determination, Humboldt draws the consequence of Kant's critical theory for the philosophy of language. The metaphysical opposition of subjectivity and objectivity is replaced by their transcendental correlation. Just as for Kant, the object, as "object in appearance," does not, as something external and otherworldly, stand over against cognition; rather, it is initially "made possible," initially conditioned and constituted, through its own categories, so now the subjectivity of language no longer appears as a barrier that cuts us off from the apprehension of objective existence [*Sein*] but rather appears as a means of forming [*Formung*], of the "objectification" of sensible impressions.²⁰⁶

Precisely this kind of considerations, which lead to a relativization of the Kantian categories in the domain of language, were decisive in developing the Cassirerian research method: Humboldt is in fact a constant source in Cassirer's thought, which can be traced from the Berlin period up until the American years. For Benjamin, Humboldt is equally recurrent as a source: he is called into question, in the same year as the first volume of the *Symbolic Forms*, in *The Translator's Task*²⁰⁷. The real meeting with this source, however, had taken place well before, during the university years in Berlin: at any rate, as evidenced by the last curriculum written

²⁰⁶ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language*, *op. cit.*, p. 96; «Mit dieser Bestimmung zieht Humboldt die sprachphilosophische Konsequenz aus Kants kritischer Lehre. An die Stelle des metaphysischen Gegensatzes der Subjektivität und Objektivität tritt ihre reine transzendente Korrelation. Wie bei Kant der Gegenstand, als "Gegenstand in der Erscheinung" der Erkenntnis nicht als ein Äußeres und Jenseitiges gegenübersteht, sondern durch deren eigene Kategorien erst "ermöglicht", erst bedingt und konstituiert wird – so erscheint jetzt auch die Subjektivität der Sprache als keine bloße Schranke mehr, die uns von der Erfassung des gegenständlichen Seins trennt, sondern als ein Mittel der Formung, der "Objektivierung" der sinnlichen Eindrücke». [E. Cassirer, "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache" (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 101].

²⁰⁷ Humboldt does not figure in the famous analysis of this text offered by the readings at Cornell University in '83 by Paul de Man, who instead insists on a partly "regressive" reading of Benjamin's thought, which addresses a lot to the mystical-metaphysical root of language. It is precisely this linguistic dimension that, according to Benjamin, is missing from Humboldt's linguistics (as can be seen from some notes from Benjamin *Reflexionen zu Humboldt*. Cf. W. Benjamin, "Reflexionen zu Humboldt" (1925 to 1928) [fr. 13], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 26; P. de Man, "'Conclusions' on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983", in *Yale French Studies*, no. 50 (50 Years of Yale French Studies: A Commemorative Anthology. Part 2. 1980-1998), 2000, pp. 10-35.

by Benjamin in 1940, Humboldt was a great inspiration for the development of his philosophy of language.

The lessons of the Munich philosopher Moritz Geiger and the Berlin private professor for Finno-Ugric languages Ernst Lewy left an indelible impression on me. The exercises that the latter held on Humboldt's work *Über den Sprachbau der Völker* and the reflections that he developed in his work *Zur Sprache des alten Goethe* awakened my interests in the philosophy of language²⁰⁸.

Despite this open acknowledgment of his debt towards the famous linguist, the perplexities that Benjamin had towards the Humboldtian method reflect the same distance that exists between Cassirer and himself. In fact, in the language as well as in the theory of knowledge, the 10's still see Benjamin turning to an unknowable truth, to a knowledge of "theological relevance" to which language can only refer symbolically. This dissatisfaction will persist in the following years, reappearing in a note from the mid-1920s, dedicated to Humboldt's philosophy of language:

Humboldt always blatantly ignores the magical side of language. He also ignores the side that concerns the psychology of the masses and the side that concerns individual psychology (in short; the anthropological side, particularly in its pathological sense).²⁰⁹

The "magical" and poetic part of the language will be identified by Benjamin precisely in the artistic, symbolist tradition, so much so that "Mallarmé is the one

²⁰⁸ W. Benjamin, "Curriculum Vitae (VI): Dr. Walter Benjamin", in *Selected Writings IV, 1938-1940*, (eds) J. M. Jeggins, M. Bullock, H. Eiland, G. Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 2006, pp. 381-386, here p. 382; «Einen nachhaltigen Eindruck hinterließen mir die Vorlesungen des Münchener Philosophen Moritz Geiger sowie des Berliner Privatdozenten für finnisch-ugrische Sprachen, Ernst Lewy. Die Übungen, die der letztere über Humboldts Schrift "Über den Sprachbau der Völker" abhielt sowie die Gedanken, die er in seiner Schrift "Zur Sprache des alten Goethe" entwickelte, erweckten meine sprachphilosophischen Interessen» [W. Benjamin, "Curriculum vitae Dr. Walter Benjamin" (1940), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 225-228, here. p. 226].

²⁰⁹ «Humboldt übersieht selbstverständlich überall die magische Seite der Sprache. Er übersieht aber eigentlich auch die massenpsychologische und individualpsychologische (kurz: die anthropologische, besonders im pathologischen Sinn) » W. Benjamin, *Reflexionen zu Humboldt* (1925-28), *op. cit.*, p. 26].

who explored it in more depth”²¹⁰; it is a theme that also reverberates in other contemporary writings, such as in the fragment *Sprache und Logik III*²¹¹, where Benjamin collects and comments on a selection of excerpts by the linguist Hermann Güntert (1886-1948) on the conception of language in Brahmin and shamanic cultures, as well as on rhetorical techniques (periphrastic) that allow greater mystical evocation within religious rituals – but also in philosophical practice. It was however the reception of the essay on Benjamin, *Consciousness-raising or Redemptive Criticism*²¹², drawn up by Jürgen Habermas in 1972, that really triggered a debate which greatly helped to understand how much Humboldt’s theory was foundational within Benjamin’s philosophical architecture²¹³. Although Habermas recognized that Benjamin’s theory of experience «was rooted in the philosophy of language»²¹⁴, the emphasis was placed by him on the concept of meaning (*Bedeutung*), even when, using a Humboldtian lexicon, he referred the linguistic structure to the progressive idea of *dynamis* and *energeia*. It is agreed with the detractors of Habermas’ interpretation that this reference to the idea of a stable meaning (to a semantic substrate on which language dances, to use the metaphor that Benjamin derives from Stéphane Mallarmé)²¹⁵ without the counterpart provided by Humboldt, risks bringing Benjamin closer to a hermeneutic tradition he was not familiar with²¹⁶.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Benjamin reports some excerpts from *Von der Sprache der Götter und Geister. Bedeutungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur homerischen und eddischen Göttersprache* del 1921.

²¹² J. Habermas, “Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik - Die Aktualität Walter Benjamins”, in *Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1972, pp. 175-223; reprinted in *Kultur Kritik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), pp. 302-344.

²¹³ For a clear and accurate summary of the debate that began in contrast to Habermas’s opinions, see the article by P. Brewster & C. H. Buchner, *Jürgen Habermas on Walter Benjamin*, in “New German Critique” no. 17, Spring 1979, (*Special Walter Benjamin Issue*), pp. 15-29. Among the authors cited so far, L. Wiesenthal also critically discusses these aspects of Habermas’s interpretation in her *Zur Wissenschaftstehre Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), pp. 199-200.

²¹⁴ J. Habermas, *Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism. The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin*, in “New German Critique” no. 17, Spring 1979, (*Special Walter Benjamin Issue*), pp. 30-59, here p. 47.

²¹⁵ F. Desideri, Introduction to *W. Benjamin, Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II, op. cit.*, p. 11.

²¹⁶ There is agreement here in arguing that «Although Habermas critiques Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, he dialectically preserves the concept of "meaning" that has been continually and critically renewed by this philosophical tradition. Whereas both Marcuse and Adorno owed certain impulses of their thought to this tradition and dialectically overcame them,

Through Humboldt it is clear instead that that extension of Kantian transcendental philosophy «to the entire territory of language»²¹⁷ must be understood for Benjamin in morphological terms, rather than semantic: many of the key concepts of Benjamin's philosophy of language, such as that of similarity or translation, in fact indicate a method of investigation that addresses the linguistic "Medium" in its ability to configure experience: «A concept of philosophy derived from reflections on the linguistic essence of knowledge will provide a corresponding concept of experience that will also encompass areas that Kant did not succeed in classifying in a truly systematic way»²¹⁸. As we have seen, Benjamin, even if not "systematically", responds to this philosophical need by following a well-defined tradition, in a path that begins with Hamann and his reflections on poetic language, the reworking offered by Herder, up to the studies in language of Wilhelm von Humboldt. This tradition, together with the theoretical presuppositions of the revisited neo-Kantianism, will be progressively enriched and, in part, re-discussed, in Benjamin's research until 1934, with the drafting of the text on *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie*, in which many of Benjamin's researches coalesce: technique, myth and pedagogy all find their spot, tinged by «Marxist theory of language and linguistic constitution, developed by the Soviet linguists Nikolaus Marr and L. S. Vigotsky»²¹⁹.

However, there is a caesura that seems to be kept alive during these twenty years that divides the early texts dedicated to language and this last writing left by Benjamin on the same theme: the contrast, or rather the dialectic, between a relativized form of language and the idea of an original language, understood in its expressive function. This dialectic is expressed in various polarities, in the relationship between name and word, between divine language and profane

Benjamin was almost completely untouched by this philosophical current - despite numerous superficial resemblances» [P. Brewster and C. H. Buchner, *Jürgen Habermas on Walter Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. 25].

²¹⁷ F. Desideri, introduction to *W. Benjamin, Conoscenza e linguaggio. Frammenti II*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²¹⁸ «Ein in der Reflexion auf das sprachliche Wesen der Erkenntnis gewonnener Begriff von ihr wird einen korrespondierenden Erfahrungsbegriff Schaffen der auch Gebiete deren wahrhafte systematische Einordnung Kant nicht gelungen ist umfassen wird» [W. Benjamin, *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (1917-18), *op. cit.*, p. 168].

²¹⁹ A. Rabinbach, *Walter Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar"*, in "New German Critique" no. 17, Spring 1979, (*Special Walter Benjamin Issue*), pp. 60-64, here p. 63.

language, between mediation and immediacy and, as we are trying to highlight, between medium and symbol. Benjamin's translation theory very clearly returns the relationship between these two different orders: it is in fact the translator's task to ignore the spiritual structuring of a specific language, to refer to expression, to the pure linguistic function. The contrast is between the historical relationship between languages and their super-historical relationship (*überhistorische Verwandtschaft der Sprachen*) in which pure language (*die reine Sprache*) is founded²²⁰.

Humboldt's research fits into Benjamin's theory with regards to the historical determination and differentiation of the various human languages, but not so for the idea of a pure language. Indeed, as is clear from the *Reflexionen zu Humboldt* (1925/28) note, Benjamin welcomes the linguist's historical research, while lamenting the absence of a general, more metaphysical plan in which to inscribe language as such²²¹ in its super-historical guise. However, what Benjamin borrowed from Humboldt is the hypothesis that different linguistic structures led to different «spiritual movements (*Geistesbewegungen*) in different peoples (*in den verschiedenen Völkern*)»²²². This Humboldtian view is more clearly summarized in *The Translator's Task*, when Benjamin writes that «In “*Brot*” and “*pain*” what is meant is the same, but the way of meaning it is not»²²³, emphasizing that although the relationship of the two words with the same object is equivalent, the linguistic intention differs between the two.

This hypothesis is now codified under the name of “linguistic relativity” or through the more controversial wording of “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”²²⁴ and is generally traced back to the cluster of thinkers that C. Taylor gathered under the

²²⁰ W. Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923), *op. cit.*, p.13.

²²¹ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Reflexionen zu Humboldt* (1925-28), *op.*, p 26.

²²² W. Benjamin, “La Traduction - Le pour et le contre” (1935/36), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 157-160, here p. 159.

²²³ «In “*Brot*” und “*pain*” ist das Gemeinte zwar dasselbe, die Art, es zu meinen, dagegen nicht» [W. Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 13].

²²⁴ Tendentally “linguistic relativity” is used rather than Sapir – Whorf hypothesis due to the strong determinism that is ascribed to the theories of B. L. Whorf. For the development of this hypothesis within the German philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, please refer to the text J. M. Penn, *Linguistic Relativity versus Innate Ideas: The Origins of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in German Thought*, Mouton, Paris 1972. For the red thread that connects Hamann, Herder and Humboldt in the development of this theory cf. pp. 49-55.

acronym “HHH” (Hamann, Herder, Humboldt)²²⁵. Albeit playing a marginal role in the research devoted to this topic today, which concern linguistics rather than philosophy, Cassirer was one of the thinkers and historians who helped stabilize and define this theoretical tradition. The theories of Edward Sapir, central to this field, are also mentioned directly by Cassirer in the 1940s, in the article *The Influence of Language upon the Development of Scientific Thought* (1942)²²⁶ and in the book *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (1944)²²⁷.

This tradition of the philosophy of language, regardless of its more or less deterministic declinations, is based on the idea that linguistic structuring can determine a specific cognitive, emotional or perceptive configuration: it therefore proposes a vision of language which flows into the medial field²²⁸, renouncing a representational vision of language, and eliminating the remoteness and the qualitative difference between content and its medium, in that double correlation between form and content that has also marked modernism in literature²²⁹. Cassirer, in the first volume of the *Symbolic Forms*, especially in the introduction and in the first chapters, offers a very detailed reconstruction of the romantic antecedents of this theory, which he places at the basis of his research. In fact, Cassirer’s so-called “linguistic turn”, i.e., his first approach to the theory of symbolic forms, is based on

²²⁵ For a recent survey of these authors in the panorama of contemporary philosophy of language and its most famous exponents: Cf. C. Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2016.

²²⁶ In this article Cassirer criticizes the hypothesis of grammatical invariants through Sapir’s studies of purchased linguistics, dedicated to the differentiation between verbs and adjectives. Cf. E. Cassirer, “The Influence of Language upon the Development of Scientific Thought” (1942), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1941-1946], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 24, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2007, pp. 128-130.

²²⁷ For Cassirer’s extensive elaboration of the thought of Sapir, Cf. E. Cassirer, “An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture” (1944), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 23, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2006, esp. pp. 136-141.

²²⁸ This theory has already found applications outside the field of linguistics, see: F. K. Koerner, *The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: A Preliminary History and a Bibliographical Essay*, in “Journal of Linguistic Anthropology” vol. 2 no.2, 1992, pp. 173-198.

²²⁹ On the relationship between form and content in the modernist movement, see K. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), University of California Press, Berkeley 1973; R. Lehman, *Impossible Modernism: T. S. Eliot, Walter Benjamin, and the Critique of Historical Reason*, Stanford University Press, 2016. As for the influence of this movement on Benjamin’s work, see the recent publication by M. Charles, *Modernism Between Benjamin and Goethe*, Bloomsbury, London 2019.

the symbolic concept of language, intended as a primary tool for structuring experience and objectivity:

Cassirer first developed his conception of symbolic forms utilizing a distinction he borrowed from Humboldt's philosophy of language. Humboldt distinguished between language as a fixed structure, as "*Ergon*," and language as a process, "*Energia*," much as Saussure later distinguished between *langue* and *parole* or Chomsky between "competence" and "performance." Cassirer defined symbolic forms as the "energies" by which concrete sensory signs are related to contents of meaning²³⁰.

It is very complex to discuss the hypothesis of this configurative possibility of language in Benjamin: If in fact for Cassirer Humboldt's work allows the linguistic sphere to be expanded from the logical to the cultural domain, thus departing from the Marburg school²³¹, in the case of Benjamin this shift is marked by a theological tension. So, if for Benjamin the philosophy of language «contains the possibilities of a mediation to the mode of perception of historical materialism»²³², at the same time the very possibilities of this mediation collide with the idea of a pure, divine language.

1.7. *Towards the Trauerspielbuch. A paradigm Shift*

The most extensive and complete treatment left by Benjamin of the notion of symbol is the one contained within *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Unlike previous writings, where the symbol was used as an asymptotic concept to define the ideal and complete relationship between experience and knowledge, in the *Trauerspielbuch* there is a reconfiguration of the term: this concept becomes also a

²³⁰ J. M. Krois, *The priority of "symbolism" over language in Cassirer's philosophy*, in "Synthese" *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²³¹ This recent publication must be added to the texts already cited on this subject: S. Luft, *The Space of Culture: Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture (Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

²³² A. Rabinbach, *Walter Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar"*, in "New German Critique", *op. cit.*, p. 60.

crossroads between the investigation of myth and its reception. Furthermore, it also problematizes the relationship between image and word, between plasticity and expression. Even the interpretative landscape changes, because Benjamin approaches this concept through the re-elaboration of the romantic mythologists (*gemäß der Einsicht der romantischen Mythologen*)²³³, rather than the neo-Kantian school he had referred to in previous years. This is a passage that in the same years Cassirerian philosophy also completed a little in advance, accompanied by the research that took place within the circle of Aby Warburg.

Proposed as a unitary counterpart to the allegorical method of investigation, which in some way mixes the polar tensions of the Warburgian method²³⁴, the symbol is described mainly by subtraction, through a negative dialectic, aimed at bringing out the misunderstandings around this concept within the *Kunstwissenschaft/Kulturwissenschaft*. Yet, this process is not without contradictions, especially if it is compared with the treatment that the symbol will receive in the *Trauerspielbuch's Vorrede*: if Benjamin re-proposes here that old need for «limitation [*Einschränkung*] of knowledge in the symbol»²³⁵, during the progression of the essay he tries to abate the concept of the symbolic as an intuitive scheme of knowledge.

The symbol and its philosophical intention in the *Baroque Drama* seem therefore to shift its centre from that original phenomenological²³⁶ function to a theological task. This predominance of a theological meaning of the symbol, at the basis of many contradictions in the text, could lead to the presupposition of a complete divergence between the studies of Benjamin and those of Cassirer. Actually, if we give up the positivistic reading of Cassirer's research, the perspective changes. Cassirer in fact, as will be seen, also worked on the theological and mystical

²³³ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), *op. cit.*, p. 359.

²³⁴ As regards the reception of Warburg's morphological method in the *German Baroque Drama*, especially as regards the notion of "Polarität", please refer here to A. Pinotti, "Lo studio degli estremi. Benjamin morfologo tra Warburg e Goethe", in *Giochi per melanconici*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-232.

²³⁵ «Die Einschränkung der Erkenntnis im Symbol sind die beiden Aufgaben der Erkenntnistheorie». W. Benjamin, *Erkenntnistheorie* (1920/21), *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²³⁶ As regards the meaning of the phenomenological landscape of the concept of symbol, as structured by Cassirer, please refer to the article by D. Verene, *Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer. The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in "Journal of the History of Ideas" vol. 30, no.1, 1969, pp. 3-46.

implications of the symbol, even in its evolution from the pagan to the early Christian age. As Johnson has well noted, the diffuse reading of an Olympic and positivistic Cassirer – frequently opposed to a “demonic” Warburg – is, however common, limiting. It fails to appreciate the common effort that was taking place around the "organon"²³⁷ of the Hamburg library: «Pondering, therefore, whether Cassirer’s account of the development of symbolic thought (that is, of language out of art and myth, and then of mathematics and theoretical reason out of language) is more teleological or hierarchical than simply causal is essential if we are to appraise what Warburg in fact owed to his friend and colleague»²³⁸. Embracing this view, and excluding a causal determinism from Cassirer’s work, a genealogical concern for the mystical substratum of symbolization appears clear in his work as well.

Apart from the Warburgian influence that links the *Trauerspielbuch* to *Das mythische Denken*²³⁹ (and more generally to Cassirer’s research on the myth of the early 1920s), it must be remembered that in 1925 (during the draft of the *Baroque Drama*) Benjamin was discussing by correspondence with Hugo von Hofmannsthal about the value of Cassirer’s research on myth and symbolization. In that letter Benjamin admitted that he did not understand the theoretical purpose of Cassirer’s text, although he appreciated it very much: he wondered if Cassirer simply wanted to describe mythic thought or if he wanted to contrast it with rational thought²⁴⁰.

²³⁷ As Cassirer writes in the dedication to Warburg in *Individuum und Kosmos*: «Möge das Organon geistesgeschichtlicher Forschung, das Sie mit Ihrer Bibliothek geschaffen haben, uns noch auf lange Zeit hinaus immer wieder neue Fragen stellen, und mögen Sie selbst uns, wie bisher, neue Wege zu ihrer Beantwortung weisen» [E. Cassirer, “Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance” (1927), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 14, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2002, p. 11].

²³⁸ C. D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²³⁹ This article, which reports a previous conference, was first published in the "Studien der Bibliothek Warburg" (Leipzig/Berlin 1922), edited by Fritz Saxl and, as Cassirer would like to remember, had been based in part on some suggestions by Panofsky. Cf. E. Cassirer “Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken” (1922), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1922–1926], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 16, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2003, esp. pp. 3–4.

²⁴⁰ «[Ernst] Cassirers Arbeit über die “Begriffsform im mythischen Denken” habe ich vor längerer Zeit mit viel Interesse gelesen. Fraglich aber blieb mir, ob der Versuch durchführbar ist, das mythische Denken nicht nur in Begriffen – d.h. kritisch – darzustellen, sondern auch durch den Kontrast gegens Begriffliche hinreichend zu erleuchten». [W. Benjamin to H. von Hofmannsthal, Berlin 28.12.1925, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910–1940), *op. cit.*, p. 106].

This kind of concern, as we have seen, is completely external to Cassirer's work²⁴¹. But this path taken by Cassirer on the studies of the symbolic was inspired precisely by the collaboration with Warburg and with the access to his circle. Before proceeding with the analysis of the concept of symbol in the *Baroque Drama*, it is therefore necessary to trace the horizon of this notion within the Hamburg Kreis.

²⁴¹ Even if we agree with Marchesoni on the tautegoric characterization of the myth in Benjamin, in this respect we must disagree with his contrast between Benjamin and Cassirer, which seems to trace the just quoted letter from Benjamin to Hofmannsthal: «In other words, Benjamin is not aiming to brighten the myth reducing it to a necessary premise of rational thought (in Cassirer's way)» [S. Marchesoni, "Walter Benjamin e l'interruzione del mito", in F. Carmagnola, *Il mito profanato. Dall'epifania del divino alla favola mediatica*, Meltemi, Milano 2017, pp. 221-246, here p. 238 (my translation)].

2. The Symbol as a Tool of Cultural Investigation between Warburg and Cassirer. A Reconnaissance

2.1. Before the Kreis. Usener and Warburg's Early Research

Investigating the ways in which man came to orient himself in the world by representing the causes of his phobias was the common thread on which the research of the Hamburg art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was grafted. The founder of iconology, to whom Cassirer and Benjamin turned in the 1920s, referred to a vast tradition that indicated the symbol as an instrument of investigation. Cassirer, as is well known, actively participated in this debate, whereas Benjamin rejected the application of symbol to the theory of art and he was in turn rejected by Panofsky in 1928, when he tried to approach the Hamburg circle. It is therefore appropriate to briefly introduce the main thematic nodes of Warburgian *milieu*, which were then systematized in a real methodological orientation - sometimes embracing divergent directions, as in the case of Panofskian iconology - by the intellectual heirs of the Hamburg scholar, by the so-called "Warburg Kreis". Obviously, the aim here is not to summarize Warburgian thought in a few pages, but to trace some common threads that have attracted the gaze and the minds of the two philosophers, especially in the elaboration of their respective treatment of the concept of symbol.

Among the primary sources of Warburg's thought is the teaching of Jacob Burckhardt, who in *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*²⁴² (1860), conceived the history of civilizations in terms of a general and evolutionary development, understood as a series of clarifications and emergencies of human aptitude. In the wake of this study, Warburg aimed to reconstruct the original context of the work of art, while criticizing the tendency of the Swiss historian to proceed in historical and artistic research in parallel, without indicating the connections between one and

²⁴² Warburg also dedicated to Burckhardt and his research on the Italian Renaissance a seminar cycle that took place in 1927 at the University of Hamburg. Cf. B. Roeck, "Aby Warburg Seminarübungen über Jacob Burckhardt im Sommersemester 1927", in *Idea. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle*, vol.10, Hamburg 1991, pp. 86-88.

the other²⁴³. Another fundamental aspect of his thought belongs to a different cultural matrix, namely the problem of expression, openly based on the poetics of *Einfühlung*, developed by Robert Vischer and Friedrich Theodor Vischer²⁴⁴. From these cultural premises, the formulation of a new historical-artistic method will be born, aimed at understanding the meaningful and expressive function of images. It will be precisely this twofold relationship that induces Warburg to situate his studies in the liminal space between figuration and language (a method crystallized in the motto: *Zum Bild das Wort*), a question that will later prove essential for the foundation of iconology. His doctoral thesis of 1892 (later published as an essay in 1893)²⁴⁵, concerning the mythological paintings of Botticelli, is dedicated to this report – “La nascita di Venere” e “La Primavera”-, and it will be decisive because it prefigures the various aspects of the problems that will later be investigated by Warburg during his Florentine stay in 1889. In this period the art historian deepens his studies on the myth in Usener, Lamprecht and Vignoli²⁴⁶, as testified by the *Fragments on expression*²⁴⁷ drawn up in those years. This is the beginning of that

²⁴³ Also of the seminars held in Hamburg in the mid-1920s is the Warburgian idea of a space of contamination between the various disciplines which, on the model of Usener, should have converged in producing, almost alchemically, a *Stylöpfte*. Cf. K. Mazzucco, *I seminari della KBW. Un laboratorio di metodo*, in “Engramma” no. 56, 2007, pp. 118-125.

²⁴⁴ On the role of *Einfühlung* in Warburgian thought, see: G. Carchia, *Aby Warburg, Simbolo e Tragedia*, in “Aut aut”, no.199-200, 1984, pp. 92-10. As for the similarities between the stages of Vischer’s image and those symbolic functions of Cassirer, through Warburgian reception see: A. Pinotti, *Symbolic Form and Symbolic Formula: Cassirer and Warburg on Morphology (Between Goethe and Vischer)*, in “Cassirer Studies”, pp. 119-137.

²⁴⁵ A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis “Geburt der Venus” und “Frühling” Eine Untersuchung über die Vorstellungen von der Antike in der Italienischen Frührenaissance*, Leopold Voss, Hamburg-Leipzig, 1893.

²⁴⁶ Cassirer’s positions on these three authors were very different: Usener was highly appreciated by Cassirer and ended up covering a central point of his theory of myth. The studies of the positivist Vignoli were also cited by Cassirer, especially in relation to the concept of *Ausdruckserlebnissen* and the study of myth in relation to animal consciousness. Cf. E. Cassirer, “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis.” (1929), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 13, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2002, esp. p. 84. In reverse Cassirer did not appreciate Lamprecht’s approach, which he considered the main precursor of *Kulturseele’s* Spenglerian idea. Cf. E. Cassirer, “Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band. Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart (1832–1932)”, vol. I, (1957), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 5, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2000, esp. pp. 327-340.

²⁴⁷ The fragments on expression are a collection of private notes written by Warburg between 1888 and 1895. In these early writings the author highlights a key theme of his work: the study of the processes that lead to the objectification of human expression, especially the artistic one. The goal is to outline a “physics of thought” that allows us to analyse stylistic change as the relationship between pathos and form. For an overview see F. Drugeon, *Aby Warburg, Fragments sur l’expression*, L’Ecarquillé, Paris 2015.

disciplinary intersectionality - capable of drawing from scientific and cultural sources - which will mark Warburgian research and justify the association with Cassirer: Usener's approach to the myth was based on a philological-comparative study of language, which turned micrologically to the genesis of minor deities, *dei loci* and patron saints²⁴⁸; for Lamprecht, the pioneer of *Kulturgeschichte*, the formation of myths consisted instead more of a psychological question, in the light of which an attempt was made to explain the peculiarities of thought, memory, language and art. In Vignoli's evolutionary theory, mythical thought and scientific thought had the same origin, namely the psycho-physiological act of personification of phenomena²⁴⁹.

Thanks to these readings, Warburg frames the development of human consciousness, which passes from a magical-religious state of identification of the causes to a rationalization of the same, coinciding with the appearance of scientific activity. Anthropomorphism has its roots in a pathetic perceptive act from which man gradually distances himself through his reflective capacity; bearing this in mind, the idea of a tension in which the artistic image resides begins to emerge, in constant oscillation between magic and rationality, abandonment and detachment. In the view of the art historian, «every cultural fact is therefore a figure of embedded psychic compromise that the author outlines as a polar diagram between magical power and a rational mastery of affects (*Affektenlehre*)»²⁵⁰. It is fundamentally to these two aspects that Benjamin's thought will turn in the *Baroque Drama*: this conflict, which he will re-elaborate, arises as the control of mythical terror through artistic or allegorical exegesis. As he writes in the *Trauerspielbuch*:

European antiquity was divided, and with its luminous afterimage in humanism there was a resurgence of its dark medieval aftereffect [*Nach-Wirkung*]. Warburg,

²⁴⁸ The debt of the *Trauerspielbuch* towards Usener has been identified precisely in this micrological method: the myth in the *Baroque Drama* recurs in fact in the guise of a "broken down mythology", in the exegetical dialectic of Christian allegory towards the "surviving" remains of paganism ancient. See R. Kany, *Particularism in the Work of Walter Benjamin*, in "Criticism", Summer 1990, vol. 32, no. 3 (*Particularism*), pp. 325-341.

²⁴⁹ For an in-depth analysis of Vignoli's influence on Warburgian thought, see: J. Murano, *Aby Warburg e la cultura scientifica italiana. L'incontro con Paolo Mantegazza e Tito Vignoli*, in "Studi Culturali", no. 1, 2017, pp. 23-46.

²⁵⁰ M. Ghelardi (ed.) *Aby Warburg, Astrologica. Saggi e appunti 1908-1929*, Einaudi, Torino 2019, p. X (my translation).

out of deep affinity with his subject, has provided a fascinating account of how in the Renaissance “celestial phenomena were grasped in human form, so that their demonic power might be contained at least by an image”.²⁵¹

If Benjamin’s reading of Warburg’s demonic conflict is marked by the standstill dialectic of a polarity, Cassirer, in his more Warburgian work, *Individuum und Kosmos* (1927), understands this conflict not in a historical sense, but in a gnoseological sense: as Ferretti summarizes, for Cassirer «what is apparently consolidated turns out to be fraught with tensions and what is apparently in the making - in the modern spirit of the Renaissance - is consolidated into “ancient and at the same time new forms”»²⁵². Far from Benjamin’s immobile dialectic, Cassirer proposes, even in this case, a dynamic and synthetic conflict that is resolved in the production of symbols (more precisely, as new modes of symbolization).

Warburg’s research on this issue progressed Florence. In the company of master August Schmarsow²⁵³, Warburg was commissioned to research Masaccio’s frescoes in the Brancacci chapel²⁵⁴. The study presents a physiognomic and gestural analysis of the figures aimed at bringing out the link between figurative expression and poetic language, a hypothesis that was then fully developed in the subsequent study on Botticelli mentioned above. The latter intends to demonstrate the correspondence between Renaissance literary descriptions and the respective

²⁵¹ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, (ed. and tr.) H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 2019, p. 240; «Die europäische Antike war gespalten und an ihrem strahlenden Nach-Bilde im Humanismus belebte neu sich ihre dunkle Nach-Wirkung im Mittelalter. Warburg hat aus wahlverwandter Stimmung faszinierend entwickelt, wie in der Renaissance “die Himmelserscheinungen menschlich umfaßt wurden, um ihre dämonische Macht wenigstens bildhaft zu begrenzen” » [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 395].

²⁵² S. Ferretti, *Il demone della memoria. Simbolo e tempo storico in Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, Marietti*, Casale Moferrato 1984, p. 96.

²⁵³ As W. Waetzoldt wrote one year after Warburg’s death «In entscheidenden Perioden seines Lebens und zu Schicksalszeiten des Kunst historischen Institutes hat Warburg in Florenz gelebt. Zuerst als Student (1888/89), der Justi, Thode, Janitschek seine Lehrer, Jacob Burckhardt und Nietzsche seine geistigen Führer nannte und unter der Leitung August Schmarsows und unter der Nachwirkung der Lektüre des Lessingschen “Laokoon” die Untersuchungen über die Vorstellungen von der Antike in der italienischen Frührenaissance begann» [W. Waetzoldt, *In Memoriam Aby Warburg*, in “Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz”, no. 3, July 1930, pp. 197-200, here p. 197].

²⁵⁴ A. Warburg, *Die Typen der Brancacci Capelle* (Vortrag, 12.02.1889), Warburg Institute Archive, III. 33. 2. 5-6; in M. Ghelardi (ed.), *La Rinascita del paganesimo antico e altri scritti* (1889-1914). Nino Aragno Editore, Torino 2004.

figurative representations. In this sense, in the analysis of the Botticellian iconographic motifs, from the reading of the works of Alberti, Poliziano and Leonardo, Warburg understands the centrality accorded to the idea of movement, which is translated into figurative language through the exaltation of the drapery of the clothes and of the hair movement. Movement as a characteristic feature of classicism is one of the first points of arrival in Warburg's research, which materialized in the analysis of the figure of the nymph²⁵⁵. This is a renowned topos that will not recur in either Benjamin's or Cassirer's work²⁵⁶, despite the fact that it underlies the cultural or gnoseological tensions in which both were interested. In fact, the art historian demonstrates how the nymph qualifies as an expression of rebirth and emancipation with respect to medieval obscurantism, revealing at the same time the contrast between two different civilizations: the Nordic one in which the medieval tradition persisted, and the Mediterranean one, oriented to the rediscovery of classical antiquity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Warburg's interest turned towards astrology, understood as a phenomenon that oscillates between cultic practice and mathematical contemplation. The importance of astrological studies in Warburgian thought is demonstrated by the conspicuous notes on the subject, to which the art historian Maurizio Ghelardi recently dedicated a publication²⁵⁷. These writings cover a period of time from 1908 to 1929, the year of the Hamburg scholar's death.

²⁵⁵ The interest in the figure of the *Nymph* emerges from the *Dissertation on Botticelli*. In the movements of the hair and drapery of the Spring and the *Birth of Venus*, Warburg recognizes that iconographic, potetic and pathetic function in which the atmosphere of Renaissance Florence is reflected, much more attracted to the movement full of grace and passion of which the *Nymph* represents the 'emblem that not from Winckelmann's "imperturbable serenity". Ninfa is the representation of *Nachleben*, the survival of what comes down to us from the past. For an in-depth analysis of the figure of the nymph in Warburgian research see; G. Didi-Huberman, *L'immagine survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, De Minuit, Paris 2002; G. Agamben, *Ninfe*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2007.

²⁵⁶ Although Benjamin does not refer directly to this iconographic *topos*, Agamben emphasized its function within his work, which would have sparked Benjamin's interest in the moving image: «Warburg's interest in the representation of moving bodies - which he calls "moving life" and whose canonical example is the nymph, was not so much the scientific-technical or aesthetic order as his obsession for something called the "life of images" could call. This topic is of central importance for a philosophical and poetic (possibly even political) movement of the early 20th century that should by no means be neglected - which encompassed pretty much everything from Klages to Benjamin, from Focillon to Futurism. An investigation into their relationship to cinema is still pending» [G. Agamben, *Ninfe*, *op. cit.*, p. 22].

²⁵⁷ M. Ghelardi (ed.) *Aby Warburg, Astrologica. Saggi e appunti 1908-1929*, *op. cit.*, p. XI (my translation).

Astrology is in fact a theoretical tool that allows us to answer the fundamental question that guides Warburg's research, namely understanding the way in which man orientates himself in the world by objectifying his own phobias. The history of civilizations becomes thus a survey in the ways civilizations can objectivize the relationship between subject and object, consciously creating a distance between the subject and the eternal world: «Thus, starting from Botticelli's allegorical paintings, I came to the practice and history of the astrological symbol. The general meaning (...) is to prove how the path from concretion to abstraction is not in sharp contrast, but rather represents an organic circle of human intellectual capacity. In this way, the astrological symbols reveal the double characteristic of being in some cases tropes, in other metaphors»²⁵⁸.

Although this quote is taken from a letter written by Warburg to his brother in 1928 - that is, a year before his death - the first study devoted to astrology dates back to 1912, when he made an intervention on P. Schubring's report dedicated to *Die Stellung des nordischen und südlichen Künstlers zum Bildvorwurf*²⁵⁹. In this contribution he outlines his position on the passage from a medieval to a Renaissance conception of the world: if in the Middle Ages astrological entities are understood as uncontrollable and demonic forces, in the Renaissance, thanks to an anthropocentric conception of the world, the individual is able to characterize the divinities as personifications of astral forces and, in so doing, exorcise them to the point of making them positive entities: «in astrology, two completely heterogeneous spiritual powers are unquestionably allied: mathematics, the most subtle instrument of the abstract reflection, and the fear of demons, the most primitive form of religious causality»²⁶⁰. As Ghelardi explains, the rise of astrology can be traced back to a psychic need encoded in the corporal eloquence - rhetorical, semantic - that is, in the expression relating to the body and *habitus*. The myth therefore qualifies as the original form of mimic language. On the basis of these reflections, at the centre of Warburg's research lies a psycho-historical interest that concerns

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. XIV.

²⁵⁹ C. Cieri Via identifies at the basis of this intervention in Rome the need to reconcile some polarizations, such as that between Nordic art and Mediterranean art, but of a historicism that advances by stages: Cf. C. Cieri Via, *Introduzione a Aby Warburg*, Laterza, Roma-Torino 2014, esp. pp. 111-112.

²⁶⁰ M. Ghelardi (ed.) *Aby Warburg, Astrologica, op.cit.*, p. XLVIII.

the forms of expression that are connected to the rise of religious thought. «Symbol and myth both descend from the same source (...) fundamental for the mythic representation are the attribution of a soul (personification) and the production of images (metaphor)»²⁶¹.

A consonance, or at least a debt, has already been noted between Benjamin and Warburg's treatment of astrology. Specifically, with regard to the note drawn up by Benjamin in 1933 dedicated to the mimetic faculty, *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (1933)²⁶². Benjamin initially discusses whether there may have been a historical evolution in the ways of producing similarities and analogies and identifies astrology as the archetype of the free game of similarity:

It should be remembered that neither the mimetic forces nor the mimetic objects [*Objekte, oder Gegenstände*] have remained the same over the millennia. Rather, it can be assumed that the gift of producing similarities [...] and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, has changed in the course of history. [...] The allusion to the astrological sphere may supply a first reference point for an understanding of the concept of nonsensuous similarity [*unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit*]. True, our existence no longer includes what once made it possible to speak of this kind of similarity: above all, the ability to produce it.²⁶³

Even under the sign of astrology and fifteen years after his reflection on language, Benjamin places the original symbolic content as the first mimetic formation: «Language plays a central role in this primitive metaphysics, since the system of correspondences consists in non-sensuous similarities, which are rooted

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. XX.

²⁶² Benjamin's relationship with the Warburgian study of astrology has been extensively investigated in M. Rampley, *The Remembrance of Things Past. On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin*, Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000.

²⁶³ W. Benjamin, "On Mimetic Faculty", in *Selected Writings II.2 1931-1934*, (eds) M. W. Jeggins, H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 2005, pp. 720-723, here p. 721 (slightly modified translation); «Dabei ist zu bedenken, daß weder die mimetischen Kräfte, noch die mimetischen Objekte, oder Gegenstände, im Laufe der Jahrtausende die gleichen blieben. Vielmehr ist anzunehmen, daß die Gabe, Ähnlichkeiten hervorzubringen [...] und daher auch die Gabe, solche zu erkennen, sich im Wandel der Geschichte verändert hat. Der Hinweis auf den astrologischen Bereich mag einen ersten Anhaltspunkt für das gewähren, was unter dem Begriff einer unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit zu verstehen ist. In unserem Dasein findet sich zwar nicht mehr, was einmal möglich machte, von einer solchen Ähnlichkeit zu sprechen, vor allem: sie hervorzurufen» [W. Benjamin, *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (1933), *op. cit.* p. 211].

in the primal form of language: the name»²⁶⁴. Once again Benjamin denies the conventional nature of language, tracing it back to an original vocal-act, as he goes on to write that «If language, as it is obvious, is not an agreed system of signs, then one will have to fall back again and again on thoughts as they appear in their most primitive form as an onomatopoeic mode of explanation»²⁶⁵.

Of a completely opposite sign, albeit complementary, is the reading that Cassirer gave eleven years earlier: on the relationship between similarity, astrology and linguistic symbolization, he writes in *Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken* (1922): «If, therefore, primitive thought and action succeeds in imitating a thing or a process with real fidelity and accuracy, then in this imitation it already has the essence of the thing itself. All magic of analogy is based on this premise, it goes back to the substantial meaning and power attributed to absolute resemblance. The astrological view of the world basically does nothing more than bringing this presupposition to full implementation, and it embodies the world in a consistent, self-contained system»²⁶⁶. This “self-contained system” will be deeply investigated by both Cassirer and Warburg through the studies of Hermann Usener, dedicated to myth and the relationship between theogony and language.

Although Hermann Usener has only marginally treated the history of astrology²⁶⁷, when between October 1885 and March 1887 Warburg attended the

²⁶⁴ M. Rampley, *The Remembrance of Things Past. On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²⁶⁵ «Wenn nun die Sprache, wie es auf der Hand liegt, nicht ein verabredetes System von Zeichen ist, so wird man immer wieder auf Gedanken zurückgreifen müssen, wie sie in ihrer primitivsten Form als onomatopoeische Erklärungsweise auftreten» W. Benjamin, *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (1933), *op. cit.* p. 212].

²⁶⁶ «Wenn es daher dem primitiven Denken und Tun gelingt, eine Sache oder einen Vorgang in wirklicher Treue und Genauigkeit nachzuahmen, so besitzt es in dieser Nachahmung bereits den Wesenskern der Sache selbst. Aller Analogiezauber geht auf diese Voraussetzung, geht auf die substantielle Bedeutung und Kraft zurück, die der bloßen Ähnlichkeit zugeschrieben wird. Die astrologische Weltansicht tut im Grunde nichts anderes, als daß sie diese Voraussetzung zu vollständiger Durchführung bringt und daß sie sie in einem folgerichtigen, in sich geschlossenen System verkörpert» [E. Cassirer, *Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken* (1922), *op. cit.*, p. 52].

²⁶⁷ However, the marginality of these studies is disputed. Many sources agree that Usener worked on an entire volume dedicated to these themes, which was then lost: «According to several statements by people who were in a position to know, including Eduard Schwartz, one of the many medieval and modern manuscripts which were burned with Mommsen's library on 12 July 1880 was a complete book by Usener relating to the history of astronomy and astrology. Our witnesses are vague, and not in agreement on details. Perhaps the book was just a first draft of the edition of the texts Usener contributed to later, the *Chronica Minora*. In any case these texts had something to do with astronomy and astrology. Evidently about 1880 Usener considered ancient astronomy and

German philologist's course in mythology in Bonn, he had already elaborated the key points of his research, in which mythical thought is also linked to the astrological approach. In Usener's studies astrology is in fact understood as an indispensable tool for penetrating the human psyche's origin. Psyche is here intended as featured in the study of the birth of religions, traditions and myths, which all imply an "unconscious becoming" of the most ancient history of civilization and the very persistence of myths in the evolution of the human mind: «We are looking for a history of the representations that the archaic epoch built starting from things external and internal to ourselves. In following the multiple creation and neo-formation of the individual representations, we are paving the foundations for the great edifice of a history of the evolution of the human spirit»²⁶⁸.

From Usener, Warburg acquires that mythology is a theory of the forms of religious representations, and the mythical forms of expression that constitute the world in their image. The myth is part of an essentially cognitive (as well as cultural) region. It is a constitutive and functional element of the human psyche, and its function dwells precisely in an attempt to create a distance from external impressions, capable of weakening and controlling their phobic aspect: «Our theory of knowledge will be devoid of its necessary presupposition, until linguistic science and mythology have clarified the processes of spontaneous and unconscious representation that underlies the rise of religions»²⁶⁹. The forms of figurative representation are conceived as reflections of mental images (*Vorstellung*) that materialize through the medium of painting, decorative art and parties. For this reason: «It must have been exciting for young Warburg to hear the first lessons of Usener, who rejected the traditional approach to the "system" of classical mythology. Mythology was to be the study of the ideas (*Vorstellungen*) of a certain people around the supernatural. The formation of myths is a psychological problem»²⁷⁰. The comparative analysis of the forms of religious imagination for

astrology one of his provinces - or rather one of the fields a student of ancient religion had to master» [Hermann Usener, in "History and Theory", Dec. 1982, Vol. 21, No. 4, Beiheft 21, (*New Paths of Classicism in the Nineteenth Century*), pp. 33-48, here p. 41].

²⁶⁸ M. Ghelardi (ed.) *Aby Warburg, Astrologica, op.cit.*, p.XIX

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ E. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1986, p. 32.

Usener is divided into five phases: first, we have an analysis of religious conceptualizations, that is, the process of forming names; following from this, the must be understanding of the elementary and unconscious processes of imagination that underlie this conceptualization; in other words, this is the stage where personification and metaphor enter myths and forms of worship. These levels descend from the imagination, so that the dynamic that leads to representation passes through the personification and therefore the metaphor. These are nothing but the invention of an image suitable for representing the mental object that has been constructed. The image or name therefore allows us to go back to myth, worship and the form of the symbolic, as they have developed and intersected historically.

Following an evolutionary pattern and openly inspired by many of Vignoli's analyses²⁷¹, Usener argues that, given the lack of agreement between individuals, the original mass of sensitive impressions is matched by a great wealth of synonyms and homonyms. Usener develops these theories in two most famous works, *Götternamen. Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung* (1896) and *Die Sintfluthsagen* (1899)²⁷²: «The mythical motif has the same fundamental characteristics of variety (*Vielfältigkeit*) and polysemy (*Mehrdeutigkeit*) that are present in the image. Usener writes: "These images are living forms which, [...] as if detached from the original whole, possess their own capacity for autonomous movement". In making use of the Platonic and Aristotelian definition of a living, animated organism, Usener also employed a biological-evolutionary model to explain, on the one hand, the transmission of mythical images and tales, and on the other, the very formation of concepts, within the framework of a general theory of the evolution of language by successive degrees of abstraction»²⁷³. The repetition of perceptions causes the more regular and relevant ones to separate from the

²⁷¹ «At the time when Warburg was taking Usener's and Lamprecht's courses, ambitious attempts were being made in this direction. Usener had drawn the attention of his students to the book of the Italian evolutionist Tito Vignoli, *Myth and Science*, whose German translation had been published in 1880. Warburg obtained it immediately in the winter semester of 1886» [*Ibid.*, p. 67].

²⁷² H. Usener, *Götternamen. Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung*, F. Cohen, Bonn 1896; H. Usener, *Die Sintfluthsagen*, F. Cohen, Bonn 1899.

²⁷³ G. Targia, *Modelli biologici per la trasmissione culturale. Tracce del dialogo con Jolles nei Frammenti sull'espressione di Aby Warburg*, in "Cahiers d'études italiennes", no. 23, 2016, pp. 61-71, here p. 68.

momentary ones, even if the selection and abstraction end up impoverishing the nuances of language, of which some expressions survive that have lost their initial link with the sensible representation. In this way, the name loses its adjectival nature by stiffening in its own name. The word therefore arises from the impulse to designate the thing and the consequent process of generalization makes some particular gods (*Sondergötter*) prevail over others with the assumption of their functions. The designation of an important particular god causes the loss of the link with the area that was pertinent to him: only at this point does the god develop an autonomous personality, crystallized by a hypostasis. As will be seen later, this approach to the myth will deeply mark Cassirer's research in the second half of the 1920s and will constitute one of the major points of contact with Benjamin's research: Cassirer will dedicate many pages and an entire volume to Usener, while Benjamin will refer to him within the *German Baroque Drama*. Indeed, as he wrote in a letter addressed to his friend Florens Christian Rang, Benjamin had received a copy of *Götternamen* in '23, first volume of the bibliographic catalogue from which he would begin his study on "*Form des Trauerspiels*"²⁷⁴.

2.2. *Symbolischen Formung. The Meeting with Ernst Cassirer*

About thirty years after his training at the University of Bonn, Warburg was hospitalized in Kreuzlingen, in the clinic of Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger²⁷⁵. In the same year, Fritz Saxl, who took over as director of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW), wrote in his annual report:

²⁷⁴ «Da wir einmal beim Wissenschaftlichen sind, so lasse ich am besten an dieser Stelle das Geständnis einfließen, daß ich am letzten Abend in Braunfels, nachdem ich vorher nur eben kurz um gelegentliche Verleihung gebeten hatte, die Götternamen von Usener genommen und also jetzt bei mir habe. Im Übrigen bin ich zur weiteren Beschäftigung mit der neuen Arbeit (über die "Form des Trauerspiels", noch nicht gekommen, da zur Zeit das Büchergeschäft auf mir liegt. Sowie aber einmal der Katalog meiner Erwerbungen hergestellt ist, gehe ich an das Studium der notwendigen Literatur» [W. Benjamin to Florens Christian Rang, Berlin-Grunewald, 23. 3. 1923, "An Florens Christian Rang, in *Gesammelte Schriften I.1* (Apparat), *op. cit.*, p. 871.

²⁷⁵ For this particular moment in Warburg's life and for the entire clinical course under Binswanger's care, see the volume by C. Marazia (ed.), *La guarigione infinita. Storia clinica di Aby Warburg*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2005. For a summary but very in-depth analysis of the psychoanalytical context with which Warburg found himself having to deal with during his clinical history, the most recently

Professors Cassirer, Reinhardt, Ritter, Wolff, Junker and Dr. Panofsky have become permanent visitors and supporters of the Library. It has also happened that Professor Cassirer, in an illustrious lecture given to the Society for Religious Sciences in Hamburg - among which Professor Warburg is among the founders - has addressed topics which were previously foreign to him, and which he developed thanks to the use of the Library. These are questions that Professor Cassirer intends to develop into a great work²⁷⁶.

Naturally, the work Saxl refers to is *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The following year, in 1922, the Warburg Library published the first volume of the “Studien der Bibliothek Warburg” series in which an essay by Cassirer entitled *The Form of the Concept in Mythical Thought (Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken)* appears. This essay inaugurates both Cassirer’s debut as a professor of philosophy at the University of Hamburg, and the stable and lasting link with the Warburg environment²⁷⁷.

The first documented contact between Warburg and Cassirer dates back to June 26, 1921, when the philosopher wrote to the art historian that he had received from Saxl the essay *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeit*, and that he was interested in the part concerning the general problem of spiritual structuring mediated by astrology. This reflection is the antechamber of what many commentators have defined as the cultural turn of Cassirerian philosophy, as Cassirer wrote to Warburg: «I have been reflecting on this question for a long time in the context of problems of a purely theoretical-cognitive nature, and right now I am dealing with it in the perspective of an essay on the theoretical-cognitive character of the concept of symbol»²⁷⁸. However, a year will pass before the two scholars can directly exchange their ideas, during which Warburg hopes to rely on

published article by P. Loewenberg, *Aby Warburg, the Hopi Serpent Ritual and Ludwig Binswanger*, in “Psychoanalysis and History”, vol. 19, no. 1, 2017, pp. 77-98.

²⁷⁶ M. Ghelardi (ed.), *Aby Warburg, Astrologica, op.cit.*, p. XXXVI.

²⁷⁷ As has already been said, this text will recur several times within the Benjaminian corpus: from the manifestation of profound interest that Benjamin manifests in a letter to Hofmannsthal in December of ‘25, up to the last reflections dedicated to the sociology of language in the essay of 1934.

²⁷⁸ A. Warburg to E. Cassirer, 02.02.1923, in (ed.) M. Ghelardi, *Il mondo di ieri. Lettere. Aby Warburg, Ernst Cassirer*, Torino 2003, p. 41 (my translation).

the research that Cassirer was still developing. The underlying synchrony between their respective researches can be traced back to how the two scholars had come, through different paths, to the elaboration of the concept of symbol. In Cassirer's research, symbolic forms summarize a process through which man builds experience and reality: myth, language, art and religion produce a specific objectual field:

Each formation of concepts is indifferent to the field and material in which it takes place; be it objective experience or simple subjective representation, it is characterized by the fact that it embodies a certain principle of connection and ordering in series. Only through this principle are certain configurations with stable contours and qualities detached from the continuous flow of causal impressions.²⁷⁹

The forms assumed by the sensitive expression, the intuitive representation and the pure theoretical meaning correspond to different degrees of de-contextualization and objectification of the relationship between subject and object, capable of subtracting and discriminating the experience from its entirety (*Ganzheit*). The process of signification therefore allows to stabilize and objectify the sensitive experience, which thus becomes permeated and articulated by cultural, artistic and religious practices. The essays published by Cassirer between 1922 and 1923 in the *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg* deal precisely with how mythical thought embodies its own and specific principle of causality and logic. Myth is not only narrative, but is a structured form of thought, which is one with magic and primitive mentality. Similarly, astrology and totemism are understood as forms of thought that presuppose a specific and peculiar causality based on a different *Schematisierung*, in which the senses still play a prominent role in the experience, but begin to configure and distinguish an objectivity: this *mythische Kausalität* «not only constantly refers back to the concrete sensual perception, but seems to be completely absorbed in it and to merge with it»²⁸⁰. Just this aspect, as has been said

²⁷⁹ E. Cassirer, *Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken*, (1922), *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁸⁰ «Mehr noch als dieser letztere bedarf die mythische Kausalität der "Schematisierung": Sie bezieht sich nicht nur ständig auf die konkrete sinnliche Anschauung zurück, sondern scheint ganz in sie aufzugehen und mit ihr zu verschmelzen» [*Ibid.* p. 48].

and as will be seen in detail, will not convince Benjamin who confided to Hofmannsthal that he did not understand how Cassirer could put this differentiation between mythical and logical concepts. Even in the essay of '34 Benjamin will compare Cassirer to Lévy-Bruhl, towards whom Cassirer himself was very critical²⁸¹.

The process leading to the symbol emerges from what Warburg and Cassirer define as “fullness of meaning” (in Cassirer words, “*symbolische Prägnanz*”), which the art historian leads back to pathos and its consequent objectification in a sphere of experience. The struggle for style that Warburg will speak extensively in his writings indicates the moment in which the sense inherent in the images plays a fully representative function. The concept of style, imbued with metaphors and correlated to gestures, somatic expressions, excitement and expressive mimic movements, is objectified in a specific visual expression when it is balanced through its signifying function, when the designated object is balanced with its meaning. This process, transposed into the theory of art, takes up the general epistemological program in which Cassirer wrote down the function of the symbol: «For Cassirer, the concept of symbol should first of all “encompass the whole of those phenomena in which a ‘sense of meaning’ of the sensual is presented - in which a sensual, in the way it is and as it is, is both particular and embodiment as the manifestation and incarnation of a sense” »²⁸². Thus, style is connected with the concept of knowledge, since the process that goes from simple imitation to manner involves the same intellectual and logical function that is called into question when describing the passage from seeing to representing. Although, therefore, the two scholars work on common ground, Cassirer is aimed above all at investigating the gnoseological foundations of the science of culture, while Warburg moves from historical evidence and philology to arrive at the study of meaning in the visual arts.

This consonance can be measured with ease, once again, through Usener’s work. In 1925 Cassirer published the essay *Sprache und Mythos* – whose subtitle reads:

²⁸¹ In this regard, see the paragraph here dedicated to Cassirer's tautegorical approach *The Tautegoric Turn and its Function in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, p. 177.

²⁸² B. Hub, *Perspektive, Symbol und symbolische Form. Zum Verhältnis Cassirer – Panofsky*, in “Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics”, vol. 47, no. 3, 2010, pp. 144-171, here p. 155 (my translation).

(*ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen*). Here, the theme of symbolization follows and discusses Usener's theses on language and myth as presuppositions of anthropogenesis, placing a clear distinction between the processes of linguistic symbolization and that of images. «It is not by chance that both Cassirer and Warburg find a common reference in Hermann Usener – “*Usener als unser gemeinsamer Protektor!*” –, who had conceived of mythopoesis as an essentially psychological problem»²⁸³. In fact, in the wake of the German philologist, Cassirer affirms that the dynamic between the visual and the linguistic world follows divergent directions: in the mythical images, pregnant impressions are condensed, that have remained tied to the situation from which they arose. In the medium of language, the individual cases are generalized in exemplary cases, which progressively emancipate themselves from the configurative instant that produced them.

Cassirer, as he will explain very clearly in the article “*Geist*” und “*Leben*” in *der Philosophie der Gegenwart* (1930), collects the formative impulse of all possible symbolic forms in a common root. Here he specifies that even their development is not progressive or marked by a positivistic development aimed at pure conventionality. Instead, it is marked by an intrinsic reflective polarity (*Reflexketten*), which Cassirer borrowed directly from Goethe, and which he fully shares with the Warburgian method. As Cassirer explained, starting from the idea of *Actus purus* by Spinoza, taken as model to describe the *Symbolischen Formung*:

The real [*echten*] “ideas” - says Spinoza, and this applies not only to the ideas of pure knowledge, but to the creations of language and art, myth and religion - are not just silent paintings on a board, but they produce themselves, and in this act of their procreation they simultaneously allow a new view of “objective” reality [*Anschauung der “objektiven” Wirklichkeit*] to emerge from themselves. From this functional character of the pure form - from the fact pure form can reproduce itself anew in different shapes- from this derives the reason why every form is antithetical in itself - why it must have a necessary polarity. It is always a double movement that works in it; a constant interplay of the forces of attraction and repulsion [*der*

²⁸³ M. Ghelardi and G. Targia (eds.), *Aby Warburg, 'Giordano Bruno'*, in “Cassirer Studies”, no.1, 2008, pp. 1-42, here p. 6.

Anziehung und Abstoßung, der Attraktion und Repulsion]. “One does not evade the world more surely than through art” says Goethe, “and one is not linked to it more securely than through art”. This double determination applies to any kind of design, the “symbolic formation”²⁸⁴.

Myth and language mark the transition to a research that is now aimed at investigating the tenets of the science of culture, because they shed light on the configurative impulse and the progressive process of symbolization. For Cassirer «it is not the fundamental result of knowledge, the effect produced by the spirit, but rather the need, inherent in the way of knowing, to relate the self of consciousness with the world of things that it represents to itself»²⁸⁵. This need appears even clearer when grasped through the study of the *mythische Welt*. Not surprisingly, Warburg wrote, mythical thought shows «the power of sensitive impressions in primitive mankind»²⁸⁶. He had also remarked that the growth of logical thought is proportional to the weakness of sensible impressions. This is a position similar to Cassirer’s, for whom «consciousness comes, through successive imperfect determinations, to grasp its becoming in a purer way, by means of relations of order, devoid of any contact with the sensible»²⁸⁷.

²⁸⁴ «Die echten “Ideen” – so sagt Spinoza, und dies gilt nicht nur von den Ideen der reinen Erkenntnis, sondern von den Schöpfungen der Sprache und der Kunst, des Mythos und der Religion – stehen nicht gleich stummen Gemälden auf einer Tafel da, sondern sie bringen sich selbst hervor, und sie lassen in diesem ihrem Zeugungsakt zugleich eine neue Anschauung der “objektiven” Wirklichkeit aus sich hervorgehen. Aus diesem Funktionscharakter der reinen Form – aus dem Umstand, daß sie immer nur dadurch ist, daß sie sich ständig aufs neue erzeugt – erklärt sich erst ganz, daß und warum jede Form in sich selbst antithetisch ist – warum ihr eine notwendige Polarität innewohnen muß. Es ist immer eine doppelte Bewegung, die sich in ihr auswirkt; ein ständiges Wechselspiel der Kräfte der Anziehung und Abstoßung, der Attraktion und Repulsion. “Man weicht der Welt nicht sicherer aus als durch die Kunst”, so sagt Goethe, “und man verknüpft sich nicht sicherer mit ihr als durch die Kunst”. Diese Doppelbestimmung gilt für jegliche Art der Gestaltung, der “symbolischen Formung” » [E. Cassirer, “‘Geist’ und ‘Leben’ in der Philosophie der Gegenwart” (1930), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1927-1931], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 17, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004, p. 197].

²⁸⁵ S. Ferretti, *Il demone della memoria. Simbolo e tempo storico in Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky*, *op. cit.* p. 133 (my translation).

²⁸⁶ A. Warburg, *Il primo Rinascimento italiano. Sette conferenze inedite*, (ed.) G. Targia, Aragno, Torino 2013, p. 15 (my translation).

²⁸⁷ S. Ferretti, *Il demone della memoria. Simbolo e tempo storico in Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky*, *op. cit.*, p. 132. This process has given rise to some radical readings of the process of de-aestheticization of the concept of symbol. In addition to Ferretti, this reading (very distant from those evoked so far by Krois and Ferrari) is well summarized by the interpretation of G. Carchia, who read the work of the Warburgian legacy as a progressive distancing of the image from its

Several years before Cassirer, Warburg had employed the term “symbolic form” in the essay *Symbolismus als Umfangsbestimmung*²⁸⁸. Here he tried to demonstrate, following Kant, that the origins of the symbolic form had to be sought in the pictorial or graphic sign: through the sign the affective reaction to external stimuli is visually stabilized. The symbolic attitude therefore consists in the subjective orientation towards a form that is the expression of a psychological polarity between primitiveness and distance, very similar to the process described above by Cassirer, which defined the inner method of the *symbolischen Formung*. In this sense, the work of art qualifies as an “intermediate space” (*Zwischenraum*)²⁸⁹ between subject and object, or subject and world, as formative modality and first act of civilization: «The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the outside world can be described as a basic act of human civilization»²⁹⁰. Both Cassirer and Warburg therefore conceive symbolism as a kind of gravity in the cultural sphere, as impulse (*Antrieb*) and *energeia*. As the painting refers to the deep layer of the human psyche, so the symbolic form indicates the potential of cultural memory. In the essay *The Eloquence of Symbols*, Edgar Wind - first reader in History of Art at the University of Oxford and member of the Warburg Kreis – dwells on this specific point. Wind explains how in this polarity one end is the arbitrary sign, lifeless and determinable in unambiguous way. At the other end is

sensitive form, towards a strictly allegorical-conventional field: «All post-Warburgian theorists and their most emblematic representatives — Cassirer and Panofsky — engage with a kind of desemantization of the image, which increasingly is reduced to a hieroglyph or a cryptogram that seeks from the outside, from expressions of culture and language, an opportunity to give itself meaning. This is all implicit from the start in Ernst Cassirer’s limitless extension of the concept of symbol, an extension in which symbol coincides simply with all forms of human experience giving concrete form to reality, ordering it with full awareness of varying historical and cultural environments. Cassirer engages with a levelling out of the notion of symbol with the more general notion of culture, creating a crisis in aesthetic form» [G. Carchia, *Aby Warburg: symbol and tragedy*, in “Engramma”, no. 135, April-May 2016, pp. 103-115, here p. 107].

²⁸⁸ «With *Umfangsbestimmung* Warburg means what «is placed [*verortet*], from the body-symbolic point of view, in space: through language, art, symbolic action, its ability to grasp objects, or also through clothing and tools [*Gerät*]» [T. Tavani, “Aby Warburg. Simbolica Mimetica e Psicotecnica Della Distrazione”, in A. Barale, F. Desideri, S. Ferretti, *Energia e Rappresentazione Warburg. Panofsky, Wind*, Mimesis, Milano 2016, pp. 85-104, here p. 86 (my translation)].

²⁸⁹ For the history of this term in Warburg’s work and its juxtaposition with the *Denkraum* (space of thought), see the meticulous reconstruction of V. Cirlot, *Zwischenraum/Denkraum. Oscillazioni terminologiche nelle Introduzioni all’Atlante di Aby Warburg (1929) e Ernst Gombrich (1937)*, in “Engramma” no. 151, Nov-Dic 2017, pp. 121-147.

²⁹⁰ «Bewusstes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Außenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen» [A. Warburg, *Einleitung. Bilderatlas Mnemosyne (1929)*, (ed.) M. Warnke & C. Brink, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2000, pp. 3-6, here p. 3].

the ritual act which is dominated by the power of the symbol-embodied. The ritual act clings to the symbol, and at the same time it consumes it (or is consumed by it). The critical point “lies in the middle”, where the symbol is understood as a sign, but still remains a living image, in which the psychological excitement is not so concentrated by the constricting force of the metaphor as to change into action, nor so loosened by the intervention of analytic thinking as to fade into a series of concepts. It is in this point that the image finds its place²⁹¹. In 1925, in the preface to the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer explained the points of connection and divergence from Warburg’s research:

The first drafts and other preliminary work for this volume were already far advanced when, through my call to Hamburg, I came into close contact with the Warburg Library. I found in its abundant and particular nature almost incomparable material in the domain of mythology and the general history of religion, but in its organization and selection, in the intellectual stamp that Warburg gave it, this material dealt with a unitary and central problem closely related to the basic problem of my own work. This correspondence provided me with new incentive to continue along the path on which I had begun – for it suggested that the systematic task undertaken by this book is intimately connected to tendencies and demands that are the outgrowth of concrete work in the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] and of an endeavor to deepen and reinforce their historical foundations.²⁹²

²⁹¹ Cf. E. Wind, *The eloquence of symbols: studies in humanist art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983, esp. pp. 41-50.

²⁹² E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythical Thinking*, (tr.) S. G. Lofts, Routledge, London & New York 2021, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv; «Die Entwürfe und Vorarbeiten für diesen Band waren bereits weit fortgeschritten, als ich durch meine Berufung nach Hamburg in nähere Berührung mit der Bibliothek Warburg kam. Hier fand ich auf dem Gebiet der Mythenforschung und der allgemeinen Religionsgeschichte nicht nur ein reiches, in seiner Fülle und Eigenart fast unvergleichliches Material vor – sondern dieses Material erschien in seiner Gliederung und Sichtung, in der geistigen Prägung, die es durch Warburg erhalten hat, auf ein einheitliches und zentrales Problem bezogen, das sich mit dem Grundproblem meiner eigenen Arbeit aufs nächste berührte. Diese Übereinstimmung ist mir immer aufs neue zum Ansporn geworden, auf dem einmal beschrittenen Wege fortzugehen – schien sich doch daraus zu ergeben, daß die systematische Aufgabe, die dieses Buch sich stellt, innerlich zusammenhängt mit Tendenzen und Forderungen, die aus der konkreten Arbeit der Geisteswissenschaften selber und aus der Bemühung um ihre geschichtliche Fundierung und Vertiefung erwachsen sind» [E. Cassirer, “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil. Das mythische Denken” (1925), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 12, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2002, p. xv].

In a letter dated 11 June 1926, Cassirer wrote to Warburg that he intended to dedicate his latest essay to him, *Individuum und Kosmos*. We know that Warburg read this text attentively, as documented by the copy in the library and annotated by the scholar; in particular, as Ghelardi reports, notes were copious in the passages that concern the interpretation of Cusano and Giordano Bruno²⁹³. The fourth chapter exemplifies the common horizon of intent of the two scholars, oriented to understand how the new developments of human knowledge had given life to a new image of the cosmos:

When this interval [*Zwischenraum*] becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions have been fulfilled for this consciousness of distance to achieve an enduring social function which, in its rhythmical change between absorption in its object or detached restraint, signifies the oscillation between a cosmology of images and one of signs; its adequacy or failure as an instrument of mental orientation signifies the fate of human culture. In a peculiar way recollection, both collective and individual, comes to the assistance of the artist oscillating between the religious and the mathematical world view. Although it does not create intellectual space unqualifiedly, it does nevertheless strengthen the tendency either to tranquil contemplation or to orgiastic devotion, which comprise the extreme psychological poles of behaviour. It establishes the lasting legacy of memory, yet not as part of a primarily protective tendency. Rather, the full force of the passionate and fearful religious personality, in the grip of the mystery of faith, intervenes in the formation of artistic style²⁹⁴.

²⁹³ In the correspondence between Warburg and Cassirer, published in Italian by M. Ghelardi, we learn that in December 1928 the two scholars exchanged letters, underlining the common interest in the figures of Cusano and Bruno. Again Ghelardi, in the volume dedicated to Warburgian astrological studies, outlines a brief overview of the interlocutors to whom Warburg turns to discuss the subject, including the names of Gertrud Bing and Toni Cassirer. For further information see M. Ghelardi, *Aby Warburg Astrologica, op.*, pp. 50-59. About the correspondence published in Italian: *Il mondo di ieri. Lettere. Aby Warburg, Ernst Cassirer*, (ed.) M. Ghelardi, Torino 2003.

²⁹⁴ «Dieser Zwischenraum das Substrat künstlerischer Gestaltung, so sind die Vorbedingungen erfüllt, dass dieses Distanzbewusstsein zu einer sozialen Dauerfunktion werden kann die durch den Rhythmus vom Einschwingen in die Materie und Ausschwingen zur Sophrosyne jenen Kreislauf zwischen bildhafter und zeichenmässiger Kosmologik bedeutet, deren Zulänglichkeit oder Versagen als orientierendes geistiges Instrument eben das Schicksal der menschlichen Kultur bedeutet. Dem zwischen religiöser und mathematischer Weltanschauung schwankenden künstlerischen Menschen kommt nun das Gedächtnis sowohl der Kollektivpersönlichkeit wie des Individuums in einer ganz eigentümlichen Weise zur Hilfe: nicht ohne weiteres Denkraum schaffend, wohl aber an den Grenzpolen des psychischen Verhaltens die Tendenz zur ruhigen Schau oder orgiastischen Hingabe

The partnership between Warburg and Cassirer demonstrates how the two scholars commonly reasoned on the term symbol and symbolic form, but also on the relationship between word and image, mathematics and art. In one of the last Warburgian annotations of 1929, we read: «Iconology is an intermediate space: it is a historical-artistic material for a psychology of development and the oscillation between figurative and semantic research of causes [...] therefore “*Individual und Kosmos*” is a theme that is also mine».²⁹⁵ On October 26 of the same year, a few hours before his passing away, Warburg noted in his private notebooks with a certain joy that he had finally found the title for the report for the aesthetics congress to which Cassirer had invited him²⁹⁶. Unfortunately, as we know, Warburg will not participate as he will die at dawn on the same day. Later, Cassirer will return to describe their relationship and their affinity of thought, explicitly declaring the common horizon of intent. In the epicedium dedicated to his friend and colleague, Cassirer lets himself go into words with a great emotional and intellectual transport:

The problem that had seized his life and consumed his life, now I see it standing before me in all its seriousness, in its force and in its tragic immensity. I do not want to attempt here to delve into the details of this problem. Certainly, it was Warburg himself who coined the motto: “God is in the details”. And in devotion to the little things, in the love of the seemingly insignificant, no one could equal him. He did not distinguish between small and large; with the same intensity and with the same love he embraced the great masterpieces of art as well as the last apparently insignificant derivatives of intellectual and educational endeavours. He could and was allowed to cultivate this love for the smallest, because he was sure

verstärkend. Es setzt die unverlierbare Erbmasse mnemisch ein, aber nicht mit primär schützender Tendenz, sondern es greift die volle Wucht der leidenschaftlich-phobischen, im religiösen Mysterium erschütterten gläubigen Persönlichkeit im Kunstwerk mitstilbildend ein» [A. Warburg, *Einleitung. Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1929), *op. cit.*, pp. 3-6, here p. 3. English translation by M. Rampley, *Mnemosyne Atlas. Introduction* (1929), in “Engramma”, no. 142, Feb. 2017].

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ It was an opportunity for Warburg to expose the new directions and new developments of his research: «October 26, 1929, at 4 am. "Perseus", or "Energy aesthetics as a logical function of the orientation process in Giordano Bruno": I finally chose the title of my lecture ... Kant: what it means to orient oneself in thought». Ghelardi reports how the reference to Kant is also taken up in a note in the notebook on Giordano Bruno kept at the Warburg Institute Archive, where Warburg emphasizes how the magical-monstrous concretion must be reinterpreted in a Kantian way, in the sense of an intuitive-spiritual abstraction. [M. Ghelardi, *Aby Warburg Astrologica*, *op. cit.*, p. 61].

of the living context, because he was sure of the whole in which he stood at every instant. Because his gaze did not rest primarily on the works of art, but instead felt and saw the great creative energies behind the works²⁹⁷.

Unlike the documented and explicit relationship between Cassirer and Warburg, the convergences of thought between the latter and Benjamin are more tenuous. It is known, for example, that Benjamin's 1928 candidacy to the Warburg Institute was rejected, it is also known that at that precise historical moment the art historian was already interned in the Binswanger clinic, therefore how the refusal was formulated by Panofsky, urged on behalf of Benjamin from Hofmannsthal. We know that Benjamin read Warburg's texts with admiration, but there are no traces that document that the interest was requited. Over the years some similarities between Warburg's thought and that of Benjamin have been drawn: methodological correspondence between the *Bilderatlas* project and the fragmentary collage of the *Passagenwerk* was rightly noted²⁹⁸; the assonance between the concept of Warburgian polarity and the dialectical formula of the Benjaminian allegory was then discussed, in the wake previously traced by Goethe in his morphological approach²⁹⁹. It is also undeniable that the analysis of the conflicts between paganism and Christianity offered by the *Baroque Drama* is deeply affected by the Warburgian approach to the Renaissance and Baroque *Weltanschauungen*, as is

²⁹⁷ «Das Problem, das sein Leben ergriffen und das sein Leben verzehrt hatte, jetzt sah ich es in seinem ganzen Ernst, in seiner Wucht und in seiner tragischen Größe vor mir stehen. Ich will hier nicht den Versuch machen, mich in das Detail dieses Problems zu versenken. Gewiß, Warburg selbst ist es gewesen, der das Wort geprägt hat: "Der liebe Gott steckt im Detail". Und in der Andacht zum Kleinen, in der Liebe zum scheinbar Geringfügigsten kam ihm keiner gleich. Er schied nicht zwischen klein und groß; er umfaßte mit gleicher Intensität und mit gleicher Liebe die großen Meisterwerke der Kunst wie die letzten scheinbar unbedeutendsten Ausläufer geistigen und bildenden Strebens. Er konnte und durfte diese Liebe zum Kleinsten pflegen, weil er des lebendigen Zusammenhanges, weil er des Ganzen, in dem er stand, in jedem Augenblick sicher war. Denn sein Blick ruhte nicht in erster Linie auf den Werken der Kunst, sondern er fühlte und sah hinter den Werken die großen gestaltenden Energien» [E. Cassirer, *Nachruf auf Aby Warburg* (1929), *op. cit.*, p. 370].

²⁹⁸ This assonance is very clearly placed in M. Rampley, "Archives of memory: Walter Benjamin's arcades project and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas", in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin* vol. 3, (ed. by) A. Coles, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2001, pp. 174-183. This theme was recently taken up and re-discussed by Didi-Huberman in *Atlas, Or the Anxious Gay Science: How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018. Cf. esp. the chapter "Atlas and the Wandering Jew or the Age of Poverty", pp. 139-150.

²⁹⁹ This morphological axis is well clarified in A. Pinotti, "Lo studio degli estremi. Benjamin morfologo tra Warburg e Goethe", in *Giochi per melanconici*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-232.

clear from the direct references that Benjamin reserves in this text to the studies of Warburg, Panofsky and Saxl³⁰⁰. Another point is then the value of the image, understood as a contingent and historically connoted space, unstable and always liable to be overturned in its sense³⁰¹. It would be difficult to trace here all the contributions that made it possible to bring out the debt that Benjamin had towards the Hamburg art historians.

Christopher D. Johnson elucidates and collects in a clear and exhaustive way many of these affinities, which are gathered above all around the common interest in the Baroque, through a dense collection of scholars who have contributed to investigate and confirm these similarities. He also underlines, in continuity with Adorno³⁰², the fact that Warburg's interest was in visual production, while Benjamin's in language and literature (although it cannot be denied that in the *Baroque Drama* there persists a certain continuous promiscuity between the literary and the pictorial). Despite this, the question of the symbolic remains controversial, especially due to the treatment left by Benjamin in the *Trauerspielbuch*: as we have tried to bring out in these pages, regardless of Warburg's iconological studies, (towards which Benjamin felt a sincere admiration), the role of the symbol, in the Hamburg Kreis, extended to an investigation of an epistemological, phenomenological and aesthetic nature, which transcended the simple artistic and iconological analysis, and was *the* linchpin in all of those studies. However, a resonance of these researches is totally lacking in Benjamin's reflections of the mid-1920s and will also be lacking the following years: the concept of symbol, so present in the writings prior to the *Trauerspielbuch*, and foundational in its *Vorrede*,

³⁰⁰ A recent re-discussion of Benjamin's comparison with Panofsky and Saxl on the interpretation of *Melancholia I* (which brings Benjamin closer to the positions of Karl Giehlow) is offered by E. De Vito's essay in the recent Italian republication by E. Panofsky & F. Saxl, "*Melancholia I*" di Dürer. *Una ricerca storica sulle fonti e i tipi figurativi*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2019.

³⁰¹ This point was recently touched upon by Fabrizio Desideri, who touches on an assonance also between Cassirer and Benjamin: Cf. F. Desideri, "L'estetica possibile di Aby Warburg (con una coda su Georg Hirth come fonte trascurata del pensiero Warburgiano)", in A. Barale, F. Desideri, S. Ferretti (ed.), *Energia e rappresentazione. Warburg, Panofsky, Wind*, Mimesis, Sesto San Giovanni 2018, pp. 63-83 (esp. pp. 72-74).

³⁰² «In this regard it is worth mentioning the studies of the Warburg Institute, many of which penetrated to the center of artistic content [*Gehalt*] through the analysis of motifs; in poetics Benjamin's study of the *German Baroque* shows an analogous tendency, motivated by the rejection of the confusion of subjective intentions with aesthetic content» [T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (eds.) G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann, Continuum, London-New York 1997, p. 145].

is at all effects a repression of the Benjaminian reception. This is a surprising aspect, if we consider the marked metaphysical and gnoseological role that Benjamin had assigned to the concept of symbol in his writings dedicated to language, which we have previously analysed.

Warburg explicitly deals with the Baroque in his last lecture held at the Hertziana Library in Rome in 1929. Here, the author intended to give an account not only of his study on Ghirlandaio, but also to explain the method underlying the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, an atlas made up of about a hundred images arranged on 63 panels that should have shown the migration of *Pathosformeln*. Five of the aforementioned panels were dedicated to the Nordic Baroque: through them Warburg intended to demonstrate how the Baroque recurs every time the *Pathosformeln* are disconnected from the world of life. Secondly, these *Pathosformeln* require the use of the superlative, that is, exaggerated, fantastic, subjective expressive values. Just as the language is deformed by intense emotions, so the artistic forms undergo the same transformation. This idea derives from Hermann Osthoff's (1847-1909) reading of the irregular morphology of superlative and comparative adjectives, which, in the author's theory, are such as they reflect an emotional content³⁰³. By translating this concept and applying it to the world of artistic forms, Warburg has the opportunity to re-elaborate traditional concepts and classifications from the history of art. From this perspective, the Baroque is not intended as a historical period, on the contrary it becomes a synchronic notion that can be applied in the case of the art of Mantegna, Rembrandt, Dürer, Pollaiuolo. It is in this sense that the description of the statue of the Laocoonte must be understood:

The discovery of Laocoon was an outward symptom of an inwardly conditioned stylistic-historical process; it marked the climax, not the birth, of the Baroque

³⁰³ «Warburg first read about Hermann Osthoff's essay, *On Suppletion in Indo-Germanic Languages*, when the linguist delivered it as the Karl Friedrich Akademische Rede in Heidelberg on November 22, 1899. Warburg's copy of the speech, in the Warburg Institute library in London, includes a newspaper article from the "Frankfurter Zeitung" about the talk which he clipped and pasted into the offprint. The speech was a technical talk on the patterns of irregularities in stems of words, but Osthoff's mode must have attracted Warburg because it offered a vision of surprising moments of linguistic freedom, of springing from shackles» [A. Guillemin, *The Style of Linguistics. Aby Warburg, Karl Vossler, and Hermann Osthoff*, in "Journal of the History of Ideas", vol. 69, no. 4, 2008, pp. 605-626, here p. 616].

degeneration. It was a revelation of somethings that the Italians had long sought- and therefore found- in the art of the ancient world: the liminal values [*Grenwerte*] of gestural and physiognomic expression, stylized in a sublime, tragic, form³⁰⁴.

In the lecture held at the Institute in 1926 dedicated to Rembrandt³⁰⁵ - to which 6 panels of the Atlas are dedicated - Warburg had already problematized the Baroque and, in particular in this case, the theme provides the starting point for introducing the question of synchronicity. “Every era has the Renaissance it deserves”³⁰⁶, Warburg wrote in his private notes. The point was to demonstrate how the interpretation of a historical period largely depends on the cultural and temporal horizon in which it emerges, as well as on the psychological needs that underlie it. In this sense, the author rejected both Winckelmann’s hypothesis on the baroque and the enthusiastic readings of his contemporaries, proposing on the other hand his theory of *Nachleben der Antike*. Thus, if Warburg ichnographically looks at the works of Ghirlandaio and Dürer as Baroque works embodying his ideal of *Besonnenheit*, Benjamin allegorically looks at the Baroque to make sense of what he calls the ruin of natural history. However, what is important to underline here is actually the difference between the two authors on the concept of symbol. In fact, if in the Warburgian theory the symbol is an intermediate space in which cultural memory is incarnated, Benjamin rejects the romantic concept of symbol and as the “unity of the material object and transcendental” [*sinnlichem und übersinnlichem Gegenstand*]³⁰⁷. Thus, Benjamin favours allegory, which, in its written form, is oriented towards the image, towards the hieroglyph, ultimately becoming a vehicle of the sacred and its dialectical overturning in historical time. This interpretation of the hieroglyphic-symbol betrays the Warburgian vision according to which through the interpretation of astrological hieroglyphs it is possible to trace the change of

³⁰⁴ C. Johnson, *Configuring the baroque: Warburg and Benjamin*, in “Culture Theory and Critique”, vol. 57, no. 2, 2016, pp.142-165, here p. 148.

³⁰⁵ A. Warburg, *Il primo Rinascimento italiano. Sette conferenze inedite*, (ed.) G. Targia, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

³⁰⁶ A. Warburg, “Italienische Antike im Zeitalter Rembrandts” (1926), in *Nachhall der Antike: Zwei Untersuchungen* (ed.) P. Schneider, Diaphanes, Zurich 2012, pp. 69–101.

³⁰⁷ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

thought of the Renaissance; Benjamin sees in the hieroglyph a dialectical link between image and word.

The three most important impulses in the origin of western allegory are non-antique, anti-antique: the gods project into the alien world, they become evil and they become creatures. The attire of the Olympians is left behind, and in the course of time emblems collect around it. And this attire is as creaturely as a devil's body³⁰⁸.

In this way, Benjamin's Baroque takes on eschatological contours. Thus, the classical pantheon that Winckelmann reads as a symbol of antiquity and which Warburg interprets as demonic materiality is understood by Benjamin as material that requires the mediation of form: "allegory corresponds to the ancient gods in the death of their concrete tangibility"³⁰⁹. Therefore, for Warburg, when the symbol becomes a metaphor, when the language of the gesture becomes hyperbolic, then the psychological and phenomenological danger of the Baroque emerges. For Benjamin, on the other hand, when the symbol is made up of extremes, when it becomes a mere dismembered thing or "ruin", then a catastrophic and eschatological Baroque rules the picture.

2.3. Panofsky, "An art historian by trade". Benjamin's approach to the *Kreis*

As we have said, if we consider the centrality that the concept of symbol has in the *Baroque Drama*, it is surprising that Benjamin did not refer to the theories developed on symbol by the Hamburg group, however familiar he was with their theories. In fact, looking at this writing by Benjamin, which variously refers (controversially) to the meanings of the concept typical of Classicism and Romanticism, some eminent absentees catch the eye. First of all – as we will see – the work of Friedrich Theodor Vischer *Das Symbol* (1887), which opens the deep furrow of the aesthetics of *Einfühlung* within Warburg's research. This deviation can also be motivated by Benjamin's profound criticism of the concept of empathy,

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁰⁹ C. Johnson, *Configuring the Baroque. Warburg and Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

to which he preferred the Brechtian paradigm of the *Verfremdung*³¹⁰. Therefore, there may be an eminently political reason in Benjamin's departure from the Vischerian aesthetic. Regardless, it is difficult to think that Benjamin missed *Das Symbol* while extensively quoting other Vischerian works; we must bear in mind that Vischer was a towering inspiring figure in the Warburgian Kreis, an affiliation which Benjamin considered a desirable landing point at least until 1928. Moreover, if we consider the space and role that the symbolic concept occupies within the *Baroque Drama*, the absence of references to Panofsky's text *Perspektive als symbolische Form* (1927) in Benjamin's later writings is also noteworthy. Perhaps only a laconic reference of this work remains in the preparatory notes for the second version of *The Work of Art* (1936)³¹¹. This absence catches the eye for two reasons. The first is biographical: precisely in '28, one year after the publication of the famous essay dedicated to perspective, Benjamin, in search of «a connection with the Warburg Kreis»³¹², had some of his writings sent to Panofsky through Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Panofsky's response was icy, and he shattered Benjamin's hopes of getting closer to the prestigious club³¹³. With a certain bitterness, Benjamin, disappointed by the criticism of the famous art historian, wrote: «I knew that he was an art historian "by trade". However, based on the nature of his iconographic interests, I believed I could assume that he was a man of the stature – if not of the extent – of Emile Mâle, someone who manifests an interest in essential things, even if they do not concern his subject in all its breadth»³¹⁴. We would assume that,

³¹⁰ On this theme, there is the precious contribution of M. Palma who reads the critique of the concept of *Einfühlung* from the *Trauerspielbuch* (1928) to *On the Concept of History* (1940). The emancipation from the concept of identification is contextualized here within the analysis of the mass dynamics and of the subversive horizon of the Brechtian epic theater. Cf. M. Palma, *La critica dell'empatia in Walter Benjamin. Acedia, merce, dominio*, in "Atque", no. 25, 2019, pp. 107-120. This reading is certainly in continuity with that previously offered in the paper by *Estetica del godimento ed estetica dello choc. Benjamin, Geiger, e la lotta con il drago Einfühlung*, in "Materiali di Estetica", no. 4, 2012, pp. 63-76.

³¹¹ Cf. W. Benjamin, "Paralipomena, Varianten und Varia zur zweiten Fassung von Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1936), in, *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 7, (ed.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, pp. 1044-1051, here p. 1050].

³¹² W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Berlin 30.1.1928, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), vol. 3, *op. cit.*, p. 457.

³¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ «Daß er "von Fach" Kunsthistoriker ist, war mir bekannt. Ich glaubte aber nach der Art seiner ikonographischen Interessen annehmen zu dürfen, er sei ein Mann vom Schläge wenn schon nicht

despite this bitter consideration, Benjamin looked with special attention at the research that was taking place in the Warburg library circle. The second reason is of a more theoretical nature and touches Panofsky's re-reading of Heinrich Wölfflin. This author funded Panofsky's research, especially during his university years. It is Panofsky himself who wrote in a letter to his confidant and art historian Herbert von Einem (1905-1983): «What I took upon myself was not to do something "original", but rather to do justice to great tradition of the 19th century, avoiding the one-sidedness (Vöge, Riegl, Goldschmidt, Warburg, even a little Wölfflin and Friedländer), in the 20th century. (I wanted to) save the century when it was in my power»³¹⁵.

“Even a little” is obviously ironic, since Panofsky's first study of any resonance was his dissertation, where he expanded and partly criticized the theories of Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriff* (1915). But this detachment from Wölfflin is parallel (but for some scholars, not analogous) to the path that Benjamin will undertake in dealing with the succession of styles and in postulating the possibility of a historicity of perception³¹⁶. As historian Jan Białostocki well summarizes: «Panofsky took exception to this “form of beholding” which Wölfflin deemed typical of the period rather than the individual, the site where diversity of styles should be sought. Seeing, for Panofsky is a physiological process of receiving

vom Ausmaß von Emile Mâle, jemand, der wesentlichen Dingen, auch wenn sie nicht sein Fach in seiner ganzen Breite betreffen, Interesse entgegenbringt» [W. Benjamin to H. von Hofmannsthal, Berlin 2.8.1928, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), vol. 3, *op. cit.*, p. 459].

³¹⁵ «In a letter of April 1, 1962 to Herbert von Einem, Panofsky wrote the following about himself: 'Was ich mir vomahm, war nicht sowohl etwas "Originelles" zu leisten, als vielmehr unter Vermeidung der Einseitigkeit so viel von der grossen Tradition des 19. Jahrhunderts (Vöge, Riegl, Goldschmidt, Warburg, sogar ein bisschen Wölfflin und Friedländer) in das 20. Jahrhundert herüberzueretten, als es in meinen Kräften stand» [E. Panofsky, letter to Herbert von Einem (1-04-1962), in H. von Einem, *Erwin Panofsky zum Gedächtnis*, in “Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch”, vol. 30, 1968, pp. 7–11].

³¹⁶ The comparison between these two authors on this hypothesis is becoming very enriching. The aforementioned text by M. T. Costa, reads the two conflicting hypotheses on the temporality of perceptual evolution (synchronic or diachronic) [Cf. M. T. Costa, *Walter Benjamins Auseinandersetzung mit der Kunstwissenschaft seiner Zeit*, in “Weimarer Beiträge”, no. 61, 2015, pp. 364-380]; A. Somaini emphasizes a convergence in the description of the alternation of artistic styles in relation to the perceptual articulation, in the wake opened by the Viennese School and by Wölfflin [Cf. A. Somaini, “L'Immagine Prospettica e la Distanza dello Spettatore”, in A. Somaini (ed.), *Il Luogo dello Spettatore. Forme dello Sguardo nella Cultura delle Immagini*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2005, pp. 53-92 (esp. 81-82)]; As for these two authors on the changes in perception determined by technological apparatuses, A. Friedberg's interpretation places them in complete continuity [Cf. A. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window. From Alberti to Microsoft*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006 (esp. pp. 45-46)].

visual stimuli, and as such it does not change in history. What changes is the process of interpretation of what is seen»³¹⁷. Here one of the main concepts of Panofsky's theory of art is marked: the concept of *Seele* (psyche). In addition to the “modes of time” (*die Modi der Zeit*) and the physiological constant of the perceptual structure, Panofsky adds the artist's peculiar and personal psychic articulation, as a *tertium*³¹⁸. This is indeed Panofsky's position, but the distinction resumed here by Białostocki between “interpretation” and “stimuli” must not be misunderstood: as is clear, especially from the studies dedicated to this theme by Krois, Cassirer and his circle considered the symbol just like the place where perception and experience are structured through the progress of cultural, linguistic and scientific forms. Cassirer had also described this meeting point between the morphological evolution of culture and the anatomical constants; this is where he points at the concept of symbolic significance (*Prägnanz*) as the necessary reduction of perception into a single function, the reduction of the polarity *Leben* and *Sinn* into a single concept, the “life-in-meaning”:

By “symbolic pregnance” [*symbolischer Prägnanz*] we mean how a lived-perceptive-experience, as a “sensible” lived-experience, contains in itself at the same time a certain non-intuitive “sense” and brings it to immediate concrete presentation. It is not a question here of naked “perceptive” givennesses, onto which some sort of “apperceptive” act is later grafted, through which they are interpreted, judged, transformed. Rather, the perception, by virtue of its own immanent organization, acquires a kind of spiritual “articulation” [*Artikulation*] – which, as structured in itself, also belongs to a determinate construction of sense [*Sinnfügung*]. In its full actuality, in its totality and vividness [*Lebendigkeit*], it is at the same time a life “in” sense [*Sinn*] [*Leben “im” Sinn*].³¹⁹

³¹⁷ J. Białostocki, *Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968). Thinker, Historian, Human Being*, in “Simiolus. Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art”, vol. 4, no. 2, 1970, pp. 68-89, here p. 72. For a contextualization of Panofsky and Benjamin within the debate on photography and reproducibility that developed in the 1930s, see: A. Pinotti and A. Somaini, *Cultura visuale*, Einaudi, Torino 2008, esp. pp. 67-73.

³¹⁸ Cf. G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the End of a Certain History of Art* (1990), Penn State Press, University Park 2005, p. 95.

³¹⁹ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 3: Phenomenology of Cognition*, op. cit., here p. 239; «Unter “symbolischer Prägnanz” soll also die Art verstanden werden, in der ein Wahrnehmungserlebnis, als “sinnliches” Erlebnis, zugleich einen bestimmten nicht-anschaulichen

It goes without saying that this “life in meaning” subsists thanks to symbolic functions that structure a meaning through acts and practices of continuous cultural production. Panofsky himself paraphrases the notion of *symbolischer Prägnanz* to define what he means by “Symbolic Forms”: «The Perspective may even be characterized as (to extend Ernst Cassirer’s felicitous term to the history of art) one of those “symbolic forms” in which “spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign”»³²⁰. This program, which will be extended in Panofsky’s analysis also through a rereading of Riegl³²¹, is fully compatible with the theoretical foundations of Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms, even if, as some authors have noted, it does not share its complex epistemological agenda³²². It is undeniable that this research landscape, albeit with the necessary differences, offered Benjamin a solid and articulated framework in which to ask the fundamental question that he addressed to the hypothesis of a historicity of perception. To summarize the matter in the words of H. W. Puppe:

“Sinn” in sich faßt und ihn zur unmittelbaren konkreten Darstellung bringt. Hier handelt es sich nicht um bloß “perzeptive” Gegebenheiten, denen später irgendwelche “apperzeptive” Akte aufgepfropft wären, durch die sie gedeutet, beurteilt und umgebildet würden. Vielmehr ist es die Wahrnehmung selbst, die kraft ihrer eigenen immanenten Gliederung eine Art von geistiger “Artikulation” gewinnt – die, als in sich gefügte, auch einer bestimmten Sinnfügung angehört. In ihrer vollen Aktualität, in ihrer Ganzheit und Lebendigkeit, ist sie zugleich ein Leben “im” Sinn» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, *op. cit.*, p. 231].

³²⁰ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, (1927), (tr.) C. S. Wood, Zone Books, New York 1991.

³²¹ «Panofsky claims that “We cannot be satisfied with a purely discursive view of artistic volition as the synthesis of the statements of a particular period (Riegl accepts such a view when he speaks of not only a baroque but a Dutch, an Amsterdam, even a Rembrandtian artistic volition), for we feel that we can determine an ‘artistic intention’ [*künstlerische Absicht*] in exactly the same place in the composition of a single painting.” Panofsky further objects to the role of subjective experience in Riegl’s approach and proposes that artistic volition be understood instead as the objective interpretation of the immanent meaning [*immanenten Sinn*] of a single, self-contained work of art» [B. Binstock, *Postscript: Alois Riegl in the Presence of ‘The Nightwatch’*, in “October”, vol. 74, Autumn 1995, pp. 36-44, here p. 38].

³²² In this regard is very interesting the paragraph “The Paradigm of Spatiality for a History of Perception” in the recent paper by E. Alloa. In fact, the conception of the spatial *a priori*, investigated by Cassirer and Panofsky, is described here as a theoretical model to frame a theory of perception structured by cultural and historical models. [Cf. E. Alloa, *Could Perspective Ever be a Symbolic Form?*, in “Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology”, vol. 2, no.1, 2015, pp. 51-71, esp. pp. 55-58].

If the visual impressions of man are not determined only by natural constants, but also by historical variables [...] As far as the concepts of eternal values and mystery in art are concerned, it is quite obvious from Benjamin's discussion why these, too, should be deleted from aesthetics as he understood it: eternal values and mysteries have no place in a materialist aesthetic because they are ahistorical concepts. Perception in general, and perception in art and of art in particular, are part of a supra-structure subjected to changes in the infra-structure of a society, which is to say: changes occur eventually in all cultural areas when economic conditions, conditions of production, undergo significant changes.³²³

It is therefore very surprising that Benjamin should appear distant from this philosophical tradition, that was seeking (also via Cassirer) to put this conceit as the basis for a project of general “philosophical anthropology”, oriented to the description of the mode of perceptual and cultural articulation, through a renewed sense of the concept of symbol³²⁴: in other words «the event of being requires the transcendental structures of culture for there to be an event: as such, the event of a “living presence” [...]. The symbolic forms do not “copy” an already existing and given reality. The symbolic act [...] is thus performative in nature, in that it creates what it sets out, differentiates and unites; what is is only through the performance that we are, the history that we are. Thus, for Cassirer, one cannot separate the ontic historical world of culture from the existential-ontological worldliness of the world»³²⁵. Reasonably, this path, opened by Cassirer, appears as the most systematic and complete method through which Benjamin could have approached this complex question. This is not the proper site to weave a rigorous survey on the relationship between Panofsky and Benjamin; still, it must be remembered that Panofsky was involved in the 1930s in a debate that proved precious for Benjamin: that on the reproducibility of art and the relationship between original and

³²³ H. W. Puppe, *Walter Benjamin On Photography*, in “Colloquia Germanica”, vol. 12, no. 3, 1979, pp. 273-291, here p. 274.

³²⁴ Cf. J. M. Krois, “Philosophical anthropology and the embodied cognition paradigm: On the convergence of two research programs”, in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-291 (esp. pp. 283-284).

³²⁵ S. G. Lofts, “Cassirer and Heidegger: The Cultural-Event. The Auseinandersetzung of Thinking and Being”, in J. T. Friedman & S. Luft (eds.), *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-258, here p. 235.

reproduction. Panofsky had in fact contributed to the famous “facsimile debate” through a long feature, published by “Der Kreis”³²⁶, that reported the title *Original und Faksimilereproduktion*. This debate arose from a first article published in the Kreis in March 29 by the director of the Hamburg Museum, and was then exacerbated by the historic “Original und Reproduktion” exhibition organized at the Kestnergesellschaft gallery in Hanover. The themes touched upon by Panofsky’s essay, once again, show a singular complementarity with those of Benjamin, and in this case some critical assessments have been drawn on this proximity. Testifying Benjamin’s acquaintance with Panofsky’s essay, some commentators have remarked a certain kinship in Benjamin’s paper on architecture, *Streng Kunstwissenschaft. Zum ersten Bande der Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen* (1931). Here, Benjamin takes up Panofsky’s considerations on photography and applies it to architectural drawings³²⁷: «Both Panofsky and Benjamin suggest that the image of space paradoxically demands its own annihilation as image, namely the detonation of the very framing boundary that demarcates that image as autonomous and prohibits us from immersing ourselves within it»³²⁸. The similarity is therefore captured in the elision, by photography and

³²⁶ G. Markus, “Walter Benjamin and the German ‘Reproduction Debate’”, in *Moderne begreifen Zur Paradoxie eines sozio-ästhetischen Deutungsmusters*, (ed.) C. Magerski, R. Savage, C. Weller, Deutscher Universitätsverlag, Wiesbaden 2007, pp. 351-364, here p. 352. Markus, in addition to reconstructing Benjamin’s indirect participation in the debate sparked after the exhibition, points out that in the afterlife of the work of art, there have not been many attempts to correlate Benjamin’s thinking with Panofsky’s research on technical reproducibility. The author attributes this lack to a certain tendency to read Benjamin’s essay as a precursor to subsequent debates, rather than as an epitome of a thought prior to him. [*Ibid.* pp. 351-353].

³²⁷ For this echo of Panofsky in Benjamin’s photographic research, see: M. R. Lucke, *The Photographic Reproduction of Space. Wölfflin, Panofsky, Kracauer*, in “Res. Anthropology and aesthetics”, vol. 57, no. 1, 2010, pp. 339–343. R. Uchill, as we will see later, instead notes a semantic change of the word “aura” in Benjamin close to the publication of *Der Kreis*: «Although there is no evidence that Benjamin read the Kreis articles on facsimiles [...] it is notable that Benjamin’s use of the term “aura” in “The Work of Art” essay was connected to a consideration of art objects and their reproduction. This constituted a departure from his prior uses of the term: in 1930, when he described aura as an ornamental “halo” inherent to all things; or in the following year, when Benjamin suggested that “aura” connoted a “strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance” that—through photography—could operate as a “medium” imbued in and filtering the gaze of a portrait’s subject, as well as a quality that realized its “emancipation” from object through photography» [R. Uchill *Alexander Dorner and the (Re)production of Art Experience*, in “Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism”, vol. 12, no. 2, Winter 2015, pp. 13-37].

³²⁸ M. R. Luke, *The Photographic Reproduction of Space: Wölfflin, Panofsky, Kracauer*, in “Anthropology and Aesthetics”, 2010 no. 57-58, pp. 339-343, here p. 1941.

by the architectural drawings of *Rand des Bildraums*³²⁹ of images. However, and regardless of what may well be Benjamin's clearest references to Panofsky's thought, it is more relevant to point out that Panofsky's considerations on reproducibility never reached the pages of Benjamin.³³⁰ As for the relation between figurative styles and perception, a survey of the thread in Panofsky, Benjamin and Cassirer would be ill-advised and misleading - if anything, because Cassirer was not interested in the matter³³¹. There is however an aspect of the question that corroborates the debate; namely, Benjamin's posture on the aesthetic concept of symbol.

³²⁹ Cf. W. Benjamin, "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft. Zum ersten Bande der Kunstwissenschaftlichen Forschungen" (1931), in *Gesammelte Schriften III*, (ed.) H. Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 369-374.

³³⁰ E. Panofsky, "*Original und Faksimilereproduction*" (1930), (tr. T. Grundy), in "Anthropology and Aesthetics", no. 57/58, 2010, pp. 330-338, here p. 330.

³³¹ This does not mean that Cassirer did not question the concept of "style", which has an enormous importance in the development of the concept of Symbolic Form. But as already anticipated through E. Alloa's contributions, in Cassirer's research this concept does not participate in the historical-artistic debate, but in a broader epistemological order [Cf. E. Alloa, *Could Perspective Ever be a Symbolic Form?*, in "Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology", vol. 2, no.1, 2015, pp. 51-71]. As E. W. Orth specifies: «Cassirer adopts the concept of style from art theory, above all from Heinrich Wölfflin's "Kunsgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffen" of 1915 Cassirer does not mention Nietzsche's definition of "culture" as "unity of style in all the expressions of the life of a people". "Concepts of style are", according to Cassirer, "concepts of form" or "concepts of structure" in Wilhelm von Humboldt's sense of an "innerform of language" or "lawful form" [E. W. Orth, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and the Question of Human Culture. Introductions to the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, in "Synthese", vol. 179, no. 1, 2011, pp. 115-134, here p.

3. Time, Forms and Functions of Symbols. Reading the *Trauerspielbuch* in a Cassirerian Perspective

3.1. *A Common Ground, A Common Method. The Influence of Goethean Morphology*

The next few pages will address the epistemological role assigned by Benjamin to the concept of symbol within the *Trauerspielbuch*, particularly within the *Vorrede*. To appreciate both common sources and fundamental discrepancies between Benjamin and Cassirer on the subject, a reflection must be primarily stressed, one that indeed joins them: that on the relationship between symbol and morphology. As for this combination, Cassirer is much more explicit: the Goethean original phenomenon is placed by Cassirer as one of the main models for the processing of his symbol concept. As evidenced by his *Nachlass*, the reflection on these issues will continue until the last years of his life, up to drafting of the essay on the *Basisphänomene*, dated 1940³³². This text rereads, through the method of the logical positivism³³³ of Rudolf Carnap³³⁴, Goethe's notion of *Urphänomen*, placing it to the

³³² As Raio rightly points out in the Italian introduction to the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, this text is to be considered the theoretical foundation of the text *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften. Fünf Studien* (1942). Cf. also the introduction to the English translation by G. S. Lofts, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, Yale University Press, New Heaven 2000.

³³³ This harmonization of the concept of symbol between the logical and the aesthetic tradition has always been at the basis of Cassirer's symbolic forms: «The new aspect that Cassirer introduces is the genuine connection of two traditions: the formal-logical use of the symbol-concept, taking its orientation from Leibniz; and the aesthetic form of thought that reaches back to Baumgarten, Kant and Goethe. In this way Cassirer can make clear that all truly strict thought relies upon 'symbolism and semiotics'» [H. Hühn & J. Vigus, "Introduction", in Hühn & J. Vigus (eds.), *Symbol and Intuition. Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*, Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 1-14, here p. 11].

³³⁴ Carnap, as M. Ferrari rightly pointed out, in the years immediately following the publication of Cassirer's *Nachlass*, is treated in very general terms. Cassirer retrieves the concept of "basic phenomenon" from the text *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928), but it is the Goethean matrix that imposes itself in his reflections. More recent studies, such as those of G. Raio and C. Metta confirm this interpretation. Cf. M. Ferrari, *Metafisica delle Forme Simboliche. Note su Cassirer Inedito*, in "Rivista di Storia della Filosofia", Vol. 50, No. 4, (1995), pp. 809-837; C. Metta, *A Critique of the Work. Cassirer and Benjamin*, in "Cassirer Studies", vol. 4, 2012, pp. 123-141; G. Raio, *L'io, il tu e l'Es. Saggio sulla Metafisica delle Forme Simboliche* di Ernst Cassirer, Quodlibet, Macerata 2005. Alongside the text by G. Raio (2005), S. Lofts dedicates an extensive discussion about the role of the *Urphänomen* in the posthumous Cassirer (accompanied by a critical reading of the interpretation of Krois and Kajon) in his *Ernst Cassirer. A "Repetition" of Modernity*. The controversial relationship between morphology and idealism is extensively discussed here and, above all, it is highlighted how the *Basisphänomene* should have acted as a glue to describe the unity of the spirit from an epistemological point of view (see also Krois' introduction to the first edition of the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*). Cf. S. G. Lofts, *Ernst Cassirer. A "Repetition" of Modernity*, State University of New York Press, Albany (NY) 2000 (esp. pp. 220-222).

foundation of the fourth volume of symbolic forms, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen* (left unfinished due to the author's death). However, in a comparison with Benjamin, it is misleading to appeal to the unpublished Cassirer's *Formenlehre*, a part of the Cassirerian philosophy with which Benjamin could not have come into contact. Still, it must be remembered that in these posthumous texts Cassirer specifically addresses Goethe's morphology in its original sense, that is, as a study of the form that starts from the *Naturwissenschaft* (or *Naturphilosophie*, depending on the interpretations)³³⁵: the wide use of this method in fact revolves around the works of the zoologist Jacob von Uexküll³³⁶ and his studies of animal perception - not devoid, of course, of a conscious philosophical use of comparative anatomy. It is at this stage that Cassirer actively ponders the Goethean question of the "*Bildung und Umbildung organischer Naturen*". During the drafting of the three volumes of *Symbolic Forms*, the Goethean method of investigation around the problem of form and of the relationship between *type* and metamorphism is instead placed by Cassirer at a certain distance from the natural sciences. Nonetheless, it retains a valid epistemological power to establish a link between empirical form and ideal form. Cassirer in fact declines this study in terms of a *forma formans*, in the transcendental groove traced by Kantianism, but still aware of the difference between the formation [*Bildung*] and the structured form [*Gestalt*], as posed by Goethe. The morphological process is therefore understood by Cassirer as a theoretical model to embrace the impulse, the forming energy at the base of the infinity of phenomenal declinations of the experience "the living movement of spirit" or, to quote an illustrious Welsh poet, as "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower". This aspect of morphological becoming is declared many times by Cassirer, but it is in the third

³³⁵ On this debate, see the essay by O. L. Müller, "Goethes Pech mit Schelling Optimistische Blicke auf ein ideengeschichtliches Fiasko", in *Nature and Realism in Schelling's Philosophy*, in E. C. Corriero & A. Dezi (eds.), Accademia University Press, Torino 2013, pp. 131-186. (esp. the section "1. Spekulation oder Empirie?", pp. 131-150).

³³⁶ «Cassirer, as mentioned above, claims to derive these three basis phenomena from Goethe's conception of life as an *Urphänomen*. But in addition to Goethe there appears to lie behind them the conception of the human organism that he derives from Uexküll» [D. P. Verene, "Cassirer's Metaphysics", in *The Symbolic Construction of Reality*, (ed.) J. A. Barash, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2008, pp. 93-104, here p. 100]. This author is already widely present in the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, but his participation in a properly morphological project can be seen above all in the posthumous Cassirer. In any case, we refer to the last section of this research for an accurate contextualization of Uexküll's thought in the work of Cassirer and Benjamin (esp. pp. 229-234).

volume of the symbolic forms that it is made explicit with extreme clarity. And the emphasis here falls more on the unification of the *Geisteswissenschaften* embraced by the *Symbolic Forms*:

Goethe once said that the source can be described only in that it flows; in a general sense, this is valid of any living movement of spirit. The nature of its progress cannot be defined simply in stereotypes and abstractions but rather must be seized in its actuality, in the energy [*Energie*] of the movement itself. The methodological law of “procedures” can be rendered explicit only through the concrete process itself, through its inception and subsequent development, its turn and transformations, its spiritual crises and peripeteia³³⁷.

From these words one can only embrace the reading of Ferrari, who immediately underlined the extensive role that Goethe’s thought had in the architecture of Cassirer’s major work: «From this point of view, Goethean morphology seems to represent the model of that “morphology of the spirit” that the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* intended to be»³³⁸. The Goethean method thus provides Cassirer with a general model in which to collect the micro-morphology of the cultural forms of the spirit, in turn provided by other morphological paradigms, such as the linguistic studies of Hermann Osthoff, Karl Brugmann and Humboldt himself. These authors had in fact been used to discuss the problem of *Wort- und Formenbildung*, at the basis of the processes of linguistic morphology. In this domain, as Lofts rightly points out, Goethe was used to account for the unity of the spirit in its different expressions: «In the same way that “Humboldt transferred Goethe’s idea to a new field of investigation”, namely to that of language, Cassirer transfers Goethe’s idea to the field of *Geist* as a whole»³³⁹. Having therefore to consider the relationship between morphology and symbol, it is clear, from the words of Cassirer and his commentators, that the ultimate purpose of this binomial is the unification of the various historical, expressive, and experiential forms in a single

³³⁷ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Phenomenology of Cognition* (vol.3), *op. cit.*, p. 485.

³³⁸ M. Ferrari, *Metafisica delle Forme Simboliche. Note su Cassirer Inedito*, in “Rivista di Storia della Filosofia, Vol. 50, No. 4, (1995), pp. 809-837, here p. 831.

³³⁹ S. G. Lofts, *Ernst Cassirer. A "Repetition" of Modernity*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

principle, precisely that of the articulation and structuring of experience through the production of symbols. That is, the “homology” of the symbol in all its metamorphic possibilities.

Benjamin’s case is not so dissimilar at least in one respect. Morphology is a method that, as will be seen, has been placed by many commentators at the basis of some of his most important reflections: some key concepts, such as that of “polarity” (*Polarität*)³⁴⁰, were placed at the origin of the dialectical method of the Berlin philosopher³⁴¹. This is particularly the case during what he identified as his “German studies” phase, the long research process that led to the drafting of the *Baroque Drama*. It is undeniable that this work is affected by Goethe’s morphological approach - it is Benjamin himself who appeals to his theories and places the concept of *Urphänomen* as a theoretical cornerstone for setting his research on cultural forms. In the same way, it is Benjamin’s own considerations that indicate, this time *ex post*, how some concepts, such as that of the dialectical image³⁴², were directly derived from the morphological method: «The dialectical image is that form of the historical object that meets the needs that Goethe poses for the object of an analysis: to show a true synthesis. It is the original phenomenon of history»³⁴³. This note contained in the Konvolut N of the *Passagen-Werk* leaves no room for misunderstandings on the methodological influence that Goethe had on Benjamin. It is equally true, however, as an accurate analysis by Ottaviani has highlighted, that the awareness of this debt is to be placed after 1928, when Benjamin was preparing the materials necessary to compile the entry dedicated to *Goethe in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*. In the *Enzyklopädieartikel* we read that «Goethe’s philosophical orientation is to be

³⁴⁰ The polar method of the Goethean tradition was also circumscribed within Cassirer's philosophy. In this regard S. G. Lofts writes: «Throughout Cassirer’s philosophy we find a series of polar opposites which in the metaphysical tradition were thought as existing independently of each other but which in Cassirer’s thought are always defined in terms of their identity-in-difference, in terms of their ontological correspondence as being differentiated and united through the symbolic structures of culture that sets each out of the other: form/matter, I/world, I/thou, subject/object, thought/being» [S. G. Lofts, “Cassirer and Heidegger: The Cultural-Event. The Auseinandersetzung of Thinking and Being”, in J. T. Friedman & S. Luft (eds.), *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2015, pp. 233-258, here p. 237.

³⁴¹ See: A. Auerbach, *Imagine no Metaphors. The Dialectical Image of Walter Benjamin*, in *Image & Narrative*, no. 18, 2007, pp. 1-14.

³⁴² S. Buck-Morrs, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, The Free Press, New York 1977.

³⁴³ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 462.

understood not so much from his poetic works as from his scientific-natural writings»³⁴⁴. In the same pages Benjamin engages in a reconstruction of the relationship between Goethe's morphology and the teleological principle of Kant's *Third Critique*. However, the subsequent application of the morphological method, (in its most explicit emanation) occurs in a territory which is too distant from Cassirer's thought to be taken into consideration: the morphological method marries Marxism and thus becomes the main key to interpret the structural and superstructural transformations of the transition between industrial and post-industrial society³⁴⁵:

In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. [...] Seen from the standpoint of causality, however (and that means considered as causes), these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development – “unfolding” might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcades concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants³⁴⁶.

There are commentators who have emphasized how the figure of Georg Simmel may have been central in inducing Benjamin to apply the concept of the original

³⁴⁴ W. Benjamin, *Enzyklopädieartikel. Goethe* (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.2*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 705-742, here p. 719 (my translation).

³⁴⁵ In this regard there is an illuminating passage in Konvolut N: «Marx stellt den Kausalzusammenhang zwischen Wirtschaft und Kultur dar. Hier kommt es auf den Ausdruckszusammenhang an. Nicht die wirtschaftliche Entstehung der Kultur sondern der Ausdruck der Wirtschaft in ihrer Kultur ist darzustellen. Es handelt sich, mit andern Worten, um den Versuch, einen wirtschaftlichen Prozeß als anschauliches Urphänomen zu erfassen, aus welchem alle Lebenserscheinungen der Passagen (und insoweit des 19ten Jahrhunderts) hervorgehen. [Diese Untersuchung, die es im Grunde mit dem Ausdruckscharakter der frühesten Industrieerzeugnisse, der frühesten Industriebauten, der frühesten Maschinen aber auch der frühesten Warenhäuser, Reklamen etc zu tun hat, wird damit in zwiefacher Weise für den Marxismus wichtig. Erstens wird sie darauf stoßen, in welcher Weise die Umwelt, in der die Lehre von Marx entstand, durch ihren Ausdruckscharakter, also nicht nur durch ihre Kausalzusammenhänge, auf diese einwirkte, zweitens aber auch zeigen, in welchen Zügen auch der Marxismus den Ausdruckscharakter der ihm gleichzeitigen materiellen Erzeugnisse teilt» [W. Benjamin, “Konvolut N (Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts)”, in *Das Passagen-Werk, op. cit.*, pp. 573-574].

³⁴⁶ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project, op. cit.*, p. 462 [N2a,4].

phenomenon to historical and economic transformations. Benjamin himself admits that reading Simmel's *Goethe* (1923) had him understand how much his theoretical efforts had an affinity with morphological investigation. However, as N. Dodd correctly pointed out, Simmel's influence can also be grasped in the field of application of the *Passages*, since Simmel refers several times to the morphological model, and in particular to the concept of *Urphänomen*, even within his *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900)³⁴⁷.

We must nonetheless remember that the terrain of industrial production and the Marxism-morphology binomial is alien to Cassirer's reflections (we side here with Skidelsky in remarking a certain disinterest of this author for Marxist thought and more generally for economics³⁴⁸). What allows for a comparison is once again the broad-spectrum epistemological terrain on which Benjamin also articulated his concept of symbol and which precedes and accompanies the drafting of the *Baroque Drama*. In this perspective, Benjamin's "exploration of the origin" also deserves to be investigated in its own right and this can be seen in fragments such as *Zum verlorenen Abschluss der Notiz über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis* (1917/1918), or by some considerations scattered by Benjamin in his *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (1922). In these texts, similarly to Cassirer's morphological project, Benjamin will re-propose the binomial between symbol and morphology by superimposing the two terms: «*Das Urphänomen ist ein systematisch-symbolischer Begriff. Es ist als Ideal Symbol*»³⁴⁹. This reflection certainly acknowledges the instances contained in the *Trauerspiel*, where Benjamin sought a

³⁴⁷ «Benjamin uses the term less frequently than does Simmel, but he describes the dialectical image as an *Urphänomen*, [...] as a 'primal history' of modernity. There are other affinities between Goethe and these later thinkers. Both Simmel and Benjamin think through and present their ideas in an arrangement that resembles morphology. The *Passages* contains many instances of Simmel's treatment of analogy; indeed money itself appears to be an ideal vehicle for analogical reasoning. Finally, both thinkers are preoccupied by the limitations of what can be empirically known of history and society – and by the precarious role of human reasoning in scrutinizing those limitations» [N. Dodd, *Goethe in Palermo. Urphänomen and Analogical Reasoning in Simmel and Benjamin*, in "Journal of Classical Sociology", no. 8, 2008, pp. 411-445, here p. 414].

³⁴⁸ Skidelsky's text is one among many to complain about Cassirer's naivety towards economic and sociological sciences. At the same time he is one of the few to outline the political attitude of this author, linking it to a precise tradition. For example: «Cassirer's brand of liberalism was not unique to him. It belongs to the quintessentially German tradition of *Bildungsliberalismus*, the tradition of Goethe, Humboldt, and Thomas Mann. Unlike its Anglo-French counterpart, this tradition was not centrally concerned with problems of politics or economics» E. Skidelsky, *Cassirer. The Last Philosopher of Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

method to place every phenomenon in an epistemological status wherein it could be grasped as incomplete and unfinished. [*Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes*], in its pre-and post-history [*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*]]³⁵⁰. Rereading this delicate moment of Benjamin's youthful philosophy through the influences of the Berlin courses held by Cassirer and the readings that Benjamin was completing in those years, it is possible to trace the origins of the morphological method that Benjamin himself will deal with in the following seasons of his thought. The search for a unitary principle in the binomial *Urphänomen/Symbol* unites the entire evolution of Cassirer's thought to the aims, partially analysed previously, that Benjamin placed at the apex of his epistemological project. To grasp the differences and similarities, however, it is necessary to consider the status of the symbol assigned by Benjamin to probe the evolution of cultural forms under “*ein systematisch-symbolischer Begriff*”. The genealogy of the symbol within Benjamin's thought allows us to grasp the general premises of this methodology which will be decisive for the mature writings of the Berlin philosopher. There is a fact that is particularly interesting that can be highlighted: even within the *Passagen-Werk*, in the lines we have just cited, morphology is always referred back to an order that is epistemological. Konvolut N, which contains most of Benjamin's reflections on this theme, in fact carries the subtitle *Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*. The morphological approach – if paired with a theory of the symbol, aimed at linking the whole of knowledge in a systematic nexus – is the first wide-open viaticum on the particular applications that Benjamin will give of Goethe's method: in this perspective the symbol is the guide to «perceive nature as a whole in its parts and in its parts as a whole»³⁵¹, for the sake of the purest Goethean intention. Starting from this binomial, which Cassirer's juxtaposition allows us to unravel, Benjamin however does not seem to renunciate to Kant's distinction «between intuition (*Anschauung*) and concept (*Begriff*), which relate respectively to sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) and understanding (*Verstand*)»³⁵². A distinction that Cassirer tried to elide, in the path

³⁵⁰ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

³⁵¹ H. Hühn, “Aesthetic and Intellectual Intuition”, in H. Hühn & J. Vigus (eds.), *Symbol and Intuition. Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*, Routledge, New York 2013, pp.2-4, here p. 3.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

traced by Goethe, to unify the theory of knowledge with aesthetics. On the contrary, «Benjamin is inspired to attempt this penetration by the presence of the archetypal phenomena. “*Fruchtbares Zentrum einer Anschauung*”, “*wahre Natur*” “*Urphänomen*” – all these elements belong to a single constellation for Benjamin’s Goethe, and they also characterize his approach to aesthetic theory. Given this fact, and given the consistency, in both his dissertation and in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, with which Benjamin links “*Urbild*” to “*Urphänomen*”. These erroneous assertions are not surprising»³⁵³. In fact, Benjamin’s contact with morphology is entirely legitimate, but not without some interpretative criticalities. These mostly emerge around the concepts of *Urbild* and *Urphänomen*, which Benjamin tended to superimpose, while Goethe had differentiated them. As regards the concept of symbol, precisely this close contrast between *Sinnlichkeit* and *Verstand* poses some interpretative problems, namely in the distinction between *Kunstsymbol* and *Symbol*. In the reinterpretation of the concept of symbol proposed in the analysis of the *Baroque Drama*, three main aspects will be highlighted: 1) How Benjamin weakens the concept of symbol from an aesthetic point of view; 2) How much this concept is brought back to the theological and monotheistic dimension; 3) How this is transfigured into the allegorical tool, to penetrate the cultural phenomenology of the “profane”, the domain of human culture.

3.2. *The Mystical Symbol in Benjamin and Cassirer via Adolf von Harnack*

In the chapter dedicated to “*Allegorie und Trauerspiel*”, Benjamin lashes out against the “profane” application of the *Symbol* within Romantic art theory. It should be noted that Benjamin does not go directly against this notion, but against its particular meaning and its application within the philosophy of art. Benjamin laments that the *Symbol*, being of «theological relevance [*in dem theologischen Bereiche*]»³⁵⁴, finds application within the theory of art as a comfortable solution.

³⁵³J. Pizer, *Goethe’s “Urphänomen” and Benjamin’s “Ursprung”. A Reconsideration*, in “*Journal of Germanic Studies*”, no. 25, 1988, pp. 205–222, here p. 208.

³⁵⁴ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

It resolves within a term the complex dialectic between essence and appearance in the art theory [*zum Komfort kunstwissenschaftlicher Untersuchungen*]³⁵⁵. On this point, two questions inevitably arise: the first pertains to the relationship between essence and appearance, the second ponders the belonging of the symbol to the world of theology. Benjamin is very assertive on the latter point, which needs to be analysed to clarify the former interrogative as well.

The profane use of the concept of symbol recurs also as opening themes of the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*. Here, this notion is immediately presented as a piece, as a card, of the treatise method that Benjamin intends to use for his writing. This “symbolizing” purpose that is proposed in the gnoseological premise seems to question the common reading that would like to place allegory as a method of investigation of the *Trauerspielbuch*, as well as its theoretical purpose³⁵⁶. Indeed, Benjamin is here still dwelling on epistemological assumptions present in the fragments of previous years, where the term symbol was used to describe the seamless relationship of “truth and reality”. The dichotomy is thus maintained, between the fragmentation of empirical understanding [*Vernehmen*] and the asymptotic finality of complete knowledge. Therefore, among the various paradigms that Benjamin proposes to exemplify this distinction, he numbers Platonic anamnesis, the Edenic myth, the Faustian Mothers and the hypothesis of the translation, revealing philosophy of language, evoked through the metaphor of Sais. All these philosophical models tend towards a single object, the idea. For Benjamin, idea is an originary phenomenon (*Die Ideen - im Sprachgebrauche Goethes: Ideal - sind die faustischen Mütter*)»³⁵⁷ and is always housed within the realm of language, in a linguistic function that is addressed to itself, not finalized and unintentional [*als welches jeder Art von Intention entzogen bleibt*]³⁵⁸. The gap

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ As regards the apparent continuity between the allegorical method and allegory as a theoretical object within the *German Baroque Drama*, we agree with the interpretation offered by A. Pinotti: «If both frequently and reductively [Benjamin] identifies the false appearance of a harmonic totality with the symbolic tout court, as we have seen, he does not at all renounce the aspiration for a good totality and a good synthesis, in itself dialectical and polarized, which was precisely the same purpose of Goethe's morphology» [A. Pinotti, *Allegoria, fu vera gloria?*, in “Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico”, no. 2, 2010, pp. 153-162, here p. 161(my translation)].

³⁵⁷ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

between the empirical appearance and the truth becomes even more evident in these pages. The symbolic function is explicitly opposed, with more determination than previous writings, to the profane use of language:

In the empirical hearing [*Vernehmen*], in which the words have decomposed, an explicit profane meaning is inherent in the words, alongside their more or less hidden symbolic meaning. It is the philosopher's task to restore his primacy, through presentation, to the symbolic character of the word [*symbolischen Charakter des Wortes*]: that aspect in which the idea reaches self-transparency [*Selbstverständigung*], wherein the idea comes to a self-understanding that is the opposite of all outwardly directed communication.³⁵⁹

This excerpt certainly presupposes the instances of the 1916 essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*. It signals a return of Benjamin's need to emancipate language from its communicative purpose: expression and communication take place in language, not through it. As Benjamin wrote: «Was teilt die Sprache mit? lautet also: Jede Sprache teilt sich selbst mit»³⁶⁰. However, there seems to be a radicalization here: from a translational hypothesis, where the profane language is aimed at the search for the original Name (or the pure communicability), he moves on to a model of purification of philosophical language. Although Benjamin tries to place a historical function in that *Ursprung* of Cohenian origin, the idea of an ahistorical, Edenic and sacral origin of a “latent symbolic content” seems to survive, albeit immanently. It is positive that here «Benjamin distinguishes between the “paradisiac language of man” and the mediacy of language as sign»³⁶¹, juxtaposing a symbolic stability to the contingency of sign. However much unifying his method was meant to be, this gnoseological

³⁵⁹ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, *op. cit.*, p. 13 (slightly modified translation); «Im empirischen Vernehmen, in welchem die Worte sich zersetzt haben, eignet nun neben ihrer mehr oder weniger verborgenen symbolischen Seite ihnen eine offenkundige profane Bedeutung. Sache des Philosophen ist es, den symbolischen Charakter des Wortes, in welchem die Idee zur Selbstverständigung kommt, die das Gegenteil aller nach außen gerichteter Mitteilung ist, durch Darstellung in seinen Primat wieder einzusetzen» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 217].

³⁶⁰ W. Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (1916), *op. cit.*, p. 142.

³⁶¹ S. Weigel, *Body and Image Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

premise seems to firmly divide a symbolic-theological knowledge from a profane, contingent and historical mode of communication. This contrast is exacerbated by the polar and irreconcilable relationship between “*profane Bedeutung*”, which is aimed at communication, and the “*verborgenen symbolischen Seite*”; this latter, regardless of the need for communication, allows a self-transparent emergence of the idea³⁶².

Although in these passages the notion of symbol is discussed to rehabilitate allegory as a worthy form of expression, there are several interrogatives that remain in the background. The first, for example, is why Benjamin insists so much on the theological quintessence of the symbolic. Georg Lukàcs brings back this back to the scholastic tradition, to Dionysius the Areopagite and to Richard of Saint Victor (probably referring to the work *Allegoriae tabernaculis fœderis*); more generally, he links Benjamin’s persuasion to the practice of Judeo-Christian allegoresis³⁶³. Lukàcs’ reconstruction is appropriate, but an incongruity can be pointed out: these are all authors Benjamin was likely familiar with; still, none of them features in his work. More likely, Benjamin might have acquired his distinction between symbol and profane symbol through the writings of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1939)³⁶⁴, the famous Lutheran theologian and church historian, best known for his monumental work *Lehrbuch der Dogmen Geschichte* (1886). Jean-Michel Palmier had already pointed out that Harnack was a fundamental source for Benjamin, especially for the *Theologisch-politische Fragment*, while examining the political and Christian roots of Romanticism and relating them to Judaism³⁶⁵.

³⁶² This thesis that the symbol refers directly to “an idea” seems to be affected, at least in part, by Goethe’s theses that Benjamin will analyse later in the course of the *German Baroque Drama*. Benjamin criticizes with some harshness the solution proposed by Schopenhauer to differentiate allegory and symbol as forms of expression: the first would be the expression of an idea and the second of a concept. From what appears from this excerpt it is Benjamin himself who keeps alive the dichotomy that he will criticize a few pages later. This contradiction seems to confirm the thesis proposed by A. Pinotti in his article “*Allegoria, fu vera gloria?*”, which shows with a certain effectiveness that the dichotomy between allegory and symbol is rather apparent within the *German Baroque Drama*.

³⁶³ Cf. G. Lukàcs, *Allegoria e simbolo*, in “Belfagor”, vol. 24, no. 2, 1969, pp. 125-166.

³⁶⁴ For a contemporary compendium of Harnack’s work, see K. Nowak (ed.), *Adolf von Harnack. Christentum, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2003.

³⁶⁵ «Seine Lektüre von Harnacks Dogmengeschichte (1891) im Frühjahr 1918 führte ihn auf die Frage nach den Beziehungen zwischen politischem Katholizismus und Romantik und auf die Suche nach deren Äquivalent im Judentum» [J. M. Palmier, *Walter Benjamin. Lumpensammler, Engel und bucklicht Männlein. Ästhetik und Politik bei Walter Benjamin*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2006, p. 290].

Thanks to the correspondence with Gershom Scholem, it is certain that in 1917 Benjamin was reading Harnack's monumental *History of Dogma*. Let us consider a letter written on October 22nd: after lecturing his friend and intellectual confidant, on the need to revolutionize the Kantian doctrine, Benjamin speaks with enthusiasm of Harnack's text³⁶⁶. This reading is therefore a solid part of Benjamin's epistemological attempt on the fragments between '18 and '21, where the need to re-read Kantian epistemology through Jewish mysticism began to emerge. A year before this letter, Benjamin had finished his *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*: it is not to be excluded that the reading of Harnack's book might have informed Benjamin's drafting of that text as well. At any rate, it is certainly in the *Trauerspielbuch* that Harnack's reading becomes fundamental. Benjamin builds on Harnack to extend the research on the symbolic beyond Goethean philosophy and Jewish mysticism, and to appreciate the concept of symbol even in its early-Christian background. With regards to the study of allegory, Harnack's text might have been precious for Benjamin's studies, since Harnack regarded the exegetic-allegorical (allegoresis) method as an attempt to extend Christian origins beyond the Gospels, up to Judaism and to the Old Testament. As Harnack wrote: «Allegory, however, was required to establish the continuity of the tradition from Adam down to the present time — not merely down to Christ»³⁶⁷.

In one of the many treatises in Harnack's work dedicated to the cultic function of the symbol, a passage is particularly fit to make Benjamin's fruition of Harnack more tangible: «The symbolical of that time early Christianity is not to be considered as the opposite of the objectively real, but as the mysterious, the God produced (μυστήριον), as contrasted with the natural, the profanely clear»³⁶⁸. The symbolic is presented here as immanent in objectivity, and its mystery is something

³⁶⁶ «Presently, before I can begin reading Kant, I am reading Harnack's textbook on the history of dogmas in three volumes. I'm at the end of the first. The book gives me a lot to think about by enabling me for the first time to get an idea of what Christianity is and constantly leading me to comparisons with Judaism for which my knowledge, euphemistically speaking, is quite inadequate» [W. Benjamin to G. Scholem, Berna 22.10.1917, in *Gesammelte Briefe* (1910-1940), vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 149.].

³⁶⁷ A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (1895), (tr.) N. Buchanan, Nabu Press, Charleston 2010, here p. 160.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

that must be achieved through detachment from secular communication. The concealment [*Verhüllung*] paradoxically becomes the means through which the divine manifests itself. If we then consider the essay *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (1922), it is clear why Benjamin was reading Harnack in parallel with the Kantian aesthetic:

The object to which the shell is essential in the final analysis is to be designated no differently. Because only beauty, and nothing outside of it, can be veiled or veiled essential, the divine ground of beauty lies in the mystery [*liegt im Geheimnis*]. So then the semblance in it is just this: not the superfluous unveiling of things in themselves but rather the necessary veiling of things for us. Such concealment is divinely necessary at times, just as it is divinely conditioned that, when revealed at inopportune times, that inconspicuous thing does not evaporate into anything, with which revelation [*Offenbarung*] replaces mysteries. Kantian doctrine [*Lehre*] that a relational character is the basis of beauty thus victoriously asserts its methodological tendencies in a much higher sphere than the psychological one. All beauty, like revelation, contains orders of the philosophy of history.³⁶⁹

At this very moment in Benjamin's philosophy, Harnack's thought seems to radicalize Benjamin's position towards Goethean morphology and what he defines as the *Kantischen Mystik* or the *Kants Esoterik*³⁷⁰. In this regard, commentators have already noted how precisely this mysterious reading of the symbol and of the

³⁶⁹ W. Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities", in *Selected Writings 1. 1913-1926*, (eds.) M. Bullock and M. W. Jeggins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 1996, pp. 297-261, here p. 351. (we modified the translation, mostly around the term *Geheimnis*); «Nicht anders nämlich ist jener Gegenstand zu bezeichnen, dem im letzten die Hülle wesentlich ist. Weil nur das Schöne und außer ihm nichts verhüllend und verhüllt wesentlich zu sein vermag, liegt im Geheimnis der göttliche Seinsgrund der Schönheit. So ist denn der Schein in ihr eben dies: nicht die überflüssige Verhüllung der Dinge an sich, sondern die notwendige von Dingen für uns. Göttlich notwendig ist solche Verhüllung zu Zeiten, wie denn göttlich bedingt ist, daß, zur Unzeit enthüllt, in nichts jenes Unscheinbare sich verflüchtigt, womit Offenbarung die Geheimnisse ablöst. Kants Lehre, daß ein Relationscharakter die Grundlage der Schönheit sei, setzt demnach in einer sehr viel höhern Sphäre als der psychologischen siegreich ihre methodischen Tendenzen durch. Alle Schönheit hält wie die Offenbarung geschichtsphilosophische Ordnungen in sich» [W. Benjamin, "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften" (1922), in *Gesammelte Schriften I.1*, (eds.), R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 123-203, here pp. 195-196].

³⁷⁰ Cf. Walter Benjamin's fragment *Zum verlorenen Abschluss der Notiz über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis* (1917/18), *op. cit.*, p. 39.

symbolic intuition (*Anschauung*), which would manifest itself precisely through concealment (*Offenbarung*), led Benjamin to misunderstand or distort Goethean thought in the essay *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*³⁷¹.

If anything, we could discuss the esoteric attitude that Goethe himself admitted to having, already in his maturity, in his studies of natural sciences. These began from the reading of Paracelsus' works and *Aurea Catena Homeri oder, Eine Beschreibung von dem Ursprung der Natur und natürlichen Dingen* (1723) by Anton Kirchweger. Paracelsus' particular approach to alchemy «had nothing to do with the so-called alchemical “puffers” who peddled the notion that they could enrich their patrons by creating gold out of lead»³⁷². Instead, he dealt with structuring a unitary formal schematism, capable of describing the relationship between the particular and the universal: «It represented an attempt to come to grips with both material and non-material qualities of nature, and to find in them a reflection of human qualities; it was a kind of “moral chemistry”, in which the chemical processes of rarefaction and purification were carefully studied in nature and related to the human life of spirit. Macrocosm and microcosm mirrored one another»³⁷³. It was Goethe himself who defined his studies in alchemy in the '70s, which he placed at the basis of his morphological research as «mystical, cabalistic chemistry»³⁷⁴. This is an aspect that «prefigures the characteristic way in which Goethe was to conceive the relationship between the universal (*das Allgemeine*) and the particular (*das Besondere*) into his late work»³⁷⁵. In this stage Benjamin seems to emphasize this aspect of the Goethean morphological method³⁷⁶, placing the discovery of the *Urbild*, beyond the empirical world, in the theological universe of

³⁷¹ Regarding this interpretation, we note the recent contribution by M. P. Bullock, “‘In ein fahles Licht’: Walter Benjamin Misreads Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*”, contained in the volume edited by H. Adler and S. Gross *Anschauung und Anschaulichkeit. Visualisierung im Wahrnehmen. Lesen und Denken*, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2015, pp. 42-75.

³⁷² Introduction by D. Miller in J. W. Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, (ed.) D. Miller, Suhrkamp, New York 1995, p. x.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ H. Hühn, “Comparative Morphology and Symbolic Mediation in Goethe”, in H. Hühn & J. Vigus (eds.), *Symbol and Intuition. Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*, Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 81-95 (here p. 82).

³⁷⁶ An extensive study, which still remains the reference one, of esoteric, alchemical and religious characteristics was offered in 1952 by R. D. Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist. A Study of Alchemical Symbolism in Goethe's Literary and Scientific Works* (1952), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010.

what he call “the prophetic vision”³⁷⁷. This particular expression used by Benjamin seems to underline the famous distinction that Goethe placed between the *perception of form* and the *perception of the metamorphosis process*: «While the individual *Gestalt* is accessible to empirical intuition where, as Goethe puts it, we use our ‘bodily eyes’ (*leibliche Augen*), the transition from one changeable *Gestalt* to another is captured by the ‘mind’s eyes’ (*geistige Augen*)»³⁷⁸.

This implication of Goethean morphology emerges in relation to the concept of symbol when the symbol is applied to a general epistemological framework. In fact, in addition to the essay on *Elective Affinities*, the roots of this interpretation can also be traced back to the fragment of ‘18, *Zum verlorren Abschluss der Notiz über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis*, where Benjamin insists on the concept of symbol in Goethe’s philosophy, rereading it in a mystical perspective. In this fragment Benjamin recognizes the original phenomenon as an ideal term or symbol par excellence, and he leads Goethe’s thought back to the prophetic vision (*seherischen Einsichten*)³⁷⁹. Benjamin is adamant on this question: «Das Urphänomen ist ein systematisch-symbolischer Begriff. Es ist als Ideal Symbol»³⁸⁰. It is safe to assume that Benjamin persists to see the symbol in a transcendent sense, as a tensive and ideal point, which emerges from doctrine and truth, but which is not knowable: «Because of its latent symbolic content, all knowledge must carry a powerful symbolic intention [*latenten symbolischen Gehalt*] which, under the name of ontology, classifies the system itself. The decisive category of the system is doctrine

³⁷⁷ Benjamin’s interest in the alchemical implications underlying the Goethean morphological method are only recently coming to light. In the scrupulous research on sources in the recently published text *Entwendungen*, precisely in the chapter dedicated to Goethe as a source we read: «In *The Elective Affinities* essay Benjamin relates two relationships to one another: as the chemist and the alchemist relate to fire, so comment and criticism relate to the work. According to Benjamin, the declared aim is, in addition to the commentary (the chemical analysis of the material, factual constituents, the “factual content” [*Sachgehalts*]) and equally the question of the “truth content” [*Wahrheitsgehalt*], of the life that manifests itself in the work (the history)» [U. Marx & A. Richter, “Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Philosophische Alchemie”, in *Entwendungen. Walter Benjamin und seine Quellen*, (eds.) J. Nitsche & N. Werner, Wilhelm Fink, Munich 2019, pp. 97-124, here p. 98.

³⁷⁸ H. Hühn, “Comparative Morphology and Symbolic Mediation in Goethe”, in H. Hühn & J. Vigus (eds.), *Symbol and Intuition. Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*, op. cit., pp. 81-95 (here p. 91).

³⁷⁹ W. Benjamin, *Zum verlorren Abschluss der Notiz über die Symbolik in der Erkenntnis* (1917/18), op. cit., p. 39.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

[*Lehre*], which includes truth, but not knowledge»³⁸¹. To conclude, regarding Goethean morphology, Benjamin does not seem to subtract the domain of the symbolic from the theological sphere, holding to a method which favours revelation more than strict analysis. The problem of the symbol arises, as we shall see shortly, in the metaphysical and non-epistemological domain.

The symbolic connection, which Benjamin refers to morphology, Kantian doctrine and the mysticism of the Hebrew language, is enriched with Harnack in its religious and Christian meaning: that will be a fundamental passage for the *German Baroque Drama*, which, following Warburg, also seeks to analyse the polar and synchronic tensions caused by the survival of the pagan world in the modern age. However, the doubt arises that the symbol could be also an aesthetic category for Benjamin, which can be engaged within a *Kulturwissenschaft* project such as the *Trauerspielbuch*. Although Benjamin tries to fix it in historical terms, the concept of symbol is always accompanied by the tension towards a totality (*Totalität*) which can only appear in the domain of truth and revelation, beyond the epitome of knowledge as *Inbegriff*. The gap between secular and divine language deepens further in the *Baroque Drama*. Benjamin proposes this concept of purification of language from its own communicative and profane function, by contrasting a latent symbolic content, which pertains to the field of theology-as-doctrine (or *Lehre*). Thus, even from a morphological point of view, the symbol escapes the polarization of the Goethean and Warburgian morphological method. Both theories acknowledge an indissoluble link between polarity and symbolization, as a correlation between mediation and immediacy: «The symbol is essentially presented as a dual figure and the site of tension of dualities. Such dualities are made of two characteristic poles»³⁸², that unfold on «a medial-transition of the two terms»³⁸³ and for which «the symbolic in the *medial being* is dual»³⁸⁴.

Benjamin's allegory thus seems able to solve the conundrum around secular and divine language. It is perhaps this distinction that Benjamin places between

³⁸¹ «Alle Erkenntnisse müssen durch ihren latenten symbolischen Gehalt Träger einer gewaltigen symbolischen Intention sein, welche sie unter dem Namen der Ontologie dem System selbst einordnet, dessen entscheidende Kategorie Lehre, auch Wahrheit [,] nicht Erkenntnis ist» [*Ibid.*].

³⁸² R. Giorgi, *Simbolo e schema*, Cedam, Padova 1968, p. 148 (my translation).

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

symbolic *immediacy* and allegorical *mediation*, which sees the symbol as an “usurper” who moves from the theological realm into the field of profane human production³⁸⁵, in the degraded shape of a *Kunstsymbol*. In conclusion, it seems that this exclusion of the symbol from the succession of profane expressive forms may bring into focus the system already proposed in the fragment on *Erkenntnistheorie* (1920-21). Behind the contrast between allegory and symbol in the *Baroque Drama*, is posited the same distinction between symbol as a “*neutrale Medium*” and the fragmentation of the experience «in fragments, in symbolic concepts [*Symbolischen Begriffe*]»³⁸⁶. Even from this perspective, the divorce of allegory from symbol, programmatically posed by Benjamin, falls within the contradictions well observed by A. Pinotti: «In his explicit intent to re-evaluate the baroque and modern allegory against the false totality of the symbol, the allegorist Benjamin, far from adopting an allegorical method, recognises in the allegory the original phenomenon of the Baroque and modernity, as something able to collect around itself the chaos of phenomena just like a mother calls her children together, thus making them a symbol in the best Goethean morphological tradition»³⁸⁷. The question to ask, however, is the following: is the concept of symbol, as it evolves in Cassirer's philosophy, a systematic unit? Does it therefore constitute a *unicum* of knowledge and experience?

3.3. *Aesthetic and Mystical Symbol According to Cassirer*

If Harnack ascribes the symbol to the mystical and theological dimension, opposed to “the natural, the profanely clear”, Benjamin delineates the matter differently: instead of designating the realms of relevance, he relocates the dichotomy within the arena of language. Benjamin thus envisages a “profane”

³⁸⁵ Refer to the beginning of the addendum to the writing *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* where Benjamin tries to draw a difference between the metaphysical and epistemological domains. See W. Benjamin, *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie, 1917-1918* (Nachtrag), *op. cit.*, p. 169.

³⁸⁶ W. Benjamin, “Erkenntnistheorie” (1920/1921) [fr. 25],

³⁸⁷ A. Pinotti, *Allegoria, fu vera gloria?*, in “Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico”, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

function, aimed at clear communication, and a “symbolic” dimension, which is the domain of the philosopher; it is this latter that must «restore the primacy, through representation, of the symbolic character of the word»³⁸⁸. The belief that the symbol belongs to mystical (or intellectual) insight (*Anschauung*) will be recurrent in the *Trauerspielbuch*.

There is here a consistency with Cassirer, who describes the emergence of the concept of aesthetic symbol from its religious origins. In a minor text, *Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*³⁸⁹, written in 1927, he questions the origin of the concept of symbol starting from its most archaic roots. Taking up a consideration by Theodor Vischer, contained in his *Philosophischen Aufsätzen* and concerning the “protean nature” of the notion of the symbolic, Cassirer inquires the symbolic function in antiquity, at the dawn of Christianity. This metamorphic acceptance of the symbol could be a variation of Goethe’s study of “types” in the Schillerian sense. The type, for Goethe was a “*wahren Proteus*”, as Cassirer writes, recovering this definition: «The type itself is a being that is only in becoming [*nur im Werden*], something that remains, that can only be demonstrated in what is happening»³⁹⁰. Cassirer’s path is contrary to that of Benjamin. He remarks in the mysteric approach to the symbol traces of functional peculiarities that would emerge only centuries later. It is significant in this sense that Cassirer leans here on Vischer. It was Vischer who had identified the first stage of the symbolic in the perfect exchange between meaning and image, which is accomplished through confusion and obscuration:

Vischer identifies the aesthetic symbol, which analytically consists of a tension between magic and rationality, as the central point of an evolution that goes through

³⁸⁸ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

³⁸⁹ Cassirer's article was published in 1927 on the journal “*Zeitschrift für Ästhetik Und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*”. See E. Cassirer, “Vorträge und kleine Schriften: Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie” (1927), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1927-1931], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 17, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004.

³⁹⁰ «Der Typus selbst ist ein Sein, das nur im Werden, ein Bleibendes, das nur im Geschehen aufweisbar ist. Insofern spricht Goethe – paradox genug, wenn man an die ursprüngliche Grundbedeutung des Typus denkt – von der “Modalität und Biegsamkeit” des Typus, ja er nennt ihn einen “*wahren Proteus*”» [E. Cassirer, “Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band. Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart (1832–1932)”, vol. 2, (1957), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 5, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2000, p. 171]

three stages. The binding of sense and image is a principal of any symbol and is determined in the first stage, typical of religious consciousness, by a dark, controlled form. This is the *dunkel-verwechselnde* relationship of those states of consciousness characteristic of both natural religion and Christianity, in which image and meaning are exchanged and tangled and the image itself assumes a magical significance³⁹¹.

It should be noted that Vischer is a common source for Benjamin and Cassirer, but he was also pivotal for Aby Warburg's studies on iconology³⁹². As for Cassirer, Vischer is central in the essay of '27 *Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*. Here Cassirer acknowledges (with some reservation) the author with having inserted and reconfigured the role of the symbol within aesthetics. Some commentators have also pointed out a derivation, or at least a consonance, between the three stages of the Vischer symbol and the three phases of symbolization as identified by Cassirer³⁹³: the expressive function (*Ausdrucksfunktion*), the representative function (*Darstellungsfunktion*) and the meaning-function (*Bedeutungsfunktion*), paving a process that leads to a progressive weakening of the iconicity of the symbol, to the point of bringing it to its significant function.

On his part, Benjamin discussed Vischer's texts dedicated to social transformations and fashion³⁹⁴, primarily the 1879 essay *Mode und Cynismus*.

³⁹¹ G. Carchia, *Aby Warburg. Symbol and Tragedy*, in "Engramma" *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³⁹² As Johnson clearly summarize «I do not mean to suggest, however, that Warburg eschews the term "symbol" in his last years and in the materials for Mnemosyne. As Wind and others following his lead have shown, Warburg's debt to F. T. Vischer's theory of the symbol was considerable and lasting. Yet by the advent of the Mnemosyne project he had greatly refined, even transformed, Vischer's notion of the symbol as a *Mitte* between image (*Bild*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*)» [C. D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, *op. cit.*, p. 117].

³⁹³ A. Pinotti delineates this correspondence very well between the phases of the symbolism of Cassirer and those of Vischer, clearly showing the same morphological root of Goethean origin. Johnson's text also takes this position, which is more than legitimate, showing how this assonance has progressively weakened. Cf. A. Pinotti, *Symbolic Form and Symbolic Formula. Cassirer and Warburg on Morphology (between Goethe and Vischer)*, in "Cassirer Studies", vol. 1, 2008, (*Philosophy and Iconology*), pp.119-135.

³⁹⁴ Vischer's importance as a source of the *Passagenwerks* was scarcely considered by critics. The question about the centrality of the German sources of nineteenth-century aesthetics (including Vischer) was recently posed by P. Ekardt: «Benjamin's other fashion materials largely pre-date the moment of his working on the *Arcades Project*, with a vast number of them, unsurprisingly, dating to the nineteenth century. It is not always easy to ascertain the potential status which texts - such as the already quoted von Jhering reflections about fashion and media, or the eminently fashion-phobic observations of philosopher and philologist Friedrich Theodor Vischer, whom Benjamin occasionally

Beiträge zur Kenntniß unserer Culturformen und Sittenbegriffe (a source that complements Georg Simmel's writings on the same subject in Benjaminian corpus), which recur many times in the *Passagenwerk* and in the studies on Baudelaire's poetry. Benjamin also cites Vischer's critical work *Goethe's Faust, Kritische Bemerkungen über den ersten Theil von Göthe's "Faust", namentlich den "Prolog im Himmel"* (1857). Despite the agility with which Benjamin uses Vischer as a source during the 30s, the work *Das Symbol* is never quoted. Still, it is presumable that Benjamin incurred in it somehow (if anything, for the impulse that, as we have seen, Vischer's aesthetics had produced on Warburgian enquiry). In *Das Symbolproblem* Cassirer is concerned with restoring a general characterization of the concept of symbol. In its broadest sense, he wants «to provide a framework for dealing with the symbol problem [*einen Rahmen für eine Behandlung des Symbolproblems schaffen*]»³⁹⁵. Vischer is called into question, precisely to identify a prismatic model of the concept of symbol, which ought to be interdisciplinary and common to all fields of knowledge – a *systematischen Zentrum*. The symbol is a morphological element, which brings together the movement of becoming, but which also moves from one discipline to another, in the extended space of all human disciplines: In Vischer's words, it is a *gestaltwechselnder Proteus*:

And this difficulty is increased and exacerbated if one takes the problem of the symbolic so comprehensively, as will be done in the following considerations, that it does not belong exclusively to any single area of the spiritual, but that it becomes a systematic centre on which all the basic disciplines [*Grunddisziplinen*] of philosophy - no less than the aesthetics, as well as the philosophy of religion, the logic, the philosophy of language - each strive in the same way³⁹⁶.

excerpts on theoretical and systematic matters—would have had within the logic of the Arcades Project» [P. Ekaradt, *Benjamin on Fashion*, Bloomsbury, London & New York 2020, p. 77].

³⁹⁵ E. Cassirer, *Vorträge und kleine Schriften: Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*, (1927), *op. cit.*, p. 269.

³⁹⁶ «Und diese Schwierigkeit steigert und verschärft sich noch, wenn man, wie es in den folgenden Betrachtungen geschehen soll, das Problem des Symbolischen so umfassend nimmt, daß es keinem einzelnen Gebiet des Geistigen ausschließlich angehört, sondern daß es zu einem systematischen Zentrum wird, auf das alle Grunddisziplinen der Philosophie – die Logik nicht minder wie die Ästhetik, die Sprachphilosophie so gut wie die Religionsphilosophie – in gleicher Weise hinzielen» [E. Cassirer, *Vorträge und kleine Schriften: Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*, (1927), *op. cit.*, p. 254].

Here Cassirer briefly summarizes the extension of his research field which locates the symbol as the main “organ” of thinking (*echten Organon des Denkens*)³⁹⁷, one that allows the human being to participate in objectivity. Cassirer begins to outline the archaic origin of this concept in its mystery guise, which would correspond to the first stage of the symbolic - *unkel und unfrei* - indicated by Vischer. In this first stage the relationship between meaning and image is inseparable and the symbol is captured in its full objectivity, devoid of any representative tension³⁹⁸. In this first stage the symbol is the meeting point between materiality and religious ideality: it is an artifact, and it is transcendent at the same time. This means that he does not yet know the difference between *Symbol* and *Kunstsymbol*. To describe this archaic and mysterious stage of the symbol, however, Cassirer does not turn to Vischer directly. He chooses instead to employ Harnack’s studies on early Christianity:

The symbol has nothing of a mere indirect comparison, of a metaphor or a “emblem” [*Sinnbild*] about it: it stands before us as something that is immediately real [*unmittelbar Wirkliches*] because immediately effective [*unmittelbar Wirksames*]. In the primeval Christian faith, according to Harnack, the symbolic is not to be thought of as the opposite of the objective and the real, but rather as that which is mysterious and God-made – as the mystery opposed to the natural and the profane.³⁹⁹

Cassirer, contrary to Benjamin, takes this distinction between the profane world and the symbolic, understood in its religious guise, to overcome it. To reach the

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

³⁹⁸ For the correspondence between this stage of the symbolic in Vischer and the expressive symbolic function in Cassirer [*Ausdrucksfunktion*], see again A. Pinotti, *Symbolic Form and Symbolic Formula. Cassirer and Warburg on Morphology (between Goethe and Vischer)*, in “Cassirer Studies”, pp.119-135, esp. pp. 127-128.

³⁹⁹ «Dem Symbol haftet nichts von einer bloß mittelbaren Vergleichung, von einer Metapher oder einem »Sinnbild« an: Es steht als ein unmittelbar Wirkliches, weil als ein unmittelbar Wirksames vor uns. In der Urzeit christlichen Glaubens ist, nach Harnack, das Symbolische nicht als der Gegensatz des Objektiven, Reellen zu denken, sondern es ist das Geheimnisvolle und Gottgewirkte – das Mysterium, dem das Natürliche, das profan Klare gegenübersteht» [E. Cassirer, *Vorträge und kleine Schriften: Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*, (1927), *op. cit.*, p. 254].

concept of symbol in its aesthetic configuration, the symbolic polarization must emanate from its own objectivity⁴⁰⁰. In other words, it must reach for its fundamental polarity (*grundlegende Polarität*), between the sensual and the ideal – and it must do so through a *Gegensätzlichkeit*⁴⁰¹. while in the religious world the symbol internally reveals its own divine structure, in the realm of aesthetics the symbol must split, showing its formal and ideal connection with the general: «In this splitting of [*Spaltung*] it, in this clinging to the sensual and in this going beyond the sensual, it not only expresses the tension that passes through the world of our consciousness; it also reveals the original and essential polarity of being itself»⁴⁰².

The use of Harnack and the considerations contained in this excerpt allow us to place Benjamin and Cassirer on common ground, at least as regards the interpretation of the symbol in its theological guise. More specifically: in the prototype of transcendence that both propose, the symbol is denoted as a part of immanence. The symbol is thus capable of showing its own divine structure, the “god-made” [*Gottgewirkte*]. Outside the religious lexicon, it is clear that self-transparency [*Selbstverständigung*], in Benjaminian terms, is the emergence of the linguistic structure, deprived of its profane need for communication. This perfect match between the word and the idea, which allows self-understanding, thus eliminates the distance between the represented and the representative, according to that almost tautological model of the correspondence between essence and name that Benjamin proposed in his linguistic theory. Benjamin maintains a clearly introflexed view of the symbol, in much the same fashion described by Harnack, Cassirer and Vischer in connection with the mystical-theological symbol. There is no lack of references to this peculiarity in the *Trauerspielbuch*: Benjamin speaks of

⁴⁰⁰ As regards the problem of the objectivity of the symbolic, understood as natural or conventional in the religious sphere (also through the considerations of Vischer and Warburg), refer to: J. Maritain and M. Morris, *Sign and Symbol*, in “Journal of the Warburg Institute”, Jul. 1937, pp. 1-11.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. S. G. Lofts, *The Symbolic Auseinandersetzung of the Urphänomene of the Expression of Life*, in “Cassirer Studies”, no. 3, 2010, pp. 41–65, esp. p. 45; S. G. Lofts, “Cassirer and Heidegger: The Cultural-Event. The Auseinandersetzung of Thinking and Being”, in J. T. Friedman & S. Luft (eds.), *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. A Novel Assessment*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2015, pp. 233-258, esp. p. 237.

⁴⁰² «In dieser seiner Spaltung, in diesem Haften am Sinnlichen und in diesem Hinausgehen über das Sinnliche, drückt es nicht nur die Spannung aus, die durch die Welt unseres Bewußtseins hindurchgeht, sondern es offenbart sich darin die ursprüngliche und grundlegende Polarität des Seins selbst» [E. Cassirer, *Vorträge und kleine Schriften: Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*, (1927), *op. cit.*, p. 254.]

the symbol as an object «compact, perched in itself [*in sich beschlossenes, gedrungenes*]»⁴⁰³ that «welcomes in its hidden and wooded interior [*verborgenes und waldiges Innere aufnimmt*]»⁴⁰⁴.

3.4. A Note on Edenic Language

This characterization of the symbolic that Benjamin is developing, which reduces the idealistic tension, eliminating the distance between word and thing, also resurfaces from the comparison that Benjamin proposes between the Platonic anamnesis and the Adamic experience in prelapsarian time. As Roland Boer writes: «It is not just that Plato's forms are trumped by Adam's naming; Benjamin plays with his reader here, recasting one Platonic category after another in Adamic terms. Thus, the Forms themselves should be understood as 'deified words' and 'verbal concepts'. Further still, since the philosopher cannot speak in the terms of revelation, like the theologian, recourse must be made to the act of remembering. But this suggestion echoes Plato's anamnesis, the process of recalling the Forms that had been forgotten at birth»⁴⁰⁵. In this communion between Platonic and Biblical thought, it is precisely the symbolic character of the words (*symbolischen Charakter des Wortes*) that must be recalled anamnesticly:

In the end this stance is not Plato, but Adam the father of humankind regarded as father of philosophy. The adamic name-giving is so far from being an arbitrary game [*Spiel und Willkür*], that precisely in it is confirmed the paradisiacal state as such, a state that did not yet have to grapple with the communicative significance of words. Just as ideas manifest themselves without intention in the act of naming, so they have to renew themselves in philosophic contemplation. In this renewal, the original hearing [*ursprüngliche Vernehmen*] of the words is restored.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰³ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ E. Boer, *From Plato to Adam. The Biblical Exegesis of Walter Benjamin*, in "The Bible and Critical Theory", vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-12, here pp. 2-3.

⁴⁰⁶ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14; «In solcher Haltung aber steht zuletzt nicht Platon, sondern Adam, der Vater der Menschen als Vater der Philosophie, da. Das

This model is opposed by Benjamin to the arbitrary choice of naming, the vicarious assignment of a word to a phenomenon, typical of secular communication, one that finds its worst use in the construction of neologisms⁴⁰⁷. This reflection derives directly from the studies carried out by Benjamin on the concept of original language (*Ursprache*) in its link with the kabbalistic tradition⁴⁰⁸; but here, in the first pages *Trauerspielbuch*, this reflection recurs precisely in the *Vorrede*, which constitutes the programmatic philosophical manifesto of the entire research project undertaken by Benjamin. The same theme, as will be seen later, is directly linked to the Goethean morphological tradition, which has a prominent place in the research of this period. Moreover, Benjamin repeatedly proposes the contrast between a declarative language, fit for bourgeois utilitarian exchange, and a symbolic language, uninvolved in the mediation (or representation) of an object-content. In fact, «the bourgeois confusion of language»⁴⁰⁹, which Benjamin refers to the biblical mythologeme of the tower of Babel, has been condemned because «it reduces the objective mediation of the communicable to the function of an instrument of communication, transforming signification into denotation»⁴¹⁰. The quality of profane language is for Benjamin the emblematic exposition, as opposed to the simplicity (*Einfachheit*) of pure language, which, through the unveiling of itself, can illuminate the phenomenal world as well, in its symbolic concomitance with language. The rise of profane designation into the realm of theology also returns in the Marx-tinted considerations that Benjamin devoted to the

adamitische Namengeben ist so weit entfernt Spiel und Willkür zu sein, daß vielmehr gerade in ihm der paradiesische Stand sich als solcher bestätigt, der mit der mitteilenden Bedeutung der Worte noch nicht zu ringen hatte. Wie die Ideen intentionslos im Benennen sich geben, so haben sie in philosophischer Kontemplation sich zu erneuern. In dieser Erneuerung stellt das ursprüngliche Vernehmen der Worte sich wieder her». [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 217].

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.* p. 218.

⁴⁰⁸ Regarding the subject of the original language and its redemptive and political power, please refer to R. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994; R. Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*, Harvard University Press, Cincinnati 1991.

⁴⁰⁹ D. Messina, "Parola e segno. Teoria dell'allegoria e critica del linguaggio in Walter Benjamin", in *Giochi per melanconici*, (ed.) A. Pinotti, Mimesis, Milano 2003, pp. 233-248, here p. 239.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

commodity⁴¹¹. The bourgeoisie of the twentieth century, invested by the capitalist scheme, fetishizes through a gesture of designation the commodity which⁴¹², in the eyes of Marx (read by Benjamin), transcends its own value, using the instrument of “beautiful semblance” (*Schein*)⁴¹³. Therefore, it is presumable that Benjamin poses the theological question for a philosophical purpose: in attempting to discriminate the prerogatives of the symbolic from those of the allegorical, he tries to show what the original characteristics of this concept were. In other words: if the symbol is veritable when it eliminates the distance between name and thing, the allegory is veritable when it fragments that same bond, reconfiguring the relationship according to an arbitrary scheme, while pursuing the illusion that there is a direct correspondence between the empirical phenomenon (*Sachgehalt*) and the term of designation in its conventional guise.

As we have seen, this is an original contrast, that for Benjamin must be overcome by philosophical work capable of re-harmonizing language with the object (or idea) while depriving it of profane and eminently extroverted bonds. As well explained by Richard Wolin, «The problem of the *arbitrariness* of knowledge has, in the post-

⁴¹¹ «Commodity is the ease which the commodity is supposed to produce. The relation between psychological well-being and material objects is present in the word from the beginning and therefore, it is not possible to distinguish desire from need in humans, between use-value and exchange-value. Marx wants to strip off all exchange-value (all mimetic desire produced because of someone else's desire, all price, a fiction that corresponds to no properties of the object) from things and get back to use-value. But the fetishism of the commodity he rails against is contained in the word “commodity” itself» [B. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, Bloomsbury, London 2006, p. 72].

⁴¹² For an examination of the particular interrelationships between symbol, theology and commodity fetishism in Benjamin's work compare with: M. Charles, *On the conservatism of post-Jungian criticism: competing concepts of the symbol in Freud, Jung and Walter Benjamin*, in “International Journal of Jungian Studies”, vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 120-139.

⁴¹³ Messina's reflection on this point is particularly interesting for the theme in question: as we have seen, Benjamin in fact accuses the philosophy of language of neo-Kantian origin precisely of not having considered the economic-social aspects, treating language as an ideal and abstract instrument. In his essay on the sociology of language and in his writing of '39, Benjamin will attempt to fill this void through the pages of Mass. It is undeniable that Benjamin hoped for a virtuous union between the philosophy of language and historical materialism (Cf. D. Messina, *Parola e segno. Teoria dell'allegoria e critica del linguaggio in Walter Benjamin*, in *Giochi per melanconici*, *op.cit.*, p. 239). On the relationship between *Schein* and myth we report this good consideration by S. Marchesoni: «The mythical world, which is violent as sacrificial, is a world of beautiful appearances. The secret of pervasive force with which the myth imposes itself on man is not so much in violence, which by itself would end up making itself unbearable, but in the enchanting glow of the *Schein*. The beautiful appearance does it gently imposes, seduces with irresistible immediacy and unthinking, it charms the senses in a flash. The *Schein* is mythical as it transfigures historical data into nature» [S. Marchesoni, “Walter Benjamin e l'interruzione del mito”, in F. Carmagnola, *Il mito profanato. Dall'epifania del divino alla favola mediatica*, Meltemi, Milano 2017, pp. 221-246].

paradisiacal state of the world, become the problem of knowledge. This fact is attributable to the profane origin of knowledge which coincides with man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Before the fall there existed no division between name and thing. [...] The pure *Ursprache* preceded the breach between subject and object which all subsequent knowledge has attempted to fill»⁴¹⁴. It is clear how the Adamic myth is considered by Benjamin as the emblem of a metaphysical tension underlying his philosophy of language, in its symbolical connotation.

The same path can be followed in Cassirer. although much less accustomed to considerations of theological taste, Cassirer re-proposes the question several times, precisely as an ideal paradigm between word and object, through the Edenic myth. The most telling passage is one offered in the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* dedicated to empiricism. Here Cassirer examines John Locke's concept of "mixed modes" (*gemischten Modi*), the complex ideas moulded by the heterogeneous union of simple ideas. This passage is particularly interesting because Cassirer, through Locke, discusses the symbolic relationship between idea (*Ideen*), language and the empirical world. According to the empiricist paradigm, as presented by Cassirer, language does not emerge from a transformation of sensible impressions (*sinnliche Eindrücke*), from an objectivity that is passively received, but from the relationship of the relations that connect these impressions to each other: «The linguistic-concepts [*Sprachbegriffe*] do not simply stand as symbols for objective things [*objektive Gegenstände*]»⁴¹⁵ and «this will assert itself with particular emphasis where it is not a question of capturing simple sensory impressions in sound, but where the word serves as an expression of a complex [*komplexen*] and composite idea [*Gesamtvorstellung*]»⁴¹⁶.

Cassirer identifies this emancipation of language from the empirical world (or rather, from the objective correlated) as the essence of expressive and imaginative freedom. Unlike Benjamin, who finds in the Adamic myth the lost splendor of a

⁴¹⁴ R. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁴¹⁵ «Stehen die Sprachbegriffe nicht einfach als Zeichen für objektive Gegenstände» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil. Die Sprache* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 79].

⁴¹⁶ «Diese wird sich mit besonderem Nachdruck dort geltend machen, wo es sich nicht darum handelt, einfache sinnliche Eindrücke im Laut festzuhalten, sondern wo das Wort als Ausdruck einer komplexen Gesamtvorstellung dient» [*Ibid.*].

pristine language, for Cassirer it is the emancipation from the coercion of the empirical world of language that really characterizes the Adamic freedom of naming. Ideas (represented here through the Lockean model of mixed modes) can be «created without any direct connection to really existing things»⁴¹⁷, and it is thanks to this creative act of language that man can experience «the same freedom that Adam had when he created the first naming of complex ideas [*komplexer Vorstellungen*] according to no other model than that of his own thoughts - the same freedom existed and continues to exist for all people»⁴¹⁸.

It is clear that Benjamin and Cassirer have a completely opposite point of view around the symbolic of language: for the former focuses on symbolic language taken in its translational aspect, while Cassirer appreciates the creative function of the structuring of meaning. This difference emerges clearly from the way the two thinkers approach the idea of an original language (*Ursprache*). Cassirer in fact considers the hypothesis, mystical and historical, of an original language as «a dream that has gradually dissipated»⁴¹⁹ Cassirer always appeared skeptical on the search for an original linguistic commonality, based on the original onomatopoeia; yet, in the chapter dedicated to the sensual expression of language (*Die Sprache in der Phase des sinnlichen Ausdrucks*) he briefly and clearly summarizes his position as follows:

The philosophy of language of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries still believed that onomatopoeic formations offered the key to the basic and originary-language of humanity, to have immediately in hand the “*lingua adamica*”. Today, to be sure, the dream of this originary-language has gradually faded away with the critical progress of linguistic analysis; however, we still find the occasional attempt to prove how in the earliest periods of language formation the classes of signification and those of sound corresponded to one another – that the totality [*Ganze*] of

⁴¹⁷ «Ohne jede unmittelbare Anknüpfung an wirklich existierende Dinge» [*Ibid.*].

⁴¹⁸ «Dieselbe Freiheit, die Adam besaß, als er die ersten Benennungen komplexer Vorstellungen nach keinem anderen Musterbild als dem seiner eigenen Gedanken erschuf – dieselbe Freiheit bestand und besteht weiterhin für alle Menschen» [*Ibid.*].

⁴¹⁹ E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 139

originary-words were divided into certain groups, each of which was linked to certain phonetic materials and constructed out of them.⁴²⁰

From these excerpts it might seem that Cassirer assigns full freedom to human ideation mediated by language. Indeed, it is at this point that the morphological approach that Cassirer borrowed from Humboldt enters the picture. The freedom of language is in fact determined by contingent structures, by the set of relations that constitute the regular structures of linguistic morphology. Arbitrariness (*Willkürlichkeit*), in full compliance with the concept of Kantian limit, is realized and resolved within the possibilities of connection between the parts and the whole:

The formations [*Gebilde*] of language are, in the highest sense, also “regular,” without, however, being derived from and compared to an objective conceptual rule. By virtue of the agreement of all the parts to a whole, they are also purposively formed through and through; however, there prevails in them that “purposiveness without purpose” [*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*]⁴²¹ that excludes all mere caprice and all merely subjective “intent”.⁴²²

⁴²⁰ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language, op. cit.*, pp. 137-138; «Die Sprachphilosophie des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts glaubte noch vielfach, in den onomatopoetischen Bildungen den Schlüssel zu der Grund- und Ursprache der Menschheit, zu der “Lingua Adamica”, unmittelbar in der Hand zu haben. Heute ist freilich durch die kritischen Fortschritte sprachwissenschaftlicher Betrachtung der Traum dieser Ursprache mehr und mehr zerronnen; aber noch immer finden sich gelegentlich Versuche, den Nachweis zu führen, wie in den frühesten Perioden der Sprachbildung die Bedeutungsklassen und Lautklassen einander entsprachen – wie das Ganze der Urworte in bestimmte Gruppen abgeteilt war, deren jede an bestimmte lautliche Materialien geknüpft und aus ihnen aufgebaut war» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 138-139].

⁴²¹ Cassirer takes his cue from Kant, who grounds judgment in the subjectively necessary requirement of *Zweckmäßigkeit* - purposiveness. Kant suspects that though one can in principle speak of knowledge of objects without introducing a purposive outlook, one would not bother to ask epistemological questions were it not for our goal-oriented, contemplative attitude as human beings. Kant specifies that such a critical attitude arises out of feeling, not cognition. Cassirer is convinced that the purposive framework of *Zweckmäßigkeit*, which is internalized within all symbolic forms, even science, enables us to formulate the critical attitude that positions us for meaningful discourse [E. Wortsman Deluty, *Seeking Cultural Meaning. Ernst Cassirer and the Concept of the Symbol*, in “Iyyun. The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly”, vol. 60, Jan. 2011, pp. 33-52, here p. 43].

⁴²² E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language, op. cit.*, pp. 84; «Auch die Gebilde der Sprache sind im höchsten Sinn “regelmäßig”, ohne daß sie doch aus einer objektiven begrifflichen Regel abgeleitet und an ihr gemessen werden könnten. Auch sie sind, vermöge der Übereinstimmung aller Teile zu einem Ganzen, durch und durch zweckmäßig gebildet – aber es waltet in ihnen jene “Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck”, die alle bloße Willkür und alle bloß subjektive “Absicht” ausschließt» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 87].

It is this link between personal conception, linguistic-conceptual structure and objectivity, that determines that sense of immediate effectiveness that Cassirer confers to the mystical symbol. The self-understanding (*Selbstverständigung*) of the symbol, that exposes its object through its form in a mutual and balanced correspondence, is instead for Benjamin the ultimate target of philosophical practice and method. The arbitrariness of the relationship between represented and representative, through the analysis of the Adamic myth, is excluded by both philosophers: Benjamin promotes an emancipation of language from its communicative purpose, while Cassirer, more moderately, argues that this drive can be achieved through a “purposiveness without purpose” [*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*]. In more general terms both analyses clearly attest that the fulcrum of the mystical symbol is based on a relational symmetry between subject and object, i.e. ideal, in turn represented by the correspondence between subjective freedom and the general expressive canon. In both cases, the object is not subsisting outside the word that indicates it, and signification can only occur as a perfect harmony between the transcendental configuration and the language that expresses it. It is therefore in this sense that it is possible to safely affirm that, for Cassirer, «the symbol is no longer relationship-polarity only of sensible and intelligible, but also the meeting point of “subjective” and “objective”»⁴²³.

The idea of transcendental interdependence, mediated by language, between subject and object, is derived from the studies of Humboldt, which Cassirer leads back to the Kantian tradition as far as method and presuppositions⁴²⁴ are concerned. In fact, the famous linguist did not see linguistic communication in either a purely

⁴²³ V. Andolfato, *Il rapporto sensibile-intelligibile nella concezione del simbolo di Ernst Cassirer*, in “Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica”, no. 2/3, vol. 57, June 1965, pp. 224-23, here p. 227.

⁴²⁴ Cassirer's considerations are many that go in this direction, especially in the first volume of the *Philosophy of symbolic forms*. In this sense, Humboldt's primary merit would be for Cassirer to have adopted a transcendental method, capable of reconfiguring the analysis of language in a critical sense, while taking into account Herder's criticisms of the philosophy of language and his proposal of a *dynamischen Entwicklung* as the theoretical basis of his investigation. For the relationship between Kantian philosophy, the differences in method between Humboldt and Herder, and the parallel branch of Goethean morphology: W. Wildgen, “Dynamische Sprach- und Weltauffassungen (in ihrer Entwicklung von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart)”, in *Dynamische Sprachauffassungen auf dem Hintergrund dynamischer Weltauffassungen: eine historiographische Untersuchung*, vol. 3, Zentrums Philosophische Grundlagen der Wissenschaften, Breme 2005.

subjective or objective sense: a language, regardless of its morphology, is the primary instrument of a representation which, although subjective, depends on objective conditions - in a relationship that can only be transcendental. These objective conditions are considered at the same time in historical and physiological, or rather, anatomical-perceptive terms. In the chapter “Das Sprachproblem in der Geschichte der Philosophie”, contained in the first volume of the *Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer analyses a paragraph by Wilhelm von Humboldt⁴²⁵ which describes human language in terms of this necessary interdependence between subjectivity and objectivity: «Humboldt drew from Kant’s critical doctrine the consequences for the philosophy of language. In the place of the metaphysical opposition of subjectivity and objectivity, their pure transcendental correlation is now found»⁴²⁶. This transcendental correlation, however, is far from the arbitrary representation of the conventional sign but is based on «that original correspondence between the world and man, on which the possibility of any knowledge of truth resides»⁴²⁷. This hypothesis contrasts with that “naive realism”, as defined by Cassirer, which fails to free itself from the idea «of a subjectivity that elaborates the objective element in an arbitrary way»⁴²⁸.

Outside its religious role, Cassirer and Benjamin’s treatises on the Edenic myth speak undeniably of two completely reversed perspectives towards the concept of symbol. Despite the Goethean traces of the *Vorrede*, it appears that due to the anamnestic model proposed by Benjamin, the concept of symbol cannot participate

⁴²⁵ Curiously, despite the fact that Wilhelm von Humboldt’s researches have many points in common with Benjamin’s thought, as is emerging from the present discussion, the latter reserves some pungent comments on the work of the famous linguist: traces of them can be found in some fragments on philosophy of the language drawn up between ‘25 and ‘27. Particularly disparaging is the fragment *Reflexionen zu Humboldt* which accuses Humboldt’s analysis of a profound lack in understanding poetic expression which, for Benjamin, depends directly on a mysticism of language, from its magical side. The second part of the fragment instead concerns the relationship between word and language: Benjamin laments here the excessive predominance of the single word, as an object of investigation, within Humboldt’s research (Cassirer’s analyses of Humboldt’s work reported here seem to lead to polar opposite considerations). A point of continuity with the linguist can be looked for in the last line, where Benjamin reports that «Humboldt speaks of the “fine and never completely comprehensible interrelationship between expression and thought» [W. Benjamin, *Reflexionen zu Humboldt*” (1925 to 1928) [fr. 13], *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 27].

⁴²⁶ E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

in the morphology of language, except as a tensive, unrealizable and non-communicable purpose. For Cassirer, however, the symbolization describes the continuous stabilization within the *Gestaltung*: «The dynamic principle of *autotelia* characterises the function which creates the particular symbol and configures the symbolic reference sphere: this means that this function self-determines dynamically, not just once and for all, continually»⁴²⁹. Mediation for Cassirer does not reflect a given reality. The different symbolic forms are not “indifferent mediums” (*indifferenter Medien*), they rather constitute the very condition of vision: the symbols are *geistige Energien*. As Cassirer wrote in a particularly exhaustive passage:

Each particular spiritual energy shares in this establishment in its particular way and consequently contributes to the constitution of the I-concept as well as the world-concept. Neither cognition nor language, myth, and art act as a mere mirror simply reflecting images of a given inward or outward existence [*Sein*] as it produced them in itself; they are not indifferent media but rather the real sources of light, the conditions of seeing [*Bedingungen des Sehens*] as well as the origins of all configuration [*Ursprünge aller Gestaltung*].⁴³⁰

In Benjamin, on the other hand, the concept of symbolic is always placed as the moment of the original configuration, heralding a truth that is stable with respect to the progression of the world of forms, and to their mythical, linguistic and cultural articulation. However, the access to this dimension seems to be somehow incompatible with the profane articulation of experience.

⁴²⁹ B. Henry, *The Weltbild Concept According to Ernst Cassirer*, in “Humana-Mente. Weltbilder and Philosophy”, vol.4, no. 18, Sep. 2011, pp. 123-140, here p. 124.

⁴³⁰ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language, op. cit.*, p. 24; «Jede besondere geistige Energie trägt in besonderer Weise zu dieser Feststellung bei und wirkt demgemäß an der Konstituierung des Ichbegriffs wie des Weltbegriffs mit. Die Erkenntnis wie die Sprache, der Mythos und die Kunst: sie alle verhalten sich nicht wie ein bloßer Spiegel, der die Bilder eines Gegebenen des äußeren oder des inneren Seins, so wie sie sich in ihm erzeugen, einfach zurückwirft, sondern sie sind statt solcher indifferenter Medien vielmehr die eigentlichen Lichtquellen, die Bedingungen des Sehens wie die Ursprünge aller Gestaltung» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil. Die Sprache, op. cit.*, p. 24-25].

3.5. *Symbol: Idea or Concept, Inductive or Deductive?*

Attempting to rehabilitate the allegorical domain (and Baroque literature along with it), Benjamin reconstructs the best-known positions of the detractors of this expressive form. He duly reports the sources that have created over time a strict dichotomy between the symbolic and the allegorical. While these positions are examined, Benjamin contrasts the diachronic, almost cinematic, trend of allegory with the iconicity of the symbolic, based instead on a synchronic temporality. Several studies have covered the role of temporality within Benjamin's analysis of the allegorical; it has been mainly related to the *Geschichtsphilosophie* and Jewish messianism, designating a dialectic manifest in all of Benjamin's work but most directly expressed within the *Theologisch-Politisches Fragment*⁴³¹. After the *German Baroque Drama*, the elaboration of a synchronic and ahistorical temporality will function as a model for Benjamin to articulate some of his most famous concepts: it is a paradigm that will return in the famous "dialectical images", in the photographic flash, in the "Medusa's Gaze"⁴³² that Adorno attributed to Benjamin's materialism, but also in the epiphanic shock produced by the work of art, freed from its aura.

In the *Trauerspielbuch* this temporal contrast appears in the distinction between "true" and "real". It also surfaces from a historical-artistic perspective in the complex relationship between different artistic movements and techniques, analysed or implied by Benjamin during the drafting of the work. There are many identifiable or already identified dyads: «As for the genres: tragedy vs drama; tragedy vs comedy, saga vs history; drama of the tyrant vs drama of the martyr. Relating to cultural periods: Antiquity vs Baroque [...]; Renaissance vs Baroque;

⁴³¹ For a description of temporality (divided between profane and mystical) in Benjamin's messianic vision, one can refer to Fabrizio Desideri's commentary on *Theologisch-Politisches Fragment*. Cf. F. Desideri, *Walter Benjamin. Il tempo e le forme*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1980, pp. 107-109; D. MacFarlane, 'Waiting Still' Baudelaire and the Temporality of the Photographic Portrait, in "History of Photography" vol.36, no. 1, 2014, pp. 3-14; For a discussion of the momentary (*Augenblick*) between Benjamin and Heidegger, which we cannot deal with here, we refer instead to P. Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, esp. pp. 72-73.

⁴³² Please refer to the extensive analysis of this concept of A. Abbas. The article offers a literary rooting of this concept, concentrated mainly in Baudelaire's poetics and in the studies conducted by Freud on the myth of Medusa: A. Abbas, *Benjamin's Images*, in "New German Critique", no. 48, Autumn 1989, pp. 43-62, esp. pp. 56-60.

Baroque vs Romanticism; Baroque vs Expressionism. Regarding to methodological and epistemological issues: induction vs deduction; idea vs concept; image vs word; symbol vs allegory; mourning vs game»⁴³³. Many of these dyads are based on the difference, investigated by Benjamin, between symbol and allegory⁴³⁴. If, as we will see, the temporal distinction (*Zeitmass*) is the only one accepted by Benjamin to distinguish these two expressive models, it is safe to assume that the contrast between an extensive and an intensive temporality is the founding model of many of these contrasts.

Although Benjamin refutes the representational role of the symbol, he does not question the object of its representation, but the way in which the symbol is realized. As evident from Benjamin's treatment of the theory of language, the symbol-as-sign (*Zeichen*) carries an improper and imperfect meaning, always defective: «“The sign” (*das Zeichen*), is always associated with “improper meaning [*uneigentliche Bedeutung*]” and therefore with a negative mode of language»⁴³⁵. Thus, excluding the vicar role of the symbolic, Benjamin's attention turns to the mediation itself. The allegoric fragmentation (*Bruchstück*), which is spatial and substantial fragmentation (close to the paradigm of the emblematic *sparagmòs*⁴³⁶, which recurs so much in the *German Baroque Drama*)⁴³⁷ can also be grasped in its temporal

⁴³³ A. Pinotti, “Lo studio degli estremi. Benjamin morfologo tra Warburg e Goethe”, in *Giochi per melanconici*, *op. cit.*, p. 195. Obviously Pinotti is the first to consider this list incomplete and inexhaustible, nevertheless it is an extremely illustrative table of the tensions underlying the text. The author takes into the utmost account that polarity that runs through the entire Benjaminian text [...] that of nature vs history» (196). We note that many of these dyads, apart from those of “genre”, can be also read through the filter of a contrast between intensive and extensive temporality.

⁴³⁴ It must be added that the same temporal contrast is also present in the relationship between the *nomos* of the court and the profane spectacle. As Samuel Weber reports: «The privileged site and scene of such emphatically theatrical artifice is the court: “The image of the setting, or, more precisely, of the court, becomes the key to historical understanding. For the court is the setting par excellence.... In the *Trauerspiel* the court represents the timeless natural decor of the historical process”» [S. Weber, *Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt*, in “*Diacritics*”, vol. 22, no. 3/4, Autumn - Winter, 1992 (*Commemorating Walter Benjamin*), pp. 5-18, here p. 10].

⁴³⁵ P. Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁴³⁶ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Allegorie und Trauerspiel*, I.391. In this passage the anatomical decomposition of the human body is described through the martyrological tale and the re-designation of the single parts carried out by the Baroque allegoresis. The temporal fragmentation also seems to take up the interpretation that Benjamin offers of the translation in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* «Scherben als *Bruchstück* eines Gefäßes, als *Bruchstück* einer grösseren Sprache erkennbar zu machen» [W. Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923), *op. cit.*, p. 18].

⁴³⁷ Noteworthy is A. Seyhan's interesting interpretation of the cultural role of fragmentation in the *German Baroque Drama*. The author, in addition to discussing the epistemological role of the

guise, as a counterpart to the immediate iconic effectiveness of the symbolic intention: the temporal quality of the symbol has already emerged from the analysis of its theological characterization, as insight (*Anschauung*) that occurs in the grace of the mystical moment (*das mystische Nu*).

Observing the paradigms that Benjamin analyses to define the difference between allegory and symbol, three different methods of investigation can be identified: the first, proposed by Schiller and reworked by Goethe, juxtaposes the allegory and the symbol to the categories of deductive and inductive⁴³⁸; a second method, offered by Schopenhauer, uses the represented content as a distinction (content as an idea or content as a concept). A third way, proposed by Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1771-1858) and Johann Joseph Görres (1176-1848), distinguishes the allegorical from the symbolic through a temporal divide, starting from the analysis of the symbolic origins of myth. Out of the three options, only the latter is considered by Benjamin as a clear and insightful way of interpretation. In our perspective, it is important to retrace Benjamin's analysis for two reasons. The first is to identify what role the symbol plays in Benjamin's works following the *Baroque Drama*. The second is to highlight how Benjamin extrapolates the temporal distinction from a specific tradition, which referred to myth as a tautology. Such tradition was corroborated by Cassirer in the texts of the first half of the 1920s, and supports the analysis offered in *Sprache und Mythos* (1925), published during the writing of the *Baroque Drama*.

As mentioned above, Benjamin begins by analysing the dichotomy between symbol and allegory through Goethe's thought. After having hastily selected the beginning of the 19th century as the moment of the most rigid contrast between the

fragment, also relates it to a reflection on the state of the art of the German academy in the 1920s Cf. A. Seyhan, *Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Fragmented Academic Sensibilities*, in "Pacific Coast Philology", vol. 19, no. 1/2, Nov. 1984, pp. 22-27.

⁴³⁸ A contrast of this kind between allegory and symbol, according to the inductive or deductive model, is found in the preparatory notes left by Benjamin for the drafting of the *Gnoseological Premise*. The first draft of the paragraph analysed above, in which the hypothesis of a contrast between the symbolic content and the communicative content of language is introduced, is described by Benjamin according to this model: «Hence trying to determine ideas inductively [*Ideen induktiv*] (according to a "scope" [*Umfang*]) from popular linguistic usage and then to search for an essence that is completely empirically fixed by a scope cannot lead to anything» [W. Benjamin, "Manuskriptvariante zur 'Erkenntniskritischen Vorrede'" (1924), in *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 3, (ed.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, pp. 926-948, here p. 938].

allegorical and the symbolic form, Benjamin chooses to comment Goethe's maximum n°279:

“It makes a great difference whether the poet seeks the particular in the general or sees the general in the particular. Allegory stems from the former, where the particular functions only as instance, as example of the general. The latter, however, is truly the nature of poetry: it gives expression to a particular without thinking of the general or referring to it. Whoever vividly grasps this particular receives at the same time the general along with it, though without becoming aware of it, or becoming aware only later”.⁴³⁹

Although the maxim is dismissed in a few lines by Benjamin, there are some aspects to consider. The first is that, in this case, Goethe's point of view is that of an artist, who discusses the poetic intention. The relationship between the detail and the general cannot in any way be artificially provoked by the poet, but must emerge, as a formal concordance, which appears quite independently of the author's poetic intention. Cassirer, who in turn commented upon this same maxim⁴⁴⁰, marks this moment of Goethean thought as the exit from the classicist period, following the

⁴³⁹ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, *op. cit.*, p. 167; «Es ist ein großer Unterschied, ob der Dichter zum Allgemeinen das Besondere sucht oder im Besondern das Allgemeine schaut. Aus jener Art entsteht Allegorie, wo das Besondere nur als Beispiel, als Exempel des Allgemeinen gilt; die letztere aber ist eigentlich die Natur der Poesie: sie spricht ein Besonderes aus, ohne ans Allgemeine zu denken oder darauf hinzuweisen. Wer nun dieses Besondere lebendig faßt, erhält zugleich das Allgemeine mit, ohne es gewahr zu werden, oder erst spät» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 338].

⁴⁴⁰ «The relationship between the general and the particular, which is here designated, and the symbolism which emerges from it, are common to Goethe's youth and age poetry; but the way in which the required unity of the two moments is established is different in both cases. Goethe's youth poems almost always begin with the direct representation and pronouncement of a certain, individually limited emotional content». [E. Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form. Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (1916), *op. cit.*, p. 211]. Benjamin also identifies Goethe's trip to Italy as the beginning of his mature poetry. In fact, it is precisely the symbolization, embodied by concrete objects, that leads Goethe to a new poetic sentiment, aimed at empirical and lyrical perception that wants to be both subjective and receptive: «In a simultaneous letter to Schiller, Goethe deals with subjects which, without being “quite poetic”, would have aroused a certain poetic mood in him. He says: “I have therefore looked closely at the objects that produce such an effect and, to my amazement, noticed that they are actually symbolic.” But the symbolic is that in which the indissoluble and necessary connection of a truth content to a factual content appears. “If,” as the same letter says, “in the future, as the journey progresses, one should focus not on the remarkable but on the important, then one should in the end win a good harvest for oneself and others. I still want to try here what I can see symbolically, but especially in strange places that I see for the first time, to practice myself». [W. Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (1922), *op. cit.*, p. 152].

poet's Grand Tour in Italy⁴⁴¹. The question about temporality here does not figure in a way inherent to symbolic expression but is analysed from the point of view of the poet experience, who can recognize the value of his work only through recognition allowed by the afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*). The problem posed is exquisitely expressive and refers to that idea of artistic genius that Cassirer outlines very well, problematizing precisely this consideration of Goethe while discussing the art as a momentary and immersive practice: «Art wants to be practiced, not understood; their [of the artists] practice is their only true concept»⁴⁴². This relationship between detail and universal within the poetic practice is a theme that also finds its place within Benjamin's essay *On two poems of Hölderlin* (1914), analysed above through the studies of P. Fenves⁴⁴³. At his point, we must add that it was Cassirer's reflection on temporality, inspired by Einstein's theory of relativity, that stimulated part of Benjamin's reflections on the concept of poetic (*Gedichteten*). As J. Etzold recently pointed out: «This “radical dissolution of “things into mere relationships”, and so the pointed formulation of Ernst Cassirer, had an effect on Walter Benjamin, for example, who incorporated the theory of relativity into his Hölderlin reading: The “principle” of the “poetic” permeates “spatiotemporally” all forms, and it is indicated [by Benjamin] as the “unique rule of relationship»⁴⁴⁴. This “*Alleinherrschaft der Beziehung*” also seems to permeate the analysis of Benjamin's symbol, who, renouncing the concept-idea dichotomy, turns to the temporal distinction to indicate the symbolic realm.

This becomes clearer if we proceed to the second author called into question by Benjamin. Schopenhauer's consideration quoted by Benjamin certainly considers Goethe's maxims 1112 and 1113: «The first illustrates the process of allegoresis:

⁴⁴¹ According to Cassirer, the *Grand Tour* marked a real revolution in Goethe's lyric and intellectual attitude. The desubjectivation and abandonment of intentionality would have arisen from the need of the poet and naturalist Goethe to clean himself from “the chaff of subjectivity”: «Wenn Goethe nach seiner Rückkehr aus Italien darangeht, die “Spreu des allzu Subjektiven”» [E. Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form. Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (1916), *op. cit.*, p. 206].

⁴⁴² «Die Kunst will geübt, nicht begriffen sein; ihre Ausübung ist ihr einzig wahrhafter Begriff» [*Ibid.*].

⁴⁴³ “We covered his interpretation in the paragraph “What Cassirer Courses Could Walter Benjamin Have Taken? The Documents and Hypotheses”, p. 46.

⁴⁴⁴ J. Etzold, “Milieus, Rhythmen, Licht Zwischen Appia und Uexküll” in *Rhythmos. Formen des Unbeständigen nach Hölderlin*, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2016, pp. 253-279, here p. 254 (my translation)].

Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept [*Begriff*] and the concept into an image [*Bild*], but in such a way that the concept can be kept and still have always limited [*begrenzt*] and complete [*vollständig*] in image and express through it". The second instead describes the process of symbolization: "Symbolism transforms the phenomenon into an idea [*Ideen*], the idea into an image [*Bild*], so that the idea remains in the image always infinitely effective [*unendlich wirksam*] and unattainable [*unerreichbar*] and, even if expressed in all languages, it remains all the same inexpressible [*unaussprechlich*]"⁴⁴⁵.

Schopenhauer, who is judged "more detailed" on this subject by Benjamin, admits that art can also use the allegorical expression, as long as it is not declarative, and therefore does not expose its own conceptual purpose: the charm of spectator would fall «if he read the word "Glory" large and clear on the wall»⁴⁴⁶. In this sense, the pictorial example reported by Schopenhauer of the painting "Il Genio della Gloria" by Carracci can be interpreted.⁴⁴⁷ This weakening relationship of the word on the image had already been outlined by Benjamin a few years earlier, during the writing of essay *On Goethe's Elective Affinities*, between 1920 and 1921. According to what Benjamin left in a coeval short fragment, the complete «weakening of the symbolic and communicative power of the word [*Schwächung der symbolischen und mitteilenden Kraft*]" would coincide with «the skeleton of the word [*Das Skelett des Wortes*]"⁴⁴⁸. That is, the word assumed as such, «without a representation [*ohne Vorstellung*]"⁴⁴⁹. It can be strengthened, when placed in a metaphor (*Wortbild*), in relation to a «virtual» image, but in any case its expressiveness remains «postulated but not detectable»⁴⁵⁰. On the contrary, the "structure" of the word rediscovers its

⁴⁴⁵ A. Pinotti, "Lo studio degli estremi. Benjamin morfologo tra Warburg e Goethe", in *Giochi per melanconici*, pp. 195-232, here p. 222 (my translation).

⁴⁴⁶ «Wenn er plötzlich das Wort "Ruhm" groß und deutlich an der Wand erblickte» [A. Schopenhauer, "Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung", in *Sämtliche Werke*, Leipzig 1892, in W. Benjamin *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, op. cit., p. 338].

⁴⁴⁷ For a precise discussion on the different role of the caption, intended as an inscription or subscriptio, and the debate that led to the extensive elaboration proposed by Ernst Gombrich in his *Symbolic Images. Studies in the art of the Renaissance*, see here the short essay by T. Griffero, "Immagini con o senza cartiglio. Dall'emblema all'ermeneutica pittorica di Ernst Gombrich", in R. Bösel, M. G. Di Monte, M. Di Monte, S. Ebert-Schifferer (eds.), *L'arte e i linguaggi della percezione. L'eredità di Sir Ernst H. Gombrich*, Electa, Milano 2004, pp. 17-33, esp. pp. 24-25.

⁴⁴⁸ W. Benjamin, "Das Skelett des Wortes" [fr. 5] (1920/21), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, p. 15.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

power as a sound-image (*Lautbild*) which, expressing itself empirically in sound, can demonstrate its own communicative strength despite the lack of meaning (or signification). The skeleton of the word appears when the word itself is “intended”: «When the word is [therefore] separated from its representation»⁴⁵¹. The caption, like the cartouche, creates a break between *representation* and *word*, which become two parallel expressive domains, where the word escorts its own meaning without representing it.

However, according to Benjamin, Schopenhauer’s hypothesis is useless, due to a methodological flaw, to a “logician imprint” and an ideological burden, a fact which «precisely accommodates the modern and unsustainable discourse on allegory and symbol»⁴⁵². The final judgment, in Benjamin’s usual style, is lapidary: these observations «are nothing different from the many rapid condemnations of the allegorical form»⁴⁵³. The same kind of considerations will be offered by Benjamin in his discussion of the Creuzerian concept of *Zeichenallegorie*⁴⁵⁴ (sign-allegory). Benjamin reads this definition in terms of a classicist prejudice (in Winckelmann's spirit) that condemns the allegorical form to mere sign conventionality. Yet it is from this “ancient and banal doctrine” (*älteren banalen Lehre*)⁴⁵⁵ that Benjamin derives his concept of symbol.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² «Enau die moderne und unhaltbare Rede von Allegorie und Symbol aufnimmt» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 339].

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ For a history of this concept and its evolution from medieval art, see: A. Assmann, “Zeichen – Allegorie – Symbol”, in *Die Erfindung des inneren Menschen: Studien zur religiösen Anthropologie*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh 1993, pp. 28-50. This is It should in fact be noted that in the *Gnoseological premise* it is Benjamin himself who proposes a direct relationship between the symbol and an ideal content, while during the analysis of the considerations of Goethe and Schopenhauer Benjamin finds it useless to discriminate allegory from symbol according to this method. The same problem arises with Creuzer's text, where the notion of *Zeichenallegorie* is presented, which proposes a conventional relation, precisely expressed in the same cartouche formula which Benjamin seems to reject in Schopenhauer's treatment. For these and other contradictions contained in the symbol and allegory treatment in the *German Baroque Drama*, see again the article by Andrea Pinotti, “Allegoria. Fu vera gloria?”, in which these contradictions are made structurally emerge: «These indications, together with innumerable other places preceding and following Benjamin's work, spring from an evident epistemological aspiration to totality and synthesis, which at first sight seems to conflict with the allegorical poetics of incompleteness, of the fragment, of the rune, of the ruin, understood in its methodological form» [A. Pinotti, “Allegoria. Fu vera gloria?”, in *Aisthesis – pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico*, *op. cit.*, p. 156].

⁴⁵⁵ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

3.6. *Timing the Symbolic Anschauung*

Benjamin well remembers the studies carried out by Georg Friedrich Creuzer and the studies by Görres on ancient and Christian symbolism [mainly contained in the works *Die Christliche Mystik* (1836–1842) and *Mythengeschichten der asiatischen Welt* (1810)]. When balancing the quality of their arguments, he writes that «thanks to Romantic intuition of these thinkers, the relationship between symbol and allegory can be fixed precisely and formally»⁴⁵⁶. For Benjamin, the intuition of these thinkers is to have transferred this distinction «in the semiotic field [*Gebiet der Semiotik*]»⁴⁵⁷, that is, in the relation of signification «under the decisive category of time»⁴⁵⁸. *Moment, erschütternde, Kürze, Blitzstrahl, Augenblicken*⁴⁵⁹ – these are the main terms that Benjamin collects from the treatment of the symbol offered by Creuzer in his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1812-37). As R. Lehman rightly notes, in this way the symbol escapes from space-time mediation and is considered by Benjamin as an immediate or, as he defined it in the fragment on *Erkenntnistheorie*, “a neutral medium”:

While the thing-in-itself plays an epistemological (rather than ontological) role as the hypothetical object of an experience that does not involve spatial and temporal mediation [...] the possessor of an *intellektuelle Anschauung*, which, as Kant writes, “would immediately present the object and grasp it all at once”; it would, therefore, present the object as it is in itself, without the spatial and temporal orderings performed by a finite intuition⁴⁶⁰.

Among the four moments identified by Creuzer and reported in the *Trauerspielbuch*, «das Momentane, das Totale, das Unergründliche ihres

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴⁵⁸ The full passage is: «Unter der entscheidenden Kategorie der Zeit, welche in dieses Gebiet der Semiotik getragen zu haben die große romantische Einsicht dieser Denker war, läßt das Verhältnis von Symbol und Allegorie eindringlich und formelhaft sich festlegen» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 340].

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ R. S. Lehman, *Killing Time with Walter Benjamin*, in “New Literary History”, vol. 39, no. 2, (*Reading, Writing, and Representation*), Spring 2008, pp. 233-250, here p. 242.

Ursprungs, das Nothwendige»⁴⁶¹, Benjamin receives and develops only the first. On the contrary Creuzer's treatment of the *Kunstsymbol*, which re-proposes for Benjamin «the false image of the symbol»⁴⁶² of Classicism, lapses precisely because of its underlying substantialist ideology for which «the symbol [...] admirably unites the beauty of form to the maximum fullness of the substance»⁴⁶³. In Creuzer's treatment, the *Kunstsymbol* finds in its form a «too fragile vessel»⁴⁶⁴ to contain the «infinite power of its being»⁴⁶⁵. This containment game, on the other hand, rises for Creuzer to a perfect harmony in the plastic symbol, resolving «the antagonism between finite and infinite»⁴⁶⁶ in the complete and organic form of the statuary body (*dem Bilde der organischen Totalität*). Later «Benjamin attempts in the third chapter of the *Tragic Drama* book to distinguish between the much-prized symbolic thinking of German Classicism, the “idea” and its “appearance” as one, on the one hand; and what he calls the “movement between extremes”, here the extremes of the “material” and the “transcendent,” in the form of “expression” that was Baroque allegory as it was most “authentically” available in Baroque emblem books»⁴⁶⁷. Even the natural elements in their idealized representation, «such as mountains and plants»⁴⁶⁸, are tested by Benjamin through the distinction of momentary temporality: it is precisely «the temporal measure of symbolic experience»⁴⁶⁹ that guarantees the possibility of «the mystical moment»⁴⁷⁰. This upheaval is perhaps the most interesting from an aesthetic point of view, because thanks to the temporal distinction Benjamin can eliminate the dialectic between nature and history while following the juxtaposition of the “natural” (and therefore absolute) elements, and historical, always contingent⁴⁷¹. The contamination between the two elements,

⁴⁶¹ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁴⁶⁷ J. O. Newman, *Benjamin's Library Modernity. Nation, and the Baroque*, Cornell University Press and Cornell University Library, Ithaca (NY), 2011, here p. 180.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ Cassirer dedicates several pages to the differentiation of value of natural and spiritual phenomena in the mythical symbolic dimension in *Sprache und Mythos* (1925). Also for Cassirer a subdivision of these phenomena to define which ones can be defined at the origin of mythical thought is to be

which are characterized as historical or natural (and thus allegorical or symbolic) depends on their temporal effectiveness, an effectiveness that justifies the transfiguration of nature in history. It is in this sense that nature, transfigured by allegory, loses its privilege as an ahistorical constant and becomes «original landscape»⁴⁷², the former of those temporal “stations”, that Benjamin defines as “the prehistory of meaning” (*Urgeschichte des Bedeutens*)⁴⁷³.

Benjamin expands and clarifies these considerations of Creuzer through a counterpoint offered by the studies of Johann Joseph von Görres on the same theme. The latter more clearly specifies that the object of the two expressive forms is not diriment; rather, it is the temporal form, synchronic in one case and progressive in the other, that differentiates them. In the passage reported by Benjamin, Görres specifies that he does not «know what to do with the conception of the symbol as a being and allegory as a meaning»⁴⁷⁴. Görres even adds that he favours «the explanation that sees in the first a sign of ideas concluded in itself, compact, perched in itself, and in the second instead an image of the same progressive and subsequent, which flows over time, dramatically mobile and flowing»⁴⁷⁵.

If it is safe to say that Benjamin recognizes the momentary as the main quality of the symbolic, it is certainly more complex to understand how this supposed instantaneity of the symbolic is realized. For example, it is not clear whether it should be realized in the moment of creation, whether it is the poet or the artist who creates it (as it would appear from the reading of Goethe’s maxim reported by Benjamin), or if it is a state determined by the fruitive posture of the spectator, the one who enjoys the work of art; again, it is not clear if this mystical moment is realized through an interpenetration of the work and the user. Indeed, Benjamin seems to superimpose two layers here: the epistemological one of the *Vorrede* and

rejected and constitutes only a philosophical regression. He too would prefer to adopt a morphological vision inherent in the method of structuring these phenomena. Critically, in a passage he writes: «Equally the attempt to isolate spiritual or natural mythology is always renewed, and to consider it as the mythology par excellence. But even if one of these attempts is successful, the question that philosophy has to ask about the myth is not resolved at all, but only pushed one step back» [E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos*, *op. cit.*, p. 20].

⁴⁷² W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

the historical-cultural one regarding the treatments of the allegorical. However, the two levels do not seem to harmonize well, and it is only thanks to the introduction of the allegorical tool that the problem of knowledge and that of historical dialectics can meet in an expressive medium.

The simple distinction between natural and historical elements, and the turning of the one into the other, can only be pursued if there is a continuity between the fruition of an artefactual work and the enjoyment of a natural element, which is given only through the senses, without an artistic direct mediation. After all, this deliberate promiscuity between artistic and perceptological aesthetics is one of the distinctive features of the Benjaminian approach. The image of *this* natural landscape will in fact return in one of the most famous definitions that Benjamin will give of the notion of aura: «To follow, in a summer afternoon, a chain of mountains on the horizon or a branch that casts a shadow over the one who rests – until the moment or the hour takes part in their appearance [*Augenblick oder die Stunde*] – this means breathing the aura of those mountains and that branch»⁴⁷⁶. And it is in this direction that the analysis of the symbolic must proceed, as the first model for that «particular intertwining of space and time [*Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit*]»⁴⁷⁷. Benjamin's position on this intertwining between profane diachrony and symbolic synchrony will be transfigured again in the text of 1933 *Lehre vom Ähnlichen*. Discussing the experience of reading, he re-proposes the scheme of the *Trauerspielbuch*, contrasting a progressive and profane reading with moments of enlightenment that participate in a temporal measure (*Zeitmaß*). In the temporal measure, analogies break through as instant revelation, interrupting the “flow of things” (*aus dem Fluß der Dinge*):

The tempo, however, that rapidity in reading or writing, which can hardly be separated from this process, would then, as it were, be an effort, the gift of letting the mind participate in that time measure [*Zeitmaß*], in which similarities, fleetingly

⁴⁷⁶ «An einem Sommermittag ruhend einem Gebirgszug am Horizont oder einem Zweig folgen, der seinen Schatten auf den Betrachter wirft, bis der Augenblick oder die Stunde Teil an ihrer Erscheinung hat – das heißt die Aura dieser Berge, dieses Zweiges atmen» [W. Benjamin, “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schwepenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 368-385, here p. 378].

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

to immediately sink again to shine out of the flow of things [*aus dem Fluß der Dinge*]. Profane reading still shares this – if it does not simply want to come down to understanding [*Verstehen*] – with every magical one: that it is subject to a necessary pace, or rather the critical moments [*kritischen Augenblicke*], which the reader must not forget at any price if he does not want to go empty-handed⁴⁷⁸.

If observed from this point of view, Benjamin's treatment of the symbol in these pages also seems to retrace the juxtapositions that he placed a few years earlier in his philosophy of language. In fact, the domain of the symbolic affirms itself as the moment of intuition, of mystical immediacy, as the convergence between resolution and origin. Those authors are surely right, who have noticed in the allegory a polar tension that so much recalls the symbolic essence of Goethean morphology and the iconological method of Warburg. However, it is equally true that the symbol is placed by Benjamin as a landing on the thing itself, in an experience that «does not involve spatial and temporal mediation»⁴⁷⁹. If we add to this the Platonic accent of the *Vorrede* discussed by other commentators⁴⁸⁰, it appears increasingly clear that the symbol in Benjamin cannot participate in the historical course; it can only exist as a pure intuitive moment, not mediated, free from the diachrony of events and expressive styles. It must be devoid of the «expression of the convention [*Ausdruck der Konvention*]]»⁴⁸¹, that Benjamin assigns instead to allegory. From this

⁴⁷⁸ «Das Tempo aber, jene Schnelligkeit im Lesen oder Schreiben, welche von diesem Vorgang sich kaum trennen läßt, wäre dann gleichsam das Bemühen, die Gabe, den Geist an jenem Zeitmaß teilnehmen zu lassen, in welchem Ähnlichkeiten, flüchtig und um sogleich wieder zu versinken, aus dem Fluß der Dinge hervorblitzen. So teilt noch das profane Lesen – will es nicht schlechterdings um das Verstehen kommen – mit jedem magischen dies: daß es einem notwendigen Tempo oder vielmehr einem kritischen Augenblicke untersteht, welchen der Lesende um keinen Preis vergessen darf, will er nicht leer ausgehen» [W. Benjamin, *Lehre vom Ähnlichen* (1933), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 204-210, here p. 209].

⁴⁷⁹ R. S. Lehman, *Killing Time with Walter Benjamin*, in “New Literary History”, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁴⁸⁰ As regards what Benjamin proposes as a “eine platonisch auf Darstellung der Wesenheiten gerichtete Wissenschaftstheorie”, besides the authors previously quoted, we are also referring here to the contribution of B. Hanssen, *Philosophy at Its Origin: Walter Benjamin's Prologue to the Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in “MLN”, vol. 110, no. 4, Sep. 1995, (*Comparative Literature Issue*) pp. 809-833. A reading of the epistemological program of the *Trauerspielbuch* under the sign of the Platonic concept of “Eros”, reread through German idealism is instead offered by M. Ophälders, “Bellezza, Stile, Verità. Il Problema della *Darstellung* nella “Premessa Gnoseologica”, in A. Pinotti (ed.), *Giochi per Malinconici. Sull'Origine del Dramma Barocco Tedesco di Walter Benjamin*, Mimesis, Milano 2001, pp. 261-267, esp. p. 263.

⁴⁸¹ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

perspective, the introduction of the concept of allegory appears even clearer: it seems to mediate the dialectical relationship between truth and doctrine, in that elusive Benjaminian link that unites historical materialism and messianism. Benjamin clearly states that in the concept of symbol there is a historical, biographical subtraction:

And though it is true that to such a thing all “symbolic” freedom of expression, all classical harmony of form, and everything human is lacking, nevertheless in this figure, the most fallen in nature, is expressed meaningfully as enigma not only the nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual.⁴⁸²

And it is also in these terms that Benjamin receives the concept of an original phenomenon: an object to be restored and completed at the same time, an unfinished ruin, the object that instantly gathers its pre- and post-history, a perfectly synchronic realization, which can only be in the realm of intuition. This aspect is clear from the “rhythm” (*Rhythmik*) – or the interruption of it – that Benjamin assigns to his concept of *Ursprungsphänomen*:

The origin [*Ursprüngliche*] never reveals itself in the naked, obvious existence of the factual, and its rhythm is only open to double insight. It wants to be recognized as a restoration, restitution, on the one hand, and as something incomplete and unclosed [*Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes*] on the other. In each original phenomenon, the shape is determined under which an idea repeatedly grapples with the historical world until it lies there in the totality of its history. So the origin [*Ursprung*] does not stand out from the actual findings, but concerns its fore- and after-history [*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*]⁴⁸³.

⁴⁸² W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, *op. cit.*, p. 174; «Und so wahr alle “symbolische” Freiheit des Ausdrucks, alle klassische Harmonie der Gestalt, alles Menschliche einem solchen fehlt – es spricht nicht nur die Natur des Menschendaseins schlechthin, sondern die biographische Geschichtlichkeit eines einzelnen in dieser seiner naturverfallensten Figur bedeutungsvoll als Rätsselfrage sich aus» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 343].

⁴⁸³ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, *op. cit.*, p. 25 (modified translation); «Im nackten offenkundigen Bestand des Faktischen gibt das Ursprüngliche sich niemals zu erkennen, und einzig einer Doppeleinsicht steht seine Rhythmik offen. Sie will als Restauration, als

This unfolds a peculiar meaning of the symbolic as origin (*Ursprüngliche*). Benjamin does not discuss in this case the unconscious survival (*Nachleben*) of a symbol or image in a trans-historical sense, but of the appearance of an original phenomenon in its historical “totality” (*Totalität*)⁴⁸⁴. From the point of view of a general theory of knowledge, which seems to strongly contaminate the *Trauerspielbuch*, the relationship between the world of forms and the original phenomenon is also captured in the clash-encounter of historical motion. This dynamic had been read since the early 1930s by Adorno as a dialectical movement, as an attempt to overcome the dichotomy of a naive Platonism between a world of forms and a world of ideas, realm of history and realm of necessity⁴⁸⁵.

This interpretation fits quite well with that offered, now many years ago, by the Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson, who saw in the project of the *German Baroque Drama* a psychological demand rooted in the concept of *Lebensweisheit*, derived in turn from Goethe. Exacerbated by Benjamin’s approach to historical materialism, the dialectic between stability and the historical alternation of forms structures for Jameson the melancholic root of the theory of knowledge inscribed in the Baroque Drama: «The *Lebensweisheit* is indeed a kind of half-way house between the classical idea of a fixed human nature, with its psychology of the humours, passions, sins or character types; and the modern idea of pure historicity, of the determining influence of the situation or environment»⁴⁸⁶.

Wiederherstellung einerseits, als eben darin Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes andererseits erkannt sein. In jedem Ursprungsphänomen bestimmt sich die Gestalt, unter welcher immer wieder eine Idee mit der geschichtlichen Welt sich auseinandersetzt, bis sie in der Totalität ihrer Geschichte vollendet daliegt. Also hebt sich der Ursprung aus dem tatsächlichen Befunde nicht heraus, sondern er betrifft dessen Vor- und Nachgeschichte» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 226];

⁴⁸⁴ As regards the concept of anachronism in the Warburgian approach, reference is made to the discussion of the famous book of P. A. Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, Zone Books, New York 2007. In particular, refer to the discussion on the temporality of Warburgian images offered by the introduction to this text by G. Didi-Huberman (cf. pp. 15-17).

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. T. W. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1973, pp. 344-365.

⁴⁸⁶ F. Jameson, *Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia*, in “Salmagundi”, no. 10/11, Fall 1969 - Winter 1970, pp. 52-68, here p. 55.

3.7. *Symbol-based Epistemology? A Contribution to Sigrid Weigel's Investigation on Benjamin's "Image-based epistemology"*

For Benjamin, the notion of symbol gradually undergoes a weakening in its aesthetic and morphological function. That is, it subtracts from that “*Denken in Gestalten*” that occurs in the whole of becoming (*Zusammenhang des Werdens*) of Goethean matrix⁴⁸⁷. Even the participation of the symbol in diachrony and historical dialectics is progressively eroded, up to the turning of the symbol into a more dialectical and profane medium; namely, allegory. Tracing the main qualities ascribed to the symbolic by Benjamin, a closed model appears, instantaneous and latent, realized in the mystical moment (*Mystischen Nu*), self-transparent (*Selbstverständigung*), immediately effective and capable “of appearing immediately real” (*unmittelbar Wirkliches*).

This genealogy also outlines the transitional role assigned by Benjamin to the symbol: this concept seems in fact to constitute a tensive point for the philosophy of language, and for the epistemological project which was abandoned at the time of the *Trauerspielbuch*. Such a role was indeed reserve for the symbol appears explicit if we consider that in both the *Vorrede* and in the fragments dedicated to the theory of knowledge, the symbolic is always placed beyond the becoming of forms, beyond distortion (*Entstellung*) and the temporal and conceptual fragmentation of reality. Seemingly disappearing from Benjamin's epistemological program after the academic failure of the *Baroque Drama*, the symbol looks like dead end. It seems somewhat in contradiction with the development of Benjamin's philosophy to come. His thinking would be then articulated on the heterogeneous *mise en place*, on material objects, on technological apparatuses, on the architectural, on advertising, on dreamlike and psychoanalytic elements. All of this will lead to the micrological collage of the *Passagenwerk*, following a «montage-like approach to theory of knowledge, a theoretically informed crystallization of

⁴⁸⁷ Here we refer to a fortunate expression of Cassirer: «Von der Denkart der modernen Mathematik und der mathematischen Physik ist auch Goethe dadurch geschieden, daß er das Ganze der Welt nicht einfach in seine Elemente zerlegen, sondern daß er es als ein geformtes Ganzes, als Komplex reiner Gestalten anschauen will. Aber dieses “Denken in Gestalten” untersteht bei ihm jenem Grundprinzip, das seinen universellen Ausdruck in der Idee der Metamorphose findet» [E. Cassirer, *Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken*, (1922), *op. cit.*, p. 43].

“material elements»⁴⁸⁸. All such elements will be placed in the deep dialectical “groove” of allegory, and they all come from that profane world from which the symbol seems to be completely excluded. Even from a perceptive and cultural point of view, Benjamin will never address symbolization, but instead will speak of *mediation*: it is in fact the *medium* of perception, its *milieu*, that reconfigures itself thanks to historical, aesthetic, technical and stylistic conditions. Quite differently, as seen from the analysis of the programmatic fragment on the theory of knowledge, the symbol is for Benjamin a peculiar medium, a “neutral medium”, capable of returning the real according to the singularity of its original act of configuration.

The symbol is therefore opposed to the distorting-creative prerogatives of the Benjaminian medium, which, on the contrary, is always (perceptually) diaphanous⁴⁸⁹; the medium produces its own minimal and peculiar distortion⁴⁹⁰. This “neutral” and “immediate” function of the symbol appears from the various contrasts that have emerged so far: in the juxtaposition between a profane language and the Edenic language, between diachrony and the momentary entrenchment. Defining whether this concept has survived its own treatment in the *Baroque Drama*, is pivotal if we are to understand what became of Benjamin’s early epistemological project. Secondly, only a full grip on the concept’s evolution can elicit a comparison with Benjamin’s moment of greatest interest in Cassirer’s work, which, as we have seen, is in the second half of 30s. The historiographical

⁴⁸⁸ R. Wolin, *Aestheticism and Social Theory: The Case of Walter Benjamin's*, in “Theory Culture Society” vol. 10, no. 2, 1993, pp. 169-180, here p. 169.

⁴⁸⁹ «As emerged from the analysis of fragment *Erkenntnistheorie* (1920/1921), Benjamin also considers linguistic and cognitive mediation with the same characteristics with which he will refer to the medium of perception: «Benjamin’s concept of the “*Medium* of perception” can be better understood if we contextualize it within the long, post-Aristotelian tradition of the so-called *media diaphana*: the material, intermediary, diaphanous substances (air, vapor, smoke, clouds, water, glass...) that, with their different consistencies and their different degrees of transparency and opacity, structure the visual environment in which our experience takes place» [A. Somaini, *Benjamin’s Media Theory. The Medium* in “Grey Room”, vol. 62, Winter 2016, pp. 6–41, here p. 8].

⁴⁹⁰ It should also be emphasized that this aspect is also inscribed in Goethe's morphological theory, as far as the theory of colors is concerned: the concept of refraction, with which Goethe defines the *Urphänomen*, has many characteristics compatible with the concept of “medium diaphanous”: «Goethe divides colours into three categories. Physiological colours are evoked by the eye. Physical colours are produced by external media which themselves have no colours. Chemical colours are inherent in the objects themselves. It is in his discussion of the physical colours that Goethe defines the *Urphänomen*, which he also refers to as the *Grundphänomen*. An archetypal phenomenon is produced by an opaque medium. Thus, the archetypal phenomenon is evoked by refraction» [J. Pizer, *Goethe's “Urphänomen” and Benjamin's “Ursprung”. A Reconsideration*, in “Journal of Germanic Studies”, no. 25, 1988, pp. 205–222, here p. 207].

reconstruction shows how much Benjamin was well informed of the theories that flourished in those years in the recovery of this notion from Kantianism and its application in the aesthetic and cultural field. Is it therefore possible that while not accepting this precise notion of symbol *per se*, Benjamin has accepted its prerogatives, reworking them through other notions?

This question could be approached through studies that have recently recast the whole of Benjamin's work as an «image-based epistemology»⁴⁹¹. This interpretation has been proposed by Sigrid Weigel since the 1996 text *Body- and Image-Space. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* and has been then developed and clarified in the 2015 article, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images*. This analysis expands the concept of image (*Bild*) within Benjaminian epistemology beyond the figurative and perceptive level, positing it as the theoretical fulcrum of his theory of knowledge, from the early years to the last unfinished works: Weigel considers the Benjaminian concept of image not as a content, visual, metaphorical or virtual, but as a specific modality of knowledge. Through a momentary and traumatic irruption, the image can reconfigure the limits of experience, managing the stabilization of trauma in an image:

The flashlike image – a sudden, ephemeral coming-to-appearance – becomes a mode of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) that operates outside of the linear temporality of historiography and narration. In other words, the mode of thinking- and speaking-in-images leads to a way of knowing figured as a sudden flash that *solidifies* into thought-images and linguistic images⁴⁹².

⁴⁹¹ S. Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, Routledge, London-New York 1996; S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, vol. 41, no. 2, Winter 2015, pp. 344-366, here p. 344. To these is added the author's most recent publication which partly takes up this theme: S. Weigel, *Il risveglio come ‘caso esemplare del pensiero dialettico’*. *Sul carattere di immagine e la struttura temporale della dialettica nella nozione epistemica di soglia in Benjamin, ovvero: Benjamin legge Michelet, Hegel e Dante*, in “Il Pensiero” vol. 49, no. 2, 2020, (*Dialettica negativa e immagine dialettica*), pp. 93-111.

⁴⁹² S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8.

This instantaneous appearance that breaks the historiographical “linearity of time” is grasped by Weigel within the distinctly Benjaminian historical materialism of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*⁴⁹³. Yet, as we have seen, the root of this temporal distinction emerges from the distinction between symbol and allegory proposed by the romantic mythologists Creuzer and Görres. This distinction is still the only treatment trusted by Benjamin to define the transcendental prerogatives of the symbolic. Benjamin acknowledged that these thinkers had relocated the symbol into a semiotic context (*Gebiet der Semiotik*), discriminated only by the fundamental category of time (*Unter der entscheidenden Kategorie der Zeit*). And it is in this “momentary” that Weigel places her concept of image, an unconfigured revelation that “precedes the distinctions” of perceptive, linguistic and artistic order:

Benjamin’s use of the word refers to a meaning of *Bild* [...] precedes the distinctions among mental, visual, and material images as well as the differentiation of scripture and pictures and the separation of concept [*Begriff*] and metaphor. In his epistemology the image is linked not to representation but to a simultaneous, instantaneous cognition [*Erkenntnis*] or insight [*Einsicht*]. The importance of the image in Benjamin’s theory attests to a way of thinking and writing that favors simultaneity and constellation over continuity, similitude over representation or sign⁴⁹⁴.

If the concept of symbol is posited as one of the roots of this expanded notion of the image in Benjamin, it is possible to reconcile and fully appreciate some interconnections that would otherwise remain inconsistent. Firstly, this symbolic epistemology is based instantaneous intuition, it is marked by the “now of

⁴⁹³ This is not the place to discuss this very delicate part of Benjaminian thought. We only want to point out the interpretative distance between Weigel and Agamben on the concept of "state of exception" of the Theses and the proximity of Benjamin (resized by Weigel) with the thought of Carl Schmitt. Refer to: S. Weigel, *Walter Benjamin. Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, Stanford University Press, Santa Clara County 2008; G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2005. For a summary of this debate on Benjamin and Schmitt, see instead: D. Pan, *Against Biopolitics: Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben on Political Sovereignty and Symbolic Order*, in “The German Quarterly” vol. 82, no.1, Winter 2009, pp. 42-62.

⁴⁹⁴ S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8.

cognoscibility” *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* and is quality-wise akin to the flash (*blitzhaft*): How can it be brought back to the morphological-materialistic method which plays a leading role in the Benjaminian approach? Indeed, Weigel proposes the concept of image as a solution for «the repeated complaints about the incompatibilities and contradictions (between “Marxist” and “theological” elements, for instance) which have always accompanied [his] approach»⁴⁹⁵. The discussion left by Benjamin on the concept of symbol helps to detach the image from its visual root, bringing it back to a peculiar event that touches on a multiplicity of cultural, literary and material products which Benjamin has collected in his works. Even the portrait of the symbol emerged so far – a weak theoretical object from an aesthetic point of view – is clarified in the treatment offered by this interpretation of the Benjaminian image:

This concept of the image is not a descendant of aesthetic theory but rather of Benjamin’s reflections on the philosophies of language and of history. However, this does not mean that the visual image is derived from the linguistic image; it is rather the case that the receiving aspect in contrast to the denoting dimension is privileged, as it appertains to a biblical language⁴⁹⁶

Sigrid Weigel proposes a double genealogy of this epistemology of images, which runs parallel to the one we have so far reconstructed. The first points to the early years of Benjamin. It considers thus the enormous interest and the multiple references that he makes to figurative art and to the great masters of Western painting, from the Renaissance to the avant-garde, in a time span that goes «from Pisano to Klee». From this iconological, or rather figurative «palimpsest», Benjamin would have developed a method of “thinking-by-images”, wherein thanks to this direct contemplation of the images the «elements of perception survive within a contemplation that can recall scenes of revelation or epiphany»⁴⁹⁷.

⁴⁹⁵ S. Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

⁴⁹⁶ S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8

⁴⁹⁷ S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8.

This reading should finally unveil that «hidden grounding for the subsequent development of a stratum of epistemology in which thinking-in-images is predominant»⁴⁹⁸. As already mentioned, this epistemic structuring was then applied by Benjamin in all fields of human production and perception: from the interest in new optical technologies, to the theses on history, up to the philosophical-psychological description of Parisian life in the 19th century. It is rightly to appreciate and intersect the epistemological method underlying this heterogeneous collection of cultural elements that Weigel proposes image-based epistemology.

This reconstruction does not start from the concept of *Bild*, because, as the author rightly points out, it would be impossible to trace an exhaustive and complete genealogy of the concept (which, as mentioned, is understood in its broadest sense) within Benjamin's work⁴⁹⁹. However, she proposes a path that proceeds from figurative and artistic contemplation, to question about the limits of perception, up to the expansion of the method to the philosophy of culture. An evolution that progressively moves away from the iconological interpretation of the image and its representative significance, to focus instead on its original configurative moment, up to the timeless “flash-like illumination”, which fall under the illustrious appellation of “dialectical image”. Weigel talks of these images in the *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* not as a simple historical divergence, but as a general intensive state, capable of marking a new perceptual configuration where «the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous»⁵⁰⁰ could be manifested:

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁹ Although it does not go so far as to propose an epistemology, compatible reading for the relationship between shock, perception, memory and image (and above the psychoanalytic root of shock as trauma) is carefully outlined in the text by A. Meek, *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images*, Routledge, New York-London 2010. However, the reconfigurative power of Freudian trauma is outlined in Benjamin's philosophy of history: «Freud's theory became for Benjamin an explanation of how cultural forms could also be approached as carrying the equivalent of unconscious memory traces. In his final theses “On the Concept of History” (completed only a year after the Baudelaire essay) Benjamin proposed that critical practice, by seizing upon these disturbing images, had the potential to shatter the dominant interpretation of the past». [A. Meek, *Benjamin. Trauma and the Virtual*, in “Transformation”, no. 15, November 2007 (*Walter Benjamin and the Virtual: Politics, Art, and Mediation in the Age of Global Culture*), pp. 1-19, here p. 3].

⁵⁰⁰ S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-8.

«Benjamin’s epistemology can be understood as a constellation based on the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous (which appertains to a representation similar to images) in which the what-has-been and the now come together in an instant as image»⁵⁰¹.

This specific temporality of the image, which we have already encountered in the discussion of the symbol, is expressed for Weigel in the functional concept of “shock” and in that of “flash”, moments capable of subverting the cultural or perceptive habitus of society through a traumatic foray. We say functional because, in this interpretation, Benjamin’s «perspective is less concerned with the event that caused a trauma than with the process of isolating memory-images»⁵⁰². Weigel uses the term “memory-images” here, linking the concept of shock to that of Freudian trauma⁵⁰³, which is certainly a fundamental precedent for understanding its active and mnemonic function, especially for the description that Benjamin gives of it in *Berliner Chronik*⁵⁰⁴. However, she also notes that in Benjamin this dynamic transcends the psychoanalytic dimension to extend to the domain of cultural and perceptive production, and the modalities of their reconfiguration, establishing a contamination «between language, perception, the corporeal, and the body»⁵⁰⁵. The different applications of the concept of shock have been extensively analysed: from

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰² S. Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

⁵⁰³ In addition to Freud, Proust (*mémoire involontaire*), Valéry and, obviously, the *Chockerlebnis* of *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* are reported as sources of this concept. To these references we add here Georg Simmel, who certainly contributed to defining the perceptual routine that Benjamin described in the industrialized metropolises: «“Making use of Simmel’s analysis dedicated to the dialectic of hyperesthesia and anesthesia produced by the “intensification of nervous life” (*Steigerung des Nervenlebens*) typical of life in the metropolis, and the Freudian doctrine of traumatic neuroses expounded in *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Benjamin develops a true energetic theory of shock as a constitutive core of the experience of modernity» [W. Benjamin, *Aura e Choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media*, (eds.) A. Pinotti, A. Somaini, Einaudi, Torino 2012, p. 272 (my translation)].

⁵⁰⁴ «While our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self-rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is a little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its indelible images» [W. Benjamin, “Berliner Chronik” (1932), in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.), R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 465-519, here p. 516.]

⁵⁰⁵ S. Weigel, *Body- and Image- Space. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

a perceptological point of view, as the irruption of tactility in the optic⁵⁰⁶; as *Chockerlebnis* of the metropolitan experience⁵⁰⁷; as a way of artistic fruition, opposed to the auratic one. Its theological-historical implications were also underlined, as a moment of distortion (*Entstellung*) and rearrangement (*zurechtstellen*) of historical time⁵⁰⁸. Starting from the transversality of this concept, Weigel identifies in it a general epistemological paradigm which is articulated according to “moments of sudden lighting” (*Augenblicke plötzlicher Beleuchtung*) capable of generating indestructible images (*unzerstörbarsten Bilder*)⁵⁰⁹ that will settle down and structure the experience through “images”. But this connotation is what Benjamin accepts of the symbol from Creuzer and from Görres: the violent irruption of an event capable of meaning itself, of indelibly structuring the experience. Returning to the *Baroque Drama* from this perspective, we witness a consistency between the Benjaminian image according to Weigel and the prerogatives and features that Benjamin himself ascribes to the symbolic, filtering the work of Creuzer.

Together with the banal older doctrine still surviving in them, they contain observations whose epistemological development Creuzer could have taken much further than he succeeded in doing. Thus he posits the essence of symbols, [...] in the following four moments: “The instantaneous, the total, the unfathomability of its origin, the necessary”. And elsewhere he remarks justly apropos the first factor: “That wakeful and at times unsettling quality goes together with another, namely brevity. It is like a suddenly appearing specter, or like a lightning flash that suddenly lights up the dark night. It is a moment that lays claim to our whole being”⁵¹⁰.

⁵⁰⁶ Cf. A. Pinotti, *Sindrome Cinese. Benjamin e la Soglia Auratica dell'Immagine*, in “Rivista di Estetica”, no. 52 (*Aura*), 2013, pp. 161-180; G. Gurisatti, *Estetica del Godimento ed Estetica dello Choc. Benjamin, Geiger, e la Lotta con il Drago Einfühlung*, in “Materiali di Estetica”, vol. 4, 2012, pp. 63-76.

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. A. Latham, *The Power of Distraction. Distraction, Tactility, and Habit in the Work of Walter Benjamin*, “Environment and Planning D. Society and Space”, vol. 17, 1999, pp. 451-473.

⁵⁰⁸ Cf. A. Greiert, *Geschichte als Katastrophe. Zu einem theologisch-politischen Motiv bei Walter Benjamin*, in “Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte”, vol. 64, no. 4, 2012, pp. 359-376.

⁵⁰⁹ W. Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik*, (1932) *op. cit.*, p. 516.

⁵¹⁰ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, *op. cit.*, p. 171; «Neben der älteren banalen Lehre, die in ihnen überdauert, enthalten sie Beobachtungen, deren erkenntnistheoretischer Ausbau

Weigel's critical analysis brings the Benjaminian image to be mean and aim of knowledge at once. As a medium, it describes the moment of configuration of experience and, as finality, it is the object of the incessant "hunt" for the first configurative instant. It is relevant that Benjamin should be interested in an "epistemological development" (*erkenntnistheoretischer Ausbau*) of the concept of symbol, thus offered by Creuzer. This interpretation confirms above all Benjamin's «aims to investigate in a historical perspective the correlation between the body-perceptive organization and the media that shape it from time to time (including that particular but not limited class of media that are the works of art»⁵¹¹ – but outside the diachronic flow of history. Weigel's reconstruction of Benjamin's epistemology proceeds through "traumas" and "moments" and might seem incompatible with the Cassirerian method, which many commentators read as fluid and progressive. As we have seen, in some cases, it is even considered spoiled by a positivistic charge. Yet in the texts dedicated to the myth, those that received the most attention from Benjamin, Cassirer will begin to question himself on the momentary configurative impetus of the symbol: on the impulse capable of stabilizing a meaning within a scheme, or a sign, which can open a new portion of reality.

Creuzer viel weiter hätte führen können, als er gelangt ist. So setzt er das Wesen der Symbole, in die folgenden vier Momente: "Das Momentane, das Totale, das Unergründliche ihres Ursprungs, das Nothwendige" und vorzüglich bemerkt er an anderer Stelle zu dem ersten: "Jenes Erweckliche und zuweilen Erschütternde hängt mit einer andern Eigenschaft zusammen, mit der Kürze. Es ist wie ein plötzlich erscheinender Geist, oder wie ein Blitzstrahl, der auf einmal die dunkele Nacht erleuchtet. Es ist ein Moment, der unser ganzes Wesen in Anspruch nimmt"» [W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *op. cit.*, p. 340].

⁵¹¹ A. Pinotti, *Sindrome Cinese. Benjamin e la Soglia Auratica dell'Immagine*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

III. The Reception and Legacy of Cassirer's Philosophy in Benjamin's Thought

1. Cassirer's Investigation into *mythischen Welt* and Benjamin's Response

1.1. Tautology and Broken-down mythology

The arrival at a definition of the symbolic based on temporality, and above all the path taken by Benjamin to reach it, testifies to a further point of contact with Cassirer's thought. The authors that Benjamin calls into question to extract a convincing definition of the symbolic experience, in fact belong to the same tradition on which Cassirer, in the same year, builds *Sprache und Mythos*. An even more interesting fact if we consider that Benjamin agrees to derive the qualities of the symbolic by detaching himself from Romantic and Idealistic philosophy (Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Herder, up to Schopenhauer) to appeal instead to the impulse for renewal that tradition gave to the studies on the myth, through Görres, Creuzer and, in the wake of Schelling. In addition to the contacts that the two philosophers had in Berlin in the 1910s, the works dedicated to the myth of Cassirer were those that most attracted the attention of Benjamin, who testifies to having read them entirely: from *Begriffsform im mythischen Denken* (1922), up to *Sprache und Mythos* (1925) and the second volume of the *Symbolic forms* (1925), which Benjamin certainly read in the 20s, and re-read before '34. This moment of Cassirerian philosophy, initially emerged from research in Hamburg and in the *Kreis* of Warburg, is the site where the consonances or dissonances between the two philosophers can be sought.

There are in fact two main themes that connect the works of Benjamin and Cassirer: the first is precisely the recourse to the tradition of romantic mythologists to describe the concept of symbol. Perhaps more important still, a second aspect redirects to the study of symbolic-mythical production to examine the symbolic-perceptive structuring, or the phenomenic acquisition of objectivity (which will flow abundantly in the last volume of the philosophy of symbolic forms, completed in '29). This is a problematic aspect of Cassirerian philosophy. This is the view of those authors who locate in the studies on myth the fundamental separation of his philosophy from the transcendental method⁵¹²: the encounter with unconfigured

⁵¹² M. Ferrari discusses this pivotal moment in Cassirer's philosophy and summarizes the debate sparked by it in the critical reception (Cf. M. Ferrari, *Ernst Cassirer. Dalla scuola di Marburgo alla filosofia della cultura, op. cit.*, p. 306).

objectivity, in a functionalistic philosophy such as Cassirer's, seems to push towards an overcoming of the purely functional link between subject and object of experience. In fact, underneath the immense mythographic and ethnographic compilation left by Cassirer within these works⁵¹³, a core idea remains intact; that is, the mythical formula constitutes the first moment of symbolic appropriation of the environment by man: therefore «the myth is some kind of “matrix” or “*Urschicht*” of culture that is fundamental to all kinds of cultural activities»⁵¹⁴. The three functions of the symbolic, the expressive [*Ausdrucksfunktion*], the representational [*Darstellungsfunktion*] and the conceptual [*Bedeutungsfunktion*] are thus reinterpreted as cooperating and coexisting functions, and not as historical stages of development of culture and experience. They are reinterpreted «as a concept of totality that encompasses all possible subjects of philosophy and ultimately includes every conceivable method»⁵¹⁵. The same happens with mythical, linguistic and scientific symbolic forms, which constitute for Cassirer the three major areas of symbolic production in civilizations. These three symbolic forms do not contain all the formative possibilities: there are in fact many other options that Cassirer has identified during his philosophical path: «In the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer mentions the possibility of symbolic forms of ethics [*Sitte*], law [*Recht*], economics [*Wirtschaft*], and technology [*Technik*]]»⁵¹⁶. Therefore, contrary to the logicist and positivist trend that has sometimes been attributed to him, «Cassirer's cultural panorama implies that objectivity emerges from multiple perspectives in culture. It is an indirect product of our judgment, twice removed from raw material data, first through symbolic

⁵¹³ As we will see shortly, Cassirer borrows most of his ethnographic sources from the researches of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, but also from the philologist and orientalist Max Müller, from whom Cassirer acquired the concept of "Parynomia", that is linguistic ambiguity, dark shadows language (*Dunkle Schatten*) from which emerges the continuous configurative effort of mythical poetry. [Cf. E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos*, *op. cit.*, p. 235]. For a broader contextualization of Müller's theories and their relationship to Cassirer's thought, see: G. R. Welbon, *Comments on Max Müller's Interpretation of the Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, in "Numen", vol. 12, no. 3, Sep. 1965, pp. 179-200, esp. pp. 199-200.

⁵¹⁴ U. Renz, *From philosophy to criticism of myth: Cassirer's concept of myth*, in "Synthese" vol. 179, no. 1, 2011, pp. 135-152, here p.153.

⁵¹⁵ «Als ein Totalitäts- begriff, der alle möglichen Themen der Philosophie umfaßt und jede denkbare Methode letztlich in sich einschließt» [M. Steinmann, *Kulturphilosophie als praktische Philosophie*, in "Philosophische Rundschau", vol. 51, no. 1, 2004, pp. 53-74, here p. 65].

⁵¹⁶ T. I. Bayer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms as a Philosophy of Pluralism*, in "The Pluralist", vol. 3, no. 3, 2008, pp. 95-110, here p. 99.

presentation, and then through symbolic forms»⁵¹⁷. The mythical primacy of symbolization must therefore not be conceived as a cultural and historical primacy, but as an experiential and functional *Urschicht* that is at the basis of all these formative possibilities, up to the perceptive ones. Krois sums up very well this transition, which took place during the years of contact with the Kreis. It is then that Cassirer begins to consider the mythical experience as the first moment of encounter between the human and his environment⁵¹⁸:

After his discovery of the Warburg library, Cassirer embarked upon a program of study there that resulted in a number of publications on the importance and theory of myth, culminating in his book *Mythic Thought*. By the time that this book was published in 1925, Cassirer had revised his initial understanding of symbolic forms as an extension of Humboldt's conception of language. Cassirer no longer thought that language was the basis of human thought, perception and action. Rather, mythic thinking was more fundamental because it gave expression in symbolic actions to the dangers and threats – real and imagined – lurking in the world⁵¹⁹.

Cassirer derives the concept of mythical experience, understood as the first formative impulse, mainly from two models: first and foremost, the philosophy of romantic mythology, inaugurated by Schelling, Creuzer and Görres; however, he also dives in the studies of Usener, another source that recurs in the *Baroque Drama*⁵²⁰. Benjamin confronted Cassirer's position on myth in his own essay on

⁵¹⁷ E. Wortsman Deluty, *Seeking Cultural Meaning: Ernst Cassirer's Concept of the Symbol*, in "Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly", vol. 60, Jan. 2011, pp. 33-52, here p. 34.

⁵¹⁸ Here we follow Krois in using the term "environment". We will discuss later the genesis of this concept, which for its exhaustiveness it seemed right to anticipate, from the studies of Jacob von Uexküll.

⁵¹⁹ J. M. Krois, *The priority of 'symbolism' over language in Cassirer's philosophy*, in "Synthese" vol. 179, no.1, pp. 9-20, here p. 11.

⁵²⁰ The influence of Usener within the *Trauerspielbuch*, even if little discussed, has already been noted since the text of R. Kany, *Geschichte, Erinnerung und die Andacht zum Unbedeutenden im Werk von Usener, Warburg und Benjamin*, in "Studien zur deutschen Literatur", vol. 93, 1987. In this text, Kany links Benjamin to Usener's method as regards the micrological method, aimed at the mythological and material fragment, and not at mythographic organicity. The same theme will be analysed a few years later in its broadest sense in R. Kany, *Particularism in the Work of Walter Benjamin*, in "Criticism", vol. 32, no. 3, Summer 1990, (*Particularism*), pp. 325-341. More recently, the relationship between Usener and Benjamin has been investigated to understand Benjamin's reception of the pagan world and its relationship with monotheistic thought. Cf. S. Tufano, "Walter Benjamin and the Greek Historiography", in *Reconciling Ancient and Modern Philosophies of History*, (ed.) A. Turner, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2020, pp. 263-290, esp. pp. 266-268.

Sprachsoziologie (1934). Somewhat forcefully, he would lead Cassirer's research back to the thought of French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939). This is an author who certainly recurs frequently in Cassirer's works dedicated to the mythical world, but his presence is attributable, as Cassirer himself admits, to the enormous amount of ethnographic material (*Zusammenstellung des ethnologischen Materials*)⁵²¹ that this author collected during his research, especially in the volume *La mentalité primitive* (1922) and in *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910). Cassirer distances himself several times from this author; such gap will progressively increase until the writing of *The Myth of the State* (1946). This text offers an extremely synthetic passage around the position that Cassirer held towards the researches of Lévy-Bruhl:

And there are still other reasons that convince us that the description of primitive mentality given in the works of Lévy-Bruhl remains, in one essential point, inadequate and inconclusive. Lévy-Bruhl admits and emphasizes that there is a close relationship between myth and language. A special part of his work deals with linguistic problems, with the languages spoken by savage tribes. In these languages Lévy-Bruhl finds all those characteristics that he had ascribed to primitive mentality. They too are full of elements that are diametrically opposed to our own modes of thought. But this judgment is not in keeping with our linguistic experience. The best experts in this field, the men who have spent their lives in the investigation of the languages of savage tribes, have come to the opposite conclusion. In modern linguistics, the very term and concept of a primitive language has become highly questionable. Antoine Meillet, who has written a book on the languages of the world, has told us that no known idiom can give us the slightest idea of what a primitive language may be. Language always shows us a definite and thorough-going logical structure, both in its sound system and in its morphological system. We have no evidence whatever for a "prelogical" language – the only one that, according to Lévy-Bruhl's theory, would correspond to the prelogical state of mind⁵²².

⁵²¹ E. Cassirer, "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken" (1925), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 12, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2002.

⁵²² E. Cassirer, "The Myth of the State" (1946), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 25, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2007, p. 16.

In his essay on the sociology of language, Benjamin puts the research of Cassirer and Lévy-Bruhl in continuity. This choice is motivated by their shared attempt at establishing a pre-logical and primitive kingdom of language⁵²³: «Lévy-Bruhl's doctrines had an impact far beyond France and were also reflected in Germany. Suffice it to recall here Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of language. His attempt to associate primitive linguistic concepts to the form of mythical concepts, rather than comparing them to form of logical concepts, is evidently influenced by Lévy-Bruhl»⁵²⁴. This misunderstanding partly follows the previously analysed perplexities that Benjamin had when reading Cassirer's 1922 text on "mythical thought": it seems that Benjamin reads in Cassirer's research a clear contrast between "logical concepts" and "mythical concepts". Things might not be straightforward, however; as Cassirer himself tries to explain, the study of myth is mainly aimed at describing the first encounter between the subject and the external world: the myth is a paradigm to functionally describe the appearance of an event not yet discernible in the eyes of a subjectivity or community. Such event will then be structured and overcome through the various symbolic forms.

The interpretation offered by Benjamin becomes more problematic when we consider that the essay on the sociology of language ends with some considerations dedicated by Benjamin to the studies by the neurologist Kurt Goldstein to aphasia. The partnership between Cassirer and Goldstein began actively during the drafting of the works dedicated to the myth, when in 1925 he went to visit his cousin in the

⁵²³ As Renz rightly notes, the Cassirerian method eliminates, thanks to the notion of symbol, any possible contrast between a logical and a prelogical language. In fact, language is realized in its transcendental function: «Cassirer, however, goes much further in this direction than Lévy-Bruhl. Particularly one point has to be stressed here. In contrast to Lévy-Bruhl, he avoids any terminology that presupposes mythical thought as pre-logical, primitive or archaic. The difference between Lévy-Bruhl's and Cassirer's approach is not that the former is interested in the content of myth, whereas the latter regards its structures. It rather consists in a different theoretic interpretation of these structures. [...] It is one of the fundamental tenets of his transcendental approach to culture that all cultural forms, myth as well as formal logic, are to be analysed in terms of their symbolic constitution» [U. Renz, *From philosophy to criticism of myth: Cassirer's concept of myth*, in "Synthese" *op. cit.*, p. 140].

⁵²⁴ «Die Lehrmeinungen Lévy-Bruhls haben weit über Frankreich hinaus gewirkt und auch in Deutschland einen Niederschlag gefunden. Es genügt, hier an die Sprachphilosophie Ernst Cassirers zu erinnern. Ihr Versuch, die primitiven Sprachbegriffe, statt sie der Form der logischen Begriffe zu vergleichen, vielmehr mit der Form der mythischen Begriffe zusammenzufassen, ist offenbar von Lévy-Bruhl beeinflusst» [W. Benjamin, *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* (1935), *op. cit.*, p. 456.]

Frankfurt al Main clinic. Cassirer's research on the myth is thus intertwined with Goldstein work on "symbolic pathologies"; both complemented each other precisely in the analysis of the configurative efforts of language, as *reactions* to an immediate solicitation. Equally important to Cassirer, the cultural study of the myth entailed for him a deeper investigation of the perceptive encounter between the individual and the surrounding world. Studies on myth were therefore conceived as «a psychological-ethnological analysis, fruitful on a documentary level»⁵²⁵. To lay the first bricks of his phenomenology of perception, Cassirer needs to question himself on the first immediate relationship between subject and object; he needs to establish the contours of whatever may come *before* that very cultural structuring, which in Humboldtian sense will structure objectivity: «Indeed, the world of our immediate experience [*unmittelbaren Erfahrung*] – that world in which we all live and are, insofar as we stand outside the sphere of conscious, critical-scientific reflection – contains a wealth of features that, from the perspective of this reflection, only appear as the so-called mythical»⁵²⁶. Cassirer's preoccupation is whence to derive this "immediate experience" (*unmittelbaren Erfahrung*), on which the configurative impulse of symbolic forms arises. That is when he primarily focuses on the concept of "myth interpreted as a symbol".

1.2. *The Tautegorical Turn and its Function in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*

In 1925, during the drafting of the *Trauerspielbuch*, Cassirer published the second volume of the *Philosophy of symbolic forms* and *Sprache und Mythos*. There are two preliminary aspects that make this link particularly interesting from a historiographical point of view: in the first place, Cassirer is here busy with the allegorical exegesis, a theme that constitutes a *hapax* in his production. A second remarkable fact occurs in fact while discussing the allegorical interpretation of the

⁵²⁵ M. Ferrari, *Ernst Cassirer. Dalla scuola di Marburgo alla filosofia della cultura*, op. cit., p. 306.

⁵²⁶ «Ja auch die Welt unserer unmittelbaren Erfahrung – jene Welt, in der wir alle, sofern wir außerhalb der Sphäre bewußter, kritisch-wissenschaftlicher Reflexion stehen, beständig leben und sind – enthält eine Fülle von Zügen, die sich, vom Standpunkt ebendieser Reflexion, nur als mythisch bezeichnen lassen» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, op. cit., p. 17].

myth; in a comparison of the two, Cassirer refers to none other than Creuzer⁵²⁷ and Görres⁵²⁸. While this alone could constitute a precedent of Benjamin's treatment, Cassirer shares with him a strong admiration for these two authors. Just like Benjamin, he recognizes that they have emancipated themselves (at least in intentions) from the Romantic tradition that sought to interpret myth in a sapiential and allegorical key:

Furthermore, both Creuzer in his *The Symbolism and Mythology of Ancient Peoples* and Johann von Görres in his *A History of the Myths of the Asian World* see in myth an allegorical and symbolic language that conceals a secret deeper meaning, a purely ideal content [*Gehalt*] that shines through the pictorial expression itself. On the other hand, if we look at myth itself, at what it is and what it knows itself to be, we see that this separation of the ideal from the real, this divorce between a world of immediate being and a world of mediated signification, this opposition of "image" and "thing" [*Sache*], is alien to it⁵²⁹.

Cassirer refutes the split between "a world of immediate being" and a "world of indirect meaning" – the mythical event divided from its narrative and linguistic interpretation. His intent in this passage is to clarify the autonomy between the mythical event, the mythical image, and the mythological reception. A parallel can be here drawn, as Benjamin in the *Trauerspielbuch* delineates the same research field as the «perspective of the deciphered myth as allegory»⁵³⁰ – a perspective,

⁵²⁷ As for the reception of Creuzer in the German twentieth century as a scholar of ancient mythology and historiography, see A. Momigliano, *Friedrich Creuzer and Greek Historiography*, in "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", vol. 9, 1946, pp. 152-163.

⁵²⁸ Although in historical, if not philosophical-political terms, Otto von Brunner was one of the few authors to comment on the continuity between Schelling, Görres and Cassirer on the notion of myth, interpreted in its symbolic guise. Please refer to: O. von Brunner, *Vom Gottesgnadentum zum monarchischen Prinzip Der Weg der europäischen Monarchie seit dem hohen Mittelalter*, in "Vorträge und Forschungen", 1956.

⁵²⁹ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythical Thinking*, op. cit., p. 48; «Creuzers *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* wie Görres' *Mythengeschichte der asiatischen Welt* sehen beide im Mythos eine allegorisch-symbolische Sprache, die einen geheimen tieferen Sinn, einen rein ideellen Gehalt, der durch den bildhaften Ausdruck hindurchscheint, in sich birgt. Blickt man dagegen auf den Mythos selbst hin, auf das, was er ist und als was er selbst sich weiß, so erkennt man, daß gerade diese Trennung des Ideellen vom Reellen, diese Scheidung zwischen einer Welt des unmittelbaren Seins und einer Welt der mittelbaren Bedeutung, dieser Gegensatz von "Bild" und "Sache", ihm fremd ist. [E. Cassirer, E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, op. cit., p. 47].

⁵³⁰ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, op. cit., p. 343.

moreover, that undoubtedly «plays a certain role in Creuzer»⁵³¹. The temporal distinction, proposed by Creuzer and Görres (and analysed by Benjamin the following year) is posed by Cassirer in terms of a “distance”, that is, a separation between the ideal and the real. A distance and an opposition that «is completely foreign»⁵³² to the pure and symbolic myth and that only exists in the moment of retrospective interpretation.

It is in this sense that in Benjamin’s elaboration the symbol and the myth share a “familiarity” (*Analogie und Verwandtschaft*, if we want to use a Benjaminian expression), or at least a promiscuity in the treatment left in the *Trauerspielbuch*. This continuity is especially grounded in a precise choice; in order to settle the question of the symbolic, Benjamin turns to that portion of tradition that had reshaped the approach to myth through its symbolical structure. If historically contextualized, this is not a required step. On the contrary, it is deeply affected by the research landscape that the Warburg Kreis was promoting in those same years. The common feature of this tradition is that of having applied the aesthetic concept of symbol to the interpretation of myth, dismantling a solid approach deeply rooted in the German culture: This «new interpretation of symbolical and mythical thinking was inaugurated by Herder, Schelling, and their circle; it was further developed by J. Görres, and ultimately culminated in the Swiss School of late Romanticism, of which J.J. Bachofen was the most prominent representative»⁵³³. As Alexander Altmann had rightly observed, this renewed way inaugurated by Romanticism develops methodologically in two strands. The first has a genealogical penchant; it thus reinterprets symbols as the remnants of a «broken-down mythology»⁵³⁴, much in the way of Bachofen⁵³⁵, who considered the myth as «the

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*

⁵³² *Ibid.*

⁵³³ A. Altmann, *Symbol and Myth*, in “Philosophy” vol. 20, no. 76, July 1945, pp. 162-171, here p. 163.

⁵³⁴ This notion, which as will be seen is particularly illuminating for defining Benjamin’s relationship with mythology in the *German Baroque drama*, is borrowed from Altmann from the studies of the religious scholar H. J. D. Astley, who deals with Bachofen’s approach in his *Biblical Anthropology*.

⁵³⁵ For an overview of Benjamin’s debt towards Bachofen’s method of approach and to understand its use outside the narrow sphere of the study, see J. Mali, *The Reconciliation of Myth. Benjamin’s Homage to Bachofen*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, vol. 60, no. 1, Jan. 1999, pp. 165-187.

exegesis of the symbol»,⁵³⁶ that is, a narrative structure that unfolds a precise moment of signification. The second approach, on the other hand, investigates the myth in its symbolic and operational dimension. Myth is here an epistemological tool for the orchestration of individual and/or collective experience (in cultural, perceptual, and social terms). These two approaches are obviously complementary, as both entrust the *myth* with a temporal priority over *mythology*. What distinguishes them is a different research purpose. Albeit from two different points of view, the two best known thinkers who took this symbolic perspective on the myth were, in those years, Ernst Cassirer and Carl Gustav Jung⁵³⁷. Both authors have a certain resonance in Benjamin's work⁵³⁸, and both have reworked this new interconnection of myth and symbol departing from the same premises, albeit sticking to methodologically reversed perspectives. Indeed, if for Jung the assumption is that «symbolic thinking is mythical thinking»⁵³⁹, for Cassirer myth is at the same time *Lebensform* and a *forma formans*. In this sense it is right to underline that, despite some interpretative misunderstandings⁵⁴⁰, it is now well established that Cassirer considered, at least in part, symbolization through myth as a specific formative activity, and not only as an atavistic characteristic, supplanted by scientific

⁵³⁶ A. Altmann, *Symbol and Myth*, in "Philosophy" *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁵³⁷ «Benjamin would have published in the "Frankfurter Zeitung" a article For the sixty years of Karl Wolfskehl. And he would continue to study the works of Klages and Bachofen until the end: in 1934-35 he wrote an essay on Bachofen (OC, I, 223-36) and in the late 1930s he would design a text on the role of the archetype in the work of Klages and Carl Gustav Jung» [H. Eiland & W. Jeggins, *Walter Benjamin. A critical life*, *op. cit.*, p. 285.]

⁵³⁸ Here the relationship between Jung and Benjamin will be treated in a non-extensive way. As regards the question of the symbolic in these two authors, please refer once again to the study: M. Charles, *On the conservatism of post-Jungian criticism: competing concepts of the symbol in Freud, Jung and Walter Benjamin*, in "International Journal of Jungian Studies", vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 120-139.

⁵³⁹ A. Altmann, *Symbol and Myth*, in "Philosophy" *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁵⁴⁰ Here we agree with M. Ferrari who found an excessively positivistic reading of Cassirer's epistemology in the text by S. Ferretti, *Il demone della memoria. Simbolo e tempo storico in Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky*, Marietti, Casale Moferrato 1984. [Cf. M. Ferrari, *Il tempo e la memoria. Warburg, Cassirer e Panofsky in una recente interpretazione*, in "Rivista di Storia della Filosofia", vol. 42, no. 2, 1987, pp. 305-319, here p. 313]. It is generally safe to say that the main scholars who worked on Cassirer's *Nachlaß*, and on the holistic project of the last volume of the *philosophy of symbolic forms*, are immune from this misunderstanding. However, it is indubitable that Cassirer's English text, *The Myth of the State*, strongly highlights the risk of a predominance of this symbolic form over the others. Contradiction with the *Nachlass* materials is however only apparent; if in fact the project of the *Metaphysics of symbolic forms* is aimed at a general «reunification of the previously analysed forms», *The Myth of the State* uses a broader notion of myth of a more anthropological and political character [Cf. D. Coskun, *The Politics of Myth. Ernst Cassirer's Pathology of the Totalitarian State*, in "Perspectives on Political Science", vol. 36, no. 3, 2007, pp. 153-167].

thought⁵⁴¹. The terms of Cassirer's analysis of mythical experience are in fact always those borrowed from the functionalistic analysis of language: it is always *energeia* (*Tätigkeit*) and not *ergon* (*Werk*); not a product, but an active production of signification⁵⁴². Despite the differences, the common feature of these two thinkers is that they have developed the idea of myth as an experiential and cognitive structuring tool. Jung analysed the archetypal-symbolic stability of the myth, while Cassirer investigated its formative function: It is therefore not a question «of causes or anthropological foundations, but of a “phenomenology of mythic consciousness” that places the spirit at the center exclusively in its actuality, in the multiplicity of ways of giving shape»⁵⁴³.

Cassirer recognizes a single notion, which stands as the emblem and genesis of this interpretative revolution, *Tautegorie*. This neologism proposes a crasis between ταυτολογία and ἀλληγορία. Often related to Schelling⁵⁴⁴, it was a neologism introduced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge⁵⁴⁵, a word that prompts the consideration of myth as self-significant, as an independent and self-subsisting meaningful core. It must be pointed out that, although it was Schelling who popularized this notion,

⁵⁴¹ In agreement with Verene, the "horizontal" interpretation of Cassirer's thought applies here. From this interpretation it appears that symbolic forms persist and collaborate, without historically developing from one stage to another. «all symbolic forms have equal status in Cassirer's system in that all exist either actually or potentially in each stage of consciousness» [D. Verene, *Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer. The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in “Journal of the History of Ideas” vol. 30, no.1, 1969, pp. 3–46].

⁵⁴² Cassirer uses this polarity several times to distinguish inner activity (*ergon*) from work that takes shape through action (*energeia*). Cf. E. Cassirer, “Die Kantischen Elemente in Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachphilosophie” (1923), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1922–1926], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 16, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2003, p. 132. He borrows and develops it starting from Humboldt's text.

⁵⁴³ M. Ferrari, *Ernst Cassirer. Dalla scuola di Marburgo alla filosofia della cultura*, cit. p. 306.

⁵⁴⁴ The reception of Schelling's study of the myth was mediated not only by the classical tradition of German philosophy, but also by the Talmudic and Kabbalistic interpretation in the 19th century. For a brief reconstruction of this link: P. Franks, *Mythology, essence, and form: Schelling's Jewish reception in the nineteenth century*, in “International Journal of Philosophy and Theology”, vol. 80, no. 1-2, 2019, pp. 71-89.

⁵⁴⁵ For a reconstruction of the genesis of this notion in Coleridge and its extensive reception and elaboration by Schelling, we recommend the text by E. J. Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014. The author defends the British patronage of this concept with some animosity, writing in this regard that: «The ideological overvaluation of the German tradition stems in part from a historical forgetting of where and how it inherits and transforms British materials» [*Ibid.* p.10].

its roots can be found in the studies of Karl Philipp Moritz (1756-1793)⁵⁴⁶ and in his *Götterlehre oder Mythologische Dichtungen der Alten* (1791). According to Cassirer, this text induced Schelling, and the authors who followed his path, «to free the myth from any doctrinal content»⁵⁴⁷ and «to analyse [it] only through its symbolic value»⁵⁴⁸:

Like Herder in the philosophy of language, Schelling overcomes in his philosophy of mythology the principle of allegory; like Herder, Schelling turns back from the apparent explanation through allegory to the basic problem of symbolic expression. The allegorical interpretation of the mythical world [*Mythenwelt*] is replaced by the *tautegorical* one - i.e. by one that takes the mythical figures [*mythischen Gestalten*] as autonomous structures [*Gebilde*] of the mind, which have to be understood from within themselves, sense-bestowing and gestalt-bestowing [*Sinn- und Gestaltgebung*].⁵⁴⁹

This interpretation of the myth as a self-contained, independent, and non-interpretable form of knowledge would overcome the allegorical interpretation of myths (*allegorischen Mythendeutung*). The root of this interpretative form is placed by Cassirer in the fifth century, during what he defines the “Greek Enlightenment”. He speaks of a period partially rooted in a popular philosophy that seeks wisdom validation in the myth, a content of truth to be “activated” and “extracted”.

⁵⁴⁶ Despite this genealogy, Cassirer refers to the notion of tautegory ascribing it only to Schiller. Karl Philipp Moritz, although present and somewhat recurrent in the Cassirerian corpus, is never mentioned for his research on myth, but usually for his contribution to German aesthetics, with the work *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* (1788) and for his intellectual relationship with Goethe and Schiller. The most extensive treatment is found in fact in the chapter dedicated to Schiller [*Schiller. Freiheitsproblem und Formproblem in der klassischen Ästhetik*] in E. Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form. Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (1916), *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁵⁴⁷ F. Moiso, *La filosofia della mitologia di F.W.J. Schelling. Dagli inizi all'Introduzione storico-critica*, (ed.) M. V. d'Alfonso, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2014, p. 10.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁹ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythical Thinking*, *op. cit.*, p. 5 (traduction slightly modified); «Wie Herder in der Sprachphilosophie, so überwindet Schelling in der Philosophie der Mythologie das Prinzip der Allegorie – wie dieser geht er von der scheinbaren Erklärung durch die Allegorie auf das Grundproblem des symbolischen Ausdrucks zurück. Die allegorische Deutung der Mythenwelt wird von ihm durch die *tautegorische ersetz* – d.h. durch eine solche, die die mythischen Gestalten als autonome Gebilde des Geistes nimmt, die aus sich selbst, aus einem spezifischen Prinzip der Sinn- und Gestaltgebung begriffen werden müssen» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, *op. cit.*, p. 5]

According to Cassirer, this method of sapiential extraction from the mythical world continued effortlessly from Greek to Romantic philosophy:

It is with this that the sophistry used to prefer to practice and test the power of its newly founded “wisdom doctrine” [*Weisheitslehre*]. The myth is understood and “explained” [*erklärt*], that it, is translated into the terminology of popular philosophy, and in that it is conceived as the cladding of a truth, be it speculative, be it scientific or ethical.⁵⁵⁰

In researching the main pre-romantic approaches to myth, Cassirer also comes across the Euhemerist tradition⁵⁵¹. Little preoccupied with doctrinal contents, more causalist and logicist, Euhemerism brings the narratological structure of the myth back to historical reality, enveloping great events and historical characters within a mythical aura that can only but leave fabulous traces behind. This more rationalist and positivistic approach is characterized by the propensity to explain and justify the mythic content with real events (even prodigious ones) – whether they may be natural or historical.

The concept of tautegory sums up the renewed approach to myth that was partly accepted by German Romanticism. At the same time, it reshapes the *liaison* between allegory, symbol and myth. Cassirer’s pronouncement on the works of Görres and Creuzer starts from this point: in Cassirer’s interpretation, despite their tautegorical approach, both authors end up reproposing a representational scheme within the myth, still haunted by the interpretative layers typical of medieval allegoresis (subdivided in “anagogical”, “allegorical” and “mystical” levels). Remarkably, this criticism is not unlike that advanced by Benjamin. Despite such debris of “old”

⁵⁵⁰ «Sie ist es, an der die Sophistik die Kraft ihrer neugegründeten “Weisheitslehre” mit Vorliebe zu üben und zu erproben pflegt. Der Mythos wird begriffen und “erklärt”, indem er in die Begriffssprache der Popularphilosophie umgesetzt, indem er als Einkleidung einer, sei es spekulativen, sei es naturwissenschaftlichen oder ethischen Wahrheit gefaßt wird» [E. Cassirer, “Zur Philosophie der Mythologie” (1924), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1922–1926], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 16, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2003, p. 166].

⁵⁵¹ The recent text by N. Roubekas offers a distinct picture of this interpretative method up to the present day, outside the Romantic tradition, with particular attention to Medieval and Renaissance evolution: N. Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion: Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present*, Taylor & Francis, Milton Park 2016. For the difference between euhemerist and symbolic interpretation see esp. pp. 156-158.

interpretative theory, the tautology reveals to Cassirer a functionalistic method to include myth as one of the three symbolic forms. In fact, he quotes Schelling's words⁵⁵² in this regard, acknowledging that he has reached the description in «the highest form of objectivity»⁵⁵³:

The content of the process is not merely imagined [*vorgestellte*] potencies, but the *potencies themselves* – which create consciousness, and which create nature (because consciousness is only the end of nature) and for this reason are also real powers. The mythological process has nothing to do with *objects* of nature [*Naturobjecten*], but rather with the pure creating potencies whose original product is consciousness itself. Thus, it is here where the explanation fully breaks through into the objective realm, becomes fully *objective*.⁵⁵⁴

In this perspective, it is not a question of discussing the meaning of a myth, nor of tracing its historical roots, but of understanding its formative moment, its functional structuring of the experience. The myth thus becomes a method to «give meaning and comprehension [*Prinzip der Sinn- undbegriffen*]»⁵⁵⁵ to experience: it presupposes mythical figures [*mythischen Gestalten*] as autonomous structures [*Gebilde*] of the mind, which have to be understood from within themselves, from «a specific principle of giving meaning and shape»⁵⁵⁶.

This “tautogoric reason” of the mythical experience is proper to all symbolic forms identified by Cassirer: each one tends to build its own objectivity through its own modes of production, generating and articulating itself within its own symbols (*selbstgeschaffenen Symbolen*). This interpretation contains the two main features

⁵⁵² Cf. The pages quoted by Cassirer in F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, (eds.) K. F. A. Schelling, Stuttgart-Augsburg 1856-61, vol. 5, pp. 407-11.

⁵⁵³ E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵⁵⁴ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythical Thinking*, *op. cit.*, p. 10; (traduction slightly modified); «Der Inhalt des Processes sind nicht bloß *vorgestellte* Potenzen, sondern die *Potenzen selbst* – die das Bewußtseyn, und da das Bewußtseyn nur das Ende der Natur ist, die die Natur erschaffen, und daher auch wirkliche Mächte sind. Nicht mit *Naturobjecten* hat der mythologische Proceß zu thun, sondern mit den reinen erschaffenden Potenzen, deren ursprüngliches Erzeugniß das Bewußtseyn selbst ist. Hier also ist es, wo die Erklärung vollends ins Objective durchbricht, ganz *objectiv* wird» [*Ibid.*].

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

that Benjamin will ascribe to the symbol in the *Trauerspielbuch*: self-containing and self-transparency; it is clear how the tautegoric principle, if inserted in the morphological context, participates in the most extreme polarity identified by Goethe, that of the magnet, in which we have complete elision and superimposition of explanation and phenomenon: «The symbol is a tautegory, it does not mean something, but it is that something, thus assuming, unlike allegory but also the pure contingent image, a world redeemed from any dualism, a plane in which *Urbild* and *Bild* coincide, where the particularity is revealing as it is a metamorphic variation of the original phenomenon»⁵⁵⁷.

Contrary to Benjamin, Cassirer starts from this tradition but does not seek the revelation of the original phenomenon through metamorphic variation. He rather considers metamorphism as the only true object of knowledge. The mediation of content, and the understanding of its laws of formation – that is the true object of epistemological research in the context of cultural and material production: «Cassirer labels the philosophy of symbolic forms point of view “tautegorical”. Here that means understanding the respective production of images as autonomous mental creations, “which one must understand from within by knowing the way in which they take on meaning and form”»⁵⁵⁸.

Some authors have noted a tautegorical modality in the way Benjamin confronts myth: as Marchesoni rightly notes, the concept of *Rettung* (salvation) applied to the myth would be «the subtraction of the myth from the myth»⁵⁵⁹; in other words, it would imply the enucleation of the tautegorical content of the myth from the interpretative side and, in turn, it would signal a sacralising superimposition. However, it is a reading that takes into consideration the approach that Benjamin will have in dealing with the political myth, as he describes it in his *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (1920-21) and in the *Passagenwerk*: a myth that is based on *Blutgewalt*,

⁵⁵⁷ T. Griffero, “Immagini con o senza cartiglio. Dall’emblema all’ermeneutica pittorica di Ernst Gombrich”, in *L’arte e i linguaggi della percezione. L’eredità di Sir Ernst H. Gombrich*, (eds.) R. Bösel, M. G. Di Monte, M. Di Monte, S. Ebert-Schifferer, Electa, Milano 2004, pp. 17-33, here p. 19.

⁵⁵⁸ M. Lauschke, “‘Representation’ and ‘Presence’ in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer”, in *Ernst Cassirer on Form and Technology Contemporary Readings*, (eds.) A. S. Hoel, I. Folkvord, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012, p. 183.

⁵⁵⁹ M. Marchesoni, “L’interruzione del mito”, in F. Carmagnola, *Il mito profanato. Dall’epifania del divino alla favola mediatica*, Meltemi, Milano, 2017, pp. 221-247, here p. 241. (my translation).

which proceeds by a primitivistic sacralisation of the earth and the past, by means of the dream of a lost “*sapientia veterum*”⁵⁶⁰. This kind of considerations stand out against the background of the advent, in the 1930s, of the great totalitarian mythologies, which for Benjamin had to be deconstructed through fragmentation. It is true that in the *Passages* Benjamin aims to «show that allegory is the antidote to myth»⁵⁶¹. As Marchesoni writes, summing up this knot of Benjaminian philosophy: «It is a question of profaning the myth and above all of inhabiting this profanation, instead of degrading it to a preparatory stage for something else, by means of some higher end. The *Rettung* is not at all about preserving the myth. Rather, it is profanation to the extent that, by passing through the deconstruction of the myth, it saves the myth from the myth [...]: if the myth is absolute totality, then there is not outside of the myth (the myth is always tautegoric). At most [...] one can try to open a breach in this totality that claims to be autarchic, that wants to be perfectly immanent in itself. A peculiar idea of salvation, which consists in a sort of crumbling, in a fruitful disintegration from which ruins will emerge - and will never cease to emerge»⁵⁶². This interpretation is certainly correct if we consider the relationship between myth and allegory, but in the light of the notion of tautegory things appear a little different, since the operation of demythologizing the myth, which is described here masterfully, was already on the agenda at the approach of the tautegorical method, which instead of interfacing with a total mythology, referred to a broken-down mythology, to fragments of myth, “captured in their singularity”. The symbolic-tautegorical tradition, to which Benjamin refers to discuss the momentary and intensive quality of the symbol, blossoms precisely – as Cassirer pointed out – to supplant an idea of myth as a general sapiential complex (*Weisheitslehre*)⁵⁶³.

⁵⁶⁰ Cf. W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, p. 348.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*

⁵⁶³ But the tautegoric tradition does not come to Benjamin only through the reading of Cassirer and the romantic mythologists, but also through his respected friend and intellectual Franz Rosenzweig, who had widely used the concept of tautegory to found his own philosophy and mysticism of language. On this topic, see the studies of C. Belloni, *Tautegoria e cipolle. Note per un'ermeneutica della lettera in Schelling e Rosenzweig*, in “Fenomenologia e Società” vol. 23, no. 1, 2000, pp. 124-130; C. Belloni, *Rosenzweig nella scia dell'ultimo Schelling*, Marsilio, Venezia 2002 (especially as regards the chapter “Rivelazione e linguaggio”).

2. Symbolic Configuration Models. Benjamin's Choc between Cassirer, Usener, Goldstein and Uexküll

2.1. The "Sea Change" of – and in – perception. The Symbolic Antrieb

“Wahrnehmung bezieht sich auf Symbole”. Benjamin wrote this sentence in 1917, years before hypothesizing a “historicity of perception”. Benjamin never really outlined an organic theory on this point. Despite this, there are interpretations that place historicity of perception as a primary purpose of his philosophy, while others other see it more as a heuristic method, aimed at understanding anthropological and economic transformations, in the dialectic between *Unterbau* and *Überbau*⁵⁶⁴. As we have already reported in the previous pages, this hypothesis has famously been traced back to the Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte, and therefore to Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl and the studies of Heinrich Wölfflin on artistic styles⁵⁶⁵. At the state of the art, we are therefore within the *Kunstwissenschaft* field, and distant from the neo-Kantian philosophy that Benjamin addressed in his youth⁵⁶⁶. However, the proposal of a historicity of perception - if grasped in its theoretical framework and not in its specific applications - can be traced back to a unitary principle: the idea that technological, cultural, and artistic transformations can modify some of those

⁵⁶⁴ In the introductory essay to the new Italian edition of the *Kunstwerk* (Donzelli, Roma 2019), F. Desideri traces this dispute, claiming the importance of not separating aesthetic reflection from the revolutionary political aims of the text. He recalls how this trend began with the cutting of the first chapter of the French edition (dedicated to the dialectic between *Unterbau* and *Überbau*) for publication in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* by Hans Klaus Brill, on behalf of Horkheimer: «Without that part - Benjamin complains painfully to Horkheimer - the essay was missing of its orientation: that political orientation entrusted to the connection between the first and last chapter». F. Desideri, “I Modern Times di Benjamin”, in W. Benjamin, *L'opera d'Arte nell'Epoca della Sua Riproducibilità Tecnica. Edizione integrale Comprensiva delle Cinque Stesure*, (eds) F. Desideri and M. Montanelli), Donzelli, Roma 2019, pp. VII-XLV, here p. XXII (my translation).

⁵⁶⁵ Cassirer's philosophical interest in these authors, especially Wölfflin, is very late and belongs to the Cassirer of the American period. Only recently has Cassirerian theory been emphasized to the theories of the famous art critic. For a discussion of Cassirer's reception of Wölfflin, see the recent contribution: R. Mermet, “Grundbegriffe/Basisphänomene. Cassirer lecteur de Wölfflin”, in (eds.) D. Cohn and R. Mermet, *L'Histoire de l'Art et Ses Concepts. Autour de Heinrich Wölfflin*, Éditions Rue d'Ulm, Paris 2020, pp. 45-65.

⁵⁶⁶ A point of contact between these two fields of study could have been Panofsky, yet in the previous pages we have seen the suspicion and the low regard that Benjamin had of this author (see pages XX-XX).

that Cassirer and neo-Kantianism defined “the invariants of experience”. In Benjamin, the technological question has rightly received great attention, declined in the binomial *Apparatur-medium of perception*, and in the transition between *first* and *second* technique. Some recent studies (see for example N. Ross ⁵⁶⁷ and J. Sieber) have begun to highlight the more theoretical implications of Benjamin’s treatment of technology. For these authors, Benjamin’s effort is the critique of a process and not of its specific artifactual declinations: «Benjamin’s concept of technique can be said to be non-technological; in other words, technique doesn’t name neither one single technological apparatus nor the sum of all technologies available at one given time. It appointed rather the practical relation to the world as a medium that historically entails different practices and technologies. [...] Technique is the medium in which humanity shapes the world as well as its social relations»⁵⁶⁸ Yet, a more general application of this hypothesis (which goes from the theory of art, to the philosophy of technology, up to the theory of language) can be traced back to a wider philosophical theory of a transcendental matrix, consistent with the Benjaminian project of an *Erkenntniskritik*, aimed at demonstrating that «experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge»⁵⁶⁹. Now, if this passage is implemented, Cassirer is one of the main sources on which to base this parallelism.

The medial interrelation between *téchne* and corporeality features in both Benjamin and Cassirer (but also in Heidegger, whose positions were nonetheless questioned by both Benjamin and Cassirer). To them, this interrelation was an element inherent in the historical and biological path of the mankind. In Benjamin the intertwining between historicity and corporeality appears very clear in the

⁵⁶⁷ We refer here to the recent work by N. Ross, *Walter Benjamin’s First Philosophy: Experience, Ephemerality and Truth*, Routledge, London & New York 2021. This work has a common aim with the present research, connecting the first stage of the Benjaminian philosophy (dedicated to the theory of knowledge) to the last part of Benjamin’s research, more focused on aesthetics and theory of perception.

⁵⁶⁸ J. Sieber, *Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Technique*, in “Anthropology and Materialism”, no. 4 (Art and Technique. A Framework of Unaccomplished Promises), 2019, pp. 1-9, here p. 2.

⁵⁶⁹ “On the Program of Coming Philosophy”, in *Selected Writings I. 1913-1926*, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-111, here p. 108. “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie” (1917-1918), in *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-168.

writing of the early '20s *Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem*⁵⁷⁰ where he writes that «the Corporeal substance is one of the realities that stand within the historical process itself»⁵⁷¹. Benjamin indicates in the binomial corporeality-technology the fundamental link that constitutes “the unity of life”: «In addition to the totality of all its living members, humanity is able partly to draw nature, the non-living, plant, and animal, into this life of the body of mankind [...]. It can do this by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed»⁵⁷². It is a unitary process, an inseparable interrelation, which greatly clarifies the subsequent Benjaminian statement, of the essay on the work of art, according to which «the way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs is conditioned not only by nature but by history»⁵⁷³. This liaison between corporeality and cultural practices is therefore to be considered a stable grounding, a constant inherent in the historical and biological category of the human, a unanimous element of anthropopoiesis. It is in this sense that the hypothesis of a historicity of

⁵⁷⁰ This text extensively discusses Ludwig Klages' theories on *Wahrnehmungspsychologie*. Klages was one of the most controversial, albeit constant, presences in Benjamin's life. Their first contact was during the Freideutsche Jugendtag in Kassel in October 1913. A year later Benjamin, now president of the Free Students in Berlin, contacted Klages to invite him to give a lecture on the rudiments of his *Lebensphilosophie*. From these early youthful contacts, the figure of Klages will be decisive in Benjaminian thought until the 1930s, in which Benjamin planned to write a volume on the collective unconscious (starting with Klages and Jung). The interests in the field of graphology, in the cosmogonic concept of Eros (Benjamin was enthusiastic for the publication of *Kosmogonischen Eros*), and a certain fascination for the particular counter-psychoanalytic conception of Klages, allowed Benjamin not to deviate entirely from this thinker, despite some drifts of his thought foreshadowing, as Georg Lukács later wrote, “a proto-fascist irrationalism” [G. Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, Palmer, London 1980, p. 191]. Benjamin was therefore attracted to aesthetic aeras (especially *Wahrnehmungspsychologie*) of Klagesian theory, rather than the vitalistic and irrationalist project of his *Lebensphilosophie*. The human and intellectual relations between Benjamin and Klages, since their meeting in 1913, are well described by many authors. Refer here summarily to: J. Mc Cole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, Ithaca 1993; M. Pauen, “Eros der Ferne: Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Klages” in *Global Benjamin. Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongreß* 1992, (3 vols.), Klaus Garberand Ludger Rehm., Munich, 1992, vol. 2, pp. 693–716; As regards the specific derivation of the concept of aura from Klages' studies, please refer to: G. Moretti, “Nimbus. Nota sulla Questione dell'Aura in Ludwig Klages”, in *Rivista di estetica*, no. 52, 2013, pp. 149-159; M. Bratu Hansen, *Benjamin's Aura*, in “Critical Inquiry”, vol. 34, no. 2, 2008, pp. 336-375, esp. pp. 353-361.

⁵⁷¹ “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem”, in *Selected Writings I. 1913-1926*, (eds.) M. Bullock and M. W. Jeggins, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 1996, pp. 393-401, here p. 394; “Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem” (1922) [fr. 56], in *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 78-87.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁷³ “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version”, in *Selected Writings III, 1935-1938*, (eds) E. Jephcott and H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) & London 2006, pp. 101-133, here p. 104; “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Zweite Fassung” (1936), in *Gesammelte Schriften VII*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, C. Gödde, H. Lonitz und G. Smith, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1989, pp. 350-384.

perception can be contextualized from a transcendental point of view. We are referring to the lines that open the very illustrious IV paragraph of the second version of the *Kunstwerk*: «Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception»⁵⁷⁴. The question to ask this statement, however, is the following: what are the conditions for obtaining a sea change *of* – and *in* – perception? Can the earlier Benjaminian hypothesis according to “*Wahrnehmung bezieht sich auf Symbole*” shed light on this process? To undertake this path, tentative but paved in the previous pages, we can be escorted by two functional and non-ontological concepts that Benjamin proposes in his writings: that of *choc* and that of *milieu*. This dialectical dyad indicates a precise way in which Benjamin reads the irruption of new portions of objectivity within the individual and collective perception. Indeed, already from the analysis of Weigel’s considerations it emerged that shock constitutes the impulse (*Antrieb*) capable of opening up new artistic and perceptive possibilities. As we will see, the concept of *choc/Antrieb* actively participates in every moment of aesthetic-perceptive reconfiguration: metropolitan life, marked by the *Chockerlebnis*, the fixing of a mnemonic content according to the paradigm of the *choc évocateur*, the hyperaesthesia of the photographic flash, the impulse to a perceptive fruition based on distraction and, finally, the auratic decay. The *milieu (der Wahrnehmung)* is instead the site of reconfiguration, the relational threshold (*Schwelle*) - undeniably transcendental - that connects the subject to the world. If considered from this point of view, Benjamin’s is an extended aesthetic theory that inevitably reflects on the gnoseological and epistemological domain: since every configurative possibility of perception is a new cognitive chance. We know for a fact that Benjamin had a profound understanding of Cassirerian works around the time he drafted the essay on the work of art. From the angle of the present research, this fact can be decisive. Cassirer has in fact reasoned extensively on the possibilities of perception to reconfigure itself, precisely through the production of symbols. Radically, Cassirer considers the manifestation of each portion of objectivity as the unveiling of the ways in which it comes to light: what is perceived is nothing other than the scheme

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

with which it is perceived. In fact, in three very dense lines he writes: «Every symbolic form works in its own way and by its own means to bring about this turn from mere *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself* and, at the same time, achieves with the objective configuration of culture that new way, that particular mode of consciousness that exhibits itself in the human»⁵⁷⁵. Cassirer's aesthetic research is aimed at accounting for these changes in their broadest spectrum, in a game of mirrors ranging from perceptology to the organization of the sciences⁵⁷⁶: it is precisely an investigation aimed at defining the fundamentals of anthropopoiesis, *via* a “cultural idealism”. In the following pages we want to highlight how Cassirer worked extensively on the idea of impulse (*Antrieb*), reflecting on the experience on the relationship between perceptual trauma and environmental alteration. This path of Cassirerian research, which considers the relationship between trauma and the environment, can be articulated mainly through three authors Usener, Goldstein and Uexküll, all participating in Benjamin's research⁵⁷⁷. Under the sign of these authors, we can see how the theory of perception, both in Benjamin and in Cassirer, «is Filled with a tension that is generated between what is understood as a historical passage [...] and the background of nature from which this passage emerges, with ever new configurations»⁵⁷⁸.

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. the interpretation of this excerpt by S. G. Lofts in the introduction to the first volume of the *Symbolic Forms*: «Life as a cultural life is thus a historical process of self-realization in a twofold sense: in the sense of its self-actualization and in the sense of its self-awakening. The life of culture thus must be understood as the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of the historical process» [S. G. Lofts, “Translator's Introduction”, in E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 1: Language, op. cit.*, p. LIV].

⁵⁷⁶ This is indeed the path opened by Helmholtz and followed by Cassirer: «In popularizing these results, he established the relevance of sensory physiology for epistemology and as the foremost proponent of a return to Kant involving closer dialog between science and philosophy, Helmholtz may even be considered “one of the principal founders of the discipline we now call philosophy of science” (Friedman 1997, 19). Both directly, through his own writings, and indirectly, through his student Heinrich Hertz, Helmholtz exerted enormous influence on early scientific structuralists such as Cassirer and Schlick» [A. Isaac, *Realism without tears II. The Structuralist Implications of Sensory Physiology*, in “Studies in History and Philosophy of Science”, no. A, 2019, pp. 11-26, here p. 12].

⁵⁷⁷ Despite clear affinities and biographical intertwining, Uexküll never appears in any of Benjamin's writings. We will see in the following pages how Benjamin's reception of him is probably mediated by reading the writings of Goldstein and Cassirer.

⁵⁷⁸ . Desideri, “I Modern Times di Benjamin”, in W. Benjamin, *L'opera d'Arte nell'Epoca della Sua Riproducibilità Tecnica. Edizione integrale Comprensiva delle Cinque Stesure, op. cit.*, pp. VII-XLV, here p. XXIII (my translation).

2.2. *Augenblicksgötter and Choc*

The concept of *choc* is one of the most fruitful insights of the late Benjamin. The variations of this concept, widely investigated, are many, and all have a deep root in the Benjaminian philosophy of the 1930s. Among these, the following certainly stand out: 1) the citizen's relationship with the perceptive routine of the industrialized metropolis; 2) the perceptual perspectives deriving from the interaction with new media⁵⁷⁹; 3) the traumatic experience of contact with the original unveiled by the auratic decay. This concept is also traced back, with good reason, to Simmel's studies in *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903), and specifically to the phenomenology of the perception of the metropolitan citizen: the Simmelian blasé, overstimulated by the feverish impulses of the industrialized city, is subject to a continuous "intensification of the senses", which leads him to a progressive sensory and existential dulling. As A. Pinotti wrote, focusing on the tactile collisions of Simmelian theory:

It is in the "bustle of the metropolis" (so reminiscent of Baudelaire's "*fourmillante cité*") that "the closeness and narrowness of bodies make it more sensitive to the psychic distance". That degeneration thus develops, called "contact phobia", the fear of to be touched too closely, to be consigned to shocks and to disturbances that derive from immediate proximity and contact with men and things⁵⁸⁰.

What we want to investigate here is instead the configurative capacity of the Benjaminian shock, showing how this concept was part of Cassirer's research as well as pertinent to the main sources consulted by him in the same years. Indeed, not only does Benjamin's shock display this anaesthetic characterization, due to the

⁵⁷⁹ We have already encountered some of these models of the Benjaminian shock, especially in the treatment of S. Weigel and M. Bratu-Hansen. A complete genealogy of this concept and an exhaustive description of its application in Benjamin's philosophy is offered by the thematic and critical anthology by A. Pinotti and A. Somaini (eds.), *Aura e Choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media*, Einaudi, Torino 2012.

⁵⁸⁰ A. Pinotti, "Simmel Filosofo della Città", in G. Simmel, *Roma, Firenze, Venezia*, (ed.) F. Corecco, C. Zürcher, Meltemi, Milano 2017, pp. 7-30, here p. 20 (my translation).

continuous exposure to shock (*Chockerlebnis*)⁵⁸¹; it also triggers a productive one, which is both painful and redemptive: for Benjamin, shock is the moment of demythologization of bourgeois society, the extraction of the work of art from its ethereal envelope – from its *Schein*. In fact: «Whereas the decline of aura entails the crisis of individual attentiveness, the standardization of shock experience in urban everyday life involves the establishment of a new mode of perception»⁵⁸². The aesthetic-political purpose of this “configurative shock” has been scrupulously investigated, as evident from the conclusive pages of the essay on technical reproducibility as well as from thesis XVII of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. Precisely in these theses we can discern and profit from possible a description of the productive and configurative mode of the shock, detailing its ability to give (or give back) form. As Benjamin wrote in the French draft of the Theses:

L’acte de penser ne se fonde pas seulement sur le mouvement des pensées mais aussi sur leur blocage. Supposons soudainement bloqué le mouvement de la pensée – il se produira alors dans une constellation surchargée de tensions une sorte de choc en retour; une secousse qui vaudra à l’image, à la constellation qui la subira, de s’organiser à l’improviste, de se constituer en monade en son intérieur⁵⁸³.

Benjamin proposes a reconfiguration model that proceeds from “intensification” that interrupts the flow of time, producing a shock capable of crystallizing into “a monad”, one of his most recurrent models of the concept of symbol. In the light of the analysis conducted here on the *Vorrede* of the *Trauerspielbuch*, many of the qualities of the symbolic indicated by Benjamin recur in this process: the intensive, momentary, monadic qualities, the interruption of the diachronic of historical time. But above all, the idea of stabilization and “concretion” that reveals a particular

⁵⁸¹ S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images. Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

⁵⁸² J. Kang, *Walter Benjamin and the Media. The Spectacle of Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 2014, p.123.

⁵⁸³ W. Benjamin, “Sur le concept d’histoire”, (1940) in *Gesammelte Schriften I.3*, (eds.) R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 1260-1266, here p. 1265.

model of traumatic and “catastrophic”⁵⁸⁴ symbolization is close to Cassirer’s research. It is also reminiscent of authors who were very familiar to Cassirer and well known by Benjamin. Interpretation diverges here in a twofold way. One declination emphasizes the continuing aspect of shock, the other highlights its momentary and exceptional character. The first is the one which most fits Simmel’s theory, and which also unfolds in Benjamin’s *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939). The main issue at stake here is an «experience [*einer Erfahrung*] for which exposure to shock [*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm»⁵⁸⁵. This line of investigation considers the perceptual routine of the subject exposed to incessant stimulations: «An integral part of a world of technical devices that promote abrupt, fragmentary and interrupted sensations (from the intermittence of telephone conversations to the click of the camera, from the *cluster* of images of the *réclames* published in the newspapers to the solicitations of urban traffic)»⁵⁸⁶. In this perspective, the interpretation linking Benjamin’s work to media theory appears quite appealing; such reading focuses on Benjamin’s analysis of the continuous testing or training of the sensory, which is forced to reconfigure itself due to a series of continuous external stresses. This sensory burden is in turn determined and accommodated by new lifestyles, superimposed by technological apparatuses and metropolitan rhythms. The second interpretative way, which is complementary to this, insists on shock as a singularity, as the instant of irruption of objectivity within the perceptive experience of the subject.

It in this sense – more than in terms of a symbolization – that the concept of *choc* has been interpreted as mnestic stabilization of images, especially in relation to the concept of Freudian trauma⁵⁸⁷. In other words, it is understood as an

⁵⁸⁴ «Das Ideal des chockförmigen Erlebnisses ist die Katastrophe» [W. Benjamin, *Notizen und Varianten zu Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1939), in *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 8 (*Arbeiten zum Passagenwerk und zu Baudelaire*), (ed.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, p. 1182.

⁵⁸⁵ W. Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 614.

⁵⁸⁶ A. Somaini, “L’oggetto attualmente più importate dell’estetica”. *Benjamin, il cinema come Apparat e il “Medium della Percezione”* in “Fata Morgana” no. 20, 2013, pp. 117-146, here p. 143.

⁵⁸⁷ «He thus updates Freud’s theory of trauma, which describes trauma as a state of exception in the mechanisms of memory, in case the threat to the protective shield by external influences should gain normalcy and, as an effect, produce a habitualized mode of behaving» [S. Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images. Walter Benjamin’s Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, p. 364].

exceptionality that attacks the subject, leaving him/her with a wound, a memory belatedly operating through a *Nachträglichkeit*⁵⁸⁸. However, this mnestic function of shock is also accompanied by the persistent idea of a perceptual and cognitive disclosure, bordering on that neutral mediation (or *Unmittelbarkeit*) which, as we have seen, constitutes the stronghold of Benjamin's epistemological-symbolic territory. Returning to Weigel's interpretation, Benjamin's shock (both in its psychological and perceptive form) is always characterized by intensive immediacy producing a state of momentary hyperaesthesia: a state forever peculiar in itself, a "temporal instance" captured in the image of the photographic flash; a phenomenon which is linked by all means to a momentary lapse, like the click of the camera. It is in this sense that M. Bratu Hansen's interpretation of *A Berlin Chronicle* (1932) of the choc/flash dyad also proceeds:

What is illuminated by the flash and thus photographically preserved in memory is neither the content of the message nor the child's room but an image of our "deeper self," separate from and outside our waking, everyday-self, which "rests in another place and is touched by shock [*Choc*] just like the little heap of magnesium powder is shocked by the flame of the match." And, Benjamin concludes suggestively, "it is to this immolation [*Opfer*] of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images"⁵⁸⁹.

Between 1925 and 1930, Cassirer was in turn investigating the reconfiguration possibilities underlying the trauma-environment binomial. He was both interested in perceptual routine and in instantaneous irruptions of a hyperaesthetic moment. This research was conducted leaning heavily on two authors that Benjamin knew well – Kurt Goldstein and Hermann Usener. This genetic link between trauma and

⁵⁸⁸ In the wake of B. Lindner's studies, which have clearly brought out Benjamin's relationship with Freudian psychoanalysis, especially as regards shock-trauma and the formation of the concept of the optical unconscious, N. Werner has recently traced Benjamin's debt towards the Freudian. See: B. Lindner, "Benjamins Transformationen der Psychoanalyse. Eine Rekonstruktion", in *Studien zu Benjamin*, (eds.) J. Nitsche & N. Werner, Kadmos, Berlin 2016, pp. 355–468; N. Werner: *Archäologie des Erinnerens. Sigmund Freud in Walter Benjamins Berliner Kindheit*, Wallstein, Göttingen 2015; N. Werner, "Sigmund Freud Nachträglichkeit, oder: Wie Benjamin das Kontinuum der Zeit aufsprengt", in *Entwendungen. Walter Benjamin und seine Quellen*, (eds.) J. Nitsche & N. Werner, Wilhelm Fink, Munich 2019, pp. 77-96.

⁵⁸⁹ M. Bratu Hansen, *Benjamin's Aura*, in "Critical Inquiry" *op. cit.*, p. 347.

symbolization is less surveyed in Cassirer, despite being the entry point to some deeper aspects of his philosophy. The correlation with Benjamin is particularly interesting because a Simmelian root is also shared. As he himself claims in a commemorative text, Cassirer came to the thought of Hermann Cohen via Simmel's lectures, which he attended as a young student at the University of Berlin⁵⁹⁰: Simmel is described here as a profound thinker, gifted with charisma, prone to excite the souls of a young audience; indeed, this is much the way Benjamin had also described him⁵⁹¹. Despite these acknowledged merits, Simmel becomes a polemical target in the philosophy of Cassirerian maturity. In *Form und Technik* (1930) the Simmelian philosophy of *Tragödie der modernen Kultur* is compared to the vitalistic upheavals of *Lebensphilosophie* – also present in Klages – and examined in its confrontation of rapid technological development. The same will happen in the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*. Inaugurating then a controversy with Bergson, Simmel and Klages, Cassirer will try to untie the contrast between life and spirit (*Geist und Leben*). By so doing, he legitimizes a unitary principle unifying in a single concept the cultural articulation and the basic conditions of experience⁵⁹². This would be, of course, the concept of symbol. However, it must be said that in Simmel's case there we can only speak of a partial controversy: Cassirer recognizes the urgency and dignity of the Simmelian theses, which he does not include in the catalogue of sterile apocalyptic approaches to the technological question; rather, he tends to consider it more of a “spiritual” question. According to Cassirer, Simmel

⁵⁹⁰ «I made a second attempt to find a clue in the labyrinth of the “Critique of Pure Reason” by attending the lectures of Georg Simmel [...]. Simmel was a very original and penetrating thinker. He worked in nearly all the fields of modern philosophy, and later he became one of the first founders of philosophical sociology. At that time, however, he was still a young privatdocent who delivered his lectures before a small but very interested and attentive audience. In one of the first hours he gave a short bibliography of the literature on Kant. And it was on that occasion that I first heard the name of Hermann Cohen» [E. Cassirer, “Hermann Cohen, 1842-1918.” (1943) in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1941-1946], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 24, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2007, p. 163].

⁵⁹¹ Cf. p. 27 of the present work.

⁵⁹² «Cassirer wiederum teilt den bereits von Frischeisen-Köhler an Simmel gewürdigten Gedanken, dass sich das Leben in "seiner inneren und not-wendigen Dualität" analog dem Geist erklärt. Das so verstandene Leben kann "nicht nur als das ursprüngliche Quellgebiet des Geistes, sondern auch als dessen Urbild und Proptotyp" erscheinen. Ist es doch "dieselbe Doppeltheit", die sich "im Sein des Geistes in einer neuen gesteigerten Gestalt darstellt", indem der Geist von sich und um sich weiss. Deshalb vermerkt Cassirer Simmels "Begriffsbestimmung des Geistes" als einem "schlechthin Lebendigen" mit Zustimmung» [C. Möckel, *Das Urphänomen des Lebens: Ernst Cassirers Lebensbegriff*, Felix Meiner, Hamburg 2005, p. 237].

was the first to describe the dyscrasia between man and machine “from the point of view of the spirit”, assuming the inability of the man-system to reintegrate itself into one of its own creations. Cassirer’s own emphasis actually falls on alienated cultural productions as interruptions of the “vital flow” (*Lebensstrom*):

The ego, free subjectivity, created this order of things; but it no longer knows how to embrace it and how to penetrate with itself. The movement of the ego breaks with its own creations; its original life flow decreases, the wider the field of application and the stronger the power of these creations⁵⁹³.

In general terms Cassirer does not accept Simmel’s analysis as the fatal destiny of cultural production. Nevertheless, he further elaborates on this idea of otherness that presents itself to the subject while pondering the configurative impulse of mythical experience. He is however keen on rectifying Simmel’s position by reworking the concept of *lebensfeindlich*: «So the law of meaning, under which stands the inconclusive process of shaping reality by means of symbols, proves by no means “hostile to life” [*lebensfeindlich*], since this law intervenes in the world of living things and, as it were, repeatedly dips back into it»⁵⁹⁴. In fact, if we exclude the considerations of *Form und Technik*, which moves precisely from this Simmelian concerns, Cassirer places his own investigation on symbolic forms in the opposite direction. The “encounter-clash with otherness” is in fact for Cassirer the beginning of the configuration drive, not its epitome: to him, “alienation” via symbolization is but a first, liberating step towards the building of an objectivity – the same process harboured in (and starting from) the first mythical stage, wherein «myth begins with an undifferentiated intuition of efficacy»⁵⁹⁵. In the two-year period between ‘24 and ‘25 Cassirer follows the interest trends of the Warburg

⁵⁹³«Das Ich, die freie Subjektivität, hat diese Sachordnungen geschaffen; aber es weiß sie nicht mehr zu umspannen und nicht mehr mit sich selbst zu durchdringen. Die Bewegung des Ich bricht sich an seinen eigenen Schöpfungen; sein ursprünglicher Lebensstrom verebbt, je größer der Umfang und je stärker die Macht dieser Schöpfungen wird» [E. Cassirer, *Form und Technik*, *op. cit.*, p.172].

⁵⁹⁴ C. Möckel, *Das Urphänomen des Lebens: Ernst Cassirers Lebensbegriff*, *op. cit.*, p. 237 (my translation).

⁵⁹⁵ E. Skidelsky, *From epistemology to cultural criticism: Georg Simmel and Ernst Cassirer*, “History of European Ideas”, vol. 29, no. 3, 2003, pp. 365-381, here p. 373; on this topic see also: W. Geßner, *Geld als symbolische Form. Simmel, Cassirer und die Objektivität der Kultur*, in “Simmel Newsletter”, vol. 6, no. 1, Summer 1996, p. 1–31.

circle and dedicates himself with great profit to the systematic understanding of *Mythischen Welt*. The first outcome of this immersion is *Zur 'Philosophie der Mythologie'*, which will come together a year later as an introduction to the second volume the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Between these two works is the famous *Sprache und Mythos. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen*, inspired by the research of one of Warburg's mentors, the comparativist and philologist Hermann Usener⁵⁹⁶, and directly published by the journal of the Hamburg library.

The urgency to investigate the mythological sphere arises from Cassirer's need to expand Humboldt's morphology of language: dissatisfied with a linguistic production in continuity with a supposedly original language, Cassirer begins to investigate myth, seeking an origin that accounts for the emergence of the linguistic articulation. In *Sprache und Mythos* the mythical world is thus examined: first, an experiential analysis of the myth, which can only take place through the symbolic-*tautegorical* interpretation proposed by Schelling. The second interpretative perspective is instead inaugurated by Usener in his *Götternamen*⁵⁹⁷. Through a tripartite process, Usener traced the birth of linguistic concepts back to a first epiphanic moment, to the appearance of a momentary divinity (*Augenblicksgötter*). The manifestation is realized "inside" the mythical man as an instant configuration, a momentary excitement (*ein schlechthin Momentanes*) that violently bursts «into the excitability [*Reizbarkeit*] of the mythical-religious fantasy»⁵⁹⁸: at this stage there is still no representation or personification – crystallization of divinity through

⁵⁹⁶ It is certain that Benjamin only read Usener after 1923, as can be proved by a letter he sent to Florens Christian Rang (Cf. "W. Benjamin to Florens Christian Rang", Berlin-Grünwald, 23.3.1923, in *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (Electronic edition), vol.10 (*Briefe*), (ed.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, p. 871).

⁵⁹⁷ In addition to the aforementioned interpretations, especially those of Skidelsky (2008) and Krois (2010), the configurative function (also from a perceptive point of view) that Usener's *Götternamen* carries out within *Sprache und Mythos* has been emphasized since the 1950s: how writes C. H. Hamburg: «According to Cassirer, this "apparent overstepping of the usual boundaries of logical inquiry" will do two things for us: it will make us understand more clearly the structure of our perceptually-experienced world from which all rational thought must depart if it is to perform its distinctive task. This point is programmatically put by Usener, a mythologist and philologist much admired and often quoted by Cassirer: "Our epistemology will not have any real foundation until the sciences of language and mythology have revealed the processes of involuntary and unconscious modes of representation» [C. H. Hamburg, *Symbol and Reality. Studies in the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, Springer Netherlands, The Hague 1956, p. 130].

⁵⁹⁸ E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

a hypostasis has not been implemented yet. Indeed, this first impression is not even perceived, but simply felt.

This instantaneous precipitate of objectivity is divided into a representative projection; that is, different divinities who discriminate, becoming discrete and particular (*Sondergötter*), isolable even if not yet deified – hypostatized, so to speak, in a subjectivity. Through this passage, the momentary apparition takes on a form, illuminating itself in the indistinct flow of intermediate forms (*Zwischenformen*); only then can the event that was simply experienced assume the subjective identity of a divinity. For Cassirer, the attempt to describe the theogonic phenomenology is no idle task: just as with Klages⁵⁹⁹, Cassirer sees in Usener's text a heuristic possibility that extends far beyond the mythical sphere and its genetic interpretation. In fact, by recovering the Kantian root of the concept of symbol, which describes the interaction between sensuality and intuition (*Sinnesanschauung*), Cassirer extends Usener's theory within the field of aesthetics. He thus incorporates the theogonic process, placing it as a model of perceptual articulation:

They are different stages of one and the same instinct of symbolic formation, which arise from the same basic act of mental processing: concentration and heightening of simple sensory perception.⁶⁰⁰

Augenblicksgötter are the breakthrough of an objectivity not yet configured through the senses. It is a “non-I” (or “non-ego”) not yet represented, which collides (*kollidiert*) with perceptive and already symbolically articulated routine. Cassirer describes this collision with a quotation mark, which could possibly evoke Georg Simmel's reflections on the phenomenology of nervous life in industrialized metropolises. For Cassirer, the expression of this objectivity manifests itself

⁵⁹⁹ Cassirer considers Klages a pioneer in the study of the expressive function (*Das Ausdrucksphänomen*) in the field of perceptual psychology (*Wahrnehmungspsychologie*). Cf. E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, op. cit., pp. 73-75.

⁶⁰⁰ «Sie sind verschiedene Sprossen ein und desselben Triebes der symbolischen Formung, die aus demselben Grundakt der geistigen Bearbeitung, der Konzentration und Steigerung der einfachen Sinnesanschauung hervorgehen» [E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos*, op. cit., p. 303].

through an “intensification of perception”⁶⁰¹ which occurs from the collision with a non-ego (*Zusammenstoß mit einem Nicht-Ich*)⁶⁰². This perceptual shock establishes the first contact between the senses and a new and not-yet-meaningful portion of objectivity. Otherwise put, it gives “life to a symbol”: a new portion of objectivity has burst open; and it is in the image of the sun and the violence of its light that Usener recognizes the archetype of this configurative faculty of mythical experience. From the description of this first symbolic link, it emerges how Cassirer must have glimpsed the occasion to outline the causes of a hypothetical original language, corroborated by phonemes that recur in different languages to designate the same concept. The perceptive shock leads, in fact, to the release of inner tensions (*inneren Spannung*) through an obligatory reaction, which manifests itself in the emission of a characteristic sound, a phonetic singularity:

“The naming of a thing is not determined by an arbitrary act” Usener emphasizes” One does not create any sound complex in order to introduce it as a sign of a certain thing like a coin. The spiritual excitement that a being in the outside world evokes is at the same time the impetus and the medium of naming⁶⁰³.

Symbolization, as *Augenblicksgötter*, is realized as a compulsion of objectivity on perception, as an imperative of reconfiguration. The shock is placed in this way a moment before what Cassirer identified with the expressive symbolic function (*Ausdrucksfunktion*). This would rather constitute “the first reaction”, the expression whence the long path of configuration of myth and language begins. The

⁶⁰¹ «*Intensivierung der Sinnesanschauung*». The German expression is difficult to translate: the German *Sinnesanschauung* combines *Sinnliche* and *Anschauung*: it could be translated with “perceptual intuition”, here in the sense of an instant reaction of the senses, of a momentary one. Even the interpretations more linked to the mythical-religious sphere do not disregard the perceptive foundation of the theogonic description: «Vergleicht man Symbol mit Metapher, so fällt zunächst auf, dass beide der sprachlichen Intensivierung der Sinnesanschauung und insofern der Wirklichkeitserschließung dienen und dass bei beiden der Dualismus von Sinnlichkeit und Verstand aufgehoben ist» [B. Luscher, *Arbeit am Symbol. Bausteine zu einer Theorie religiöser Erkenntnis im Anschluss an Paul Tillich und Ernst Cassirer*, LIT, Münster, 2008, *op. cit.* p. 203.]

⁶⁰² E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos*, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

⁶⁰³ «“Nicht durch einen willküract”, so betont Usener, “stellt sich die Benennung eines dings fest. Man bildet nicht einen beliebigen lautcomplex, um ihn als zeichen eines bestimmten dings wie eine münze einzuführen. Die geistige Erregung, welche ein in der Außenwelt entgegnetretendes wesen hervorruft, ist gleichzeitig der anstoss und das mittel des benennens» [E. Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos*, *op. cit.*, p.303].

path carries on through a progressive ability to structure objectivity, by which myth and language were initially overwhelmed; on the path, they find themselves capable of expressing it, representing it and signifying it. Unlike Benjamin, who places the rediscovery of the Name, of the original “*naming*”, as the desirable point of arrival of language (as opposed to *Die Willkür der Zeichen*), Cassirer sees in the original sound a traumatic phenomenon, a compulsion from which language tries to escape tending towards convention, towards the discreet and perspicuous sign. But to understand its perceptual implications, this theory must be supported with and related to its own counterpart – in the person of Kurt Goldstein.

2.3. *Choc and “Catastrophic Reactions” in Kurt Goldstein’s Research*

It is not only through the myth that Cassirer investigated the traumatic origin as the first configurative trigger of perception. A parallel can be found in the studies that he conducted alongside his cousin and neurologist Kurt Goldstein. Now, there is a strong diachronical adherence between the research and the works that Cassirer published in the same period; from this angle, the study of myth, concentrated in ‘25, is ideally followed by *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (1929), which Cassirer’s work most indebted to Goldstein’s thought. However, if such editorial consistency is ignored, the perspective changes abruptly. Reflecting the aims of his own work, Cassirer worked on second and third volumes of the symbolic forms at once. Alongside the drive imparted by the Warburg Kreis towards analysis of mythical consciousness⁶⁰⁴, Cassirer’s interest in Goldstein’s neurolinguistic research - as we would call it today - was already vivid and aware⁶⁰⁵ by 1924. This

⁶⁰⁴ As has already been highlighted, Tito Vignoli’s impulse on the Hamburg Kreis, and even earlier on Usener, was decisive in the development of this particular physiological-perceptive approach to myth. Cf. M. Rampley, *From Symbol to Allegory. Aby Warburg’s Theory of Art*, in “The Art Bulletin”, 1997, Vol. 79, No. 1, 1997, pp. 41-55, esp. p. 46; As for an examination of Vignoli’s studies, please refer to the monograph by E. Canadelli, “*Più positivo dei positivisti*”. *Antropologia, psicologia, evolucionismo in Tito Vignoli*, ETS, Pisa 2013.

⁶⁰⁵ For the reconstruction of the editorial events, the second and third volumes of the Symbolic Forms rely here on the excellent considerations of A. Mètraux, *Philosophy, Neurology, and the Pathology of Symbolic Consciousness: On two unpublished letters from Ernst Cassirer to Kurt Goldstein*, in “Science in Context”, vol. 12, no. 4, Winter 1999, pp. 645 – 660. This text offers an excellent reconstruction of the relationship between Cassirer and Goldstein prior to the publication

affiliation succeeded despite the philosopher's self-declared poor skills, unfit – by his own admission – to a rigorous approach to this disciplinary field. At any rate, forays into neurological and psychopathological research proved instrumental in consolidating Cassirer's epistemological model. He himself places these studies at the head of his philosophical project, as a filter to survey the results obtained from the two previous volumes:

As a consequence, we must strive to bring the teachings of pathology, which cannot be ignored, into the more general problem of a philosophy of culture. Can the pathological alterations in speech and in the related basic symbolic performances provide a clue as to what these performances signify for the construction and the total structure of culture? [*Aufbau und Gesamtgestalt der Kultur*]?⁶⁰⁶

It was shortly after, already in March 1925, that Cassirer left for Frankfurt. There, he visited the clinic where Goldstein and Ademar Gelb were conducting their research on patients suffering from those pathologies that he will identify as *Pathologie des Symbolbewußtseins* (pathologies of symbolic consciousness). These pathologies were investigated by Goldstein through continuous clinical monitoring, protracted at times for more than ten years, of patients who had undergone «lesions of the motor, sensory, and visual areas and of the frontal lobes, cerebellum, and vestibular apparatus»⁶⁰⁷. The localized injuries of these patients, who were mainly veterans of WW1, allowed Goldstein to establish a direct correlation between the physical trauma and the psychological-cognitive response. However, it should be emphasized that these precise correlations were intended by Goldstein in a holistic sense: his studies, as confirmed by the 1934 publication *The Organism*, were aimed

of the third volume of the philosophy of symbolic forms (therefore the second half of the 1920s), clearly showing how these two disciplinary fields (myth and neurology) were interconnected during the writing of texts on the world mythical.

⁶⁰⁶ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 3: Phenomenology of Cognition*, op. cit., p. 314; «Läßt sich den pathologischen Veränderungen der Sprache und der mit ihr verwandten symbolischen Grundleistungen ein Hinweis darauf entnehmen, was diese Leistungen für den Aufbau und für die Gesamtgestalt der Kultur bedeuten?» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (1929) op. cit., p. 319].

⁶⁰⁷ K. Goldstein, *Aftereffects of brain injuries in war: their evaluation and treatment. The application of psychologic methods in the clinic*, Grune & Stratton, New York- London, 1942.

at evaluating the patient as an “organic complex”. Therefore every alteration was considered as a trigger of an overall reconfiguration of the whole organism-patient.

The exchange between Cassirer and Goldstein was specular and of mutual benefit. Cassirer found in neurology a positive model for the confirmation and development of his theories, while Goldstein saw in the complex cultural phenomenology an interpretative grid for orderly placing his own experimental results. Cassirer reclaims the importance of this interdisciplinary exchange in the third volume of the *Symbolic Forms*, writing that: «Above all, I have to thank Goldstein at this point for repeatedly demonstrating to me a large number of the illnesses to which his publications refer and for actually enabling me to understand them more precisely⁶⁰⁸». Indeed, the study of pathologies such as aphasia, agnosia and apraxia allowed Cassirer not only to consider the morphological processes of configuration between language and cognition; they also redirected him towards the impulse, the very origin of this continuous configurative need. As in the shock experienced by Usener’s *Augenblicksgötter*, Cassirer identified the stimulus – in brain trauma as well as in environmental shock – as an impulse to reconfigure the entire organism-subject, his perception and his cognition. To understand this aspect, one must refer to the general investigation perspective used by Goldstein: psyche works through “catastrophic reactions”, that is, a continuous effort to configure to internal and external stress of “an organism” «confronted with a task that it could not face»⁶⁰⁹, namely a “shock”. This productive view of trauma contrasts with Freud’s one, which sees the response to trauma as an attempt to reconfigure what preceded it:

For Goldstein the brain is constantly in a state of active *shock* and even arranges “*slight catastrophic reactions*” in the act of coming to terms with the world. It is

⁶⁰⁸ «Goldstein habe ich vor allem auch an dieser Stelle dafür zu danken, daß er mir eine große Zahl der Krankheitsfälle, auf die sich seine Publikationen beziehen, wiederholt demonstriert und daß er mir hierdurch ihr genaueres Verständnis erst eigentlich erschlossen hat» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, (1929) *op. cit.*, p. 319].

⁶⁰⁹ We quote here G. Gainotti who works operationally on Goldstein's research. He interprets the notion of “catastrophic reaction” only from a psychopathological point of view. In reality, seen in his general program, also through Cassirer’s research, it is clear that this “configurative effort” is common to psychopathological subjects as much as to healthy individuals. See G. Gainotti, *Emotional Behavior and Hemispheric Side of the Lesion*, in “Cortex”, vol. 8, no. 1, March 1972, pp. 41–55. Here the reading offered by Pasquinelli and the aforementioned Métraux is preferred.

worth noting that in the same years, around 1920, Sigmund Freud was developing the theory of the death drive, in which a biological primacy is granted to inorganic matter, and trauma is defined negatively as the inability to restore a previous state⁶¹⁰.

Unlike Freud, Goldstein's "catastrophic reaction" is not aimed at restoring a previous and lost stage. It rather signals the incessant quest for an ever-new configuration. This concept is also the linchpin of Goldstein's psychopathology, wherein various pathologies are interpreted as different ways of shaping and acquiring the surrounding environment. As summarized in one recent survey of Goldstein's studies by M. Pasquinelli: «For Goldstein, both normal and abnormal behaviours are the result of the brain's antagonism with the environment: abnormal states of mind are an expression of adaptation as much as the normal states are»⁶¹¹. Particularly suitable for this investigation is the study of aphasia. When analysed from a neurolinguistic point of view, this pathology reveals to the doctor the configurative efforts that an organism mobilises to seize the surrounding world linguistically and perceptively. This reconfiguration tension pertains to the whole organism, to all its perceptual, cognitive and emotional functions:

«Alterations in a person's symbolic capacities did not just influence their thought; it changed everything: the patient's perceptions, capacities for action, and even the patient's personality, their attitudes to others and their own self-relationship. Cassirer came to realize that the source of language was a general symbolic function that survived in different ways even in patients suffering from different kinds of aphasia and other neurological disorders»⁶¹².

However, too much insistence on the psychopathological aspect may overshadow that theory of experience which cemented the partnership between Cassirer and Goldstein. As the previous passage suggests, the question Cassirer

⁶¹⁰ M. Pasquinelli, "The Alien Hand of the Technosphere: Kurt Goldstein and the Trauma of Intelligent Machines", in *Technosphere Magazine*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, web publication, November 2016.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹² J. M. Krois, *The Priority of 'Symbolism' over Language in Cassirer's Philosophy*, in "Synthese", vol. 179, no. 1, 2011, pp. 9-20, here p. 12.

poses around these pathologies concerns the dubious role of the symbolic faculty play, regardless of language, myth, cultural activities. In other words, he investigates the configurative impulse *before* its own configuration possibilities. Human experience, in its broadest and most holistic sense, was considered by Goldstein as an incessant configurative effort, stimulated by environmental micro-traumas: small shocks triggered by an objectivity that is un-configured, disordered, and temporarily still extra-environmental. In open contrast to the anaesthetic attributes in the routine of collisions in Simmelian shocks, Goldstein assigns a productive capacity to these continuous and incessant stimuli *in their singularity*. The organism is constantly in a state of reactive inadequacy towards its environment: «The organism never lives in a completely adequate *milieu* but must continuously assert itself against inadequate stimuli, that is, against stimuli that evoke isolated effects»⁶¹³.

The shock model explicitly proposed by Goldstein can certainly fit in the series of references scattered in Benjamin, from Simmel and Freud up to Proust and Baudelaire. In fact, compared to other concepts such as that of “*choc évocateur*” or “*memoire involontaire*”, Goldstein’s model focuses on the dynamic reconfiguration of the subject’s perceptual and cognitive *milieu* (which, again, is different from the “restoration” proposed by the Freudian elaboration of trauma). Moreover, the relationship traced by Goldstein’s lexicon between “shock and catastrophe” appears several times, directly or indirectly, in Benjamin’s writings of the second half of the 1930s⁶¹⁴. In a side note to *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939) Benjamin clearly explicit this correlation: «Das Ideal des chockförmigen Erlebnisses ist die Katastrophe»⁶¹⁵. This is not surprising; as we have seen, Benjamin was directly acquainted with Goldstein. Moreover, the neurologist had personally treated Asja Lācis, and Benjamin had read and appreciated his studies to the highest degree. From a strictly philosophical point of view, this appreciation clearly shows at the

⁶¹³ K. Goldstein, *The Organism. A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man*, (1934), with a foreword by O. Sacks, Zone Books, New York 1955, p. 227.

⁶¹⁴ Cf. O. Clarinval, *La Mémoire de l'Histoire chez Proust et Benjamin*, in “The French Review”, vol. 82, no. 5, 2009, pp. 994-1003;

⁶¹⁵ W. Benjamin, “Notizen und Varianten zu Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire” (1939), in *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 8, (*Arbeiten zum Passagenwerk und zu Baudelaire*), (ed.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, p. 1182

end of the essay on *Sprachsoziologie*: Benjamin directly quotes an excerpt from *L'analyse de l'aphasie et l'étude de l'essence du langage* (1933), placing Goldstein's studies at the spearhead of the new methodologies that were then restructuring the philosophy of language. Benjamin reports this passage from Goldstein noting that «it is this insight that expressly or implicitly stands at the beginning of the sociology of language»⁶¹⁶:

What we have seen is language in cases wherein it is only suitable as an instrument. Even in normal people, it comes to pass that language is only used as an instrument [...] But this instrumental function presupposes that language basically represents something completely different from what it used to be for the patient before the illness brought him to other configurational modes [...] As soon as man uses language to establish a living relationship with himself or with his own kind, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a mean, but a manifestation, a revelation of our innermost being and the psychic bond that connects us to ourselves and to our kinship⁶¹⁷

In keeping with his writing *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin turns here to Goldstein's studies to emphasize the productive capacity of language, which constitutes the psychic structure of both individual and social praxis. This obviously clashes with a reduction of language to a communicative and representational function. The excerpt quoted above gathers two fundamental categories of Goldstein's research, namely that of the "concrete" (*konkreten*) attitude of language, as opposed to the "abstract" (*abstrakten*). Goldstein had noted that in aphasic patients, language tended to attach in practical action, interrupting any symbolic or analogue operation: one famous exemplary case, commented by

⁶¹⁶ «Diese Einsicht ist es, die ausdrücklich oder stillschweigend am Anfang der Sprachsoziologie steht» [W. Benjamin, *Probleme der Sprachsoziologie* (1935), *op. cit.*, p. 480].

⁶¹⁷ «Sprache in den Fällen, in denen sie nur noch zum Instrument taugt. Auch beim normalen Menschen kommt es vor, daß die Sprache nur als Instrument gebraucht wird [...] Aber diese instrumentale Funktion setzt voraus, daß die Sprache im Grunde etwas ganz anderes darstellt, wie sie auch für den Kranken ehemals, vor der Krankheit, etwas ganz anderes dargestellt hat [...] Sobald der Mensch sich der Sprache bedient, um eine lebendige Beziehung zu sich selbst oder zu seinesgleichen herzustellen, ist die Sprache nicht mehr ein Instrument, nicht mehr ein Mittel, sondern eine Manifestation, eine Offenbarung unseres innersten Wesens und des psychischen Bandes, das uns mit uns selbst und unseresgleichen verbinde» [The cuts we made in Goldstein's quote are the same ones made by Benjamin (*Ibid.*)].

Cassirer, is often remembered: a patient was asked to lie about the climate outside the clinic. Although he consciously wanted to lie by saying that it was sunny outside, he could not, and ended up saying that it was raining⁶¹⁸. Another remarkable case was that of an aphasic patient, who was asked to utter the following sentence: “the snow is black”. Although the patient was able to pronounce the words that made up the sentence separately, he was not able to pronounce the full utterance, and he was forced to say the truth – that the snow was white⁶¹⁹. These studies were aimed at demonstrating that when deprived of the symbolic faculty, language was forced to an instrumental and descriptive function. However, the same dyad was used by Goldstein to analyse the movements of apraxic patients:

Another patient cannot raise his hand as if to make an oath when asked to do so; however, he places it in the correct position as soon as the words of the oath are recited to him. To express differences [*Differenzen*] of this kind, a distinction has been made between “concrete” and “abstract” movements. Abstract movements refer to isolated, voluntary movements made on demand; concrete movements refer to those movements of everyday life that are made more or less automatically in certain situations.⁶²⁰

It is indeed curious that Benjamin should cut some sentences out of Goldstein’s quote above, including – surprisingly enough – the following: «La fonction instrumentale du langage suppose la fonction représentative, c’est-à-dire une attitude générale très déterminée, l’attitude symbolique et catégorielle

⁶¹⁸ Cf. E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (1929) *op. cit.*, pp. 259-261.

⁶¹⁹ Cf. K. Goldstein, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1940, p. 55.

⁶²⁰ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 3: Phenomenology of Cognition*, *op. cit.*, p. 304; «Ein anderer kann auf Geheiß die Hand nicht zum Schwur erheben; aber er gibt ihr sofort die richtige Stellung, sobald ihm die Worte der Schwurformel vorgesprochen werden. Man hat, um Differenzen dieser Art zum Ausdruck zu bringen, zwischen “konkreten” und “abstrakten” Bewegungen unterschieden. Unter den letzteren versteht man hierbei isolierte Willkürbewegungen, die auf Aufforderung hin gemacht werden; unter den ersteren die Bewegungen des täglichen Lebens, die sich in bestimmten Lagen mehr oder weniger automatisch einstellen» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (1929) *op. cit.*, p. 307].

justement»⁶²¹. This is particularly interesting because, as we already said, Goldstein's research thoroughly partakes theoretical assumptions and tenets that Cassirer had previously offered. Only a few pages before the passage quoted above, Goldstein himself directly namechecks Cassirer; together with Humboldt, he appears as the one who managed to penetrate the profound link between environment and word, between objectivity and language:

Ce sont même ces faits là qui offrent le plus d'intérêt pour la psychologie et la philosophie du langage, puisqu'ils fournissent les documents nécessaires à l'examen d'un des problèmes fondamentaux de la science du langage: celui des rapports entre le langage et le monde des objets. Wilhelm von Humboldt en a déjà indiqué l'importance, et Cassirer, de nos jours, en a fait le centre de ses réflexions sur le langage⁶²².

The continuity that Goldstein establishes between Humboldt and Cassirer is motivated by their shared analysis of language; their object is the configurative function of language, following from which linguistic mediation can structure reality up to the most immediate, perceptive levels. As Cassirer wrote in 1929, quoting precisely the studies conducted with Goldstein, the study of the pathologies of symbolization «shows how much the world of “perception”, which is initially accepted as a datum of the senses, owes to the spiritual medium of language; in the same fashion, every inhibition or hindrance of the spiritual mediation process that takes place in language, including the “immediate” [*unmittelbare*] quality and the immediate “character” [*Charakter*] of the perception itself – all this meets, and changes»⁶²³. This kind of considerations, which also recur several times in *L'analyse de l'aphasie*, would perhaps lead to place the studies of Goldstein and

⁶²¹ K. Goldstein, *L'analyse de l'aphasie et essence du langage*, (1933) in *Selected Papers /Ausgewählte Schriften*, (ed.) A. Gurwitsch, E.M.G Haudek, W.E. Haudek, *Phaenomenologica*, vol. 43, Springer, Dordrecht 1971, p. 471.

⁶²² *Ibid.*

⁶²³ «Es zeigt sich in ihr, wieviel die Welt der “Perzeption” die man zunächst als ein Datum der Sinne hinzunehmen pflegt, dem geistigen Medium der Sprache verdankt, wie jede Hemmung oder Erschwerung des geistigen Vermittlungsprozesses, der sich in der Sprache vollzieht, auch die “unmittelbare” Beschaffenheit und den unmittelbaren “Charakter” der Wahrnehmung selber trifft und verändert» [E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, (1929) *op. cit.*, p. 238].

Cassirer within the cluster of thinkers who contributed to support Benjamin's hypotheses around a hypothetical "historicity of perception", understood as the possibility of historical reconfiguration of the basic conditions of experience. However, to understand to what degree the work of Cassirer and Goldstein penetrates Benjamin's theories, it is necessary to evoke a further fundamental concept of Cassirerian and Benjaminian research: the notion of *milieu* of perception.

2.4. *Milieu – Umwelt. Kurt Goldstein and Jacob von Uexküll via Cassirer*

Looking at the concept of Benjamin's *milieu*, it is legitimate to wonder, for a series of theoretical and historical reasons, whether Benjamin could have had any contact with the works of Jacob von Uexküll (1864-1944). A backbone of Goldstein and Cassirer's cross-research, the Estonian zoologist had largely contributed to revisiting the concept of environment (*Umwelt*) within ethology; However, his theoretical framework – heavily tinted with Kantianism – had his work trespassing his specific fields of expertise. This approach was allocated by Cassirer to a trend labelled and periodized as "idealistic morphology" (*idealistischen Morphologie*)⁶²⁴ applied to the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*); still, it was deemed a fertile approach for the philosophical field as well. More specifically, it was useful to survey the applicative evolution of transcendental philosophy into the natural sciences.

Benjamin may have drawn the term *milieu* from a vast series of authors and disciplines. Likely matches in this sense have already been widely established: besides Uexküll, one of the most plausible derivations could be Bergson's philosophy of life, where the term *milieu ambiant*⁶²⁵ is used in a rather similar sense – even if not superimposable – to that of the Estonian zoologist. Bergson's

⁶²⁴ E. Cassirer, "Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band. Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart (1832–1932)", vol. I-II-III (1957), in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 5, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2000, p. 231.

⁶²⁵ «In France, the term *milieu* and the expressions *ambiance* or *milieu ambiant*, closely connected to *medium* and *ambient medium*, are used by authors such as Hippolyte Taine, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Honoré de Balzac, and Émile Zola in order to indicate different kinds of social, biological, or atmospheric environment, while Henri Bergson uses *milieu* to describe the relation between the body and its surroundings» [A. Somaini, *Walter Benjamin's Media Theory. The Medium and the Apparatus*, in "Grey Room", *op. cit.*, p. 31].

acceptation, however, is less “creative” than that of Uexküll, since it identifies the threshold of relationship between space and environment without emphasizing the active function of the organism⁶²⁶. These similarities have already been noted, yet it has not been possible to clearly investigate the philosophical contact that Benjamin had with the founder of “theoretical biology”. Giorgio Agamben claims that Benjamin was Uexküll’s guest in his villa in Capri in 1926⁶²⁷, while other more cautious commentators argue that the two probably met in Capri in 1924 in a small and exclusive circle, without however sharing the same house⁶²⁸. Regardless of these historical hypotheses, it is however certain that Benjamin never mentioned Jacob von Uexküll in his works.

The same cannot be said à propos of Uexküllian lexicon, which especially in the 1930s seems to recur in Benjamin’s texts. In fact, some terms like *Umwelt* and *milieu* can be traced back to the research on animal perception carried out by the famous zoologist⁶²⁹. To appreciate this lexical consistency, it is necessary to consider Benjamin’s *milieu* in its unique meaning of *Medium der Wahrnehmung* (medium of perception). This expression (frequently recurring in Goldstein and Cassirer’s coeval third volume of *Symbolic Forms*)⁶³⁰ indicates the general perceptual structure, the overall set of the perceptive possibilities of an individual. Therefore, it delineates «the intermediate ontological region or, we could say using another term that has an important history behind it, the *milieu* in which sensible

⁶²⁶ Cassirer broadly discusses in this sense the limits of Bergson’s vitalistic philosophy [Cf. E. Cassirer, “Henri Bergson’s Ethik und Religionsphilosophie” (1933), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1932-1935], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 18, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004, p. 229]. Cassirer, claiming his holistic position, rejects the stringent division between torpeur, instinct and intelligence, which Bergson had proposed in his *Évolution créatrice* (1907).

⁶²⁷ Cf. G. Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, (tr.) Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004.

⁶²⁸ I. Pollmann, *Uexküll’s Umwelt*, in “Critical Inquiry”, vol. 39, no. 4, Summer 2013, pp. 777-816, here p. 810.

⁶²⁹ Uexküll’s research model still plays a fundamental role in “environmental media theory”: «Notions such as “the commons,” so current in digital talk, or the wide interest in Jakob von Uexküll, the biologist who made the notion of *Umwelt* famous, for instance, revive the long tradition of thinking about *milieu* and *ambiance*» [J. D. Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2015, p. 49].

⁶³⁰ Cf. esp. E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, *op. cit.*, p. 145; And the essay “Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs” (1938), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1936–1940], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 22, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004.

perception takes place. A *milieu* that is incessantly configured, moulded, modulated, sculpted»⁶³¹. It is precisely this creative connotation of perceptive work that reconnects to Uexküll's research, famously opposed to the passive and reactive model of the Darwinian *milieu*: «Uexküll was unhappy with Darwinian concepts of *milieu* and adaptation, which, he felt, placed too much emphasis on the determining power of external forces, to which organisms *reacted* rather than getting actively engaged with them and thus shaping their surroundings»⁶³². This stance, which places the organism in an active configurative interaction with its environment, was simplified by Uexküll with a metaphor that later became famous, according to which biology must conceive the organism as a “machinist” and not like a “machine”⁶³³.

To summarize Uexküll's method in a nutshell, a particular interweaving of two methodologies is particularly helpful: the transcendental investigation approach and comparative anatomy. As testified by Krois, the relationship between Uexküll and Cassirer was particularly fruitful (especially for Cassirer) precisely because of the complementarity that each found in the disciplinary field of the other:

Cassirer incorporated Uexküll's biological perspective into his symbolic theory, and conversely Uexküll explicated his biological theory with an increasingly emphasis upon semiotics, especially in his late publication *Bedeutungslehre* (1940). Together, Uexküll and Cassirer developed a comparative theory of living systems. Animals live in a world of signal routines, but in addition to receptor and

⁶³¹ A. Somaini, “L'oggetto attualmente più importate dell'estetica”. *Benjamin, il cinema come Apparato e il “Medium della Percezione”* in “Fata Morgana” no. 20, 2013, pp. 117-146, here p. 118. For a comment on these considerations by Somaini, in relation to the use of the term *milieu* in the French context of the early 1900s and the philosophies of life, compare with: E. Binda & A. Maiello, *Il medium come esperienza*, in “Fata Morgana” n. 33, 2017, (*Medium*), pp. 53-69, here p. 62.

⁶³² I. Pollmann, *Uexküll's Umwelt*, in “Critical Inquiry”, *op. cit.*, p. 779.

⁶³³ Goldstein's theories are very useful to Cassirer in emphasizing the configurative capacities of the individual. As A. Ostachuk points out, Uexküll's research can suggest a closed environment, where the individual is perfectly in harmony with it. Goldstein's approach helps to emphasize free configurative effort [Cf. A. Ostachuk, “The Organism and its Umwelt. A Counterpoint between the Theories of Uexküll, Goldstein and Canguilhem”, in F. Michelini, K. Köchy (eds.), *Jakob von Uexküll and Philosophy Life, Environments, Anthropology*, Routledge, Milton Park 2019, pp. pp.158-171].

effector systems, humans possess symbolic systems that gave them access to symbolized worlds⁶³⁴.

As for the incorporation of the Kantian transcendental principle into zoology, the reference text is certainly *Theoretische Biologie* (1920), in which Uexküll highlights how Kant's Copernican revolution could be a valid epistemic tool for investigating the perceptual world of different animal species: by identifying objectivity as a cognitive product of the subject, it is possible to distinguish the different perceptual modalities according to their basic conditions. Comparative anatomy responded precisely to the task of engaging the different basic conditions, investigated through the cross-study of the different anatomical-perceptual configurations (which Uexküll reported under the concept of *Bauplan*). The transcendental approach and comparative anatomy were, however, linked by another fundamental concept that Uexküll had borrowed from the studies of the physiologist Johannes Müller (1801-1858): the "law of specific nerve energies"⁶³⁵. In his next and best-known text, *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* (1934), Uexküll will articulate the perceptual relativization which his theory demanded. Here, he describes the proper environment (*Umwelt*) of different animal species, suggesting how each of these environments offered an independent perceptual model, rooted in its own objectivity. It is particularly interesting to note that the concept of *milieu*, which Goldstein uses several times in the essay on aphasia quoted by Benjamin, is openly derived from that of Uexküll. In the 1934

⁶³⁴ J. M. Krois, "Philosophical anthropology and the embodied cognition paradigm: On the convergence of two research programs", in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*, *op. cit.*, pp. 283-284.

⁶³⁵ «Müller pointed out that the discovery of the possibility of arousing different sensations in different nerves by the same stimulus, e. g., electricity, and also of the fact that different stimuli, e. g., electrical and mechanical, can produce in the same sense organ similar sensations, had rendered the theory of the susceptibility of nerves to certain impressions inadequate and unsatisfactory. He therefore advanced the theory that "each peculiar nerve has a special power or quality, which the exciting cause merely renders manifest"; and that in sensations we do not experience the qualities or states of external bodies, but merely the conditions of the nerves themselves» [J. W. Bridges, *Doctrine of Specific Nerve Energies*, in "The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods", vol. 9, no. 3, Feb. 1912, pp. 57-65, here p. 57]. Cassirer defines, through Helmholtz, Müller's work as «Die empirische Ausführung der theoretischen Darstellung Kant's von der Natur des menschlichen Erkenntnisvermögens» [E. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band. Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart (1832–1932)*, *op. cit.*, p.1]. In another passage he leads it directly back to Goethe's science of nature. [*Ibid.*, pp. 215-216].

essay *The Organism*, Goldstein reveals the authorship of this concept, which is used throughout the text as a descriptive model to indicate the perceptual threshold between the individual and the environment:

We must make a clear distinction between the surrounding world, in which the organism is located, and the milieu that represents only a part of the world - that part that is adequate to it, that is, that allows for the described relationship between the organism and its environment. Each organism has its *milieu*, as Jakob von Uexküll has emphasized. Its existence and its “normal” performances are dependent on the condition that a state of adaptation can come about between its structure and the environmental events, allowing the formation of an “adequate” *milieu*⁶³⁶.

However, there is a difference between the purposes of the two authors, probably “biased” by their fields of specialization: the zoologist Uexküll investigated through comparative anatomy the stable characteristics of different animal perceptive environments, the specific perceptual structure (*Bauplan*) in relation to his environment (*Umwelt*); the neurologist Goldstein explored how the *milieu* rearranged itself – and how it could be scientifically rearranged by the therapist. This research perspective was both psychopathological and clinical: the diagnostic attempt was based on analysing how the *milieu* had reconfigured post-trauma; therapy and treatment equally targeted a “rearranging the *milieu*”. Goldstein explains very clearly how this need was at the centre of his therapeutic strategies:

Insofar as medical therapy does not eradicate the damage, it consists only in rearranging the *milieu*. To avoid misunderstandings, I should like to point out that the term “rearranging the *milieu*” is to be understood in the broadest sense. Thus, it includes the necessity of taking certain drugs continually, to keep oneself within a certain mode of living, it includes avoiding situations or indulgences in the somatic or psychological realm, it requires renouncing or entering certain human relationships, and so on⁶³⁷.

⁶³⁶ K. Goldstein, *The Organism* (1934), *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

It is clear from this excerpt how the concept of environment was not simply a theoretical handrail for Goldstein, but an operational and creative workshop. In a certain sense, one could also glimpse a continuity between this environmental conception and the research of Ludwig Binswanger, which in their phenomenological and existentialist approach considered every mental pathology as a particular existential configuration, a “world” structured according to their own laws. At the basis of this assonance there is always the influence of the zoologist Uexküll, whom Binswanger had read through Heidegger⁶³⁸.

The irruption of objectivity constitutes a profound question of Cassirer’s philosophy, one which develops progressively during the evolution of the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. From a perceptological point of view, it constitutes what with a contemporary expression could be termed the “low-level” of perception, the moment when something, not yet symbolized, attacks the senses. As we have seen, this meaning is investigated by Cassirer, firstly through Usener and his *Augenblicksgötter* – the “presences” triggered by a perceptive violence begging to be configured; but also through Goldstein, who interpreted cerebral or psychological traumas as violent alterations of the perceptual structure (*Apparatus*)⁶³⁹ of his patients’ *milieu*. At some point, this veritable “war” raged by the real on senses is also investigated by Cassirer through Rousseau: «Le sentiment est la réponse immédiate, spontanée, irrésistible, du Moi en face du choc du monde extérieur»⁶⁴⁰; roughly the same contention will be elsewhere supported through Leibniz and Descartes. Trauma therefore constitutes the first moment of symbolic “conrescence”; the self-unleashing of objectivity through cultural and

⁶³⁸ The two psychiatrists knew each other and Binswanger’s debt to Goldstein’s theories is acknowledged. Please refer to the introduction by O. Sacks, in K. Goldstein, *The Organism. A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man*, (1934), Zone Books, New York 1955. As regards the concept of *Umwelt* in Binswanger, see T. Breyer, T. Fuchs, A. Holzhey-Kunz (ed.), *Ludwig Binswanger und Erwin Straus: Beiträge zur psychiatrischen Phänomenologie*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg 2016, pp. 120-121; S. Lanzoni, *Existential encounter in the asylum: Ludwig Binswanger’s 1935 case of hysteria*, in “History of Psychiatry”, vol. 15, no. 3, 2004, pp. 285–304, esp. p. 286. For a recent examination of Binswanger’s psychology between Freud, Heidegger and Jaspers, we refer instead to the accurate studies of A. Molaro. Briefly here we refer to: A. Molaro, “Ludwig Binswanger”, in A. Molaro, & G. Stanghellini (ed.), *History of clinical phenomenology: The origins, developments, the Italian school*, UTET, Torino 2020, pp. 29-68.

⁶³⁹ K. Goldstein, *The Organism* (1934), *op. cit.*, pp.123-125.

⁶⁴⁰ E. Cassirer, “L’unité dans l’œuvre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (1933), in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* [1932-1935], in *Gesammelte Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, (ed.) B. Recki, vol. 18, Meiner (ECW), Hamburger 2004, p. 315.

physiological patterns both an individual and a community. This performativity of trauma finds theoretical substantiation in other descriptive models focusing on the custom – the organized diachrony of perceptive life. Exemplary in this sense is another theorization of animal perception discussed by Cassirer, which could well sum up the idea of rhythm as a stable perceptual scheme: the reference is here to Volkelt’s “perceptual melodies”⁶⁴¹, which analysed animal perception as a eurhythmically articulated perceptual habit: As Goldstein, for whom any trauma leads to a “catastrophic reaction”, which induces a real revolution in the individual’s relationship with the world, Cassirer saw in the interruption of the “rhythm” the first impulse to a symbolic reconfiguration. He recognizes the quality of Volkelt’s theory, while changing its sign: the interruption and detachment from perceptive eurhythmy is a primal act of human freedom. It would be easier to limit this revolutionary power only to the perceptive world, but Cassirer extends this possibility to the cultural world as well. Quoting Fustel de Coulanges, Cassirer writes that «To reshape the rhythm meant to destroy the law itself by destroying the sacred form under which it had revealed itself to men»⁶⁴². And this is the secret that the Cassirerian symbol shares with that of Benjamin: that of an instant precipitate, capable of revealing itself as a catastrophe and marking a new beginning, a new historical, perceptive, and cultural regime. It is this *kritischen Augenblicke* that discloses the flash of meaning between the pages of reading, the photographic flash that fixes an image in the personal and collective, a momentary divinity that appears and claims to have a name. It is the revolutionary and traumatic moment wherein one is forced to give shape to anything required of and from him or her, from which a monad can be born:

⁶⁴¹ «For Volkelt [the Komplexqualitäten] are “diffuse and unstructured”, but at the same time, clearly distinguishable from each other - the way in which each motive in a melody is perceived as different from the others even without having the notes that is composed of clearly distinguished from each other. The animal appears to orient its own behavior following the rise, continuation and disappearance of single elements in the whole» C. Brentani, *Jakob von Uexküll. The Discovery of the Umwelt between Biosemiotics and Theoretical Biology*, Springer, Dordrecht 2015, p. 197.

⁶⁴² «Den Rhythmus umgestalten hieß das Gesetz selbst zerstören, indem man die heilige Form zerstörte, unter der es sich den Menschen offenbart hatte» [E. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band. Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart, op. cit.*, p. 365].

Il se produira alors dans une constellation surchargée de tensions une sorte de choc en retour; une secousse qui vaudra à l'image, à la constellation qui la subira, de s'organiser à l'improviste, de se constituer en monade en son intérieur⁶⁴³.

⁶⁴³ W. Benjamin, "Sur le concept d'histoire" (1940), *op. cit.*, p. 1265.

Symbol as Schwelle. A conclusion and a survey of the research

«The meaning of the immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*] in relation to the indirectness [*Mittelbarkeit*] still remains to be determined»⁶⁴⁴. This is the question that this research has brought to light in Benjamin's thinking. As it often happens with this author, we are addressing an open, insoluble question; precisely for this reason, this is also a remarkably modern interrogative. We have not tried and will not try now to provide an answer. Rather, we have tried to seek for it a philosophical origin – to place it, so to speak, “in its time”. If we wanted to rephrase the question in the light of the work carried out so far, we would obtain something like the following: “How can something which is not yet mediated by experience penetrate experience and become part of it?”. To further extend this apparent quandary, Benjamin also speaks of a “relationship”. The implication here is that our question operates also as its own reflection: “How can experience give shape to what is not yet mediated by itself?”.

Cassirer was unquestionably the one who most keen on articulating this investigation, offering the most extensive and systematic treatment still available today. In 1929, in the last volume of the *Symbolic Forms*, he came to describe this inquiry according to one of the most apical dyads of Benjaminian thought. The symbol, his theoretical object, was described by Cassirer as a threshold (*Schwelle*) between perception and experience, between immediacy and mediation. The symbol is the space where the interaction between outside and inside takes place, between perception and intellect, between nature and culture. The entire experiential world is articulated in this threshold, amounting ultimately to nothing other than the symbol itself. Cassirer was aware that affirming this concept would undermine an analytical cornerstone of philosophical tradition, one of its most deeply rooted beliefs: the presence of a boundary (*Grenze*), between perception and intellect, between physiology and culture, between word and concept.

If the problem of symbols receives us immediately on the threshold [*Schwelle*] of pure conceptual knowledge, then on the other hand, it seems, we must also

⁶⁴⁴ W. Benjamin, *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

acknowledge that it arises only at this threshold [*Schwelle*]. [...] When we are dealing with an overview of the whole of knowledge, of the totality of its forms, may we focus only on this end instead of embracing its beginning and centre at the same time? All conceptual knowledge is necessarily based on perceptual knowledge. [...] This would mean touching on one of the most certain insights of the critique of knowledge, it would mean giving up a truly classic distinction that has become firmly established in centuries of tradition if one wanted to dispute or blur this boundary [*Grenze*] between the “immediacy” [*Unmittelbarkeit*] of perception or intuition and the indirectness [*Mittelbarkeit*] of logical-discursive thinking⁶⁴⁵.

Benjamin wrote in a famous excerpt from *Passagenwerk*: «Threshold [*Schwelle*] and boundary [*Grenze*] must be clearly distinguished. The threshold is a zone. Namely a zone of transition»⁶⁴⁶. But the *passage* is nothing other than the allegorical and plastic embodiment of a threshold on which, as we have tried to show, Benjamin had lingered from the beginning of his philosophy, placing it in its most absolute and metaphysical terms, in the relationship between *Wahrsein* and *Wahrheit* or between *Unmittelbarkeit* and *Mittelbarkeit*. It was Benjamin himself who wished for the reduction of this dyadic opposition in the liminal terrain, in the unitary principle of the symbol. Could Cassirer have helped Benjamin to open this *passage*? The research conducted so far has shown how Cassirer’s research offered Benjamin a vast literature and a systematic framework to open this space of investigation, a theoretical terrain where every phenomenon is considered as a performative “object of transition” – to use a famous expression of the psychoanalyst D. Winnicott.

However, the generality of this question was not the starting point, but the result of this research. By this we mean that, as the comparison proceeded, it became clear that Benjamin's symbol-as-threshold shares with that of Cassirer the generality of an epistemic question, but not the applicative particularities: Benjamin posed the

⁶⁴⁵ E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

⁶⁴⁶ «Schwelle und Grenze sind schärfstens zu unterscheiden. Die Schwelle ist eine Zone. Und zwar eine Zone des Überganges» W. Benjamin, “Erste Notizen. Pariser Passagen I” (1927-1930), in *Briefwechsel und Gesammelte Schriften* (electronic edition), vol. 3 (*Arbeiten zum Passagenwerk und zu Baudelaire*), (ed.) K. L. Worm, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville 2015, pp. 993-1028, here p. 1025.

problem of configuration and transition; he pondered how to dialectically measure historical conflicts; he questioned how to weigh the revolutionary contribution of new technological apparatuses and artistic avant-gardes with their expressive techniques. Cassirer, by contrast, drew from heterogeneous sources to describe a single heuristic concept. His was a systematic model that attempted to collect and describe the unitary principle that underlies all configurative possibilities, trying to weaken any “substantialistic” model that looked beyond the configurative effort and towards ontology. This inversion of perspectives has emerged out of the historiographical reconstruction of the human and intellectual relationship that Benjamin had with Cassirer, making a comparison on specific issues almost impossible.

Yet accepting Cassirer’s investigation as a Benjaminian source allows to shed light on interesting aspects: it permits to identify with a certain ease the recurrence and persistence of the philosophical notion of symbol in Benjamin’s philosophy, mapping its emergence, development and transfiguration. From the analysis of early fragments *Zur Sprachphilosophie und Erkenntniskritik*, the symbol immediately established itself as one of the leading concepts, an epistemological model par excellence. The role of the symbolic has emerged here as a primary configurative moment: that is particularly evident in the name-word tension, where it corresponds to the divine name, capable of giving shape and life. Relating both thinkers to Humboldt’s research has revealed how Benjamin rejected the idea of conventionality as the origin of language, albeit bringing it back afterwards to a first symbolic moment of union between name and thing. On this aspect, evidence was brought of a further Cassirerian connection: besides the biblical *Bereshit* model, Benjamin derived this “creative omnipotence of language” from the same sources that Cassirer was using to describe the configurative capacities of language: above all, Hamann, Herder and Humboldt. Through the recent studies by C. Taylor, which have linked this cluster of authors to the development of the Sapir-Worth Hypothesis (to whose development Cassirer’s studies have contributed), it has been possible to describe in what terms Benjamin thought of this symbolic-configurative moment. It was thus noted that the configurative possibilities of language were posed by Benjamin beyond the morphology of language proposed by Humboldt.

The symbolic-linguistic moment is in fact placed by Benjamin in a magical, mystical act that does not participate in the historical evolution of the communicative language; on the contrary, this latter reveals itself as a distancing from (and distortion of) that original symbolic act. Hence, a description of the symbolic configuration was obtained, marked by the concepts of “immediacy” and “neutral mediation” which contrast with Benjamin’s studies on the concept of *Medium*. These characteristics made it possible to clarify Benjamin’s ascription of the symbol to the theological dimension, conversely illuminating his use of a more profane theoretical object that could participate in the historical course: allegory. Harnack’s work, used by Cassirer to discuss the evolution of the symbol from religious to aesthetic role, was identified as the basis for Benjamin’s exclusion of the symbol from the *Kunstwissenschaft* method of investigation, implemented in the *Baroque Drama*. At this point it was deemed necessary to reconstruct the role that the concept of symbol played within the Hamburg Kreis, focusing on the close collaboration between Warburg and Cassirer. Here we have chosen to emphasize above all the essential trigger that Hermann Usener’s theories represented for Warburgian and Cassirerian research, building on recent works conducted by Ghelardi on this topic. Again, this reconstruction seems to substantiate a proximity: from the research of Usener, Warburg, but above all Cassirer, a concept of symbolic emerges that is compatible with the Benjaminian one. Such concept is therefore linked to the configurative impulse (*Antrieb*) and not to the diachronic process of cultural reconfiguration; proof is given that Benjamin grew increasingly sceptical of this declination during his militancy in the ranks of the *Freiestudentenschaft*, leaning on the theses of Gustav Wyneken.

It is under the sign of this contrast that Benjamin’s 1928 attempt to get in touch, (through Hugo von Hofmannsthal) with Erwin Panofsky is also discussed: Benjamin’s position against the use of symbol within the *Kunstwissenschaft* is in fact somewhat problematic. From the reconstruction of the partnership between Cassirer and Warburg, it became apparent how central and foundational this notion was within the Warburgian investigations. Why Benjamin should try to approach an institution founded on a concept that he himself found questionable remains however an open interrogative.

Having contextualized the research carried out by Cassirer and the Kreis during the drafting of the *Trauerspielbuch*, it was then possible to identify some of the specific characteristics of this concept from this text. To this end, the descriptive path left by Benjamin was traced, trying, where possible, to avoid the strong contrast with the allegorical model. Two results were obtained from this analysis. The first concerns the sources: in outlining the characteristics of the symbolic, Benjamin referred to a very specific portion of authors who feature Cassirer's research in the mythical sphere. Thanks to the parallel reading of *Sprache und Mythos*, it became apparent that Benjamin referred to the specific current of Idealistic-Romantic investigation that had tried to investigate the myth according to the concept of "tautegory", also a key concept in Cassirer's analysis (mainly borrowed from the research of Schelling, Creuzer and Görres). When placed alongside the documentary evidence collected, this peculiar choice of sources on Benjamin's part makes Cassirer's presence among the "hidden" sources of the *Trauerspielbuch* very likely.

From a theoretical point of view, Benjamin's choice to appeal to this tradition reconfirmed many of the aspects linked to the concept of symbol that had previously emerged from the analysis of early fragments and from research on the philosophy of language: the immediate, temporally synchronic character, linked to the hour of knowability; that which reveals itself as illumination (*Augenblicke plötzlicher Beleuchtung*) capable of generating "indestructible images" (*unzerstörbarsten Bilder*), as a moment of interruption of the diachrony of forms. Noting that any direct treatment of the symbolic evaporates from Benjamin's work after the *Baroque Drama*, a question was prompted: We thus evaluated whether this notion could have influenced Benjamin's philosophy in later works: historiographical research has in fact assessed that Benjamin's second moment of interest in Cassirer's works is to be placed in the first half of the 1930s.

This step was accomplished through Sigrid Weigel's studies dedicated to the Benjaminian concept of *Bild*. These studies focus mainly on three aspects of Benjamin's image: its extended territory beyond the visual domain, its epistemological purpose and its configurative and performative abilities. By comparing Benjamin's study of the symbolic to Weigel's words on image a

surprising terminological adherence emerged. This striking proximity suggested in turn to posit the concept of symbol (not considered by Weigel) as a possible statute assigned by Benjamin to the concept of image: an image disconnected from representation and aimed at the configuration, at the unveiling of a new portion of objectivity. Weigel's research also clarify some particular methods of reconfiguration linked to the image, which share the collected characteristics of the Benjaminian symbol: the hyperesthesia of the photographic flash, the appearance of minor mythical figures in the metropolitan city, but above all the concept of *choc évocateur*, moment par excellence of configurative concretion of symbolic and mnemonic contents. These themes are dealt with by Benjamin especially from 1932 onwards, from *Berliner Chronik* (1932), *Über die Mimetische Vermögen* (1933), *Das Kunstwerk* (1935-39).

In the last section, an attempt was made to reverse the field: that is, an attempt was made to identify the link between perceptual shock and the environment in those Cassirer's texts re-read in those years by Benjamin. This step was particularly fruitful because it permitted to highlight how Cassirer's research had identified a model of symbolization, based on trauma and hyperesthesia, compatible with Benjaminian research of the following years. This research path has also unveiled and repositioned some secondary sources. Firstly, Usener's research: if read through Cassirer's lenses, it could provide a new panorama in which to insert the reconfigurative qualities that Benjamin had assigned to the concept of *choc*. The work details here how the momentary and epiphanic qualities of the Benjaminian configurative moment are well suited to and consistent with the research conducted by Cassirer of Usener's *Augenblicksgötter*, which emphasized their perceptual and traumatic aspect. Indeed, it has been shown that the theogony process described by Usener was useful for Cassirer to describe the urgency of an individual to collect and organize incoherent and pervasive stimulations in a coherent image, not yet conscious, but perceptually perspicuous. This model allowed us in turn to analyse another source which had revealed since the historiographical section a promising intertwining between the two thinkers. One of the most interesting aspects of this research emerged precisely through the combination of trauma and configuration, pinning down Kurt Goldstein as a tentative common source. Looking back over

Benjamin's essay dedicated to the sociology of language - from which the structure of this research was also derived - attention was paid to the emphatic and enthusiastic closure that Benjamin dedicates to the studies of Goldstein, primary source of the last volume of the *Symbolic Forms* of Cassirer. Analysing Goldstein's paper, from which Benjamin draws the gloss of his own paper, it is clear how Goldstein's investigation and method distinctly reflected some of the most renowned investigations conducted by Benjamin in the following years: for example, it is stressed how Goldstein conceived the entire existence of an individual (human or animal) as a constant attempt to reconfigure one's perceptual system to adapt it to external shocks and microtraumas; in the same way, it emerged that the neurologist attempted to reconfigure the patient's cognitive and perceptive *milieu* through environmental and pharmacological alterations, aimed at reconfiguring the entire "patient-organism". Remarking that Benjamin was reading both Cassirer and Goldstein, a rather controversial issue in the reconstruction of Benjaminian sources was resolved, namely whether (or to what extent) was Benjamin familiar with Jacob von Uexküll's theories. Many authors have rightly found a consonance between the zoologist's work and Benjamin's investigation in the perceptual field, especially around the notion of the "*milieu* of perception". Our work cared to show how this author was widely quoted by Cassirer and Goldstein, and precisely in the texts that Benjamin cited in the sociology of language essay, also reminding how both authors were working extensively on this concept in the late 1920s.

From Benjamin's point of view, the entire research has detailed how the concept of symbol was an epistemological, aesthetic and theological "device" through which Benjamin described and elaborated the precipitate, the collision, the first configurative instant of new portions of reality within the experience: it has in fact appeared in the guise of the biblical name, the pagan theophany, the photographic flash and perceptive shock. It is therefore a unitary question that underlies the philosophy of this author. If grasped from this perspective, Benjamin has always questioned the configurative dynamics, in a vast range of declinations. If Cassirer's philosophy had impact on Benjamin, it is to be sought (and found) precisely in the general question whence we departed: The meaning of the immediacy

[*Unmittelbarkeit*] in relation to the indirectness [*Mittelbarkeit*] remains to be determined.

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Note: Our translation from the German of Cassirer and Benjamin's texts was initially imposed by limited access to English translations during the pandemic. This was not a major impediment, and was in fact turned to our advantage, especially in the case of Walter Benjamin: the historiographic reconstruction has been actually founded on fragments letters and manuscripts, most of which have never been translated to English. In the final revision of the draft, these translations have been carefully compared with existing ones, and replaced or corrected where needed.

As for the bibliographic arrangements: Entries for Cassirer and Benjamin's works are to be found separated in a section of their own. All works and critical studies by other authors are gathered in a different section. There is a reason behind this choice: most of the scholars quoted in the research deal with Cassirer and/or Benjamin's sources and influences. The two philosophers are in turn understood both as historians and critics. Thus, a distinction between critical works and philosophical studies would have done little justice to this perpetual intertextuality.

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