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Denkbilder.
The «Thought-Image» in
20th Century German Short Prose

Edited by Raul Calzoni and Francesco Rossi

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*Instead of an Introduction:
Towards a Definition of the Denkbild*

Raul Calzoni, Francesco Rossi

In the context of literary studies, the term *Denkbild* (“thought-image”) indicates, among other things, a specific form of prose, whose tradition is embedded in the history of German culture of the last century. In 1955, after the Second World War, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno ushered in the reflection on this literary form by defining Walter Benjamin’s *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*, 1928) a “collection of Denkbilder”¹. That is why nowadays the term is commonly used to characterize a certain genre of Benjamin’s literary production, although Benjamin himself never used this concept. In his article published in this volume of *Odradek*, Peter König discusses the reasons why Benjamin could have thought that the expression *Denkbild* was not fully adequate to describe his intentions with regard to the prose texts subsumed under this title, say *Einbahnstraße* and *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (*Berlin Childhood around 1900*, posthumous 1950). To discuss this crucial point, the article focuses on the ambiguous key concept of “image” and its inherent tension between such opposites as life and lifeless-

¹ Adorno 1992, 322ff., quoted from Richter 2007, p. 12ff. For the German text see Adorno (1974), 680-685.

ness, being and illusoriness, proximity and distance, trace and aura. Lastly, by dealing with the opposition between a symbolic and an allegoric spirit of language, König suggests that in the case of Benjamin's "Denkbilder" it could be more fitting and for further critical appraisal more fruitful to instead speak of "Sinnbilder". This terminological discussion is carried out in dialogue, among others, with Adorno, who argued "thought-images" to be "scribbled picture-puzzles, parabolic evocations of something that cannot be said in words" ("Es sind eher gekritzelte Vexierbilder als gleichnishafte Beschwörungen des in Worten Unsagbaren") rather than images in a classical, conventional sense "like Platonic myths of the cave or the chariot". To him they namely establish "a kind of intellectual short-circuiting" ("eine Art von intellektuellem Kurzschluß") which does not hold back conceptual thinking, but shocks through its "enigmatic form" and thereby "get[s] thought moving". Furthermore, according to Adorno, while replacing traditional thinking, such intellectual short-circuiting should cast "a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps [set] it on fire"². Adorno's definition of the *Denkbild* implies the discussion of meaning-determination at different stages, as Walter Pedriali maintains in his article, where two main theses are discussed: the first claims that meaning is fixed by the positional value of an expression, while the second that history sediments in expressions and objects. While problematizing these two theses, Pedriali interrogates the value and meaning of silence

² Ibid.

within a *Denkbild* by relying on Adorno's musical interest and his famous pronouncement on poetry after Auschwitz.

Before dealing with the discussion of Adorno's statement and its relevance for the survival of the *Denkbild* after the Holocaust, we need to deepen our understanding of this concept over time. As Gerhard Richter correctly pointed out in his *Thought-Images. Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life* (2007), the use of the term *Denkbild* in twentieth-century philosophy has to be taken as a case of paleontology, namely the "maintenance of an old name in order to launch a new concept"³. The term *Denkbild* is already documented in eighteenth-century German literature, namely in Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (*History of the Art of Antiquity*, 1764) and Johann Gottfried Herder's *Zerstreute Blätter* (*Scattered Leaves*, 1785-1797); in the Modern Age its meaning became broader than it was originally, to signify 'emblem'⁴. Indeed, it can routinely be employed to mean an image of thought, the literary and conceptually elaborated representation of a visual element. Hence, it fluctuates between different senses such as that of subjective reproduction, idea or ideal. The philosophical fluctuation of the concept throughout time is investigated by Danilo Manca in his article devoted to the "thought-image" intended as a sublimation of Hegel's conceptual thinking. In order to reach this goal, with the help of Adorno's reflections, Manca's contribution dis-

³ Richter 2007, p. 1.

⁴ For a detailed account of the history of the word see Schulz 1968.

cusses the relationship between image and name in both Benjamin and Hegel, compares Hegel's model of system with Benjamin's model of constellation, and last but not least deals with the issue of the presentation of a philosophical conception.

In the wake of Adorno's understanding of the term, the *Denkbild* has been considered a peculiar form of short prose that interrupts the ordinary cognitive and aesthetical relations between word and image (in some cases between word and picture), or, as Heinz Schlaffer puts it, between "reality" (Realität) and "reflection" ("Reflexion")⁵. Richter's study on the *Denkbild* focuses on the literary production of the most famous scholars connected with the Frankfurt School, who are ubiquitously claimed to be the major modernist writers of *Denkbilder*. Yet this genre does not only belong to Benjamin and to thinkers closer to him such as Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer and Adorno himself (think of his *Minima Moralia*). Many other writers – even before the Frankfurt School was established – employed a literary form aligned with the *Denkbild* in Adorno's sense of the term, say Stefan George, Paul Scheerbart, Robert Walser and Franz Kafka. Therefore, in his article, Giancarlo Lacchin deals precisely with the concept of the *Denkbild* by casting light on the position taken by the *George-Kreis* within the aesthetic debate on the relationship between art and the thought of art in Germany from the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Lacchin, the standpoint of the *George-Kreis* in this debate is summed up in Stefan George's *Tage*

⁵ Schlaffer 1973, p. 143.

und Taten (*Days and Works*, 1903). It is a stance that results from an original reformulation of the great tradition of early German Romanticism, in which the *Denkbild* denotes, on the one hand, the conceptual and reflective dimension in which the relationship between art and thought of art is expressed and, on the other hand, the artistic and aesthetic representation of the creative dimension itself.

Apart from its origins within a distinct circle such as the *George-Kreis*, the literary form of the *Denkbild* is perhaps rooted in what has been seen as a revival of physiognomical theories in the early twentieth century, which in turn produced a new consideration of urban space⁶. In his recent monograph *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (2015), Andreas Huyssen takes a broader look at the history of the genre. Although he prefers the term “modernist miniature” to “Denkbild”, the scholar pays particular attention to its cultural and intermedial context, highlighting its connections with photography and film⁷. A more systematic approach to the topic dealt with in this collection of essays comes from so-called genre theory and narratology. Rüdiger Zymner’s recent proposal to consider the “Denkbild” as a realization of a “simple form” (“einfache Form”) – in the sense given to this term by André Jolles – can be seen as a sound basis for the

6 See Christians 2000.

7 See Huyssen 2007 and 2015. Huyssen focuses rather on the tradition of the “city images” (*Städtebilder*) than on “thought-images”, which are one another very near, indeed, but do not exactly coincide from a thematic point of view: not all *Denkbilder* are to be considered as *Städtebilder*, and vice versa.

argument of this volume. Zymner understands the “Denkbild” to mean a “classificatory concept” (“Ordnungsbegriff”), which he describes as a “short piece of prose” (“kurzer Prosatext”) that can be “narrative or non-narrative” (“erzählend oder nichterzählend”), “fictional or non-fictional” (“fiktional oder nicht-fiktional”)⁸. On the basis of this descriptive approach, the category of “thought-image” includes different variations, since it may also refer to a banal event or subject that undergoes a kind of poetic conceptualization of triviality in which the thematized objects are reflected in a metacommunicative, albeit figurative manner. This implies a break with narrative or argumentative linearity, for instance through the introduction of ellipsis points, surprising turns or plays of thought, escalations, incoherence or enigmaticity, while not excluding soft forms of narration. Thus, by taking up Benjamin’s notes on “dialectics at a standstill”, a typical feature of the Denkbild, one can highlight its fundamental “ambiguity”, involving both the formal and the conceptual level and with the aim of getting a thought moving into the shape of a “dialectical image”⁹. For Benjamin and Adorno, thinking in dialectical images means thinking in an unconventional, poetic way. It is in this manner that marginality becomes central, and detail significant and visible through an aesthetic modelling of the minimal¹⁰, with the experience of the frenetic way of living in the modern city finding its literary ex-

8 Zymner 2009, p. 168.

9 Benjamin 1999, p. 10 (*The Arcades Project*, Exposé of 1935).

10 See Autsch, Öhlschläger, Süwolto 2014.

pression. In order to clarify what is meant by this, a rapid comparison between the thought-image and other subgenres of short prose can be helpful.

The “Denkbild” borders on traditional genres like the parable and the aphorism. Moreover, from a literary-historical point of view, it is also related to the short story (*Kurzgeschichte* or *Kalendergeschichte*), the prose poem (*Prosagedicht*), and the *feuilleton*. Despite the commonalities between these modern short prose genres, their differences are evident. Unlike the parable, the thought-image does not necessarily contain a narration. It can be limited to a superficial report of events, regardless of its potential didactic purpose. Sometimes, the insistence on the fun fact or the curious thing may be a sign of proximity to the short story, although the “Denkbild” requires a greater stress on figurativeness and a constitutive ambiguity. The non-fictional variant of the thought-image bears remarkable similarities with the aphorism, such as conciseness, a rhapsodic character and peculiar rhetoric aptitude, but its visuality diverges from the sententious structure of an aphorism, according to its emblematic nature which is often underscored by the presence of a title. From the prose poem the “Denkbild” inherited not only the gaze upon the subjectivity of perception, but also its poetic, multi-layered figurativeness, drawing on a fantastic and oneiric perspective and, in some instances, the thematization of alienation. Furthermore, the *Denkbild* pays little attention to the rhythmical aspects of language and it mainly displays a genuine “prosaic” texture. For these reasons, the thought-image has little to do

with rhythmic or lyrical prose. Rather, the *Denkbild* has often been considered as a sort of literary superfetation of journalistic writing: it is a fact that many “thought-images” can be traced back to the feuilleton and appeared for the first time in the columns of newspaper supplements¹¹. Nevertheless, *Denkbilder* tend to be different from simple reports or comments. Suffice it to think of Kafka’s early short prose, which significantly appeared not only in newspapers, but primarily in such exclusive literary magazines as Franz Blei’s “Hyperion”; or Benjamin and Kracauer’s images of urban life, whose aim is to reveal the deep structures of contemporary society by describing the singular spaces in which those structures are involved. In this volume of *Odradek*, Didier Contadini’s article especially deals with this aspect of the *Denkbild* in the literary production of Kracauer and Benjamin, whose “thought-images” are able to question a sociability that generates from urban spaces. Furthermore, the aim of Contadini’s contribution is to probe the limits of the *Denkbild* by interrogating this form of writing with regard to its “vulnerability” in the sense given to this term by Judith Butler. What emerges is a conception of the *Denkbild* meant as a fundamental trope for philosophical reflection on problems and possibilities brought about by modern society which, thanks to its political implications, eventually turns into an epistemic tool proper to historical materialism itself. Such political implications of the “thought-image” are also discussed in Takao Matsui’s article dedicated to Benjamin’s *Berliner*

11 See Jäger 2000.

Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert, focusing mainly on the representations of violence, myth and history in this collection of *Denkbilder*. Since Benjamin wrote this collection of “thought-images” during his exile after Hitler rose to the power, one could think that the historical and political implications of his *Denkbilder* are easy to trace and detect, but instead they emerge indirectly from the places of his childhood. As Matsui shows, the sources for Benjamin’s critique were Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*, 1304-1321) and ancient myths, first of all that of Proserpina. This he mainly parodied in his *Denkbild* entitled “Tiergarten”, dedicated to the Berlin’s “central park”, in which the writer perceived the onset of something historically and politically unpredictable in the changing appearance of his hometown.

The articles of Contadini and Matsui reveal that modernist short prose has often been particularly difficult to define in clear terms, despite the broad consensus about its key role in the development of German literature in the twentieth century, a role which can be considered equal in significance to longer prose forms like the novel and the short story¹². There are both typological and terminological reasons for the hesitations in the scholarly debate on this topic. First of all, different subgenres of short prose have been essentially characterized by such diffuse connotations as variety, fluidity, mobility, hybridity, individuality and incomprehensibility – in short, uninterpretability; these characterizations have been a

¹² See Baßler 1994; Locher 2001 and 2008; Götsche 2006; Althaus, Bunzel, Götsche 2007.

hindrance to the constitution of a well-defined literary genre. Secondly, their generic coordinates have been drawn from a mix of traditional, pre-existing modes of writing, for instance the essayistic and the narrative, the aphoristic and the descriptive mode, thus leaving out important distinguishing features of the new form.

Indeed, this focalization problem is a direct consequence of the terminological pluralism which is peculiar to the broad field of literary forms covered by German modernist brief writing in the twentieth century. The complex constellation of modern and modernist short prose encompasses several sub-genres, such as the prose-piece (*Prosastück*), sketch (*Skizze*), study (*Studie*), short story (*Kurzgeschichte*), parable (*Parabel*), grotesque (*Groteske*), humorous (*Humoreske*), arabesque (*Arabeske*), miniature, mood-picture (*Stimmungsbild*), aphorism or prose poem (*Prosagedicht*), to name but a few, all of which show a high degree of figurativeness (i.e. *Bildlichkeit*) and, to a different degree, a deep connection between literarity and reflexivity. A closer look reveals that the critics already display a terminological uncertainty during this time axis. In a famous review written for the *Neue Rundschau* in 1914, Robert Musil considers Robert Walser's *Geschichten* (Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1914) and Franz Kafka's *Betrachtung* (Rowohlt, 1913 [1912]) representative of a new literary "type", but at the same time he states in a slightly contradictory way that they are "not suitable to preside over a literary genre"¹³. In a sense, this statement can be

13 Musil 1978, p. 1468.

considered the starting point of Maximilian Herford's article in this volume of *Odradek*, whose aim is to investigate Robert Walser's so-called *Prosastücke* and *Mikrogrammen* in the wake of their poetological and epistemological implications. After dealing with a theoretical background that enables him to highlight the features of Walser's short prose as a distinct – if not experimental – form of *Denkbild*, Herford focuses on the author's interest in marginalized figures, minority groups and small objects by casting light on their epistemological value and then showing that Walser's poetics of the *Denkbild* aims at productively destabilizing aesthetic orders.

In a similar manner, in a letter to Siegfried Kracauer dated 1926, Ernst Bloch talks about a “new form, which is no longer a form” („[eine] neue Form, die keine mehr ist“)¹⁴ with reference to some of the former's short texts. As Micaela Latini argues in her article, Ernst Bloch was one of the thinkers of the time most entitled to seek a definition of the *Denkbild*, since his collection of short prose entitled *Spuren* (*Traces*, 1910), along with Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*, 1928), paved the way for the sedimentation of this literary form during the first decades of the twentieth century. *Spuren* indeed offers a montage of diverse images of everyday objects and pictures of doors, frames, steps and thresholds that allows Latini to analyse the themes of “The Twice-Disappearing Frame” and “The Fall into the Now” along with their performative, visual and epistemological implications in Bloch's collec-

14 Ernst Bloch to Siegfried Kracauer, 6.6.1926, in Bloch 1985, p. 278.

tion of *Denkbilder*, meant as gateways to a higher knowledge of reality. As Stefano Beretta shows in his article, this is also true for the *Denkbilder* written by Robert Walser during the years he spent in Berlin (1905-1913) and mainly published as *feuilletons* by the newspapers of the German metropolis. The epistemic value given by Walser to the *feuilleton* recalls Benjamin's *Denkbilder*, but the Swiss author was much more interested in the poetics of the "thought-image" that originates from the solicitation of the nerves. That is to say, while Walser's *Denkbilder* may share the same structure as Benjamin and Bloch's compositions, they are much more linked by a nervous, oneiric and spontaneous literary experience of Berlin that anticipates modern psychography.

Furthermore, while Bloch's insistence on the role played by the *flâneur* in *Traces* once again aligns his *Denkbilder* with Walter Benjamin's literary representation of Berlin in the first decades of the twentieth century, one should not forget that in 1914 Robert Musil also recognized Franz Kafka's *Betrachtung* (*Contemplation*, 1912) as representative of a new literary "type". Thus, by starting from the paradigm of the *flânerie*, in his article dedicated to Kafka's short prose, and in particular to the thought-figures gathered in the *Betrachtung*, Francesco Rossi investigates the aesthetically subversive meaning of the author from Prague's style, which seems to reflect the features of modern metropolitan life. Commencing from this standpoint and dealing with recent theories on the representation of nonfunctionality, gesture and remediation through literature, Rossi's article offers

a close reading of some telling short texts by Kafka and recognizes paradoxicality, imponderability, the reversibility of opposites and the representation of alienation as the most important features and functions of his “thought-images”.

Aesthetically subversive like those of Bloch and Kafka, but furthermore politically critical are the *Denkbilder* by Ernst Jünger embedded in his novel *Das Abenteuerliche Herz: Figuren und Capriccios* (*The Adventurous Heart: Figures and Capriccios*, 1938). Jünger’s *Figures and Capriccios* – say, historical anecdotes, descriptions of plants and animals, but most of all narratives of dreams that bring about sudden recognitions of truth – are studied by Harald Zils in his article as ‘observations of the outstanding’ that aim to find traces of what is behind the scenes of the world’s appearances. Once again the feature shared by Jünger’s *Denkbilder* and Benjamin’s *Einbahnstraße*, Walser’s *feuilletons*, *Geschichten*, *Prosastücke* and *Mikrogrammen*, Bloch’s *Spuren* and last but not least Kafka’s *Betrachtung* seems to be an interrogating epistemological drive. As Zils highlights, the explorations carried out by the poet’s heart within his novel led to the discovery of a hidden ‘core’ of reality that can be only accessed by a few, among them the adventurer and the poet.

A socio-political criticism inherent in the *Denkbild* can also be traced in Camilla Passigli’s article dedicated to Günther Stern Anders’ *Kafka, pro und contra. Die Prozeß-Unterlagen* (*Kafka, Pro and Contra: The Trial Documents*, 1951). Actually, this collection of reflections on Kafka’s *Bilder* investigates the hu-

man condition in the world from both a political and aesthetic perspective by highlighting Kafka's literary method of deforming the human being in order to show the power of his literary images to derealize humankind at large. Starting from this aesthetic premise, Passigli dwells on the ethical and political implications of Anders' prose, claiming the need for a negative reading of Kafka's "hybridity" by way of a confrontation with Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin's approaches to the literature of the author from Prague.

Anders' interpretation of Kafka's *Bilder* confirms what Adorno sets out in his review of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, namely, that "the impulse that inspired the new word has remained active"¹⁵ – as was our starting thesis – throughout the whole "Short Twentieth Century", with a long afterlife in its second half. The purpose of the present volume is to shed new light on the key developments as well as on the medial and cultural devices which govern this "impulse". In other words, another question dealt with by this volume of *Odradek* is the survival of the *Denkbild* in a world damaged by the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust. In this context, Adorno once again gave a fundamental drive with his *Minima Moralia*, where he describes his 'mutilated' condition of an intellectual driven into exile by Nazism. This condition is the starting point of Raul Calzoni's article that deals with the relapses of the *Denkbild* on German literature after WWII subsequent to Adorno's reflections on the "world after Auschwitz" and

15 Adorno 1992, 322f., quoted from Richter 2007, p. 12.

on Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße*. In particular, the article focuses on W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) in order, on the one hand, to underline the reenactment of the *Denkbild* in German literary production after WWII and, on the other hand, to investigate the role played by this genre in a world offended by Nazism. As Isabella Ferron shows in her article, the standpoint of exile dominating the perception of the "damaged world" in Adorno, Benjamin and Sebald was also taken up by Elias Canetti in his autobiography, *Die gerettete Zunge* (*The Tongue Set Free. Memoir*, 1977), where the author describes his childhood in a collection of *Denkbilder* that can be compared with Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*. What emerges from the analysis is the value of the German language as the only possibility given to the damaged "*Welt nach Auschwitz*" – in both the temporal and the modal meaning of the preposition ("world after/according to Auschwitz") – to remember and to resist oblivion and the power of time. The description of Canetti's childhood, work and life with the metaphor of the "puzzle" is in this sense telling, because it alludes to the different identities of the author's fragmented self after the horrors inflicted by Nazism. Exile and violence, on the one hand, vulnerability and resilience, on the other hand, emerge from Herta Müller's literary production which, as Silvia Vezzoli argues in her article, can be brought back to the form of the *Denkbild*. This is, in particular, the case of the collection of *Kolumnen* entitled *Eine warme Kartoffel ist ein warmes Bett* (*A Warm Potato Is a Warm Bed*, 1992)

and the short stories collection *Niederungen* (*Nadirs*, 1984). These texts, following the critical guidelines by Richter and Huyssen, respond to the features of the *Denkbilder* and they also betray the peculiar inclination of this literary form towards the past and the melancholic.

As a matter of fact, the insistence on childhood in almost all of the *Denkbilder* analysed in this volume speaks for the melancholic drive of this form of brief written piece and its underlying inclination to resist the power of time, violence and vulnerability in its different manifestations, be they social, political or historical. Thus, starting from the premise that the *Denkbild* was a long-lasting phenomenon regarding the whole twentieth century, our goal was not to draw up an entire literary history of the *Denkbild* (it would deserve further research), but rather to grasp some structural features of this form of writing on the basis of primary case studies. This is why close readings have been made of representative texts, and particular attention paid to their philosophical and poetological implications, not only with reference to aesthetical and intermedial aspects, but also to cultural ones which can create bridges to studies on individual and cultural memory.

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