Image-Thinking

Artmaking as Cultural Analysis

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With a prologue by W. J. T. Mitchell

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(Opposite) Figure 0.1 Emma (Marja Skaffari) looks back at her life. Photo: Thijs Vissia
Figure 1.1 Sancho (Viviana Moin) holds Don Quijote (Mathieu Montanier) in order
to comfort him at the end of the episode 'Narrative Stuttering'. Photo: Mar Sáez.

Material Image-Thinking

The scene titled 'Narrative Stuttering' from my 2019 video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* shows Don Quijote alone on a dark theatrical stage. For most of the eight-minute episode, Sancho Panza is sitting on a chair on the side, holding the script, helping him when needed, as a prompter. The knight is trying desperately to tell his story – the adventures, his opinions, whatever happened to him and those around him – but he is unable to act effectively as a narrator. At the end, he bursts into tears and, as you see in Figure 1.1, Sancho holds him in order to comfort him, demonstrating, by physical touch, that he is not entirely alone. This physicality is a primary point this ending of the episode is to make. But there is much more happening here; and all of that participates in the artwork, its effectivity as affective, and its status as an imaginative presentation of a very sad story.

First, these two figures can do what they do because they have a space in which to do it. That space is a stage; hence, a fictional and visual one. The darkness of the stage deprives the space of perspectival depth, at times making Don Quijote almost seem floating. The stage isolates him and, at the same time, gives him an audience. In line with this brief description, I consider the theatrical setting as a material 'theoretical fiction'. It is material, built as a theatre. And, once the figures are acting in it, it is a fiction – one that helps our thinking about, in this case, the social issue of empathy. Freud came up with the term 'theoretical fiction' to justify his fanciful story, in his 1913 book *Totem and Taboo*, of the sons who kill and eat their tyrannical father. A fiction indeed. But elaborating the story led him to, then helped him with, the discovery and elaboration of the Oedipus complex, a theoretical advance in his thinking. In that case, the fiction consisted of a narrative. The concept of 'theoretical fiction' is a broader version of this. From 2008 on, Michelle Williams Gamaker and I have deployed that notion in a variety of films and video installations. Each time, we kept balancing the two sides, reflecting on how

the fictions created by others helped a theoretical idea to make itself both concrete and elaborated.[1]

This Freudian theoretical fiction is one 'genre' of what I call 'image-thinking'. Freud's is narrative. Others can be visually compelling, cinematic or poetic, such as some concept-metaphors. Or they can be anecdotal, as Jane Gallop has argued (2002). In a sense, Freud's is the exemplary one, where the theoretical result is primary. In a slightly different sense, where the visuality serves a pedagogical purpose, it is also how Leonardo da Vinci solved his problem of making his complex, abstract knowledge concrete and thus, clearer for himself, and understandable for others, through visualisation in painting. This is more literally *image*-thinking, with visual art as the primary yield. Primary, yes, for contemporary art buffs who consider Leonardo first of all the great artist he became. For Leonardo himself, who was an ambitious inventor and engineer, it was probably more ambiguous. The French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch wrote this apropos of Leonardo:

> Artistic revolutions are not so much a
> consequence of the introduction of new
> terms and new methods, even less of new
> codes; rather, they stem from a theoretical
> break that engenders a new definition of
> the system and its internal articulations.
> (2002 [1972], 80).[2]

In the scene from *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, the stage with its black floor suggests the potential of the theatre to be affectively effective; that

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1 Freud first published *Totem and Taboo* in 1913. An accessible edition is published by Vintage Books (1960). An in-depth study of the work through theoretical fiction in Freud and Lacan, rightly calling on Proust, is by Malcolm Bowie (1988). Elizabeth Abel (1989) published an analysis of the fictions of Virginia Woolf in a similar, albeit reversed perspective. Ronald R. Thomas (1990) traces the novelistic sources in Freud's work. Many other publications follow suit, often a bit judgemental, as if 'fiction' was the bad side of 'the truth'. The concept is close, but not identical, to Hubert Damisch's 'theoretical object'.
2 On this search in Leonardo's work, see Fiorani and Nova (2013).

contrary, of enduring collaboration; of thinking in discussion. That dialogic nature of thinking is another important element in the present book.

A third partner in this discussion was yet another instance of cultural heritage: an idea about media that philosophy had brought up. For, it seemed relevant that Wittgenstein's ending of his *Tractatus* (1921), 'Of what one cannot speak, one should keep silent', was modified later into 'Of what one cannot speak, one can still show'. The importance of showing is to enable *witnessing* as an engaged activity against the indifference of the world. The theatricality of this display might help to turn onlookers from potential voyeurs into activated, empathic witnesses. Witnessing became a prominent issue, especially elaborated in the episode 'The Failure of Listening' and its subsequent redress in 'Testimonial Discourses'. Not telling but showing: thinking through the implications of the distinction between the two, image-thinking, then, became the term I settled on. In the Preface to his later (1953), more philosophical-technical, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposed the useful concept 'ostensive definition': defining, or clarifying, through pointing to a concrete person, situation or thing.[13]

Image-Thinking for Thought-Images

The hyphen that connects 'image' and 'thinking' is crucial. The search is not for defining images as visual moving or still items. The question that W. J. T. Mitchell raised in the first chapter of his iconic 1986 book *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, namely 'What is an Image?' is not one I seek to answer. Mitchell and others have discussed this definitional question sufficiently. Mitchell's schema (10) that maps five 'families' of images – graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal – each containing several subcategories, convincingly implies that definitional

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13   For Wittgenstein's change of heart, see first the final sentence of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; then *Philosophical Investigations* #41, commented on by Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, 2013 (17, 51–2), who quote Maurice O'Drury, 2002 (159, 170, 173).

statements are not the most enlightening. Instead, they move in so many different directions that the futility of the attempt to pin down 'image' to a single definition is obvious. Others have grappled with the traditional distinctions between words and images that are as hard to sustain as they are to dismiss. Alternatives have been proposed to bridge the gap between the two, such as, most convincingly, Lyotard with his concept of the 'figural' (1971) that remains key; Deleuze who, considering thought a medium, made the medial distinction untenable; whereas the intense theorisations of intermediality by scholars such as Elleström (2021) and his group are only possible if the media as such are recognised.[14]

Lyotard's concept of *the figural* argues for language as more dynamic, turning it into a force, a movement, closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard describes meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation and intuition, and also spatiality. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

> nothing other than the energy that folds
> and wrinkles the text and makes of it an
> aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a
> form . . . And if it expresses, it is because
> movement resides within it as a force that
> overturns the table of significations with a
> seism that makes sense . . .[15]

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14 Mitchell's discussion remains the most relevant one for whoever is interested in multiplying definitions of images analytically. He also provides ample historical and philosophical sources. Lyotard's *Discours, Figure*, from 1971, was discussed by philosopher-film scholar David Rodowick (2001, 2017). The statement that Deleuze is interested in the *medium* of thought is the starting point for a volume edited by Holland, Smith and Stivale (2009, 1). Elleström is director of an international institute for intermedial studies at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden, called IMS.

15 I quote from Rodowick's rendering of Lyotard's concept (2001, 9–10). To grasp the concept, see Rodowick's first chapter, 'Presenting the Figural' (1–44).

Figure 1.3 The traumatised young man, Cardenio, attacks Don Quijote when the latter interrupts Cardenio's story. Sancho tries to help. Photo: José Martínez Izquierdo.

These words affiliate language with, specifically, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of 'movement' rather than any technical specificity.[16]

All this matters for my project, but in order to focus more precisely on image-thinking – with hyphen, in the progressive form, as a process – the media and the distinctions between them are not themselves central concerns. Moreover, I suggest that the example above of the two episodes on listening, 'The Failure of Listening' and 'Testimonial Discourses', important as these scenes are for the primary issue of trauma and the

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16   For another solid explanation of the figural in relation to and distinction from 'figure' and 'figurative', within the context of art history in its relation to psychoanalysis and philosophy, see Vlad Ionescu (2018). This author discusses the ideas of influential theorists of images. I discuss the conception of the cinematic as kinetic apropos of the paintings by Edvard Munch and Flaubert's prose in *Madame Bovary*, making an implicit case for the figural (2017a, 24–43).

need for empathy, would still be too content-oriented to make the case for image-thinking as the process that facilitated their emergence. My first 'imaging' intuition suggested that, in order to do justice to the peculiar, cyclic, perhaps even 'hysterical' form of Cervantes' novel while pursuing the two goals of showing and, or for, witnessing, only an equally incoherent, episodic artwork could be effective (Figure 1.3).

But this artwork then had to exceed a plain similarity of form. For, that would risk the 're-' of repetition, rehearsal, representation: the bad root of the word 'research'. Instead – and this is the heart of the present book's argument – it needs to yield 'thought-images' or *Denkbilder*, created through 'image-thinking'. Under the impact of thinking as active, these provisional (artistic-theoretical) results remain in process. Like the idea of 'theoretical fiction', this concept has a long history. The thought-image was a favourite literary-philosophical genre of the group of writers of the pre-Second World War Frankfurt School of Social Thought. The short iconic texts Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer and others wrote were texts only. What did the word *Bilder*, images, do there, then? This brings in the issue of intermediality, requiring the distinction between media as a starting point, but not as an endpoint.

Walter Benjamin is an illuminating example. He was an avid art collector, and his image-thinking in the invocation of Klee's *Angelus Novus* in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' is legendary. This is a good case where 'image-thinking' can meet, and yield, 'thought-images'. In Benjamin's ninth thesis (of eighteen), he forges his thinking through a visual image, Klee's 1920 print. At the time of Benjamin's musings this was a work of contemporary art. Benjamin brings it to bear not only on the contemporary but on time as such: on the entanglement of past, present and future. This is not only a presentation of a philosophy of history, but a reflection on time in process, with the said entanglement as an enduring result. It distinguishes between past and future as before and after, so that the inexorable stretch of duration can reveal the piling up of the debris of catastrophe. Although he produced a verbal artefact, an allegory, Benjamin espouses the visuality of Klee's image.

Klee and Benjamin together were able to show – not tell – what the angel of history must look like. The success of this image-thinking of

the philosopher and the artist is not clarity but an enriching confusion. Benjamin writes:

> Its face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, it sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of its feet. The angel would like to tarry, awaken the dead, and reassemble what has been shattered. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in its wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm inexorably propels it into the future to which its back is turned, while the pile of debris before it grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (2003, 392)

The point of quoting Klee's and Benjamin's imagings in conjunction is not to prove the latter is right with his interpretation of the image. Visually this seems rather far-fetched, but his goal was not a descriptive interpretation. Turning the image into an allegory, he severed the expected bond between image and meaning. Nor is my point to allege the image as evidence of Benjamin's description of it. For it is not, strictly or visually speaking. On the contrary: if it wasn't suggested by the work's title, it would be easy to see that no clear wings are visible (Figure 1.4).

The creature can just spread its arms and hands, and the few spots on the picture plane can hardly be called masses of debris preventing the supposed angel from closing them. It might simply be measuring the length of some invisible item, like a piece of cloth, and if looked at with a cinematic view, its eyes turned sideways could be addressing another creature *hors-champ*. Or these eyes may be trying to capture both the future and the past in one single look – an impossible task physically, but worth exploring in thought, through the creation of thought-images

that imagine and image the alternative to the hopeless failure of the 'never again' idea. And if we didn't know the title of the print, nor Benjamin's descriptive interpretation of it, the figure could be a coquettish woman in a short skirt and high heels, with an over-sized head and her hair still in curlers. It is the discrepancy, rather than the similarity, that demonstrates the visual–linguistic interaction, the encounter between the two images. Probably a shock to Klee, if less to Benjamin, the image has become an emblem, an 'icon of the left'.

Figure 1.4 Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Indian Ink, colour chalk and brown wash on paper, 318 × 242 mm. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

That is where its status as *Denkbild* has been operative in the aftermath of Benjamin's comment, due to its activating effects on viewers/readers who participated in the thinking. Nevertheless, the noun 'icon' stills the image, arresting it in a permanent meaning.[17]

Some more thoughts on the thought-image are called for, then. In a study of the genre, US-based scholar of comparative literature and German, Gerhard Richter, begins his description of the genre with a whole range of negativities: '*Denkbilder* are neither programmatic treatises nor objective manifestations of a historical spirit, neither fanciful fiction nor mere reflections of reality' (2007, 2). These negatives have something in common: every category that is negated is inapplicable

17 The phrase 'icon of the left' comes from German critic Otto Karl Werckmeister, in a book on leftist political artists (1997). For a profound analysis of Klee's work, both visual and verbal, and the impact of a little-known text by Hubert Damisch (1973) on Deleuze and Guattari (1994), see Grootenboer (2020, 120–5).

because it is one side of a binary opposition. A programmatic treatise would be something like a political pamphlet, as opposed to historical objectivations – an opposition that audio-visual art is devoted to questioning. The second pair is equally subject to the reductions of binary opposition: what Richter disparagingly calls 'fanciful fiction' stands opposed to an equally dismissed 'mere reflections of reality'. 'Rather,' Richter continues, now in a positive discourse, 'the miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production.' In line with the idea of image-thinking, let's look more closely at the choice of words. 'Engagements' brings us closer to the status of audiences as participants. 'Hovering' recalls J. Austin's use of the verb when describing the ambiguity of fire as hovering between thing and event. Integrated with the Freudian concept of 'working through', I can also imagine a verb like *weaving*, mutually engaging on all levels.

In writing, these pieces are miniatures, like Adorno's aphorisms published as *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, written between 1944 and 1946. They can also be short fragments, like Benjamin's reflection, in a childhood memory, on the ball of socks in his cupboard, where the packaging disappears as the content, the socks, unfolds. Most of all, given the following part of Richter's definition, this resonates with Benjamin's fifth thesis on images of the past, which has been a guideline for my work on art between history and anachronism: '[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably' (emphasis added). This warning is crucial for our projects; it is one of their main motors. The statement plays a key role in my most recent film, *It's About Time! Reflections on Urgency* (Chapter 4). There, it is quoted by Aeneas when this figure enacts the student of Cassandra as a Benjamin lookalike.[18]

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18 For the tradition of *Denkbilder*, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (2005 [1951]). Walter Benjamin's fifth thesis is also in *Illuminations*. For solid background, see Grootenboer (2020, 66–9).

In his most positive, descriptive definition, Richter explains the thought-image thus: 'The *Denkbild* encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant meditations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic' (2). Here, I want to draw attention again to the choice of words as elements of *image*-thinking; as process rather than result. The word 'flashes up' suggests the quick flash that Benjamin urges us to preserve by means of recognition in the first sentences of that thesis V from which I now quote a later sentence: 'The true picture of the past *flits by*. The past can be seized only as an image which *flashes up* at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (255; emphasis added). This articulates why and how we seek to revitalise Cervantes' novel for today, as well as Flaubert's; and why I felt urged to revisit the writings of Descartes. In *Don Quijote* we do it, not in a linear film but in video-snapshots, or 'flashes': in short, eight-minute video clips. The vocabulary of quick flashes also recalls the quickness of 'thinking on your feet', which was stimulated, even necessitated, by the material event mentioned in the first section of this Introduction.

Richter's view also connects to the question of historical truth, at issue in the episode 'Who is Don Quijote?' This is one of the central topics in debates about fiction and its potential relevance for reality. In this regard, in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes:

> What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling – that is to *spur on* the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike *sparks* through a kind of intellectual *short-circuiting* that casts a *sudden light* on the familiar and perhaps *sets it on fire*.[19]

As in Benjamin's thesis, the language here is again both visual and shock-oriented, with 'spur', 'sparks', 'short-circuiting', 'sudden light'

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19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1997, 322–3). Emphasis added.

and 'sets it on fire'. This is thought alive, and this living thought is active, fast, risky. The preposition 're-' of 'research' and 'representation' is out of place here. The language Adorno writes here has agency. And it is visual. In both respects, it is *fast*. In addition to the propositional content that advocates 'compelling' as a serious contribution to knowledge, Adorno's wording makes the case that thought needs a formal innovation that shocks. Thus, it can gain new energy and life, involve people, and make thought a collective process rather than the kind of still images we call clichés. Our attempt to achieve such 'sparking' innovation lies in the combination of material, practical changes of the mode of display, the anachronistic bond between present and past, the confusion of languages and other categories we tend to take for granted, and, above all, the trans-mediation, the intermediality of the audio-visualisation of a literary masterpiece. In view of the need for witnessing, such a messy form of thinking enables and activates viewers to construct their own story, and connect it to what they have seen around them; connecting the social world with the imagination stimulated by fiction. Thus, I aimed to turn the hysteria of endless storytelling into a reflection on communication as it can breach, and reach beyond, the boundaries that madness draws around its captive subjects, and instead, open up their subjectivity.

For this, we speculated that singular installation pieces might facilitate experimenting with the episodic nature of the literary work. According to this expectation, Mathieu Montanier and I designed the pieces together, in a dialogue between actor-artist and academic-artist. Collaboration, too, is subject to transformation, however, lest it become another stultified and stultifying method. This specific collaboration had to change when, at some point, Mathieu felt he had better concentrate on his acting, and we diverged in a somewhat clearer division of labour. The pieces, presenting 'scenes' or 'episodes', propose situations. To give intellectual insight into, as well as sensuous experience of, the stagnation that characterises the adventures, they are predominantly *descriptive* rather than narrative. Any attempt at narrative is 'stuttering', recurring, without development. The scene

understanding something. Thinking-through – engaging what one wishes to understand in a reciprocal intimacy – seems more promising, because more open to newness.

Thresholds: The Merging of Thinking, Imagining and Imaging

In spring 2019, I was invited to hold an exhibition of my fiction-based video work in Murcia, Spain. The curator, Miguel Á. Hernández Navarro and I plotted together, in a productive image-thinking session, to make this an exhibition of fragments, and make the connections among our most common cultural activities the thread running through it. Fragments and connections: nothing is complete, but neither can things be separated rigorously. The cultural activities of reading, imagining and seeing or making images, in other words, *imaging*, hang together. This thinking-together yielded the exhibition's title *Contaminaciones* ('Contaminations'). This title, a thought-image in itself, indicates the overlap, the fluid demarcations we are used to bringing to cultural domains, between words and images, still and moving images, material and mental images. The key word is 'between'; what matters is not the categories, the 'boxes' we need to distinguish things in order to make sense of the otherwise chaotic world. Instead, the importance is in the thresholds, the spaces where the elements of these cultural areas meet: as events, activities, rather than things. The underlying thought is that cultural life consists of performative events: everything has impact for those who see, or otherwise participate in the process. These take place in space.

This is why I began this book with the collaboration of the famous figure of Don Quijote, who combines these activities. While reading, he imagines, and figures in front of him, an image he cannot distinguish from reality. That is why he is considered mad. Madness: as it happens, this was the topic of the first of our fiction projects, but there, not emerging from a book the patients read, but from a reality that has wounded them so gravely that they cannot return to reality. In *A Long History of Madness*, reading has a different place than in *Don Quijote*. The earlier project was based on a work of literature and of