The Approach of an Inverse Theology: A Commentary on the Aesthetic Dimension of the Jewish Prohibition of Idolatry, particularly in Adorno's and Benjamin's Philosophical Thinking

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"[D]ialectic discloses each image as script" (Adorno/Horkheimer 2002: 18): This sentence from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be found in a passage where Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer try nothing less than to adapt the Jewish prohibition of idolatry to their own philosophy. They associate the Jewish prohibition of idolatry with Hegel's notion of the "determinate negation" (*bestimmte Negation*) (ibid: 18). This association is, of course, not based on historical-philological grounds. Hegel did not remotely refer to the Jewish prohibition of idolatry when he spoke of "determinate negation" within the dialectical movement of the "*Geist*." Nevertheless, Adorno and Horkheimer discern a philosophical closeness. Obviously, this adaptation takes place in a context where the authors explore the epistemological dimension of the process of enlightenment, tracing this process throughout the history of humankind. Therein, they assign a particular value to the Jewish religion:

> In the Jewish religion, in which the idea of the patriarchy is heightened to the point of annihilating myth, the link between name and essence is still acknowledged in the prohibition on uttering the name of God. The disenchanted world of Judaism propitiate magic by negating it in the idea of God. (ibid: 17)

In the Jewish religion they see a sort of enlightenment that frees the world from mythical thinking, from the belief that all life is bound to fate and death, which disenchants the world without reducing what the world is to "what the world is" – a tautological epistemology, as Adorno and Horkheimer recognized in the

process of enlightenment since its inception in the sources of ancient Greek philosophy: the modern notion of truth, linked with an approach to nature which only seeks to master it, and finally the philosophical positivism, which expresses this tautology without any decorative metaphysics, but also without any doubt or reflection on its own history. However, such a reflection on itself is desperately needed, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue:

> Enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible in its estrangement [*Entfremdung*]. In mind's self-recognition [*Selbsterkenntnis des Geistes*] as nature divided from itself, nature, as in prehistory, is calling to itself […]. Through this remembrance of nature within the subject, a remembrance which contains the unrecognized truth of all culture, enlightenment is opposed in principle to power [*Herrschaft*]. (ibid: 31–32).

In the Jewish religion the prohibition of idolatry – the prohibition on using the name of God, the prohibition on making an image of God – ensures this kind of self-recognition and provides the remembrance of nature within the subject. At least Adorno and Horkheimer present this interpretation of the Jewish religion in their text.[1]

But their adaptation of this commandment of the Jewish religion not only has an epistemological but also an aesthetic dimension, which does not condemn the image as such, as the historical process of enlightenment did, but instead saves the image as an epistemological form:

> The right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition. Such observance, "determinate negation," is not exempted from the enticements of intuition by the sovereignty of the abstract concept, as is skepticism, for which falsehood and truth are equally void. Unlike rigorism, determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth. (ibid: 18)

At first glance it seems strange that the dialectic method could and should be able to provide this rescue of the image. Adorno and Horkheimer do not say

1 I have given a much more detailed account of Adorno's and Horkheimer's epistemological adaptation elsewhere: Schmidt 2022.

much more about how this method should be employed. One reason for this is that we see it in action throughout the text and it is not possible to describe the dialectical method without employing it at the same time. Another reason is that this method is not like a finished tool, but rather changes depending on what it approaches. Finally, the description that "dialectic discloses each image as script" is itself an image that requires some kind of reading. To understand this image, it might help us to explore its origins, which leads us to the relationship between Adorno and Benjamin. An intellectual relationship with rich and complex exchanges of thoughts and critical interventions, which make it difficult to reconstruct an exact authorship of a thought – a question that, anyhow, isn't important for our philosophical interests here, but shows the fruitfulness of their dialogue. That dialogue came to a sudden end when Benjamin died while attempting to escape the mostly Nazi-occupied European continent in 1940.

In 1934, a decade after Franz Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin dedicated an essay to him. The essay provides a unique interpretation of Kafka's writings. When Adorno received a copy of Benjamin's unpublished essay he reacted with great excitement:

> Do not take it for immodesty if I begin by confessing that our agreement in philosophical fundamentals has never impressed itself upon my mind more perfectly than it does here. Let me only mention my own earliest attempt to interpret Kafka, nine years ago now – I claimed he represents a photograph of our earthly life from the perspective of a redeemed life, one which merely reveals the latter as an edge of black cloth, whereas the terrifyingly distanced optics of the photographic image is none other than that of the obliquely angled camera itself […]. (Adorno/Benjamin 1999: 66)

In other words, Adorno sees Benjamin's essay as describing the relationship between the earthly life and a redeemed life similar to the relationship he sketched by his own image. Adorno's reaction is based not only on a similar interpretation of Kafka but also on a similar approach to thinking, which he recognizes in the method Benjamin used in his essay. Adorno calls this approach "'inverse' theology" (ibid: 67), juggling with his metaphor that Kafka's perspective is like that of an angled camera. Adorno characterizes this approach as opposing both a "natural" and a "supernatural" interpretation of Kafka, which takes up Benjamin's own words that it is only possible to miss

the core of Kafka's writings by one of two divergent paths of interpretation.[2] Fortunately, it is possible to confirm Adorno's impression that in this point indeed lies the principal approach of Benjamin's interpretation. Benjamin himself wrote, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, an insightful explanation of why he thinks the essay is methodologically so challenging: "The image of the arc suggests why: I am dealing with two ends at once: the political and the mystical." (Benjamin 1978: 624, trans. MCS) Benjamin's image of an arc or bow (*Bogen*) may remind us of the rainbow as the symbol of the covenant between God and humankind. Especially in Judaism this covenant represents the relation between God and all humans, not only the special relation between God and the Jewish people. It is possible that this image is actually meant as a hint to Scholem. However, Benjamin refuses both a mere political or materialistic and a mere theological interpretation of Kafka. The tensions between a materialistic and theological point of view in Benjamin's Kafka essay were even increasing in his later thinking and appear to be unresolvable in Benjamin's thoughts *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* ("about the concept of history"), where the dialectical materialism, derived from a Marxist understanding of history, look to be superimposed on a messianic conception of history, soaked up by elements of the Jewish tradition, or – if you will – vice versa.

In the Kafka essay, it seems as if there is a closer or at least more mediated relationship between politics and mysticism, between a natural and a supernatural reading of Kafka's stories. Adorno describes what this approach of an inverse theology means from his perspective, where he is influenced by his studies of Søren Kierkegaard. In his habilitation thesis about Kierkegaard, titled *Die Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* ("The Construction of the Aesthetical"), Adorno, mentored by the theologian Paul Tillich, makes many critical and dismissive remarks concerning Kierkegaard's philosophy. However, Adorno does emphasize one particular aspect of Kierkegaard's approach, which could be seen as the model of inverse theology. Due to a Christian understanding of the self, Kierkegaard has a sense of the alienated subject and its broken relationship to the modern world. Adorno repeatedly draws attention to this sensibility. One could argue that the metaphor of a divine light, which Adorno uses to characterize the idea of an inverse theology in his letter to

2 In his essay on Kafka, Benjamin enumerates some authors from both "ends": On one side he names Hellmuth Kaiser, who interpreted Kafka's writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, and on the other side Hans-Joachim Shoeps, Bernhard Rang, Groethuysen, and Willy Haas.

Benjamin, is directly derived from Kierkegaard's Christian philosophy. It lies in the dissonance between the Christian notion of the human being, conceived as a creature of God and especially for the Christian understanding as a – dialectically speaking – mediation between the divine and the earthly sphere, and an alienated world where this mediation proves to be impossible.[3] If this were the case, it would be right to criticize Adorno's philosophical negativity as an critique of the current world which needs an anchor in a positive theology acting as a kind of countermodel, even if it is not made explicit by Adorno. But the idea of an inverse theology is not about this content: Christian doctrine versus an alienated world. Adorno is concerned with the approach to thinking in Kierkegaard's writings. Unlike Hegel, who views truth as the result of a continuous mediation between subject and object, Kierkegaard's philosophy involves a leap from the world of phenomena to the world of intelligibility. For this reason, Adorno comments on a passage from Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* where Kierkegaard, thinking of purchasing an object, describes how the recognition of an object must lead to a loss of subjectivity, to a reification of the relationship between subject and object, which is at the same time a loss of truth. For Kierkegaard, Christianity salvages this situation. Adorno translates this idea into his own terminology: "Truth is not thing-like. It is the divine gaze which, acting as *intellectus archetypus*, looks at alienated things and redeems them from their enchantment." (Adorno 1979: 60, trans. MCS) Kierkegaard's doctrine rests in an idealistic comfort that truth may not lies in the real world but in the world of the spirit (*der Welt des Geistes*), a conception that Adorno strongly refuses (ibid: 61). For Adorno, the force of Kierkegaard's philosophy lies in its principal form. Kierkegaard does not find the objects of his philosophy in a Christian catechism or in a scholastic discussion or in the great artworks but in ordinary phenomena. "What the pathos of total subjectivity has conjured up in vain rests poor, discarded, but unlosable in the excreted sediment of the aesthetic." (ibid: 183, trans. MCS) Kierkegaard found truth in all the fragmented phenomena that he describes: for example, in his *Diapsalmata*. Adorno insists on Kierkegaard's manner of thinking.

> If the history of culpable nature is that of the disintegration of its unity, then it moves towards reconciliation as it disintegrates, and its fragments bear tears of disintegration as promising ciphers. This is why Kierkegaard's opinion that through sin man stands higher than before proves itself; hence his

3 Maximilian Krämer argues in such a direction (Krämer 2023: 65).

> doctrine of the ambivalence of fear, of sickness unto death as a cure. With his negative philosophy of history as the expression of "existence," a positive-eschatological one offers itself in inversion to the mourning gaze of the idealist without his involvement. (ibid: 198, trans. MCS)

The mourning gaze of the idealistic philosophy – and here we might bear in mind not only Kierkegaard's but also Hegel's conception of the "*unglückliches Bewußtsein*" (Cf. ibid: 248) – cannot be the last anchor for the human mind. At this point the idea of an inversion occurs but combined with a very important notion for Adorno's thinking, namely the need to read the fragments as "promising ciphers." In this approach Adorno recognizes the relationship between Kafka and Kierkegaard. In his letter to Benjamin, he insists on this relationship by formulating a similar thought:

> This relationship is to be found rather precisely with respect to the position of 'scripture' [*die Stelle der 'Schrift'*], and here you claim so decisively that what Kafka regarded as a relic of scripture can be understood much better, namely in social terms, as the prolegomenon of scripture. And this is indeed the secret coded character of our theology, no more, and indeed without loss of a single iota, no less. (Adorno/Benjamin 1999: 67)

This remark closely references Benjamin's essay. In the third section, entitled *Das bucklicht Männlein* (The little Hunchback), script ("Schrift") becomes a central motif for describing the constellation of guilt and justice, or, as we might say, a mythical and a redeemed life. When Kafka tells the story of the *Penal Colony*, where a machine engraves letters onto the backs of the delinquents, Benjamin interprets this as: "the back of the guilty man becomes clairvoyant and is able to decipher the script from which he must derive the nature of his unknown guilt." (Benjamin 2002: 811) The back has to endure this guilt. The little hunchback becomes a figure, an image, of the human being, loaded with an unknown guilt. In the last section – titled after Kafka's *Sancho Pansa* – this image is juxtaposed to the figure of the student, which occurs several times in Kafka's stories:

> The gate to justice is study. Yet Kafka doesn't dare attach to this study the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah. His assistants are sextons who have lost their house of prayer; his students are pupils who have lost the Holy Writ [*Schrift*]. (ibid: 815)

Both times when script appears as a motif in Benjamin's essay it describes a bow with two ends: a political and a religious one. But this is not the end of how Benjamin brings Kafka's writings into this constellation. He also includes Kafka as a writer himself:

> […] he divests human gesture of its traditional supports, and then has a subject for reflection without end. Strangely enough, these reflections are endless even when their point of departure is one of Kafka's philosophical tales. Take, for example, the parable 'Vor dem Gesetz' [Before the Law]. The reader who read it in *Ein Landarzt* [A Country Doctor] may have been struck by the cloudy spot at its interior. But would it have led him to the neverending series of reflections traceable to this parable at the spot where Kafka undertakes to interpret it? This is done by the priest in *Der Prozess*, and at such a significant moment that it looks as if the novel were nothing but the unfolding of the parable. The word 'unfolding' has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of 'unfolding' is really appropriate to parable; the reader takes pleasure in smoothing it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka's parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect is literary. This does not mean that his prose pieces belong entirely in the tradition of Western prose forms; they have, rather, a relationship to religious teachings similar to the one Haggadah has to Halachah. They are not parables, yet they do not want to be taken at their face value; they lend themselves to quotation and can be recounted for purposes of clarification. (ibid: 802–803)

Benjamin refers to two essential forms of the Jewish tradition of writing. The Halacha is seen as a category of texts that provides legal advice on the commandments of the Torah or the teachings of the Talmud, while the Haggadah offers moral or ethical advice by telling a meaningful story – it is not directly concerned with the commandments. Kafka's stories are like a Haggadah unfolding a law, which is unknown. This is the interpretation, the reading of Kafka by Benjamin. It points in two directions or to two sorts of laws: the mythical fate and the law of justice, which in a Jewish understanding would be the Torah itself. But Benjamin's reading of Kafka's writing does not stop here. He makes a final turn, taking into account that Kafka considered his own writings as having failed, necessarily failed, and therefore demanded their destruction, which ultimately did not take place. Kafka's documented will,

> which no one interested in Kafka can disregard, says that the writings did not satisfy their author, that he regarded his efforts as failures, that he counted himself among those who were bound to fail. He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment 'Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image' so faithfully. (ibid: 808)

Benjamin does not interpret Kafka's order as an expression of personal dissatisfaction. Rather, Kafka demanded that his writings should not become a part of a literary tradition which gives advice to someone. He feels about his stories that they should provide advice, but in fact they could not. For Benjamin this respect for the prohibition of idolatry – the *Bilderverbot* – is inherent as a genuine quality of Kafka's writing. The unfolding process of the parabolic storytelling does not come to an end because the end would mean you would hold the right and final answer in your hands. Kafka's texts respect the *Bilderverbot* by not offering some kind of divine truth or divine revelation. They need to be interpreted but could not be solved. Therefore, the structure of Kafka's writing itself, or as Benjamin calls it his "gesture" (ibid: 806), points to redemption as something that is missing. Kafka's texts don't need the image of a redeemed life to come this point. They turn the whole (modern) world into writing which demands to be deciphered, as a world that is awaiting its redemption.

In his letter to Benjamin, Adorno gives his interpretation of Kafka through an image that also describes the approach of an inverse theology. Even there, Adorno says that this image was already ten years old. However, it was several more years until 1953 before he himself would compile his thoughts on Kafka in a detailed essay: *Notes on Kafka* (*Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka*). One reason for this long period lies in the inferno, which had become a historical reality. The essay responds to this and attempts to deal with it. In several instances this essay echoes Adorno's own remarks about an inverse theology from his letter. At in one particular point it merges all the motifs we have encountered:

> Kafka's artistic alienation, the means by which objective estrangement is made visible, receives its legitimation from the work's inner substance. His writing feigns a standpoint from which the creation appears as lacerated and mutilated as it itself conceives hell to be. In the middle ages, Jews were tortured and executed […] inversely [*verkehrt*]; as early as Tacitus, their religion was branded as perverse [*verkehrt*] in a famous passage. Offenders

> were hung head down. Kafka, the land-surveyor, photographs the earth's surface just as it must have appeared to these victims during the endless hours of their dying. It is for nothing less than such unmitigated torture that the perspective of redemption presents itself to him. The light-source which shows the world's crevices to be infernal is the optimal one. (Adorno 1997: 268)

Adorno resumes the image, but couples it with a much more brutal scenario. This may remind us of the machine in the *Penal Colony* that Benjamin spoke of earlier. Here, the deadly penalty is associated with an anti-Jewish or even early antisemitic characterization of Tacitus. A terrifying association, if we bear in mind that Adorno thought of this in a moment when the persecution and extermination of the European Jews was taking place and brought antisemitism to a horrifying and unbelievable new reality. But in a way, Adorno inverts the characterization of Tacitus. Kafka's perspective shows a damaged creation, a damaged life – as Adorno subtitles his book *Minima Moralia* (Cp. Adorno 2005). The inverted perspective gives more justice to the damaged life than another one which contrasts the earthly light with a celestial one. Therefore, the approach of an inverse theology is not the same as the notion of a dialectical or, I would say, even a negative theology, when the absence of God and the negativity act as an *eschaton*, as the last thing where the mind can find its rest and comfort:

> But what for dialectical theology is light and shadow is reversed. The absolute does not turn its absurd side to the finite creature – a doctrine which already in Kierkegaard leads to things much more vexing than mere paradox and which in Kafka would have amounted to the enthroning of madness. Rather, the world is revealed to be as absurd as it would be for the *intellectus archetypus*. The middle realm of the finite and the contingent becomes infernal to the eye of the artificial angel. (Adorno 1997: 269)

Undoubtedly, this passage can be seen as a self-commentary on Adorno's characterization of Kierkegaard's philosophical approach. Even when Adorno speaks here about a divine perspective, the perspective of the *intellectus archetypus*, it remains only an assumption, an "as-if." Kafka's writing, with its ambivalent form of his parabolic tales, converts the reality into a place where the search for the divine turns into an endless vortex.

In Adorno's and Benjamin's interpretation of Kafka the inner link between the approach of an inverse theology and the commandment that prohibits idol-

atry appears. To read each image as script, it is not necessary to have in mind a positive notion of redemption. On the contrary, a concrete notion of redemption obstructs or even makes it impossible to decipher the damaged life as such. Inverse theology does not presuppose an image or a notion of the absolute. It requires a sensibility to the damaged life, a capacity to recognize it in its fragmented, seemingly irrelevant phenomena like Kierkegaard's *Diapsalmata* or abandoned things, which Benjamin sees embodied in the figure of Kafka's Odradek. It does not require the whole picture to identify a fragment as such. Of course, all these expressions are metaphors that encircle the approach of an inverse theology.

However, this approach cannot be directly transferred into a method. There are in fact several models for this approach which can be found in the thinking of Adorno and Benjamin. One of these is what Benjamin called the "dialectical image," important for so many of Benjamin's writings and especially for his project about the arcades of Paris. The dialectical image brings the movement of thinking to a standstill, but without resolving the movement to a viewpoint where it can rest. As Benjamin himself describes it, when he speaks about the conception of a materialistic approach to writing history:

> Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest [*Stillstellung*] as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. (Benjamin 2003: 396)

Benjamin does not understand a thought as a monad that rests in itself. The movement of the spirit does not come to rest in the dialectical image or in the monad for the historical materialist. But it is interrupted. He emphasizes the leap that is displayed in the dialectical image. This is where the anti-idealistic trait of Benjamin's dialectic of standstill lies, which cannot be reconciled with the dialectic of Hegelian provenance.

Benjamin's idea of a dialectic in a standstill (*Dialektik im Stillstand*) is similar to the dialectic that Adorno and Horkheimer had in mind when they spoke of the implementation of the prohibition of idolatry. Similar to Benjamin's conception, Adorno and Horkheimer are also concerned with the image not just in the sense of a mere illustration, but as appearance in which the conceptual and sensual are intertwined: "[D]ialectic discloses each image as script." (Adorno/Horkheimer 2002: 18) This sentence could be regarded not only as the epistemological program of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but also as an epistemologi-

cal principle of Walter Benjamin's philosophy. At the very least, the deciphering of images or an entire imagery is a central method in many of Benjamin's and Adorno's studies.

In the motif of inverse theology, Adorno saw a convergence between his and Benjamin's philosophy. A convergence that was, of course, already recognizable in other motifs and that Adorno was also aware of. One example of this would be the idea of a natural history, which Adorno developed in his lecture *On the Concept of Natural History* in 1932 (Cp. Adorno 1990b: 383), in which he references Benjamin's philosophy, and in particular his study on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Cf. Adorno 1990a: 357). However, anyone who continues to follow the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin will also notice the divergences in their thinking, and indeed the controversies that arose between the two. One of these controversies also concerns the understanding of the "dialectical image." Susan Buck-Morrs has not only reconstructed this debate in her study on the origins of negative dialectic, but also analyzed it in detail. She characterizes Adorno's intellectual efforts around Benjamin as follows: "During all of their disagreements Adorno's goal was to rescue Benjamin from what he considered the Scylla of Brechtian materialism on the one hand and the Charybdis of Judaic theology on the other." (Buck-Morss 1979: 141)

The tension between materialism and theology in Benjamin's thinking finds (as mentioned) a degree of intensity in the theses on the concept of history that seems to tear apart the unity of Benjamin's thinking. On the other hand, Adorno himself envisioned a kind of salvation of theology through materialism, as he wrote to Benjamin in his letter of August 4 and 5, 1935: "A restoration of theology, or better still, a radicalization of dialectic introduced into the glowing heart of theology, would simultaneously require the utmost intensification of the social-dialectical, and indeed economic, motifs." (Adorno/Benjamin 1999: 108) In this letter, Adorno does not bring dialectics – certainly in its Hegelian variety – into play as a countermodel, but rather to correct a dangerous understanding of the dialectical image, which he spots in Benjamin's approach, an understanding of the dialectical image that, following Adorno's argumentation, we can call a surrealist understanding.

In this surrealist understanding, Adorno primarily perceives the problem that the dialectical image is understood as an archetype of a collective unconscious that needs to be deciphered, but is only a sheathed archetype, and that, so to speak, a dialectical movement does not come to a halt, but rather the movement of thought proves to be only a pseudo-movement. Adorno's methodological criticism refers to Benjamin's attempt in his exposé of the

passage to analyze the commodity as a dialectical image. In principle, Adorno considers this approach to be right; indeed, he encourages Benjamin to uncover a decisive point, a point of convergence, in the relationship between theology and materialism in modernity:

> It is through commodities, and not directly in relation to human beings, that we receive the promise of immortality; and develop the relationship which you have rightly established between the Arcades project and the book of the Baroque, we could regard fetish as a final faithless image for the nineteenth century, one comparable only to a death's-head. It seems to me that this is where the basic epistemological character of Kafka is to be identified, particularly in Odradek, as a commodity that has survived to no purpose. Perhaps surrealism finds its fulfilment in this fairy-tale of Kafka's as much as a baroque drama found its fulfilment in Hamlet [*in diesem Märchen mag der Surealismus sein Ende haben wie das Trauerspiel im Hamlet*]. (ibid: 107–108)

Adorno considers the surrealist understanding of the dialectical image to be insufficient and regards Benjamin's own reflections from the *Trauerspielbuch* as contrary to this understanding.

This passage shows how convinced Adorno was of the convergence of his and Benjamin's thinking. Even through his sharp criticism, Adorno shows his devotion to Benjamin's thought – at least to what Adorno called an inverse theology as a shared intention. The constellation of commodity, fetish, and image was to lead Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* to a theory of art in modernity. The work of art seems to take the place of theology. However, it is probably more reasonable to say that Adorno conceives works of art more as a surrogate for the theological than as objects of a theology. One can read Adorno's remarks as a late explication of his critique of Benjamin and as his own attempt to read the commodity or the work of art as a dialectical image. A conflict, or rather perhaps the constellation of theology and materialism, is also present here in Adorno's aesthetics, in which he develops the dialectic of commodity and artwork.

Adorno's description of an inverse theology is itself a dialectical image. Adorno himself allowed it some variation over time, as we could see. If we want to understand the dialectical image in the same sense as the phrase from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* mentioned before – that dialectic discloses each image as script – then we would also have to regard, or rather read, the image

of an inverse theology not as an illustration of a method of thinking, but as a momentary glimpse of thinking in motion.

This thinking also moves in a dynamic between theology and materialism. Adorno's image may bring this movement to a halt, but it only does so for a moment. The tension, which is also captured in Adorno's image of photography, may clarify something, but it also leaves as much open; indeed, it virtually demands an explanation. In this respect, it is a dialectical image, an image that already sets out to be read as such. The art of this required dialectic would be to read an image not as an immediate appearance, but rather, like characters that refer to something that they themselves are not, as an appearance of something else.

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