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Archetypes and the Iconic Unconscious: Jung, Benjamin, Adorno and the "Strong Program" in Cultural Sociology

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Abstract

This paper explores the heuristic potential of C. G. Jung's concepts of archetype and collective unconscious within the sociology of the imaginary, connecting them to the debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno on the Arcades Project. Through a comparison between Jung's depth psychology, Benjamin's critique of modernity, and Adorno's theory of culture, the study shows how the archaic imaginary may serve as an interpretative key to the symbolic and mythical dynamics of capitalist modernity. The article also discusses the contemporary relevance of these concepts in relation to the "strong program" in cultural sociology and the iconic turn, arguing that Jeffrey Alexander's notion of iconic consciousness can be reinterpreted through Benjamin's idea of an iconic unconscious. The aim is to outline the foundations of a sociology of the imaginary able to integrate the symbolic, emotional, and material dimensions of social experience.

Keywords: archetypes, iconic unconscious, Jung, Walter Benjamin, Adorno, strong program, cultural sociology.

1. Introduction

In this issue devoted to the sociological potential of the concept of the archetype, I revisit the debate between Adorno and Benjamin surrounding Benjamin's (2000) unfinished work on the *Paris Arcades* (1924–1940) — one of the twentieth century's most ambitious attempts to interpret the modern imaginary. This inquiry remains timely in the current context of social-theoretical debate. While postmodernism and "weak thought" (Vattimo, 2013),

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or the linguistic turn in its post-metaphysical form (Habermas, 1956, 1966, 2015, 2020), succeeded in dismantling totalizing systems and dogmatic philosophies of history, they also abandoned any theory of the unconscious and its depths. This is true both for the non-linguistic social unconscious, which remains closely tied — if not directly corresponding — to the accumulation of capital as abstract wealth (Finelli, 2020), and for the emotional unconscious of psychoanalysis, which, following Freud and Jung (who agreed at least on this point), should be understood as an unconscious without language. This stands in contrast to Lacan's assumption that the nature and function of the unconscious can be entirely resolved within the structures of language (see Finelli, 2010). The emphasis placed by the so-called semiotic-communicative paradigm on language — summarized in the maxim "Being is language" — has often obscured material, extra-linguistic, bodily, and emotional realities. These do not serve as criteria of truth for representations, but as loci for their possible objective meaning, beyond the infinite play of interpretations characteristic of constructivist sociology. A sociology of the imaginary that wishes to address the question of depth must therefore seek to connect images with the emotional sensibility of the historical human subject.

Accordingly, this article follows a three-part trajectory. First, in section 1, it clarifies the concepts of archetype and collective unconscious. Second, in section 2, it examines Benjamin's distinctive — and clearly Jung – and Bachofen-influenced — reinterpretation of the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism as the keystone of the Arcades Project. Finally,, in section 3, it discusses both the advantages and the limits of the concept of a non-linguistic unconscious within the so-called cultural studies, revisiting the essential features of the debate on the iconic turn. Archetypal analysis, in this sense, addresses the problem of the symbolic in a way not confined to the linguistic paradigm that has dominated the human sciences since the post-war period. Thus understood, the symbolic is not only — in a Durkheimian sense — the phylogenetic root of solidarity reconstructed through the linguistic elaboration of the sacred, but also the foundation of a normativity otherwise unattainable.

2. Imagination, Archetype, and the Collective Unconscious in Jung

What, then, is an archetype? How is it linked to the concept of the collective unconscious, to which it is closely related? In his two late lectures, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* (1934) and *The Concept of the Collective Unconscious* (1936), Jung treats with great clarity and precision a theme that had accompanied his research for more than thirty years.

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> "The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be distinguished in negative terms from the personal unconscious by the fact that it does not owe its existence to personal experience and is therefore not a personal acquisition. While the personal unconscious consists essentially of contents that were once conscious but have disappeared from consciousness because they have been forgotten or repressed, the contents of the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity. The personal unconscious consists chiefly of complexes; the content of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, is made up essentially of archetypes" (Jung, 1977, p. 69).

There thus exists a personal unconscious tied to the experiences of the individual, and a collective unconscious which, unlike the former, has never been part of consciousness and reaches the individual through "hereditary transmission." It is composed essentially of *archetypes*. This is not a new theme in Jung's thought. The first appearance of the concept of the "archetypes" of the collective unconscious can already be found in *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido* (1911), where Jung, in analyzing the fantasies of an American patient, rejects the Freudian approach that traced the origin of psychic disorders to the repression of sexuality and instead posits the existence of an independent psychic energy. In that work, Jung alludes to *primordial images* (*urtümliches Bild* or *Urbild* — a term formed from *Bild*, image, and the prefix *Ur*, denoting what is ancient, archaic, and yet still effective in the present as its origin). These "primordial images" are capable of autonomous generation, perceptible in consciousness but arising from an unconscious matrix common to all peoples, regardless of time or place[1]. The collective unconscious thus appears to consist of mythological images and motifs; consequently, the myths of peoples are the true representatives of the collective unconscious. To defend himself from accusations of mysticism or innatism, in the 1936 lecture Jung referred to formulations from anthropology, such as Lévy-Bruhl's concept of *collective representations*, the categories of imagination proposed by ethnologists Hubert

[1] The term *Urbild* was not coined by Jung but derives from his correspondence with the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, for whom Jung had felt admiration since his youth. Burckhardt used the expression to refer to the significance of Goethe's Faust for the German people (see Vitolo, 1977). Goethe himself referred to the *Urfaust* as the original version of Faust, the first draft of what would later become the dramatic work Faust. In his naturalistic studies, Goethe devoted himself to the search for *Urphänomene*—"primordial phenomena" or, as emphasized by Mario Pezzella (2020, p. 6),"originating phenomena"—from which empirical phenomena would emerge. For the importance of this concept in sociology (see Dodd,2008). See also our later discussion of the concept of originating history (*Ur-geschichte*) in Walter Benjamin.

and Mauss, and the biological notion of *patterns of behavior*. Above all, he emphasized that "the concept of the collective unconscious is neither speculative nor philosophical, but simply empirical" (Jung, 1977, p. 72).

Although he recognized that diagnosing the collective unconscious is not an easy task, and that it is insufficient merely to note the archetypal nature of unconscious products—since they might derive from elements acquired through language and education—Jung believed that there were sufficient examples demonstrating the "autochthonous revival of mythological motifs" (Jung, 1977, p. 72). If, therefore, there exists "a region of the psyche that can be called the collective unconscious," it must be taken into account in psychological explanation. He thus opposed the methods of Freud and Adler, which sought to bring the obscurity of the unconscious to rational clarity on the basis of etiological explanations of neurosis limited to biological and personal causes. To illustrate his method, Jung examined Freud's famous essay on Leonardo da Vinci's painting *St. Anne, the Virgin, and the Child*. Moving beyond Freud's interpretation of the artwork as the projection of the child's erotic fantasy toward the mother, Jung identified archetypal and transpersonal motifs of "double birth" and "dual descent," present both in Christian liturgy—the rebirth of Christ in the Baptism of the Jordan—and in Egyptian and Greek cultures, such as the human and divine nature of pharaohs and certain Greek deities. If one were to transpose Leonardo's case into the field of neuroses in a patient with a maternal complex suffering from the delusion of having had two mothers, a purely personalistic interpretation would be entirely mistaken. The cause of the neurosis would actually lie in the reactivation of the archetype of the "double mother," which is completely independent of whether the individual had one or two mothers. This archetype functions both individually and historically, without reference to the relatively rare empirical occurrence of dual maternity. Archetypes, then, can be compared to "unconscious images of the instincts themselves" (Jung, 1977, p. 71)—impersonal motive forces specifically formed to pursue their intrinsic purposes long before any degree of consciousness existed. According to Jung:

> "There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic constitution, not in the form of images with content, but merely as 'forms without content,' representing only the possibility of a certain type of perception and action. When a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and manifests itself as a compulsion which, like an instinctual force, presses forward against all reason and will, or produces a conflict of pathological dimensions—that is, a neurosis" (Jung, 1977, p. 78).

According to Jung, within the mythological and religious sphere lie "tremendous powers" that can cause actual neuroses in the patient whenever his psychic life fails to cooperate with the impersonal "motive forces" emanating from the collective unconscious. Surprisingly, for someone often dismissed as a mystic sympathetic to National Socialism, Jung justified his research on the basis of historical and political considerations that — as will later be seen — are the same that underpin Walter Benjamin's reflections of the same period:

> "If thirty years ago someone had dared to predict that our psychological development was moving toward a revival of the medieval persecutions of the Jews, that Europe would again tremble before the Roman fasces and the marching legions, that people would once more raise their hands in the Roman salute as two thousand years ago, and that an archaic swastika, instead of the Christian cross, would attract millions of warriors ready to die — he would have been regarded as a mad mystic. [...] The man of the past, who lived in a world of archaic représentations collectives, has returned to life in a tangible and painfully real way — not only in a few deranged individuals, but in many millions of people" (Jung, 1977, pp. 77–78).

These sociological reflections are of clear historical and political importance. What is at stake in the analysis of the collective unconscious is precisely *regression* — to use a term recently revived in contemporary analysis (Jaeggi, 2025) — to a stage of archaic drives and behaviors, or, in other words, the annihilation of progress and civilization. Here Jung's observations also recall — through his reference to Lévy-Bruhl — Durkheim's notion of the overwhelming power of the collective consciousness at the expense of individual consciousness. It is evident, however, that Durkheim never referred to the unconscious, although his descriptions of collective consciousness in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* resonate closely with Jung's concept. Durkheim writes:

> "Collective consciousness is not a mere epiphenomenon of its morphological base, just as individual consciousness is not a simple efflorescence of the nervous system. For it to appear, a sui generis system of individual consciousnesses must be produced. This synthesis develops a world of feelings, ideas, and images which, once born, obey their own laws. They attract, repel, fuse, divide, and multiply, without these combinations being directly commanded or determined by the underlying reality. The life thus produced enjoys a degree of independence great enough to engage at times in aimless or useless manifestations, for the mere pleasure of affirming itself. We have shown that this is often the case with ritual activity and mythological though" (Durkheim, 2013, pp. 489–490).

Durkheim's *collective consciousness* can in some sense be seen as encompassing Jung's *collective unconscious*, insofar as it evokes a force autonomous from individual consciousness and manifests itself particularly in ritual and myth. The difference, however, lies in its genesis: in Durkheim, the *collective consciousness* arises "horizontally" as a *synthesis sui generis* of individual consciousnesses , whereas in Jung the *collective unconscious* evokes an "hereditary" transmission of cultural traits acquired during phylogenesis — empirically observable, perhaps, though with origins that remain obscure (biological? transcendental?).

This parallel between Jung and Durkheim, although it would merit further study[2], helps introduce the central question guiding this inquiry: what relevance might Jung's reflections on the archetypes of the collective unconscious hold for the social sciences in general, and for the sociology of the imaginary in particular? There are several trajectories that extend from Jung's notion of a "non-linguistic," magmatic, and creative archetypal unconscious. Gilbert Durand and Cornelius Castoriadis have already been discussed in this issue. For this reason, attention will now turn to the debate between Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno concerning the *Passagenwerk* . Revisiting this debate is useful not only for historical reconstruction — though this is significant — of one of the twentieth century's most ambitious attempts to interpret the modern imaginary, but also because it reverberated through subsequent generations of the Frankfurt School and remains crucial for developing a sociology of the imaginary and of the depths in the contemporary context.

3. The arcades in the collective unconscious of the Nineteenth century: the debates between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno

Benjamin (2000) devoted fourteen years to his unfinished work on the Paris Arcades (1926–1940), the city that for him embodied modernity. His intention was to compose an "originating history of modernity" (*Urgeschichte der Moderne*)[3], as represented in the political events and material culture of the

[2] See, for example, Greenwood (1990).

[3] In an important 1935 letter to Adorno regarding his work on the Arcades Project, Benjamin stated: "As you know, what is at stake for me is the originating history of the nineteenth century" (1972, p. 290, modified translation). In Italian translations of Benjamin's writings, *Urgeschichte* is often rendered as "prehistory," obscuring its connection with the concept of origin (*Ur-sprung*) developed in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1969, 1999).

French capital—from the rise of the "bourgeois king" Louis-Philippe to the fall of the fragile Republic and the advent of Louis Bonaparte's Empire. The poetry of Charles Baudelaire, the early iron-and-glass architecture designed for commerce (including the arcades themselves, urban galleries devoted to the sale of luxury goods), fashion and urban culture, the art of caricature, the urban reconstruction carried out by Prefect Haussmann, the history of sects and social movements—all of these were the "relics" of spiritual and material culture that, for Benjamin, represented the "dreams and ideals" of the bourgeois century, soon destined for disillusionment and decline.

Within this context, it becomes clear that the essential "passage" Benjamin sought to depict was precisely the swift transition of bourgeois *Zivilisation* through its primordial, even "infantile," forms—those destined to be radically transformed by the rise of monopoly capitalism and the Bonapartist regime. This was, therefore, an epoch of threshold (*Schwelle*, to use Benjamin's own term, borrowed from surrealism to express the boundary between reality and surreality), a liminal phase between pre-industrial forms of life and the emergence of mass consumer society, in which the commodity form pervades every sphere of existence. Within this setting, Benjamin sought the political and cultural "originating phenomena" (*Urphänomene*) of a social order that would undergo a dramatic collapse in the twentieth century with the rise of mass reactionary regimes. "Originating phenomena," "dialectical images" (sometimes also referred to by the Leibnizian term "monads"): these are the key concepts of the new form of cultural historiography that Benjamin sought to elaborate, aiming to awaken twentieth-century European society before its final catastrophe—the Second World War. In the immense corpus of notes and fragments of the Arcades Project, Jung appears in Konvolut K, titled "City and House of Dreams, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung" and significantly also in Konvolut N, "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," which gathered Benjamin's most explicitly methodological reflections. Between 1931 and 1934, Benjamin spent most of his life abroad (in Spain, Italy, and Denmark, hosted by Bertolt Brecht), and work on the Paris Arcades book slowed considerably. Yet in early 1934 an external event decisively altered the project: Benjamin's exile in Paris (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 391). There, for the first time after a long enforced pause, he found himself alone with his work, with access to the vast archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale. His intensive research on the cultural and social history of the nineteenth century allowed him to give a "new face" to the project, animated by "new and penetrating sociological perspectives[4]." As he declared in a letter

[4] Respectively, letters to Gretel Adorno (March 1934) and to Theodor Adorno (May 1935) by. Benjamin (1995b, pp. 1103, 1118).

to Horkheimer that same year, he was, for the first time, "clearly seeing the structure of the book before his eyes." In May 1935, at the request of Friedrich Pollock, deputy director of the Institute for Social Research (then in exile in New York), Benjamin published the exposé of the work, titled Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*[5]. It consisted of six sections, each associating a historical figure with an architectural, technological, artistic, literary, or political phenomenon of Paris from the early nineteenth century to the Commune of 1870: (1) Fourier, or the arcades; (2) Daguerre, or panoramas; (3) Grandville, or the world exhibitions; (4) Louis-Philippe, or the interior; (5) Baudelaire, or the streets of Paris; and (6) Haussmann, or the barricades. Beyond the concept of commodity fetishism—the central "originating phenomenon" of his methodology—Benjamin's "new sociological perspectives" were influenced by Parisian intellectual circles, particularly his encounters with Georges Bataille, then librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and by his discovery of the theories of Johann Jakob Bachofen, Ludwig Klages, and Carl Gustav Jung. While Bataille's influence is difficult to trace (Ciantelli, 2017), Benjamin himself explicitly notes his engagement with Jung in his notes. In the Exposé of 1935, one finds several passages that echo Jung's theory of archetypes, though reformulated in Marxist language:

> "To the form of the new means of production, which, at its beginning, is still dominated by the old (Marx), there correspond, in the collective consciousness, images in which the new interpenetrates with the old. These images are wish-images (*Wunschbilder*), in which the collective seeks to eliminate or transfigure the imperfections of the social product, as well as the defects of the social system of production. In these images there simultaneously emerges the energetic tendency to distance itself from what has become outdated—from the most recent past. These tendencies direct the imagination, which has drawn its impulse from the new, back to the originating past (*Urvergangene*)[6]". (Benjamin, 1995a, , pp. 46–47; 2003, pp. 6–7).

Alongside Marx's traditional vocabulary ("means of production"), Benjamin introduces "wish-images" (*Wunschbilder*), stimulated by the emergence

[5] From that moment onward, the Exposé was included in the Institute for Social Research's official program under the title *The Social History of the City of Paris in the 19th Century*, providing Benjamin with some economic security, though at the cost of a certain intellectual deference toward his patrons (see Benjamin, 1995b, p. 1097).

[6] We note a problematic translation choice: *Wunschbilder* is rendered as "ideal images," whereas the literal "wish-images" is more appropriate; see also Benjamin (2012, pp. 374–375).

of the new technological apparatus within which they arise. These images, however, direct imagination back to the "originating past" (*Urvergangene*—preferable to "primordial past"). Benjamin further clarifies this intermingling of images of the future and fantasies of an unconscious past:

> "In the dream in which each epoch appears in images to the next, the latter appears wedded to elements of the originating history (*Urgeschichte*), that is, of a classless society. The experiences of this society, deposited in the collective unconscious of the collective itself, produce, through interpenetration with the new, utopia, which leaves its traces in a thousand configurations of life—from enduring constructions to ephemeral fashions." (Benjamin 1995a; 2003, pp. 6-7).

In these quotations we find Benjamin's conception of the "dialectical image," which encapsulates the theory of history and knowledge underlying the Arcades Project. The "new" of technocapitalist modernity interpenetrates with the "old," with "originating history" (*Urgeschichte*). This interpenetration of "new" and "archaic" generates the dream of the future—the utopia. Here, Benjamin's view closely parallels Jung's distinction between archetype and archetypal image. While archetypes are "patterns of behavior" expressing "the tendency to form particular representations of the same motif which, despite their individual variations, continually derive from the same fundamental pattern," archetypal images consist of the actual mythical representations appearing in dreams, fantasies, delusions, and, in more structured form, in the exemplary narratives constituting humanity's mythological heritage as cited in Romano & Vigna, 2012, p. 7). It is quite clear that Benjamin was attempting to "fuse" Marx and Jung, seeing the concept of commodity fetishism as the "fundamental archetype" (or "originating phenomenon") of modernity capable of producing its own modern mythology. Benjamin was convinced—uniquely among Western Marxists and in consonance with Jung—that "capitalism was a natural phenomenon through which a new sleep and new dreams enveloped Europe, giving rise to a reactivation of mythic forces" (Benjamin, 2000, p. 511). "Only the superficial observer can deny that between the world of technology and the archaic symbolic universe of mythology there exist profound correspondences" (Benjamin, 2000, p. 597).

To understand Benjamin's reference to the concept of "originating history" (*Urgeschichte*), one must also consider his interest in Bachofen, alongside Jung. The work of the Swiss anthropologist had attracted the attention of Marx, Engels, and various socialist and anarchist thinkers for its evocation of a communist society at the dawn of history. Engels and Paul Lafargue were especially drawn to Bachofen's studies of matriarchal societies, characterized by

high levels of democracy, equality, and forms of primitive communism that challenged the very concept of authority[7]. These archaic societies of *Urgeschichte* embodied the harmony between humanity and nature—shattered by "progress" and to be restored in the emancipated society of the future. As Michael Löwy (2005) has argued, Benjamin's mode of thought was that of "revolutionary romanticism," which "consists in weaving dialectical relations between the pre-capitalist past and the post-capitalist future, archaic harmony and utopian harmony, the lost ancient experience and the liberated future experience." (Löwy, 1992, p. 127). In this phase, Benjamin refers to the classless society of *Urgeschichte* to pose one of the implicit problems in the concept of fetishism: the historical-comparative reference to a situation in which the phenomenon is absent—a problem that also interested Marx in his ethnological notebooks. In this sense, the supposed existence of a primordial communist community "recollected" (*Eingedacht*)[8] in the present would provide a historical foundation for Marx's imagined "association of free men." Within the collective consciousness of capitalist society, these images of an original classless society remain, and it is the critic's task to decipher and translate them into the domain of history. "The use of dream elements in awakening is the exemplary case of dialectical thought," Benjamin observed at the conclusion of the Exposé. Benjamin's reading of fetishism is not only of philosophical-historical interest but also epistemological. Despite Engels's appreciation—and, to a different extent, Marx's—of Bachofen, Marxist theorists generally denied myth any autonomous cognitive significance, while right-wing thinkers viewed it as an extratemporal source of primordial revelation. Benjamin's interpretation sought to move beyond this dichotomy. Through Bachofen and Jung, he sought to relate nature and culture, myth and Logos, within the historical temporality in which human beings are situated. The "dialectical image" was an attempt to comprehend and represent the opposites that constitute, through their tension, the discourse of capitalist modernity: spirit and nature, myth and reason. Benjamin believed that capitalism itself was a mythical-religious phenomenon—but, unlike Max Weber's interpretation, a "purely cultic religion" without dogma or theology (Benjamin, 2013, p. 41). The concept of the "dialectical image" as a collective "dream-image" pointing to the utopia of a future society by reviving elements of "originating history" met with Adorno's

[7] On the different roles played by Bachofen in Marx and Engels (especially on the origins of the family and the primitive community) (see Iacono, 2018, pp. 85–99).

[8] The concept of recollection (*Eindenken*) is key to Benjamin's philosophy of history, expressing the act of remembering—beyond official commemorations—moments of subjective or collective experience. Recollection is a revolutionary act, a "tiger's leap into the past" that breaks the continuum of history (see Benjamin 1997, pp. 47, 49)

strong skepticism. Upon reading the Exposé on August 2, 1935, Adorno responded with a dense letter of criticism—the famous "Hornberg letter," written in the Black Forest. Adorno was skeptical of Benjamin's use of the concept of the "dialectical image as a content of consciousness—even if collective"—which he considered insufficiently materialist: "The fetish character of the commodity is not a datum of consciousness, but dialectical in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness" (Benjamin 1978, p. 295). In other words, he accused Benjamin of idealism—of neglecting the real inversion between men and things inherent in fetishism, focusing instead on its symbolic projections. Moreover, Adorno believed the Exposé overestimated the emancipatory potential of the "archaic":

> "It seems to me that the category through which the archaic passes into modern times is not the golden age but catastrophe. [...] Who is, in fact, the subject of the dream? In the nineteenth century, certainly only the individual; yet in his dreams neither the fetish character of the commodity nor its monuments appear immediately, in replica. Hence one appeals to the collective consciousness, which, in its current version, I fear cannot be distinguished from that of Jung. [...] The fact that, in the dreaming collective, class differences vanish should serve as a sufficiently clear warning" (Benjamin, 1978, p. 297).

Benjamin took these criticisms seriously. Indeed, in the 1939 *Exposé* (written in French at Horkheimer's suggestion in order to seek funding for the Arcades project), the references to wish-images and to the classless society of *Urgeschichte* disappear. This gave the impression that he had accepted Adorno's two main objections: the psychologization of the dialectical image and the incautious use of the term "classless society." Yet on one "decisive point," Benjamin remained firm: "Certain elements which I have indicated in this constellation [of the dialectical image] appear indispensable—namely, the figures of the dream" (Benjamin, 1978, p. 119). This "historical dream" must be distinguished from the psychic dream of individual consciousness and studied in its own specificity. Conversations with Adorno in the autumn of 1935 convinced Benjamin that the epistemological dimension of the Arcades Project could best be developed through an examination of "the function of psychoanalytic theories of collective psychology as applied by fascism on the one hand and by historical materialism on the other." This would be achieved through an analysis of the concept of "archaic images" in the "Aryan psychology" of Carl Gustav Jung (Benjamin, as cited in Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 552). Unfortunately, the essay on Jung that Adorno requested—meant to clarify more precisely the differences between Benjamin's approach to

dream-images and that of the Swiss psychoanalyst—was never written, leaving us only to speculate on what Benjamin might have argued[9].

Benjamin's connection with Jung and the concept of the archetype passes through the notion of "originating phenomenon" in Goethe, as interpreted by Simmel[10]. Yet this relationship among Benjamin, Jung, and Goethe via Simmel should not be misunderstood. It may be seen as an elective affinity among these thinkers only if one also perceives their philosophical differences. Benjamin's intention was to transfer the concept of "origin" (*Ursprung*) from the "pagan context of nature" to the Judeo-Christian (and thus messianic) context of "history." Throughout his reflections, Benjamin feared that an exclusive focus on nature or on "bare life"—to use his famous expression, later taken up by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (Agamben, 1998) —would neglect the dimension of "salvation" and redemption immanent to his messianic vision of history. Nonetheless, his aim was to recover the bodily-natural dimension present in the approaches of Jung, Freud, Klages, and Bachofen in order to develop a materialist conception of history and society[11]. History, for Benjamin, possesses a "natural" dimension—the eternal recurrence of the same—but also a redemptive dimension that breaks this cyclical repetition (the "new," linked to the messianic dimension). To describe this conception, he coined the term natural history (*Naturgeschichte*). The central philosophical and historical reason behind Benjamin's rejection of *Lebensphilosophie*—the philosophy of life that, through Nietzsche, influenced later thinkers including Jung—was his belief that such a naturalistic approach was too "mythical." The dissent Benjamin expressed toward Jung can thus be understood as a rejection of the naturalistic hypostatization of history, as well as concern over the potentially "fascist" implications of Jung's theory of archetypal images[12]. This last point touches upon a critique that later became widespread (as discussed by Secondulfo in the

[9] In a letter to G. Scholem (5 Aug 1937), Benjamin wrote of confronting Jung's psychology with the "instruments of white magic," which he called "a real devilry" (Benjamin, 1978, p. 312).

[10] "By studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I understood that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous transposition of this Goethean concept from nature to history. Origin (*Ursprung*) is the concept of the originating phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish context of history" (Benjamin, 2000, p. 462).

[11] In the letter above mentioned to Scholem, Benjamin also wrote: "In Jung's production there is a late and emphatic elaboration of an element explosively revealed by Expressionism… a specifically clinical nihilism… Jung himself traces the heightened interest in the psyche back to Expressionism…" (Benjamin 1978, p. 312).

[12] Letter of 9 July to Fritz Lieb: "I intended to write a critique of Jungian psychology, to unmask its fascist armor" (Benjamin as cited in Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 566).

current issue): if myths, symbols, and traditions of a people are deposited within the collective unconscious, the step toward a regressive "substantialization" of these values within the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the "people's community" invoked by the Nazis) is dangerously short. For this reason, Jung's references to an ethnic character of the psyche—and hence to a difference between "Jewish" and "Germanic" psyches—were subject to deep misunderstanding and ideological exploitation[13].

4. How Strong Is the "Strong Program" in Cultural Sociology? Contemporary Pathways in the Non-Linguistic Unconscious

The debate between Benjamin and Adorno over the sociological and Marxist re-functionalization of Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious also reverberates in their respective conceptions of mass culture. With some simplification, one may argue that the trust in the utopian potential expressed even in the forms of mass culture (from architecture to cinema and fashion), which we find in the *Passagenwerk* as well as in Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological* Reproducibility (1935–36), is connected to Jung's valorization of myth as an autonomous source of knowledge. Conversely, Adorno's categorical rejection of mass art in *The Culture Industry* (1944) is rooted in his devaluation of the concept of myth in favor of consciousness. Thus, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—entirely devoted to exposing the inauthenticity of capitalist forms of life—stops at the threshold of reflexivity and consciousness, refusing to draw from the sphere of the "aura" manifested by mass culture. In a radio conversation recorded in 1952 with the renowned scholar of classical

[13] It is not possible to address here Jung's relationship with Nazism and his alleged antisemitism. According to Aniela Jaffé, editor of Jung's autobiography (1978), these accusations, upon closer examination, prove unfounded—refuted by Jung's writings, behavior, and the testimonies of his numerous Jewish patients and collaborators. One particularly significant episode concerns Gershom Scholem, one of the foremost Jewish scholars of the twentieth century and a lifelong friend of Walter Benjamin. Scholem had been personally invited by Jung to the Eranos meetings in Ascona—gatherings that included several prominent Jewish intellectuals such as M. Neumann, M. Buber, and K. Kerényi. Having heard criticisms of Jung's conduct during the Nazi period, Scholem sought clarification from Rabbi Leo Baeck, one of the few survivors of the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Baeck, who had met Jung in 1947, "said that in that conversation they had clarified everything between them and had parted once again reconciled" (cited in Maidenbaum & Martin, 1997, p. 288). Following that reconciliation, Scholem accepted Jung's invitation to *Eranos*.

mythology Karl Kerényi, Adorno stated that he was inspired by Feuerbach's critique of religion:

> "It is not a matter of being against religion, but above it. And by this he meant nothing other than that the task of philosophy precisely consists in this: to secure the truth that is contained in mythologems without confusing it, literally and immediately, with what it pretends to be; but also without denying this truth by taking it for deliberate deception or fantasy—instead understanding which necessities in the development of humanity's consciousness are reflected in these images" (Adorno, 1998, p. 127).

If Adorno sought to stand clearly "above" myth in general—and the mythologems of mass culture in particular, as his studies demonstrate—Benjamin instead wished to stand "with" myth, preserving the energy and the potential for social change it expresses, often in an "ambiguous" (*Zweideutig*) way. Does this debate merely hold historical value for reconstructing the thought of two great twentieth-century metaphysicians, or does it still tell us something about contemporary studies of the imaginary? In a recent article (*Interpretation Dilemmas Relating to Carl Gustav Jung's Concept in the Context of the Sociological–Anthropological Tradition*, 2022), the Polish scholar Ewa Kwiatkowska sought precisely to answer this question:

> "Can the Jungian concept of the unconscious be in any way a point of reference for cultural studies today? Can the categories of the collective unconscious and archetype be used as heuristic tools in these studies?" (Kwiatkowska, 2022, p. 62).

To provide an answer that avoids both metaphysical ontologization and semiotic reductionism, the author refers to the distinction between the concepts of "linguistic unconscious" and "iconic unconscious." In the psychoanalytic tradition, two tendencies can indeed be observed: the Jungian one, which recognizes the unconscious primarily through images, and the other—stemming from Lacan and inspired by linguistic theory—which attributes to the unconscious a linguistic nature. This linguistic concept of the unconscious lies at the core of semiotic structuralism, cultural anthropology, and the cultural studies that developed within the "linguistic turn." If the essence of the linguistic turn is the belief that human knowledge is grounded in language and in linguistic description of the world, this shift expressed a tendency within semi-structuralist conceptions that reduced symbolism to signification, failing

to grasp the symbol's specific semantic dimension[14] and thereby neglecting the imaginary aspect of culture (for example, both Lévi-Strauss and his successors implicitly reduce the imaginary aspect of myth by focusing solely on its hidden signifying structure). By separating the Imaginary from the Symbolic, Lacan carried to its ultimate consequences the application of semiological and structuralist methods—not only in psychoanalysis but also, more generally, in the humanities—where such methods led to overlooking an important dimension of culture, namely, the iconic. One consequence of the semiological-structuralist approach is the inability to apprehend visual symbols, as already emphasized by Gilbert Durand. His response to this deficiency included references—though deeply transformed—to psychoanalytic themes, while his treatment of imagination explicitly positioned itself in opposition both to Sartre and to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. In this polemic, Durand invoked the notion of the archetype, which, in the context of research on the cultural imaginary, is hardly accidental. Durand absorbed the Jungian approach to the unconscious as manifest in the sphere of images and used it in his anthropological studies of the cultural imaginary. This moment is heuristically important because it provides the premise for revaluing the anthropological role of image phenomena in culture. The connection between myth and image was highlighted in a similar way by Ernst Cassirer, who, however—unlike Durand's semiostructuralism—conceived myth in a logocentric way, as a semiotic system analogous to language. Beyond the problematic innate and universal character of archetypal images, in Jung's later understanding and in Durand's interpretation the archetype "would then coincide with the disposition to produce images of a certain type, and not with the image itself" (Durand 2013, p. 36). Archetypes can thus be understood as a form—empty and universal—a "form without content," pre-existing individual human life, which gives determinate shape to certain psychic contents. Durand therefore identifies in the archetype "a dynamic form, an organizing structure of images that always transcends the individual, biographical, regional, and social concretions in the formation of images" (Durand, 2013, p. 66). It is therefore within the so-called "iconic turn" that "the heuristic significance of the Jungian tradition for cultural studies can be revealed. The Jungian concept of the collective unconscious cannot be 'reconciled' in extenso with the scientific approach of contemporary cultural anthropology and other cultural studies, if only because of its previously noted unscientific presuppositions. It can, however, be situated among those reflections that, by elevating the status of the symbolic image, opened new

[14] As Durand observed, "the semantics of the symbol is creative" (Durand, 2013, p. 381).

perspectives for research into the visual cultural sphere (cultural imaginarium, iconosphere)" (Kwiatkowska, 2022, p. 69).

Drawing on Durkheim's classic insights into totemism—according to which "collective feelings become fully self-conscious only when they are deposited upon tangible external objects" (Durkheim 2013, p. 421)—the iconic turn aims to develop a cultural-sociological approach to visual and material culture, treating icons as "agentic, relatively autonomous performers" (Alexander, Bartmanski & Giesen 2012, p. 6). From an epistemological standpoint, the iconic turn is characterized primarily by what its foremost exponent, Jeffrey Alexander, defines as a powerful interaction between aesthetic surface and discursive-moral depth. From this perspective, icons can be defined as

> "symbolic condensations that root social meanings in material form, allowing the abstractions of cognition and morality to be subsumed—to be made invisible—by aesthetic shape. Meaning is made iconically visible, in other words, by the beautiful, sublime, ugly, or simply by the mundane materiality of everyday life" (Alexander 2008, p. 782).

Iconicity, therefore, concerns "experiencing material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force" (Bartmanski & Alexander 2012, p. 1), while a cultural sociology of iconicity should aim at "aesthetically expanding sociological epistemology" (Bartmanski & Alexander 2012, p. 5)[15]. This approach, recalling Simmel's sociological aesthetics, surprisingly dispenses with Simmel—and even more surprisingly, with Walter Benjamin. Developing Roland Barthes's analysis of Greta Garbo's cinematic face, Alexander (2010, p. 324) suggests that "behind the aesthetic structure of the Garbo-surface lies the moral structure of the Garbo-depth. The Garbo icon is a sign composed of signifier and signified. Garbo is not only synonymous with beauty but also with the sacred. She bears a religious meaning that engages us in moral ideals." Through a variety of case studies—including iconic photographs, intellectuals, festivals, and even wines (see Alexander, Bartmanski & Giesen 2012; Bartmanski, 2015)—the iconic turn has aimed to deconstruct the power of specific visual-cultural objects to symbolically condense profound meanings into a particular material form. Alexander rightly claims that the idea of "iconic consciousness" has helped

[15] However, as Santoro and Solaroli rightly argue, in their attempt to bridge the divide between "cultural sociology" and the "sociology of culture": "Any analytical attempt to explain the iconic status and cultural power of specific objects and events should examine in detail how they were produced and socially organized… and how such production shaped their aesthetic form, circulation, public relevance, and the crystallization of iconic power" (Santoro & Solaroli 2016, pp. 68-69).

rescue "consumption" (through the classic studies of Campbell (1987) and Miller (1998) "from the black box of commodity fetishism" (Alexander 2015, p. 5). However, he errs in asserting that Walter Benjamin "aesthetically extended" the theory of commodity fetishism "with his argument that mechanical reproduction eliminates aura." In fact—as this article has sought to demonstrate—Benjamin argues the exact opposite. The commodity does not extinguish aura; rather, it recreates it within a capitalist and technological environment. The entire unfinished *Passagenwerk* was founded on this basic idea[16]. This is not mere philological pedantry: major theoretical innovations often rest on evident or inadvertent misunderstandings. Alexander's misreading of Benjamin, in this case, deprived the inquiry into "iconic consciousness" of its possible connection with various domains of investigation, including the "optical unconscious,"[17] or, more broadly, the re-emergence of the archaic and its possible political uses. Had the iconic turn reflected upon Benjamin's essay *Capitalism as Religion* (Benjamin 2013), for example, it would have clearly recognized how capitalism employs sacred and mythical forces to maintain an "immanence without transcendence"—that is, the "ever-same" of capitalist realism (Fischer 2009). And it is equally evident that—like every civilization—the capitalist one could not have its "centuries counted" (to recall the famous title of Giorgio Ruffolo's book) unless it rested upon forms of worship that draw from the sacred sphere. Only that—in Alexander's case—it is a sacred

[16] Benjamin's misunderstanding is not an isolated one but has been repeated since the foundational text of the iconic turn, *Iconic Power: Materiality and meaning in social life*. Here Alexander again states: "The founders of critical social theory, from Marx to Weber and Benjamin, insisted too much on disenchantment" (2012, p. 4).

[17] When Walter Benjamin coined the term optical unconscious, he was referring primarily to the psychoanalytic perspective: photography opened up a new realm of experience that was inaccessible to the naked eye, just as psychoanalysis provided access to the psychic unconscious. The camera conveys the virtuality of vision, through which the eye learns the spatio-temporal configuration of the photographed object "with its devices of slowing down and enlargement" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 230). The term optical unconscious, as defined in Benjamin's writings and later by Rosalind Krauss (1993), can play a key role in understanding the dissemination of new media. The hypothesis is that images embody iconic power also through the specific visual codes they generate. These codes can be transferred to other images as a kind of "hidden algorithm" (Romic, 2015), which may in turn contribute to their special status, much like archetypes. A coded disposition of the image (a structure, a gesture, the positioning of figures) can be stored by an observer and later recognized as a model (structure) in another image. The associative process that takes place is usually hidden from the observer—hence the use of the term optical unconscious. As the image circulates through electronic media, it is easily appropriated across a variety of different contexts, revealing its intrinsic power.

without transcendence[18]. Conversely, in Benjamin even the sacred of kitsch and the commodity contains a "phantasmagoric" element that alludes to an "other" beyond the "here and now." One may remain skeptical of Benjamin's theologically inspired Enlightenment, according to which "as long as there is a beggar, there will be myth" (Benjamin, 2001, p. 512)—that is, myth will persist even where poverty has been eliminated, only in a different guise—and of his continued reliance on the concept of totality when he affirms that "an elementary case of dialectical thinking: to use the elements of the dream upon awakening" (Benjamin, 2001, p. 499). Could a fully awakened humanity ever exist, one that does not indulge in dreaming? Yet a "strong paradigm" of cultural sociology cannot fail to engage with the recovery of the myth's semantic potential as expressed through iconic consciousness[19].

[18] Antonio Camorrino in his contribution to the current issue argues that "the cosmos of postmodern spirituality is entirely immanent in nature" and relates it to the contemporary culture of narcissism. The New Age galaxy—regardless of the concrete differences among its various groups and their corresponding practices and beliefs—reveals itself, under an imaginal analysis, as a "nocturnal" type. Human existence unfolds within an undifferentiated cosmos: "there is no here and hereafter, since it is always here that one returns after death; there is no I and God, for every I is potentially a god… there is no I and Cosmos, but rather there is an I–Cosmos" (Camorrino, 2026)

[19] In this sense, the "late Habermas" of *Verbalizzare il sacro* (2015) also moves in this direction. Here Habermas—returning to a highly influential essay he had published in 1971 on *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, after a lifetime devoted to the "critique that makes conscious" (that is, the critique of ideology, regarded as superior to the "critique that saves")—finally restores to religion what Benjamin had assigned to art: the capacity to recollect, through translation, something entirely forgotten by means of the "profane illuminations" described through the well-known concept of "aura," namely, "the unique appearance of a distance," whose irreplaceable task is to reveal the weak messianic force bequeathed to humankind. The complex of the sacred no longer represents—in the Durkheimian sense—the phylogenetic root of solidarity from which to reconstruct the linguistic elaboration of the sacred, but rather the irreplaceable foundation of a normativity otherwise unattainable.

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