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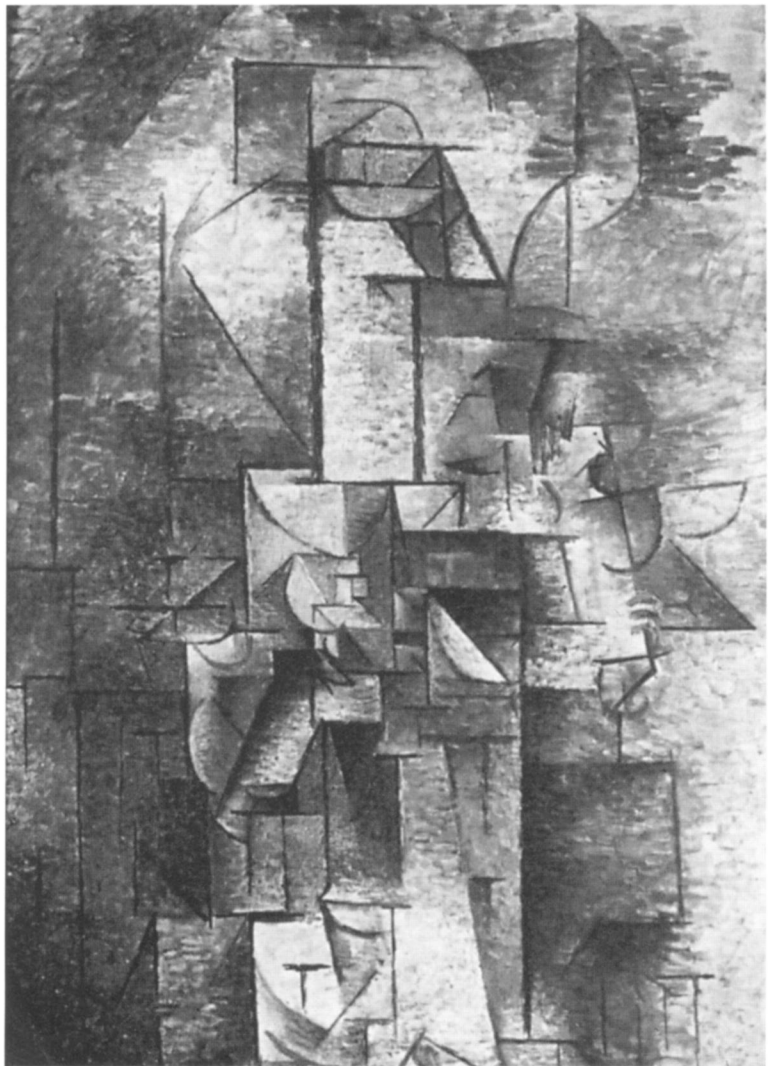
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Pablo Picasso.
Woman Playing the Violin,
spring 1911. Oil on canvas,
36.2 x 25.6 in. (92 x 65 cm).



“Radically *Uncolorful* Painting”: Walter Benjamin and the Problem of Cubism

ANNIE BOURNEUF

I.

In August 1917, Gershom Scholem, at that time a student of mathematics and philosophy, visited the Sturm gallery in Berlin—then the central point for the promotion of international modern art in Germany. There he saw an exhibition of works by Marc Chagall, Alexei von Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, August Macke, Franz Marc, and Pablo Picasso, among others, which made an enormous impression on him—Picasso, especially.¹ He wrote a letter about what he had seen to his friend Walter Benjamin, then living in Switzerland. In his reply, Benjamin disagreed sharply with most of what Scholem had said.² Scholem divided painting into two great tendencies, two essentially opposed ways of knowing or communicating the world: “colorful” (*farbig*) painting and “colorless” (*farblos*) painting.³ Benjamin emphasized instead the “unity of painting despite its apparently so disparate schools,” the ground shared by “a Raphael and a Cubist painting as such.”⁴ And against Scholem’s idea of “colorless” or linear painting, Benjamin denied that there is such a thing as line in painting.⁵

The two friends did concur in some matters. Both felt strongly that Picasso’s cubism was a failure—Scholem speaks of “*unheard-of kitsch*,” Benjamin of an “impression of impotence and inadequacy.”⁶ Both felt that cubism nevertheless contained enormous potential. Such views were not uncommon in Expressionist circles in Berlin in 1917. When it came to speaking of what this potential might be, however, neither Scholem’s nor Benjamin’s views could be called commonplace. For Scholem, “Picasso is *perhaps* on the way towards colorlessness”; that is, cubism’s great potential was that it might become purely colorless painting.⁷ Benjamin strenuously objected to Scholem’s notion of colorless painting and, in an obscure passage, proposed that the problem of cubism lay rather in the possibility of *uncolorful* painting:

Seen from one side, the problem of Cubism lies in the possibility of a, not necessarily *colorless* [*farblos*], but radically *uncolorful* [*unfarbig*] painting

in which linear shapes dominate the picture—without Cubism ceasing to be painting and becoming graphic art. I have touched this problem of Cubism neither from this nor any other side, on the one hand, because it has not yet become decisively clear to me before concrete pictures or masters. The only one among the new painters who has touched me in this sense is Klee, but on the other hand I was still much too unclear about the foundations of painting to progress from this profound emotion to theory. I believe I will get there later.⁸

Benjamin notes in this letter to Scholem that the difference between the colorless and uncolorful “must of course first be explained and clarified,” but he does not go on to explain it. And then there is the matter of the reference—Benjamin’s first—to Paul Klee. Later, Benjamin would acquire two of Klee’s works. Benjamin’s wife, Dora, gave him *Presentation of the Miracle* in 1920, and he bought the *Angelus Novus* in 1921. Klee and the *Angelus Novus* recur in Benjamin’s writing through his last major work, “On the Concept of History.”⁹ But this does not make Benjamin’s reference to Klee in the 1917 letter to Scholem any less of a mystery; Klee was not included in the exhibition Scholem visited and indeed he had only just had his breakthrough exhibition at the Sturm gallery earlier that year.¹⁰ Contemporary critics compared Klee’s small watercolors on scraps of paper and cloth to “children’s drawings” and “carpet patterns”—not to cubist painting.¹¹ And Benjamin never did move from his “emotion,” the way Klee touched him, to arrive at an explicit theory of “radically *uncolorful* painting,” of this problem of cubism.

Nevertheless, in what follows, I shall gloss this strange phrase, “radically *uncolorful* painting,” and hazard a suggestion as to why Klee’s work touched Benjamin “in this sense.” About a year after writing this letter to Scholem, Benjamin did arrive at a theory of the uncolorful as a particular relation between a picture and its description. However, the concept of a radically uncolorful *painting* was for Benjamin a compound of extreme volatility; he could pursue his idea of uncolorfulness only by disjoining it from painting and from art.

II.

Scholem’s letter to Benjamin about cubism is, unfortunately, lost. However, the diary pages in which Scholem wrote about his visit to the Sturm gallery have been preserved and seem to have served as a draft for the letter. They are the basis of my construction of his argument. The diary makes clear that the painting that provoked Scholem most was Picasso’s *Woman Playing the Violin* of

Gershon Scholem. Page from journal, August 30, 1917. ARC. 4° 1599/265, Department of Archives, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. By permission of National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

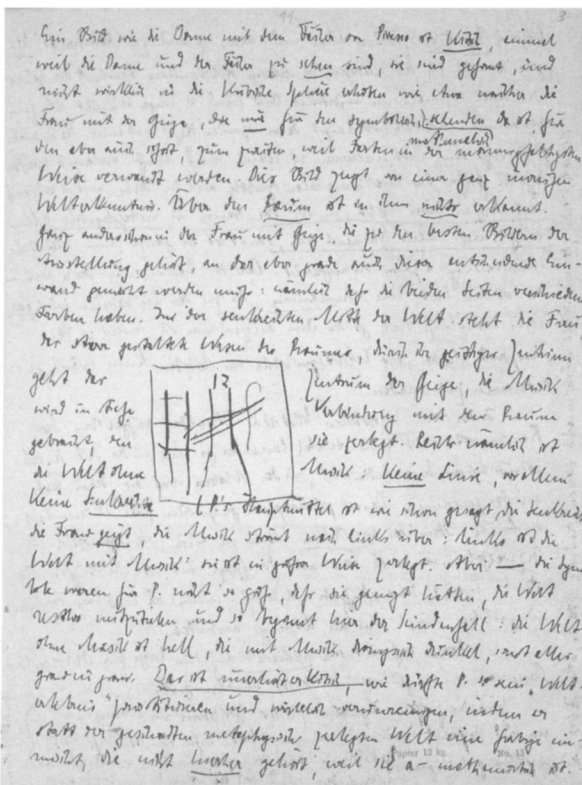
spring 1911, an austere work of what is often called hermetic cubism, marked by emphatic verticals. Scholem even sketched the painting in his diary.¹² The painting provokes Scholem both in that it suggests to him cubism's potential to become a new "symbolism" that would, like mathematics and Judaism, obey the "ban on the 'image'" and in that it fails to fulfill this potential, which Scholem calls "colorlessness."¹³ For Scholem, the presence of chiaroscuro makes the painting a betrayal of itself and thus "kitsch."¹⁴

Scholem repeats, in a sense, the venerable opposition between painting governed by color and painting governed by drawing, which may be traced back to Vasari's glorification of Florentine *disegno* over Venetian *colorito* and which many had already applied to modern painting in the 1910s, contrasting the "conceptual" concerns of Picasso's nearly monochrome analytic cubism to the "sensuous" bliss of Matisse's color.¹⁵ Also commonplace was the notion that cubism was an "art of transition," a stepping-stone to some future fulfillment.

However, Scholem's combination of these commonplaces—his claim that "Picasso is *perhaps* on the way towards the colorlessness" of cubism's fulfillment—is peculiar and stems from his peculiar understanding of what this colorlessness would entail. Scholem is not at all satisfied by analytic cubism's banishing of local color: indeed, he refers to the use of dark and light in *Woman Playing the Violin* as "the Fall."¹⁶ The extremity of Scholem's insistence that cubism ought to banish tonality can be registered by comparing his views with those of the art dealer and theorist Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in his essay on cubism published the previous year (1916) in the Expressionist monthly *Die weißen Blätter*.¹⁷ For Kahnweiler, too, chiaroscuro is problematic because "illusionistic." But he also views it as the indispensable means of "the representation of form."¹⁸ In his later book-length version of this essay, Kahnweiler,

citing Locke, speaks of "the object's form and its position in space" as the "primary qualities" in painting and thus Picasso's primary concerns; "color and tactile qualities" are secondary.¹⁹ Here Kahnweiler's position draws on academic art theory, in which drawing and chiaroscuro are, as allied means of rendering three-dimensional form intelligible, sharply distinguished from the secondary element of transitory sensation that color delivers.²⁰

For Scholem, however, form has no place



in cubism—“*The Cubist picture of genius must be colorless. That it must be formless is clear*”—and thus tonality must be banished along with color.²¹ For Scholem, the colorless painting of cubism’s fulfillment would be a matter of “symbols” alone: “tremendous symbols (the semicircle, the vertical and the horizontals, mainly the \backslash , less often the $/$),” a new “symbolism of the straight line.” In *Woman Playing the Violin*, for instance, the symbols are, for Scholem, above all the “unheard-of verticals $|$ and the $/$ -horizontal.”²² At the end of his article, Kahnweiler also speaks of the interpretation of these “regular straight lines and curves” distributed over analytic cubist paintings, hoping to correct those inexperienced viewers who see such paintings as “geometric”:

The associations call up memory-images of the only thing that seems to fit the straight and regularly curved lines of the picture, namely geometric shapes. Experience has shown that this geometric impression disappears entirely as soon as, thanks to habituation to the new mode of expression, the process of seeing-into [*Hineinsehen*] takes place correctly.²³

Scholem, however, does not interpret these straight and curved lines as bound together into “geometric shapes.” Instead, he takes each line segment as a repeatable and discrete unit of meaning, a “symbol” governed by a code outside of the painting in which it is found. It seems that he compares these symbols to those of the equations of analytic geometry, perhaps proposing that cubism’s distance from likeness is like that between the equation of a shape and its diagram.²⁴ The purity and adequacy to thought that Scholem saw in Picasso’s symbols are of a piece with what he valued in mathematics and certain developments in logic, as becomes clear from his writings that same year on Gottlob Frege’s “concept writing,” or system of logical calculus, the “symbols” of which Scholem viewed as escaping the distortions of language.²⁵ For Scholem, the colorlessness of cubism’s perfection would be that of these “symbols” alone, against the impurities not only of color but of ordinary language.

In taking Picasso’s analytic cubism as something like a formal language, Scholem is, again, both drawing on and transforming a commonplace of cubist criticism. Many critics and artists compared Picasso’s painting of 1910 through 1912 to a new language. Kahnweiler, for instance, insisted on speaking of the “script [*Schrift*]’ of the new art” and of cubism as a “new form-language.”²⁶

The metaphor of language has a number of special functions with regard to cubist painting, beyond those of the general metaphors of language long used to speak of painting.²⁷ One of these lies in how the metaphor of language, of looking as reading, can speak to a viewer’s bafflement before a cubist painting by comparing it to a reader’s bafflement before writing in an unknown language.

Thus, for instance, Picasso said,

The fact that for a long time Cubism has not been understood . . . means nothing. I do not read English, an English book is a blank book to me. This does not mean that the English language does not exist, and why should I blame anybody else but myself if I cannot understand what I know nothing about?²⁸

At times, Kahnweiler uses the metaphor similarly, to speak of the difficulty of these paintings that the viewer must first *learn* to see.

For Kahnweiler, the similarity of cubist painting to a language that must be learned entails that a cubist painting must be supplemented with *more* language outside it, a language already known to the viewer. He insisted on the importance of attaching descriptive titles to cubist paintings, translating, so to speak, the painting's unfamiliar language into one the viewer already knows. Indeed, it was Kahnweiler himself who, as Picasso's and Braque's dealer during the cubist years, named their paintings.²⁹ He emphasized the importance of these names as follows:

[N]aturally, with this, as with any new mode of expression in the arts, often the associations do not immediately arise for viewers not yet familiar with it. It is therefore strongly to be advised that Cubist works always be provided with descriptive titles, like "Bottle and Glass," "Playing Cards and Dice," since thus the state H.G. [*sic*] Lewes called preperception is brought about and then . . . the memory-images already prompted by the title adapt more quickly to the stimuli produced by the painting.³⁰

The descriptive title produces a state of "preperception" that directs what the painting will be perceived *as*. Kahnweiler refers to George Henry Lewes, the nineteenth-century British polymath, whose theory of preperception attributes great powers to the name in the construction of one object as a representation of another—that is, as something it is not. The fullest example Lewes gives is that of a toy horse:

The child at first no more mistakes a wooden horse for a live horse than the dog does. Interpreting the visible signs without the aid of symbols, both child and dog see no resemblance in the wooden horse to the huge live animal. But no sooner does the child associate the name of *gee-gee* with this wooden horse, than the name as a *dominant* revives the images of horses: the preperception of the living animal is thus brought to bear on the perception of this wooden toy . . . the identity of name acts in his con-

struction of the object. . . . The toy is fed, caressed, and beaten . . . by an identification through identity of name.³¹

For Kahnweiler, the viewer confronted with a cubist painting, like a child with a toy horse, must construct the object through the name.

For Scholem, however, the meanings of the cubist symbols are “there *only* for the one who sees symbolically-mathematically, but, for him, there immediately.”³² The descriptive title so important to Kahnweiler plays no part. When Benjamin, in his reply to Scholem, objects to the latter’s interpretation of cubism as mistaken about painting’s relation to its “sensuous object,” he implies that Scholem is as mistaken to neglect the title. One cannot “paint lady with fan (for example) in order to thereby communicate the essence of space through analysis. On the contrary, the communication must under all circumstances relate entirely to ‘Lady with Fan,’” Benjamin writes, marking off “Lady with Fan” the second time with quotation marks, marking it as a title.³³

III.

Benjamin announces in his letter that he will soon send Scholem his “plan” for an essay called “On Painting” as his reply to Scholem’s letter on cubism.³⁴ In this plan, Benjamin marks out two separate spheres, that of the sign (*Zeichen*) and that of the mark (*Mal*). Each sphere may be discussed both in terms of its mythological essence and of the art form it includes—drawing (*Zeichnung*) in the sphere of the sign, painting (*Malerei*) in that of the mark.³⁵ This is where Benjamin’s theory of painting diverges most decisively from Scholem’s: whereas, for Scholem, the colorless and the colorful are an opposition *within* painting, Benjamin separates graphic line and painting into entirely different spheres.

Benjamin interprets Scholem’s ideal “colorless” painting as painting become graphic line, or drawing, which, for Benjamin, is utter nonsense. The first paragraph of Benjamin’s discussion of painting argues that there is no graphic line in painting, that “[t]he reciprocal demarcations of the colored surfaces (the composition) of a picture by Raphael are not based on graphic line.”³⁶ The course of Benjamin’s remarks suggests that he is arguing less against Scholem than against the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, whose lectures Benjamin had attended (and loathed) in 1915. Much of Benjamin’s fragment seems directed against Wölfflin’s opposition between “linear” and “painterly” painting; Benjamin’s choice of Raphael as the only painter he names seems aimed less at Scholem, who never mentions Raphael, than at Wölfflin, who takes him as an exemplary master of the “classic linearism” of the High Renaissance.³⁷

Once, writes Benjamin, one has grasped that there is no graphic line in painting—not *even* in Raphael—one “must be astonished to find a composition in the picture that cannot be traced back to a graphic design.”³⁸ This is the central problem of Benjamin’s remarks on painting in this fragment. If composition has, as Benjamin implies, traditionally been linked to line in art theory since the Renaissance, how will he account for it in the absence of line?

In his letter to Scholem, Benjamin speaks of the connection between “On Painting” and his earlier essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916). To account for composition in the absence of line, Benjamin adumbrates (as Charles W. Haxthausen has pointed out) his retelling in the earlier essay of the biblical story of Adam naming of every living creature in paradise.³⁹

The fact that such a composition does not exist as mere semblance [*Schein*]*—*that, for example, the beholder of a picture by Raphael does not perceive configurations of people, trees, and animals in the mark by chance or by mistake*—*becomes clear from the following consideration: if the picture were only mark, it would be quite impossible to name it.⁴⁰

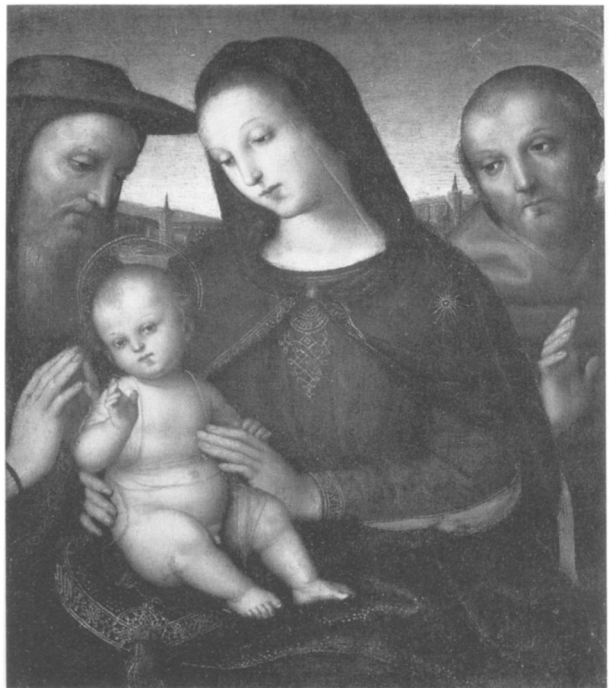
Benjamin thus displaces the questions of resemblance and representation with that of nameability, redefining composition as that which relates the picture to “what the picture is named after.”⁴¹ In place of the relation between line and color as constituent elements that together make up a painting, Benjamin substitutes a relation between the painting and language: “the picture may be connected with *something that it is not*—that is to say, something that is not a mark—and indeed this connection is achieved by naming the picture.” The composition is the entry of “a higher power into the medium of the mark,” which is nevertheless “related” to the mark: “the linguistic word, which lodges itself in the medium of the language of painting, invisible as such and revealing itself only in the composition. The picture is named after the composition.”⁴²

As in the relation between name and thing in Benjamin’s account of the language of paradise, the relation between the linguistic word and the picture established by the picture’s “nameability” is not to be understood as an arbitrary imposition from without. In the language of paradise, the connection between human language and the “language of things” excludes such arbitrariness: naming translates the silent language of things into human language through a particular way of looking, “that contemplation [*Anschauen*] of things in which their language passes into man.”⁴³ In “On Painting,” something similar happens between the “beholder” and a “picture by Raphael.” Indeed, the essay on language suggests that painting remains in contact with thing-language although

postlapsarian spoken language does not.⁴⁴ Like the naming of things in paradise, the naming Benjamin speaks of here in relation to paintings is receptive, demanded by the thing—in this case, the painting—itself.

This new relation Benjamin proposes between the mark and the painting's nameability—between what painting is and what painting is not—takes on many of the functions of the relation between color and line that it turns inside out. Like the relation between color and line, that between mark and word is a way of dividing painting's specificity as painting from its discursiveness, the very fact that it may be spoken about. This relation between mark and word provides a division around which differences between epochs of painting may be articulated. But these differences lie not in the relative predominance of one element over another, as in both academic theory and Wölfflin's art history.⁴⁵ Instead, the "great epochs of painting" may be differentiated according to "which word and into which mark it enters." The two examples Benjamin gives of such differentiation recall "On Language as Such": "For example, it is conceivable that in the pictures of, say, Raphael the name might predominate, and in the pictures of present-day painters the judging word [*richtende Wort*] might enter the mark."⁴⁶ We have already seen how, for Benjamin, a viewer before a Raphael is called upon to name the picture after its composition, its configurations of people and things, repeating, as it were, Adam's task. It is worth noting the prominence of the proper names in the titles of the Raphaels in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin at that time (*Madonna and Child, Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist, Madonna and Child with Saints Hieronymus and Francis*), for the proper name is central to Benjamin's theorization of the name in general.⁴⁷ The Berlin Raphaels may be said to ask the viewer to provide proper names (e.g., "John the Baptist") from the painted figures' attributes (camel skin tunic, reed cross). The proper name seems particularly central to *Madonna and Child with Saints Hieronymus and Francis*. The head of St. Francis is encircled by a halo of his name in letters of gold; the halos of the Madonna and child and St. Hieronymus, patron saint of translators—whose name can itself be translated as "sacred name"—are, however, uninscribed, for the viewer must translate these figures' attributes into language to provide their "sacred names."

The connection between the "judging word" and the paintings of "present-day painters" (the cubists, we may guess from the context) may be interpreted in at



least three ways. In his essay on language, Benjamin proposes that the “origin of abstraction” lies in the the fall of man and the rise of the “judging word”: although the “concrete elements” of “existing language” are rooted in the name, the “abstract elements of language” come from the “judging word.”⁴⁸ Benjamin appears to be speaking of the traditional logical distinction between, for instance, the concrete term *white* and the abstract term *whiteness*, attributing linguistic elements of the latter sort (which would include words such as *good* and *evil*) to the “judging word.” Associating a Raphael with the “concrete” and a cubist painting with the “abstract” fits easily into the widespread view of cubism as a step toward an abstract painting that would withdraw itself from the world of perceptible things to represent essences. But by speaking of this movement from concrete to abstract in terms of how different kinds of language settle into painting, Benjamin makes of this movement something very different from the purification of painting as painting that it was so often understood to entail.

But Benjamin’s linking of the “judging word” with contemporary painting might also be located elsewhere, albeit more speculatively. In “On Language as Such,” Benjamin consistently speaks of the “judging [*richtende*] word” as “judgment” (*Urteil*).⁴⁹ If Benjamin speaks of cubist painting as that in which the linguistic word in the form of *judgment* is lodged, this may point not only to abstraction but to the centrality of aesthetic judgment in conceptions of art since Kant, perhaps even to historical transformations of the form of judgment (from a statement like “This is beautiful” to one like “This is painting”) brought about in cubist and postcubist painting.⁵⁰ In keeping, however, with Benjamin’s critique of subjectivism, this judgment is located *within* the painting. If Kant attempted to ground aesthetics in the observer rather than the artwork by making the observer’s judgment into the object of inquiry, here Benjamin locates that very judgment within the artwork itself. Still another possible connection results if one reads *richtend*, which I have thus far translated as “judging,” in another sense. The verb *richten* can also mean to steer, to direct, to turn, to give something a particular direction (*Richtung*). Thus the “*richtende* word” that enters contemporary painting might also be read as referring to the crucial role, as theorized by Kahnweiler, of the descriptive title in cubist paintings: the role of steering the viewer toward the desired “reading” of the “‘script’ of the new art.”⁵¹

IV.

About a year after his letter to Scholem and the essay on painting, Benjamin wrote a short fragment called “On the Surface of the Uncolorful Picture-Book.”

Raphael. *Madonna and Child with Saints Hieronymus and Francis*, ca. 1502. Oil on panel, 13.4 x 11.4 in. (34 x 29 cm).

The explicit subject of the fragment is children's picture books. However, it may also be read as elaborating and qualifying the mysterious phrase of Benjamin's October 22 letter as well as aspects of "On Painting." In this fragment, Benjamin writes about a certain kind of picture from which color need not literally be absent but that is nevertheless "uncolorful" in that it solicits language in a particularly pressing way—it makes a "demand for description."⁵²

This fragment presents another version of an intimate connection between looking and naming. But here, instead of Adam before the animals or a beholder before a Raphael, Benjamin speaks of a child before a picture book:

If one wanted . . . to put before the child a depiction of a ball next to a real ball resembling this depiction to the smallest detail, it couldn't be the end of the matter for the child somehow to "recognize" here the sameness of the depicted and the real. Rather this recognition would only prove genuine and clear if the child pronounced the sameness of the two balls in its way, or . . . demanded to know the name.⁵³

Benjamin is at pains to make clear that the kind of picture that demands the word in this way is not painting, not art: "only the solely and simply depictive picture [*abbildende Bild*] demands the word so implacably." He is speaking, rather, of pictures in the plainer kind of picture books, of the sort recommended by "rationalist pedagogy," such as "the typical picture-book [*Anschauungsbilderbuch*]" used in German schools.⁵⁴ In this demand for the word posed by these pedagogical picture books, writes Benjamin, the child is introduced to language.

While specifying the sort of images he is speaking of, Benjamin qualifies his claim in "On Painting" that a Raphael, for instance, lays claim to nameability and thus to language: "And indeed the picture does not in itself call forth [the word]—the claim that a Madonna by Perugino refers to the word would surely be highly problematic."⁵⁵ The problematic claim to which he refers is likely his own in the earlier essay (the early Raphael Madonnas in Berlin were painted when Raphael was Perugino's apprentice and bear a close resemblance to Perugino's paintings).⁵⁶

Benjamin wishes to speak of pictures that, unlike artworks, are "solely and simply depictive" for they must demand the word—they must be describable—in two ways that would rule out artworks. First, he wants to speak of pictures that would be fully, even exhaustively, describable: "The possibility of describing the simply depictive representation is the clear expression of its reliance on the word. Only depictive representations, not the artwork . . . are describable." Second, the child's description of these pictures involves, at its limit, "the other,

concrete meaning of the word”—the verb *beschreiben* can mean not only to describe something but to write on it. The child, in Benjamin’s account, both describes the picture in words and “scribbles on it.” The characteristic “surface” of uncolorful picture books makes this possible: it “is not, like that of the artwork, a *Noli me tangere*. . . . It is instead only as it were hintingly worked and might be made infinitely denser.”⁵⁷ The surface of an uncolorful picture invites scribbling, whereas the artwork, in its untouchable richness, turns back description.

In an earlier fragment of 1917, “Painting and the Graphic Arts,” Benjamin wrote of the difference between painting and the graphic arts as that between the vertical and the horizontal, a point to which he did not return in “On Painting.”⁵⁸ He had written of children’s drawings as demanding to be placed horizontally, exemplifying the “transverse section of certain graphic works,” determined, he implied, by our habit of reading pages in the horizontal. The “surface of the uncolorful picture-book”—a page that welcomes children’s scribbles—brings aspects of this horizontality into the field of the uncolorful.

Benjamin found it necessary to disjoin the “radically *uncolorful*”—the kinds of pictures that pose a pressing demand for language, for description—from painting and from art, including Klee’s pictures that had “touched him in this sense,” to pursue such pictures instead in the inconspicuous domain of children’s books. His writings about color during the same years offer a close parallel. The pure colors of imagination, too, were to be found not in art but rather in the glowing colored plates of nineteenth-century children’s books: “Complete renunciation of the spirit of true art is the only condition under which the color in which imagination dwells can be moved.”⁵⁹

Thus Benjamin pursued colorfulness and uncolorfulness through an extraordinary series of writings about children’s books, not art.⁶⁰ Yet these concepts might be understood as turning the hoary art-theoretical opposition of color and line inside out, dislocating it in the relation between picture and description. And thus the question returns of the relations of the colorful and the uncolorful to painting and art, problematic as Benjamin found them. In a puzzling passage in “On the Surface of the Uncolorful Picture-Book,” Benjamin—directly after explaining that this uncolorfulness, this demand for language, must be restricted to the artless “depiction” (*Abbildung*)—turns straight to painting for verification:

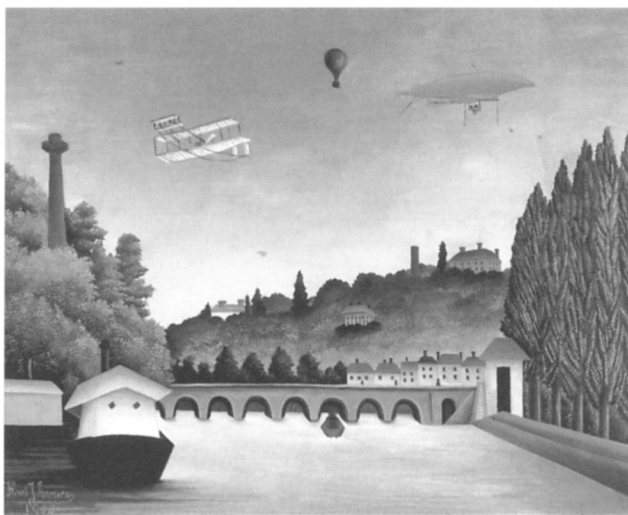
And indeed the picture does not call forth [the word] in itself . . . but rather only the solely and simply depictive picture demands the word so implacably, a remark that may perhaps be verified by certain details of

Rousseau's pictures, which on the whole, as artworks, are not solely and simply depictive, but in detail sometimes have this character from the strength of their peculiar style. One recalls Rousseau's airships and telegraph poles.⁶¹

Works of art, it seems, or perhaps only certain of their details, can at times touch upon the “uncolorful”—can, that is, demand the word. Surely it is relevant that the work of Henri Rousseau, the self-taught “Sunday painter” celebrated by the cubists and the Blaue Reiter artists, occupies a place set some distance from that indescribable richness and untouchable inviolability that, for Benjamin, pull painting apart from the uncolorful.

Let us return to this perplexing sentence from Benjamin's October 22 letter: “the problem of Cubism lies in the possibility of a, not necessarily *colorless*, but radically *uncolorful* painting in which linear shapes dominate the picture—without Cubism ceasing to be painting and becoming graphic art.” The later fragment on the “uncolorful picture book” suggests that the uncolorful might indeed have color and certainly would not aspire toward the pure symbolic code, like Scholem's vision of “colorless” painting. But it would—as cubist painting does in one sense, and illustrations in didactic picture books do in another—demand naming, description.

Now we can begin to speculate as to why Klee seems to have provoked Benjamin's unresolvable notion of “radically *uncolorful* painting,” why Klee touched Benjamin in this sense. Klee's small watercolors—located in an indeterminate zone between painting and drawing, often compared both to children's drawings and to picture books—could be said to “demand the word.”⁶² Beginning with their suggestive titles, visibly written like captions on his pictures, Klee's watercolors solicit language, further description. Many commentators have noted that Benjamin described and redescribed Klee's watercolored oil-transfer drawing *Angelus Novus* until the end of his life.⁶³ Following Benjamin's lead in



Top: Henri Rousseau.
View of Malakoff, 1908. Oil on canvas, 18 x 21.7 in. (46 x 55 cm).

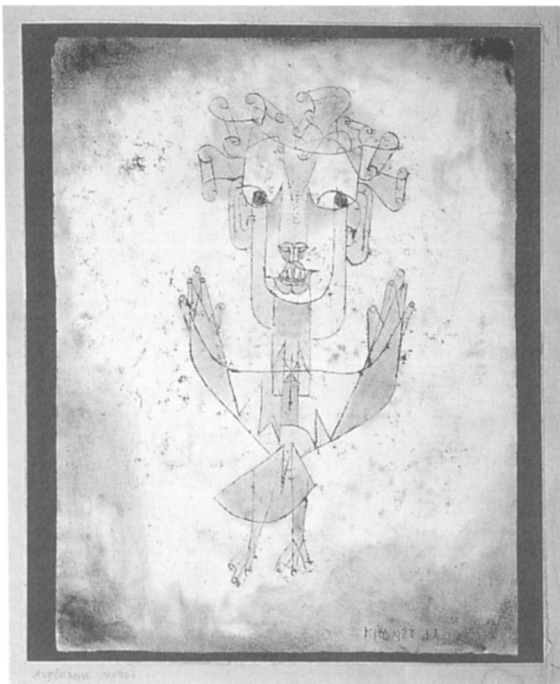
Bottom: Henri Rousseau.
View of the Pont de Sévres, 1908. Oil on canvas, 32 x 39.3 in. (81 x 100 cm).

Opposite: Paul Klee. *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Oil transfer drawing and watercolor on paper on cardboard, 12.5 x 9.5 in. (31.8 x 24.2 cm).

connecting Klee with radical uncolorfulness, one might turn away from the receiver, that turn on which Benjamin so often insisted, as when he wrote, in “The Task of the Translator,”

certain correlative concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their foremost significance, if they are not from the outset used exclusively with reference to man. One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life . . . even if all men had forgotten it. . . . Analogously, the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them.⁶⁴

Benjamin’s writings on the uncolorful suggest that a parallel construction might be necessary to theorize Klee’s “radically *uncolorful* painting”—something like descriptibility.



Notes

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1. Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, vol. 2, ed. Karlfried Gründer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink et al. (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000), 30–34. The Sturm's exhibition catalogue indicates that the works on view that August were selected from the collection of Franz Kluxen.

2. Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, 22 October 1917, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 97–102. On Benjamin's letter, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 178–179, 308; Heinz Brüggemann, *Walter Benjamin über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), 143–153; Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Color of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), 85–89; Brigid Doherty, "Painting and Graphics," in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 195–217; and Charles W. Haxthausen, "Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein," *October* 107 (Winter 2004): 64–65.

3. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 30–32; and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 100, translation modified. Scholem also mentions synthetic painting as a possibility, but not for cubism: "If I want a *synthesis* between line and color, I go to Rembrandt, I don't go to the Cubists *for that*, I demand the sphere's complete purity." Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32. In his reply, Benjamin speaks of Scholem's "trichotomy of painting into colorless (linear), colorful, and synthetic." Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 100. I leave aside this third category because, unlike the "colorless" or the "colorful," it remains undeveloped in Scholem's diary. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

4. Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 100.

5. Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 100. In his October 22 letter, Benjamin writes that he will send an essay, or, rather, "the plan for one," in his next parcel in response to Scholem's letter on cubism (100). This "plan," in which Benjamin argues that there is no line in painting, is "On Painting, or Sign and Mark." For discussions of this text and "Painting and the Graphic Arts," written earlier in 1917, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," 178–179, 308; Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Abrams, 1992), 186–187, 217; Brüggemann, 143–153; Caygill, 85–89; Doherty, "Painting and Graphics," 195–217; Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 174; Haxthausen, "Reproduction/Repetition," 64–65; Rosalind E. Krauss, "Horizontality," in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 93–94; and David E. Wellbery, "Benjamin's Theory of the Lyric," in *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 54–57.

6. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32; and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 101.

7. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32.

8. Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 100–101.

9. See Gershom Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976); O.K. Werckmeister, “Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee, and the Angel of History,” *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982): 103–125; O.K. Werckmeister, “Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 239–267; and Oskar Bätschmann, “*Angelus Novus* und ‘Engel der Geschichte’: Paul Klee und Walter Benjamin,” in *Engel, Teufel und Dämonen: Einblicke in die Geisterwelt des Mittelalters*, ed. Hubert Herkommer and Rainer Christoph Schwinges (Basel: Schwabe, 2006).

10. O.K. Werckmeister, *The Making of Paul Klee’s Career, 1914–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 88–95; and Christine Hopfengart, *Klee: Vom Sonderfall zum Publikumsliebling, Stationen seiner öffentlichen Resonanz in Deutschland, 1905–1960* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1989), 28–32. Oddly, Scholem also mentions Klee in his diary entry, aligning him with the “colorlessness” Scholem thought Picasso might be approaching: “Picasso is *perhaps* on the way to colorlessness. Then he would be good. Klee is good at times.” Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32 (emphasis in original).

11. Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, “Die Kunst und die neue Gnosis,” *Das Kunstblatt* 1, no. 6 (1917): 173; and Waldemar Jollos, “Paul Klee,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 8 May 1917. In 1917, no consensus had yet emerged as to how to place Klee in relation to other artists. Critics compared him variously to Marc, George Grosz, Oskar Kokoschka, Henri Matisse, and Paul Scheerbart, but not to the cubists. See Adolf Behne, “Glossen: Paul Klee,” *Die weissen Blätter* 4, no. 5 (May 1917): 167; and Theodor Däubler, “Acht Jahre ‘Sturm,’” *Das Kunstblatt* 1, no. 2 (1917): 49–50.

12. On the basis of the title and Scholem’s sketch, I think we can identify this painting as *Woman Playing the Violin* (Daix 393), which was in circulation in Germany in the 1910s. See Pierre Daix, *Picasso: The Cubist Years, 1907–1916: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings and Related Works* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 264.

13. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32–34.

14. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32. Bois’s analysis of “this ‘informational,’ ‘hieroglyphic’ stage of Cubism” in “The Semiology of Cubism,” 182–185, can illuminate Scholem’s response. Scholem appears to have seized on Picasso’s “search for a unitary mode of notation,” fastening on the lines of the grid and the “sickle” (Scholem speaks of the related “semicircle with tangent” as “[o]ne of the greatest symbols”; Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32), which he reads as discrete symbols. But he sees the chiaroscuro not as *play* with illusionism, play made possible by its lack of denotative function, but as the *betrayal* of that search. In Scholem’s view, the chiaroscuro functions, most objectionably, to deliver thematic meaning: “[T]he symbols were, for Picasso, not great enough to communicate the world remainderlessly and thus the Fall begins here: the world without music is light, that with music is Dionysiacally dark, all the rest grey in grey. *That is unheard-of kitsch.*” Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32 (emphasis in original).

15. See Carolin Meister, “‘Color Reading’: Zur Codierung von Farbe im kubistischen Werk Picassos,” in *Ästhetische Erfahrung: Gegenstände, Konzepte, Geschichtlichkeit*, ed. Sonderforschungsbereich 626 (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2006), http://www.sfb626.de/veroeffentlichungen/online/aesth_erfahrung/aufsaetze/meister.pdf; and Christine Poggi, “Braque’s

Early *Papiers Collés*: The Certainties of *Faux Bois*,” in *Picasso and Braque*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky, 129.

16. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 32.

17. Incidentally, Scholem mentions Benjamin’s criticisms of *Die weißen Blätter* in a journal entry of August 23, 1916; Kahnweiler’s article came out the next month. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 1, 383. On the circumstances of Kahnweiler’s early writings, see Yve-Alain Bois, “Kahnweiler’s Lesson,” in *Painting as Model*, 65–69. It is a striking coincidence that both Kahnweiler and Benjamin were exiles in Bern in 1917 and that both were deeply concerned with Kant at the time, although to different ends. Kahnweiler was introduced to Klee’s work at this time by the Bern collector Hermann Rupf. I have found no indications that Benjamin was personally acquainted with either Kahnweiler or Rupf. See *Rupf Collection*, ed. Susanne Friedli (Bern: Benteli, 2005).

18. Daniel-Henry [Kahnweiler], “Der Kubismus,” *Die weißen Blätter* 3, no. 9 (September 1916): 213, 220.

19. Daniel-Henry [Kahnweiler], *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (Munich: Delphin-Verlag, 1920), 33–34.

20. See, for example, Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (Paris: Veuve Jules Renouard, 1870), 601.

21. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 31 (emphasis in original).

22. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 31.

23. Kahnweiler, “Der Kubismus,” 222.

24. Scholem speaks in general terms of connections between cubism and mathematics in his diary, and one might suspect that the lost letter contained such a comparison on the basis of Benjamin’s retort: “In analytical geometry, I can certainly produce an equation for a two- or three-dimensional figure in space without consequently overstepping the bounds of spatial analysis; but in painting I cannot paint lady with fan (for example), in order to thereby communicate the essence of space through analysis.” Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 101.

25. See Gershom Scholem, “On Logical Calculus” (8 November 1917), in *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 109–111. In this paper, which Scholem wrote for a logic course at Jena, Scholem argues for the fundamental importance of attempts to create a formal language of logic, from Leibniz to Frege, which he understands as “the endeavor to let thought speak in its own language,” for “*pure thought can only be represented remainderlessly in the pure symbol*” (109–110; emphasis in original). See also Gottlob Frege, *Begriffsschrift und andere Aufsätze*, ed. Ignacio Angelelli (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms, 1964), xii–xiii.

26. Kahnweiler, *Der Weg zum Kubismus*, 41; and Kahnweiler, “Der Kubismus,” 217. See Bois, “Kahnweiler’s Lesson,” 66.

27. Bois has written of both the analytic power of Kahnweiler’s metaphor of cubism as writing, of his insight that Picasso discovered in the Grebo mask the semiological differentiality he investigated in his 1912 *Guitar* and the *papiers collés*, and of the limitations of this metaphor, which spring from Kahnweiler’s conception of language. On the latter, Bois writes, “I have mentioned Kahnweiler’s idea, expressed unflaggingly in his texts, that cubism is a writing. . . . Unfortunately, he extended this metaphor to all of painting (defined as ‘formative writing’), and in terms of an obsolete linguistic conception. Not only did he commit a substantial error in his estimation of nonalphabetic writing and of the possibility of a pure pictogram . . . but again, as corollary, he stopped at an Adamic conception of language, in spite of his vivid understanding of the sign’s differential nature. We can only lament that he did not have access to Saussure, for the Genevan

linguist's theory would have allowed him to emerge from this imprisoning contradiction." Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," 94. The present paper is in part an attempt to explore the implications of linguistic metaphors for cubist painting in the deeply non-Saussurian context of Benjamin's and Scholem's thought in the 1910s.

28. Interview originally published as "Picasso Speaks," *The Arts*, May 1923; republished in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 216. Marc uses this metaphor as well, writing that Picasso "personally seems to attach great value to the fact that one can 'read' his pictures, i.e. that one sees where the mustache and where the drawer etc. is." Franz Marc to Wassily Kandinsky, 5 October 1912, in *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, ed. Rose-Carol Washton Long (New York: G.K. Hall, 1993), 51.

29. Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," 66.

30. Kahnweiler, "Der Kubismus," 219.

31. George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1880), 489.

32. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 31 (emphasis in original).

33. Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 101. The identity of "Lady with Fan" remains unclear. In his journal, Scholem contrasts it with the "Woman with Violin": "A picture like the lady with the fan by Picasso is *kitsch* because the lady and the fan are there to *see*, they are formed and not really raised into the Cubic sphere like, for example, later on, the woman with the violin, who is there *only* for the one who sees symbolically-mathematically." Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 31. Since Benjamin was in Switzerland for the duration of the Kluxen exhibition, it seems that he is responding to Scholem's argumentation rather than to this particular picture—as Benjamin writes, "Please do not take it amiss that I was not able to deal directly with what you had to say on cubism. . . . This is in the nature of things; you had paintings in front of you, and I had your words." Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 102. Brüggemann associates "Lady with Fan" with Picasso's 1909 *Femme à l'éventail*. Brüggemann, 149. But, as Bois has written in a detailed note on the question, it is unlikely that this painting would have been exhibited in Berlin in 1917. Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," 308, n. 68. The editors of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Briefe* identify the picture as "Picasso's pencil drawing 'Femme à l'éventail' of 1917." *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 1, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), 397. This could denote either of the two pencil studies for *Blanquita Suarez à l'éventail*, which Picasso painted in Barcelona in the summer of 1917 (Z.XXIX, 303; or Z.XXIX, 304). See *Picasso's Paintings, Watercolors, Drawings, and Sculpture*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1995), 56. However, it is difficult to square either of these line drawings with Scholem's second reason for calling the picture *kitsch*—"because colors are used in the most various ways."

34. Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 100.

35. Walter Benjamin, "On Painting, or Sign and Mark," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, ed. Jennings, Doherty, and Levin, 221–223.

36. Benjamin, "On Painting, or Sign and Mark," 223.

37. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (1915; New York: Dover, 1950), 31. On Benjamin's disappointment with Wölfflin, see Thomas Y. Levin, "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History," *October* 47 (Winter 1988): 79. Wölfflin constructs a tactile mode of seeing in Renaissance linearism that

is equally present in painting and drawing, sculpture and architecture, qua products of the same epoch in the “history of the development of occidental seeing.” Wölfflin, 12–13. Benjamin’s “Painting and the Graphic Arts” and “On the Surface of the Uncolorful Picture Book” may be seen as countering Wölfflin to put forward a very different notion of tactility in relation to pictures.

38. Benjamin, “On Painting,” 223. It should be noted that Wölfflin himself does *not* equate the outline (*Umriß*) so important for “linear” painting with graphic line. Wölfflin, 18–19.

39. Haxthausen, 65. I am indebted to Haxthausen’s illuminating readings of the 22 October letter and “On Painting.”

40. Benjamin, “On Painting,” 223–224.

41. Benjamin, “On Painting,” 224.

42. Benjamin, “On Painting,” 224. As Doherty points out, “This early theoretical interest in the power of the act of naming, with regard to human language in general as well as to pictures, specifically paintings, finds a counterpart in Benjamin’s insistence, beginning in the mid-1920s, on the significance of captions and inscriptions broadly conceived.” Doherty, “Painting and Graphics,” 198.

43. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 72.

44. Benjamin, “On Language,” 73.

45. “It is throughout a question of relative judgments. Compared with one style, the next can be called painterly.” Wölfflin, 30–31.

46. Benjamin, “On Painting,” 224.

47. See Adolf Rosenberg, *Raffael: Des Meisters Gemälde in 202 Abbildungen* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1905), 158. On Benjamin’s “theory of proper names,” see Peter Fenves, “The Paradisal *Epoché*: On Benjamin’s First Philosophy,” in *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 215–219.

48. Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 71–72.

49. Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 71–72.

50. Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 94; and Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). To try to reconcile Benjamin’s and de Duve’s interpretations of painting in the 1910s would be foolhardy. Yet it is interesting that cubist painting leads, in wildly disparate ways, to a crux of naming for both Benjamin and de Duve’s Duchamp. See also Marie-Laure Bernadac’s suggestive comment in *Picasso and Braque*, ed. Zelevansky, 210.

51. Kahnweiler, *Der Weg zum Kubismus*, 41.

52. Walter Benjamin, “Über die Fläche des unfarbigen Bilderbuches,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 113.

53. Benjamin, “Über die Fläche des unfarbigen Bilderbuches,” 112.

54. *Anschaungsbilderbuch* might be translated as “picture book for sensory intuition.” At Manifesta 7 (Trento, Italy, 2008), Brigid Doherty organized *A Museum of Learning Things*, an exhibition on the importance of the *Anschaungsunterricht* (“instruction in perception”) for Benjamin and avant-garde art in the 1920s. Founded on the work of the educational reformers

Pestalozzi and Froebel, this pedagogical approach of “teaching through the senses” deployed wall charts, handheld cards, and *Anschauungsbilderbücher*, all bearing captioned illustrations. See Brigid Doherty, “Learning Things,” in *Manifesta 7: Companion*, ed. Rana Dasgupta, Nina Möntmann, and Avi Pitchon (Milan: Silvana, 2008), 239–255.

55. Benjamin, “Über die Fläche des unfarbigen Bilderbuches,” 112.

56. Early-twentieth-century guides to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum frequently remark on the resemblance. See Hans Posse, *Die Gemäldegalerie des Kaiser-Friedrich-Museums* (Berlin: J. Bard, 1909–1911).

57. Benjamin, “Über die Fläche des unfarbigen Bilderbuches,” 113.

58. Walter Benjamin, “Painting and the Graphic Arts,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, ed. Jennings, Doherty, and Levin, 219–220. Bois speaks of this fragment in relation to Picasso’s collage *Still Life with Chair Caning*: “in the collapse of the vertical and the horizontal, what Picasso is inscribing is the very possibility of the transformation of painting into writing—of the empirical and vertical space of vision, controlled by our own erect position on the ground, into the semiological and possibly horizontal space of reading.” Bois, “The Semiology of Cubism,” 186–187.

59. Walter Benjamin, “Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children’s Books,” in *Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. Bullock and Jennings 265; translation modified.

60. See also Walter Benjamin, “A Child’s View of Color,” in *Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. Bullock and Jennings, 50–51; Walter Benjamin, ““Old Forgotten Children’s Books,”” in *Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. Bullock and Jennings, 406–412; and Walter Benjamin, “A Glimpse into the World of Children’s Books,” in *Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. Bullock and Jennings, 435–443; Walter Benjamin, “Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über Phantasie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. Tiedemann, Schweppenhäuser et al., 19–26; and the fragments gathered under the rubric “Zur Ästhetik,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Tiedemann, Schweppenhäuser et al., 109–129.

61. Benjamin, “Über die Fläche des unfarbigen Bilderbuches,” 112–113.

62. Benjamin, “Über die Fläche des unfarbigen Bilderbuches,” 112–113. For a comparison of Klee’s works with children’s drawings and picture books, see, for example, Leopold Zahn, *Paul Klee: Leben—Werk—Geist* (Potsdam: G. Kiepenheuer, 1920), 23.

63. See note 9 above.

64. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” *Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. Bullock and Jennings, 254.

