

Mimesis

For Walter Benjamin the bourgeois cosiness of the nineteenth century domestic interior is a kind of closeted dreamspace: 'To live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web.'¹ Benjamin relates the experience of dwelling in these nineteenth century spaces to the process of fashioning a shell around the self: "'To dwell" as a transitive verb — as in the notion of "indwelt spaces"; herewith an indication of the frenetic topicality concealed in habitual behavior. It has to do with fashioning a shell for ourselves.'² This shell serves as an inverted mould of the self in which we fit snugly, encased like a compass in a velvet covered instrument case:

'The difficulty in reflecting on dwelling: on the one hand, there is something age-old — perhaps eternal — to be recognised here, the image of that abode of the human being in the maternal womb; on the other hand, this motif of primal history notwithstanding, we must understand dwelling in its most extreme form as a condition of nineteenth century existence. The original form of all dwelling is existence not in the house but in the shell. The shell bears the impression of its occupant. In the most extreme instance, the dwelling becomes a shell. The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet. What didn't the nineteenth century invent some sort of casing for! Pocket watches, slippers, egg cups, thermometers, playing cards — and, in lieu of cases, there were jackets, carpets, wrappers and covers.'³

The problem of the twentieth century for Benjamin is that this sense of 'dwelling' has been stripped away. It has given way to the 'porosity and transparency' of modern living that is characterized by the anonymous hotel room: 'The twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward the well-lit and airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense. . . Today this world has disappeared entirely, and dwelling has diminished: for the living, through hotel rooms; for the dead, through crematoriums.'⁴ There has been an important shift in the cultural life. For Benjamin, the twentieth century is an age of alienation.

¹Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 216.

²Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 221.

³Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp.220-221.

⁴Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 221.

Human beings are no longer 'cocooned' within their dwelling spaces. Architectural spaces are no longer reflections of the human spirit. Something has been lost.

For Benjamin, this condition is problematic, because human beings need to recognise something of themselves in their environment. This is what allows them to relate to their environment, and find meaning in it. The capacity to recognise similarities, he notes, is one of humankind's distinguishing features: 'Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's.'⁵ There is a natural urge in human beings to seek out resemblances and invent correspondences with the world. 'Every day,' writes Benjamin, 'the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.'⁶ Moreover, as Theodor Adorno adds, the urge to imitate and to look for similarities lies at the heart of the human condition: 'The human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being becomes human at all by imitating other human beings.'⁷

What Benjamin is alluding to here is the theory of *mimesis*.⁸ For Benjamin the concept of *mimesis* allows for an identification with the external world. It facilitates the possibility of forging a link between self and other. It becomes a way of empathising with the world, and it is through empathy that human beings can — if not fully understand the other — at least come ever closer to the other, through the discovery and creation of similarities.

Mimesis here should be understood not in the terms used, say, by Plato, to refer to simple 'imitation'. To reproduce something is to step beyond mere imitation. Here Benjamin challenges the inherited view of *mimesis* as an essentially compromised form of imitation that necessarily loses something of the original.⁹ For Benjamin *mimesis* alludes to a constructive reinterpretation of an original, which becomes a creative act in itself.

Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's writing, as indeed in Adorno's work, would appear to be a psychoanalytic term, taken from Freud, that refers to a mode of identifying with the external world. It is a term, as Freud himself predicted, of great potential significance for aesthetics: ' . . . I believe that if ideational mimetics are followed up, they may be as useful in other

⁵Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 332.

⁶Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p.217.

⁷Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, London and New York: Verso, 1978, p. 154.

⁸Benjamin developed this theory in two short writings, 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty', the latter being a condensed reworking of the former. Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', in *Reflections*, New York: Schocken, 1986, pp. 333-336.

⁹Benjamin's understanding of *mimesis* is also dissimilar to that of other thinkers like Renée Girard, who seem to see it as an unreflexive form of replication that merely echoes the given, and thereby instantiates some hegemonic norm.

branches of aesthetics. . .¹⁰ Freud writes about the term in the context of jokes. *Mimesis* is what allows us to empathise with the subject of a joke. Here mimesis is clearly ideational. It operates through the medium of the idea, and allows us to imagine ourselves as someone else. In listening to the tale about the unfortunate individual who, for example, slips up on a banana skin, we put ourselves in the position of that individual by drawing upon corporeally embedded memories of personal experiences, and imagine ourselves also slipping up. As Freud puts it, 'When, now, I perceive a movement like this of greater or lesser size in someone else, the surest way to an understanding (an apperception) of it will be for me to carry it out by imitation. . . But actually I do not carry the imitation through, any more than I still spell words out if I learnt to read by spelling. Instead of imitating the movement with my muscles, I have an idea of it through the medium of my memory traces of expenditures of similar movements.'¹¹ What results is a form of empathy (*Einfühlung*) with that other person, which constitutes a kind of 'emotional tie': 'A path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life.'¹² Crucially, however, there remains a critical dimension to mimesis. Indeed to understand the joke as a joke, we must both identify with but also distinguish ourselves from the subject of the joke. We have to both empathise with, but also laugh at that individual.

To understand the meaning of *mimesis* in Benjamin we must recognise its origin in the process of modelling, of 'making a copy of'. In essence it refers to an interpretative process that relates either to modelling oneself on an object, or to making a model of that object. Likewise *mimesis* may come into operation as a third party engages with that model, and the model becomes the vehicle for identifying with the original object. In each case the aim is to assimilate to the original object. *Mimesis* is therefore an operation that may be evoked both by the artist who makes a work of art, and also by the person who experiences it.

Mimesis for Benjamin is a linguistic concept. It offers a way of finding meaning in the world, through the discovery of similarities. These similarities become absorbed and then rearticulated in language. As such language becomes a repository of meaning, and writing becomes an activity which extends beyond itself, so that in the process of writing writers engage in unconscious processes of which they may not be aware. Indeed writing often reveals more than the writer is conscious of revealing. Likewise the reader must decode the

¹⁰Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. James Strachey, London: Routledge, 1960, p. 193. For further reading on *mimesis*, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, London: Routledge, 1993; Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis*, trans. Don Reneau, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

¹¹Freud, pp. 191-2

¹²Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 110, as quoted in Borch-Jacobsen, p. 252.

words resorting to a realm of the imagination which exceeds the logic of simple rationality. The very process of reading implies an appropriation — a ‘claiming’ of the object — and it is here, perhaps, that the parallels with hermeneutics are most obvious.¹³

Thus the activity of reading also embodies the principles of *mimesis*, serving as the vehicle for some revelatory moment. For Benjamin the meaning becomes apparent in a constellatory flash, a dialectics of seeing, in which subject and object become fused for a brief moment. As Benjamin describes it: ‘The coherence of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears.’¹⁴ And elsewhere: ‘The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.’¹⁵ *Mimesis* can also be observed, according to Benjamin, in dance movements. Here he opens up the possibility, which Adorno goes on to explore, that the principle of *mimesis* can extend to all forms of aesthetic expression. So it is that architecture and the other visual arts might be included within its range.

Mimesis constitutes a form of adaptation. We may see it at work when owners take on the characteristics of their pets, and pets take on the characteristics of their owners. We may see it at work also when a child learns to speak and adapt to the world. In fact it is precisely the example of the child ‘growing into’ language that best illustrates the operation of *mimesis*. The child ‘absorbs’ an external language by a process of imitation and then uses it creatively for its own purposes. Similarly, within the realm of architecture we might see *mimesis* at work as architects develop their design abilities: it is this process which also allows external forms to be absorbed and sedimented, and then re-articulated as an individual expression. It is as though human beings are constantly absorbing impulses from the external environment, and these impulses come to fashion their background horizon of experience, against which all further gestures are forged and dreams are moulded. ‘The rhythm of streetcars and carpet-beating,’ notes Benjamin, ‘rocked me in my sleep. It was the mold in which my dreams took shape.’¹⁶

¹³On this see Jacques Derrida’s critique of hermeneutics in ‘Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing’, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 255 ff. Likewise *mimesis* can be seen to share the same epistemological fragility of hermeneutics, in that its only source of validation is that of the interpreting agent. The understanding of *mimesis* as a form of creative appropriation echoes the theme of Narcissus trying to reach out and *appropriate* his own image.

¹⁴Benjamin, ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’, p. 335

¹⁵Benjamin, as quoted in Taussig, p. xi.

¹⁶Benjamin, as quoted in Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ‘Aesthetic Theory’s Mimesis of Walter Benjamin, in Huhn and Zuidervaart, *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, Camb., MA: MIT, 1997, p. 60.

Above all, *mimesis* involves a moment of assimilation. This is in line with Freud's own thinking on the subject. For identification, according to Freud, is based not on imitation as such, but rather on an unconscious moment of psychological assimilation: 'Identification,' notes Freud, 'is not simple imitation but assimilation on the basis of a similar aetiological pretension; it expresses a resemblance and is derived from a common element which remains in the unconscious.'¹⁷ Indeed Adorno goes on to state quite explicitly that *mimesis* is not imitation, but a form of assimilation: 'Mimetic behaviour does not imitate something but assimilates itself to that something.'¹⁸

In *mimesis* imagination is at work, and serves to reconcile the subject with the object. This imagination operates at the level of fantasy, which mediates between the unconscious and the conscious, dream and reality. Here fantasy is used as a positive term. Fantasy creates its own fictions not as a way of escaping reality, but as a way of accessing reality, a reality that is ontologically charged, and not constrained by an instrumentalised view of the world. Indeed, although *mimesis* involves a degree of organised control, and therefore operates in conjunction with rationality, this does not mean that *mimesis* is part of rationality, still less a part of *instrumental* rationality. In this transcendence of the fixed boundaries of the ego, the alienation generated by a world dominated by instrumental rationality is suspended momentarily, and the reality principle is held in check. For an aesthetic engagement does not require a sense of separation from the world, as instrumental rationality might promote, but a close affinity with it.

In terms of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, we might perceive *mimesis* as constitutive not of rationality, but of myth, its magical 'other'. *Mimesis* and rationality, as Adorno observes, are 'irreconcilable'.¹⁹ If *mimesis* is to be perceived as a form of correspondence with the outside world, then enlightenment rationality, with its effective split between subject and object, and increasing emphasis on knowledge-as-quantification over knowledge-as-sensuous-correspondence, represents the opposite pole. In the instrumentalised view of the enlightenment, knowledge is ordered and categorised, valorised according to scientific principles, and the rich potential of *mimesis* is overlooked. All this entails a loss, a reduction of the world to a reified structure of subject/object divides, as *mimesis* retreats even further into the mythic realm of literature and the arts. In this sense the rich vein of *mimesis* that once permeated human existence, and led to a seemingly magical connection between human beings and their universe has withered away. The waning of *mimesis* is the waning of aura.

¹⁷Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), *S.E.*, IV, 150, as quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 206.

¹⁸Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 169/162, as quoted in Weber Nicholse, p. 146

¹⁹Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, C Lenhardt (trans.), G Adorno, R Tiederman (eds.), London: Routledge, 1984, p. 81.

Yet the whole relation between *mimesis* and rationality is a complex one. Indeed *mimesis* depends on rationality. *Mimesis* itself contains rational elements which resist the total capitulation to nature constituted by simple mimicry. As Adorno notes: '*Mimesis* only goes on living through its antithesis, which is rational control by artworks over all that is heterogeneous to them.'²⁰

At the same time *mimesis* might be seen to offer a form of dialectical foil to the subject/object split of enlightenment rationality that has come to dominate contemporary life. This is most obvious in the case of language. Language becomes the 'highest level of mimetic behaviour, the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity'.²¹ It is 'a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.'²² The project of *mimesis* is therefore one of reconciliation and redemption that seeks to restore humankind to an unalienated state of harmony with the world.

***Mimesis* and Death**

In *One-Way Street* Benjamin describes a child playing a game of hide-and-seek:

Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes himself something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door he is himself a door, wears it as his heavy mask and as a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter. At no cost must he be found. When he pulls faces, he is told, the clock need only strike and he will remain so. The element of truth in this he finds out in his hiding place. Anyone who discovers him can petrify him as an idol under the table, weave him for ever as a ghost into the curtain, banish him for life into the heavy door. And so, at the seeker's touch he drives out with a loud cry the demon who has transformed him — indeed, without waiting for the moment of discovery, he grabs the hunter with a shout of self-deliverance.²³

²⁰Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p. 141.

²¹Benjamin, 'Mimetic Faculty' in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Schocken, 1978, p. 336.

²²Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 273, as quoted in Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, p. 336.

²³Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 74.

The child has become so perfectly at one with the environment that he fears he might never escape. Just as he might carry the burden of the face he is pulling, if caught making the expression when the clock strikes, so he risks remaining camouflaged and absorbed into the environment. He needs to offer a shriek of self-deliverance so as to free himself from the spell under which he had made himself identical to the interior landscape around him. Benjamin tells of a similar experience when as a child he is trying to hunt a butterfly. He takes on characteristics of the butterfly, while the butterfly begins to take on human attributes. But, significantly, he needs to break out of this cycle in order to preserve his identity:

The old rules of hunting took over between us: the more my being, down to its very fibres, adapted to my prey (the more I got butterflies in my stomach), the more the butterfly took on in all it did (and didn't do) the color of the human resolution, until finally it was as if capturing it was the price, was the only way I would regain my humanity.²⁴

These tales reveal the delicate oscillation that operates in mimesis between assimilating to the other, and not allowing ourselves to be trapped within the other. Mimesis is no empty mode of surrender. On the contrary, it subscribes to the logic of camouflage. It amounts to a preserving the self against a certain backdrop.

Mimesis involves the capacity to mimic and identify not only with the animate world, but also the inanimate. Indeed Benjamin notes that children may model themselves not only on animate objects, but also on inanimate ones: 'The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train'.²⁵ These references to identification with the world of inanimate objects reveal the capacity of *mimesis* to extend beyond language. Indeed words can be seen to provide access to the domain of architecture. It is through words that one might assimilate to the inanimate. Words become the ideational vehicles of corporeally embodied memory, a medium through which one might imagine the world. As Benjamin notes: 'In time I learned to disguise myself in words, which were actually clouds. For the gift of seeing likeness is nothing but a weak vestige of the old compulsion to become and act like something else. But words exercised this coercion on me. Not those that made me resemble models of good behaviour, but those that made me like dwellings, furniture, clothing.'²⁶ It is this ability to assimilate with the inanimate world which makes Benjamin's observations so relevant to the question of architecture.

²⁴Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV: 1, 262-263, quoted in Gebauer and Wulf, pp. 277-278.

²⁵Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 333.

²⁶Benjamin, 'A Berlin Childhood', p. 417, as quoted in Weber Nicholzen, p. 143.

These examples of the potential loss of self bring us to the question of how *mimesis*, in its demands for an assimilation with the inanimate world, reveals a link with the death instinct.²⁷ The action of *mimesis*, as Miriam Hansen observes, 'involves the slippage between life and death, the assimilation of lifeless material (as in the case of the chameleon) or feigning death for the sake of survival.'²⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe also links *mimesis* to death: 'There is an unavoidable *necessity* of re-presentation. . . of death, and consequently of identification, of *mimesis*.'²⁹

Hansen, however, is keen to distinguish between the positive and negative forms of *mimesis*, between a living, dynamic interaction, and an uncritical form that reifies itself in a form of 'living death'. This is paralleled by the distinction which Adorno makes between the workings of the culture industry and the operations of art. 'In the context of the culture industry, the concept of *mimesis* is obviously dominated by the negative connotations of both an unreflected mimicry onto reified and alienated conditions and the misguided aesthetic investment in imitation.'³⁰ Within the culture industry individuals compulsively mimic reified commodity forms. Their faces 'freeze' and they become fixated before these objects. In so doing they surrender their mimetic desire to 'the universe of death'. 'Positive' *mimesis* — critical, reflexive *mimesis* — operates in the opposite trajectory. It seeks to counter this 'living death', even if, as Hansen observes, it can never fully cure it: 'In the context of aesthetic theory, however, this *mimesis* onto the reified and alienated . . . world of living death, is a crucial means of negation available to modern art. . . a *pharmakon* that allegorizes the symptoms though it necessarily fails as a therapy.'³¹

The play between the animate and the inanimate, between life and death, is important for understanding the force of *mimesis*. The origins of this process lie in the instinctual mechanisms of self-preservation. Animals, when trapped in potentially life-threatening situations, will often freeze into seemingly lifeless forms rather than run away. Through this action they attempt to blend with their environment, and thereby escape the gaze of the predator. A similar trait may be found in humans. 'The reflexes of stiffening and numbness,' Adorno and Horkheimer note, 'are archaic schemata of the urge to survive. By adaptation to

²⁷ For a discussion of the death instinct see pp. . .

²⁸ Miriam Hansen, 'Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer', *Critical Enquiry*, vol. 39, 1993, p. 53, reprinted in Max Pensky (ed.), *The Actuality of Adorno*, New York: SUNY, 1997, p. 90.

²⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le sujet de la philosophie*, Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1979, p. 206, as quoted in Borch-Jacobsen, p. 256.

³⁰ Hansen, p. 91.

³¹ Hansen, p. 91.

death life pays the toll of its continued existence.³² Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the feigning of death preserves life. 'Death' is used in the service of life. This is a tactic that represents not simply the subordination of the self to nature, but also an overcoming of nature, a defence against the dissolution of the self. This 'surrendering' of life in the moment of becoming one with the inanimate world serves ultimately to reinforce life. These gestures of surrender are in fact predicated on survival.

Mimesis and Children

For Benjamin, it is children who have privileged access to mimetic processes. They have an almost magical potential to become part of their environment, and to invest that environment with the potential to look back at them, just as Benjamin describes how in order to perceive the aura of an object we must 'invest it with the ability to look at us in return'.³³ As Gebauer and Wulf comment: 'The child, on the one hand, approximates himself completely to the environment, which is comparable to mimicry, and, on the other hand, experiences his power over spaces and objects through the mediation of his magical interaction with them. For spaces and objects "look back," without completely subordinating the child. Or, we could say, things gaze at the child, providing him with an experience in which to develop self-consciousness.'³⁴

It is precisely through children's play, as Walter Benjamin observes, that one can best see the principle of *mimesis* at work. For Benjamin 'play' is the 'school' of mimesis: 'Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another.'³⁵ Much depends on the child's creative imagination, and it is this that allows the child to invest these objects with a special significance. As Benjamin observes:

[In the child's bureau] drawers must become arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt. "To tidy up" would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields.³⁶

³²Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London: Verso, 1979, p.180.

³³Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 186, as quoted in Weber-Nicholson, p. 155.

³⁴Gebauer and Wulf, p. 278.

³⁵Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle', in *Reflections*, p. 333.

³⁶Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 74, quoted in Buck-Morss, p. 263

It is as though the creative imagination of the child — the capacity for indulging in make-believe — gives the child a greater ability to assimilate. This, in turn, lays the foundation for cultural activities in adult life. ‘In order to understand paintings, plays, films and novels,’ as Kendall Walton observes, ‘we must look first at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children’s games of make-believe.’³⁷ We have to be open to the realm of fantasy, and the fantasy of the creative genius, as Freud himself observes, is born of the play and games of children.³⁸ Meanwhile the fantasies of children continue in later life through the practice of day-dreaming.³⁹

In *A Berlin Chronicle* Benjamin describes how as a young boy he started a collection of picture postcards, many of them supplied by his maternal grandmother, who was an inveterate traveller. These postcards had a magnetic effect on the young Benjamin. They seemed to have the capacity to transport him to the places depicted, as though by some magic carpet:

For I was there — in Tabarz, Brindisi, Madonna di Campiglio, Westerland, when I gazed, unable to tear myself away, at the wooded slope of Tabarz covered with glowing red berries, the yellow-and-white-daubed quays of Brindisi, the cupolas of Madonna di Campiglio printed bluish on blue, and the bows of the ‘Westerland’ slicing high through the waves.⁴⁰

This seemingly ‘throw-away’ comment — ‘I was there, . . . when I gazed’ — is one which merits further investigation. It is, arguably, part of a consistent and highly sophisticated theory of perception that adds a certain crucial gloss to Benjamin’s overall aesthetic theory in general and to his approach towards photography in particular. Nor is the observation of this phenomenon an isolated remark by Benjamin, which should be overlooked as insignificant. In the ‘The Work of Art’ essay there is a further enigmatic reference on a similar theme:

A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way that legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting.⁴¹

³⁷Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 11.

³⁸Freud, ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ in *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay (ed.), London: Vintage, 1995, p. 437.

³⁹Freud, *On Metapsychology*, p. 39. For an analysis of day-dreams see Rachel Bowlby, ‘The Other Day: The Interpretation of Daydreams’, *New Formations*, 34, Summer 1998.

⁴⁰Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 328.

⁴¹Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 232.

This comment, seemingly overlooked by mainstream commentators on Benjamin, is explained by a fuller version contained in the obscure fragment, '*Die Mummerehlen*', to be found in Benjamin's other autobiographical text of his childhood in Berlin, 'A Berlin Childhood'. This tells the tale of the young Benjamin being absorbed into the world depicted on some porcelain vase:

[The story] comes from China and tells of an old painter who gave his newest painting to friends to look at. The painting was of a park, a narrow path along the water and through some foliage, to end at a small door offering entry in the back to a little house. The friends looked around for the painter, but he was gone and in the picture. He walked along the narrow path to the door, stopped in front of it, turned around, smiled, and disappeared through the crack. So was I, with my little bowls and brushes, suddenly in the picture. I became similar to the porcelain, into which I moved with a cloud of colour.⁴²

This charming little tale does more than just explain Benjamin's enigmatic reference to the Chinese painter in his 'Work of Art' essay. It also suggests a process by which human beings can read themselves, as it were, into pictures and images. The process once more echoes the ideational theory of Freud. We have to imagine ourselves in the painting, either by identifying with a character already depicted, or by projecting ourselves into its fictional landscape. Both senses rely on memory traces. Either we have to imagine the actions being taken by one of the characters and the expressions adopted, and relate these to our own experiences, thereby identifying with that character. Or we have to read ourselves into the setting, and recall what it is like to walk down 'a narrow path along the water and through some foliage', to turn round and smile, before slipping through a half-opened door, and recreate that experience, as it were, in the space of the painting. Both gestures, however, are the same. They both depend upon a memory that allows us to identify with a given situation, even if that memory be a fictive memory.

This process of identification is one which occurs each time we gaze at — and are absorbed by — a picture. At a certain level — either figuratively or metaphorically — we have to enter into that picture. And yet it is a process that is much overlooked and relatively under theorised. What is required, then, is a form of regression to a childlike state of openness. But it must be a 'controlled' regression. As Laurie Schneider Adams puts it:

⁴²Benjamin, 'Berliner Kinderheit um Neunzehnhundert', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV:1, pp. 262-263, quoted in Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, p. 277.

'The artist must be able to 'regress' to early instinctual impulses in such a way that they are controlled and formed by the ego. This controlled regression is somewhat akin to the technique of method actors, who call from experiences from their own past as source material for emotions required for a particular role. In 1957, Phyllis Greenacre referred to this as "access to childhood". All such descriptions of creativity assume the artist's internal psychic flexibility, which permits identification with and portrayal of a wide range of characters and themes. The emphasis on "regression" and childhood "access" derives from the relatively flexible psychic structures and identifications of children as compared to adults.'⁴³

But what is significant is the manner in which we gaze at these representations — architectural or otherwise. The action of *mimesis* is dependent upon a state of mind. We have to be receptive, and alert to the possibilities of the creative imagination. It is children who are most capable of reading themselves into representations – into pictures, dolls, dolls' houses and other objects, and through them imagining themselves in other possible worlds.⁴⁴

This has obvious implications for the world of architecture. For what are architectural drawings and models but the adult equivalent of children's pictures and dolls' houses? Perhaps, then, there is something to be said for viewing architectural drawings and models with a certain childlike imagination. It is as though the architectural representations act potentially as a form of window. To gaze with a childish imagination in front of an architectural representation — or indeed any pictorial image — is to be, as it were, absorbed by it. It is to dream ourselves into another place, like Benjamin as a young boy being transported into his postcards, or like the Chinese painter disappearing into his painting, or indeed like Alice stepping through the looking glass.

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⁴³Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁴It is important to recognise here that the doll can come to operate not as a model of a human being but as a vicarious object of identification with a human being. For the child can come to imagine itself *through* the doll in the role of that human being. Thus the doll offers a mechanism of identification not with the world of toys, but with the potential world of adults. Playing with a doll, in other words, amounts to a form of role playing. By extension, the dolls house can come to figure within the imaginary as the environment of that human being. Its role is ultimately not as dolls house, so much as a potential manifestation of the 'real' house.