Theodor Adorno once commented that Benjamin’s work is characterized by a lurking romanticism, that it is too concerned with the subjective, that it is almost anthropological. But if the unifying thread of Benjamin’s oeuvre is the documentation of experience, one can without being disparaging call it an anthropology—or, to be precise, a philosophical anthropology. For Benjamin, the fundamental human ability is imitation. Benjamin concludes the first half of his oeuvre with an account of “man’s” mimetic powers, placing the mimetic capacity at the center of humankind’s constitutive activities: there “is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.” The writings on similitude and the mimetic faculty are pivotal in his broader philosophical and political outlook. They provide an optic onto his variegated corpus and illuminate signature concepts such as “aura” and “dialectical image.” We should regard the trio of unpublished short essays he wrote on mimesis between 1932 and 1933—“On Astrology,” “Doctrine of the Similar,” and “On the Mimetic Faculty”—as the definitive statement of his philosophy of experience.

The mimetic capacity has to be grasped as an elementary form of cognition that has undergone continual historical metamorphosis. Though Benjamin uses the same term for faculty as Kant (Vermögen), capacity or power is a better translation to reflect the concept’s historical dynamism. Benjamin takes two lines of inquiry: the developmental role of the mimetic capacity, operating at the most basic level of experience, producing connections between objects that apparently have no logical relation to one another; and the intersubjective manifestations of the mimetic capacity as norms of collective experience within a community, from elementary religious culture to modern capitalist society. He continually shifts between different historical time frames. Each essay is like a lens that focuses on a different manifestation of the faculty. One moment
Benjamin juxtaposes a child’s mimetic powers with those of an adult; the next moment he examines how mimesis has changed by flitting between the pre-modern world and his present.

Benjamin focuses on a specific form of animistic cognition that he calls “physiognomic perception,” a term borrowed from the child psychologist Heinz Werner, whose work Benjamin read in the 1930s. Ludwig Wittgenstein may have also read Werner around this time. His conclusions about the mimetic basis of language acquisition are similar to Werner’s. Moreover, all of the major themes dealt with in Benjamin’s trilogy on similitude—ontogenesis, elementary religion, and Gestalt psychology—form the subject matter of Wittgenstein’s own reflections on anthropology. Wittgenstein’s work thus provides an illuminating comparison for understanding Benjamin’s key concepts.

Both thinkers exhibit a unique strain of pragmatism—or “romantic-pragmatism,” after Richard Rorty:

At the heart of pragmatism is the refusal to accept the correspondence theory of truth and the idea that true beliefs are accurate representations of reality. At the heart of romanticism is the thesis of the priority of the imagination over reason—the claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken. These two movements are both reactions against the idea that there is something non-human out there with which human beings need to get in touch.3

Benjamin’s anthropology can be framed between two competing epistemologies, Platonism and pragmatism, which foreground distinct forms of human activity. The first prioritizes intellection, while the latter privileges praxis. The romantic-pragmatist, however, introduces a third constitutive form of human activity: the exercise of the imagination.

Heinz Werner and Mimesis
Benjamin transformed the notion of mimesis into an anthropological category by turning to developmental psychology. “Problems in the Sociology of Language,” a 1935 essay that retrospectively details Benjamin’s source material for works he wrote earlier in the decade, was commissioned to evaluate how critical theory could learn from recent developments in psychology and anthropology and surveys contemporaneous mimetic theories prominent in developmental psychology. Psychology and anthropology for most of the early twentieth century had held a limited view of mimesis. The very idea of an onomatopoeic theory of language, which many psychologists subscribed to at the time, shows the extent to which mimesis had been co-opted into the causal language of the
social sciences. In his essay, Benjamin singles out Werner’s achievement of rehabilitating the classical theory of mimesis: “Werner has offered the most advanced treatment of these problems so far.”4 Werner advanced the study of language acquisition beyond mimicry into a broader aesthetic notion of mimesis. Werner’s research found that empathic projection prefigures acts of mimetic recognition, specifically pictorial and linguistic apprehension. The concept of “physiognomic perception” is outlined in his major 1926 study Comparative Psychology of Mental Development.5

The account of mimesis that Benjamin saw in Werner differs in significant ways from the classical deployments of the term. For Plato, mimetic activity also plays a pivotal role in cognitive development from childhood onward. Two senses of mimesis can be distinguished in Book X of The Republic: first, the object of cognition considered as a “copy”; second, the subject’s capacity to recognize likenesses between objects.6 The parable of the cave in Book VII is typically read as exemplifying Plato’s mistrust of mimetic objects: the prisoners believe that the shadows cast on the walls are real and are held transfixed by them.7 This episode, however, establishes a link between mimetic recognition and pedagogy. If the prisoners are assumed to be analogues of children, the mimetic power used in the cave represents the first step on a ladder of knowledge.

The clearest statement of Plato’s epistemology is what he calls “the divided line.” He distinguishes four powers or capacities of the soul, the mimetic capacity (imagination) being chronologically first. As the line is ascended, the soul’s power to recognize increases until, at its zenith, the soul reaches pure intellectual vision.

Plato classifies the being of a shadow as an “image” (eikon) and the faculty of soul that recognizes it as the “imagination” (eikasia). “Imagination” is not just fantasy but a capacity that can alter the structure of perception by spontaneously recognizing nonlogical correspondences between phenomena. One could even go so far as to suggest that the entire parable of the cave is premised on the reader’s imagination: we have to imagine what these “strange prisoners” are imagining. Imagination provides a pedagogical foothold in the world that all subsequent knowledge will build upon. Once the prisoner is educated, the imagination is to be conceived as the power to extract larger philosophical truths from seemingly contingent correspondences between sense data.8

Werner’s study of mimesis is reoriented from representation toward expression. Unlike a representation in the Platonic sense of the term, a facial expression is not proximally experienced as an imitation. The meaning of a physiognomy is not behind its appearance, hidden in a different metaphysical realm, but is the sum total of its expression. The study of physiognomic affectivity is guided by
the insight that meaning and appearance manifest simultaneously as a totality, or gestalt. Werner’s research tackles the question of how the face-to-face relation is analogous to an infant’s perception of objects. The intersubjective stance is extended to nonsentient objects by reinterpreting empathy. Because a neophyte is not individuated—in the Cartesian sense of introspective knowledge—a clear distinction between self, other, and world has not been established. Werner describes empathy as a form of projected identification. The role of this emotional stance is to promote the development of self-consciousness. In Werner’s account a child’s self-awareness is furthered when an external object is transformed into a subject and then responded to. The telos of physiognomic perception, Werner argues, is always related to purposeful mimetic activity. The manner of imitative behavior can assume different forms. A child can position himself as an active participant of the mimetic relation by talking to the things around him: the “affective and motor behavior of the child impresses itself on the world of things and fashions it. A thing has the significance of ‘doll’ in so far as the child reacts to it mentally and physically as a doll.” Alternatively the child can position his or her body as the focus of a mimetic relationship—a toddler imitating an airplane with his or her arms is one such example. Both circuits of identification and imitation are dynamic. Mimesis is always to be understood as an activity, a point of conversion between perception and praxis.

Physiognomic perception might be described as a kind of anthropomorphism. But if this is the case, how can any knowledge be built upon what is essentially a cognitive distortion or substitution? Werner questions whether a cogent set of criteria can exist from which to evaluate an experience as anthropomorphic:

One speaks too readily of the anthropomorphism of the child. But physiognomic perception is something more general, more deeply rooted, than anthropomorphism. . . . It must be borne in mind that anthropomorphism, in the strict sense, can be spoken of only when there is a consciousness of the polarity between the personal and the impersonal. During the physiognomic period of childhood, however, it is the very absence of polarity and the high degree of fusion between person and thing, subject and object, which are characteristic. The average adult generally has a physiognomic experience only in his perception of other human beings, their faces, their bodies. The child, on the other hand, frequently sees physiognomic qualities in all objects, animate or inanimate. . . . Physiognomic experience is genetically precedent to anthropomorphism.

Physiognomic perception in its most basic form—an infant learning to talk—is defined by the absence of skepticism. In this state of first nature there is no
distinction between mind and body, objects and values—hence the phenomenon of animism. The Cartesian viewpoint, conversely, trusts nothing regarding human beings’ natural attitude. The human worldview, which has become second nature, is fully at home in neither the world of the child nor the skeptic. Instead, adults perceive a conflict between two divergent phenomenological stances:

All of us, at some time or other, have had this experience. A landscape, for instance, may be seen suddenly in immediacy as expressing a certain mood—it may be gay or melancholy or pensive. This mode of perception differs radically from the more everyday perception in which things are known according to their “geometrical-technical,” matter-of-fact qualities, as it were.¹¹

All of Benjamin’s work on the mimetic faculty must be understood as an extended philosophical response to this apparently irresolvable antinomy between the perceptions of facts as opposed to values.

The First Formulation of the Mimetic Faculty: Nature, Culture, Similitude

Benjamin traces the history of mimetic activity back to practices—namely, physiognomy and astrology—deemed esoteric after the Enlightenment, practices in societies where skepticism was absent and humanity’s first nature was expressed as an unquestioned belief in animism. By extracting a sense of mimesis common to both, he concludes that a certain rationality can be extracted from magical practices. The first essay Benjamin wrote on the mimetic faculty, “On Astrology” (1932), uses Werner’s research to decipher such a culture. “We must,” Benjamin argues, “reckon with the fact that, in principle, events in the heavens could be imitated by people in former ages, whether as individuals or groups. Indeed, this imitation may be seen as the only authority that gave to astrology the character of experience.”¹² “On Astrology” aims to illuminate our common life via the terms of an elementary culture. From the astrological worldview Benjamin distills a form of cultural analysis based upon seeing correspondences:

The approach starts like this: We start with “similarity.” We then try to obtain clarity about the fact that the resemblances we can perceive, for example in people’s faces, in buildings and plant forms, in certain cloud formations and skin diseases, are nothing more than tiny prospects from a cosmos of similarity. We can go beyond this and attempt to clarify for ourselves the fact that not only are these resemblances imported into things by virtue of chance comparisons on our part, but that all of them—
like the resemblances between parents and children—are the effects of an active mimetic force working expressly inside things. Furthermore, not only are the objects of this mimetic force innumerable, but the same thing might be said of the subjects, of the mimetic centers that may be numerous within every being.13

Benjamin argues that tangible affinities exist between certain natural and cultural objects—“faces, buildings, cloud formations”—and that these resemblances are not private subjective associations but have an objective meaning for all the participants of the culture. The simile he deploys clarifies the underlying principle of cohesion: the correspondences perceived between objects are like the resemblances between “parents and children”; to use Wittgenstein’s term, they are a set of “family resemblances.”14 This argument is, on one level, a response to the problem of nominalism. If one rejects Platonic essentialism, one must confront the question how then does the mind respond to raw sense data? The image of a family urges us to move beyond the fact/value dichotomy. As Stephen Mulhall points out, the perception of actual family resemblances operates on both physical and cultural levels.15 On the one hand, we can say that X has inherited Y’s eyes or his build; on the other hand, these intuitions are interwoven with our perception of how X has inherited Y’s sense of humor, his mannerisms. The second key aspect of the concept is time. Family resemblances can be thought of in a diachronic and synchronic fashion, much like a family tree:

it must be remembered that neither the mimetic centers nor their objects, the mimetic objects, can have remained unchanged through time, and that in the course of the centuries both the mimetic force and the mimetic mode of vision may have vanished from certain spheres perhaps only to surface on others.16

A comparison with Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough, a posthumously published tract that Wittgenstein wrote on elementary religion, is revealing. Considering the heterogeneous fire rituals that occurred throughout Europe, Wittgenstein argues,

The most noticeable thing seems to me not merely the similarities but also the differences throughout all these rites. It is a wide variety of faces with common features that keep showing in one place and in another. And one would like to draw lines joining the parts that various faces have in common.17

Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s use of the face as an analogue for objective expression almost certainly is derived from Werner. Likewise significant is the
fact that both looked contemporaneously toward elementary religion (Benjamin in 1932; Wittgenstein in 1931) as anthropological evidence. Finally, the very expressions both men use to capture this form of experience are themselves outside of philosophy. Whereas Wittgenstein continues to refer to family resemblances, right up to the *Investigations* (hardly a term concomitant with traditional epistemology), Benjamin will thereafter deploy the term “constellation” to convey the grouping of entities bearing physiognomic affinities to each other.

Where Benjamin draws similarity between the dissimilar, Wittgenstein establishes identity through difference:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.

To repeat: don’t think, but look!18

Like Benjamin, Wittgenstein holds up a mirror to his audience to estrange it from an overly intellectualized set of Platonic presuppositions regarding the nature of identity. The term “constellation” and the concept “family resemblances” are postulated on the same anthropological ground.

**The Second Formulation of the Mimetic Faculty: Language, Pictures, Animism**

Moreover, the shifts in meaning take center stage in both Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s understanding of images and language. Benjamin first deploys the term “mimetic faculty” in “Doctrine of the Similar” (February 1933), in which he argues that a certain power to perceive similarity has metamorphosed across history, beginning in the mystical and now manifested in language. Later that year he redrafted the essay in more materialist terms in “On the Mimetic Faculty” (September 1933). Together, these essays describe the transformation—and deterioration—of the contemporary imagination. Benjamin charts the movement from first to second nature, the transition from a holistic worldview to a form of life preoccupied with skepticism. His remarks elsewhere on the dying art of storytelling deploy an optical metaphor to portray this experiential paradigm shift:

Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him—or rather they become visible in him, just as
a human head or animal’s body may appear in a rock when it is viewed by an observer from the proper distance and angle. The distance and angle of vision are prescribed to us by an experience which we may have almost every day. It teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end.19

If the Homeric figure of the storyteller embodies a naive (prescientific) relation to nature, then we moderns are increasingly Cartesian in the manner in which we partition nature from culture. We get a glimpse of our first nature in the guise of occasional anthropomorphic experiences; yet the significance that the ancients endowed these with is undoubtedly coming to an end. These divergent forms of life are, however, still commensurable. Benjamin argues, by providing a genealogy of “reading,” that a tacit affinity still holds between two ostensibly alien forms of activity:

If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading per se, and if it proved a mediating link to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis of clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity. In this way, language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty—a medium into which the earlier perceptual capacity for recognizing the similar had, without residue, entered to such an extent that language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another.20

The hypostasized connection between language and astrology springs from the concept of “nonsensuous similarity.” In the context of language proper, the term concerns a process through which two dissimilar impressions, the sign and the signified, coincide. Is it not paradoxical to refer to an invisible (non-representational) but nonetheless concrete resemblance between two dissimilar impressions? We must first distinguish between two forms of equivalence: equivalence in kind and equivalence in use. Must not some form of representational coherence in kind inhere in two dissimilar objects? In the domain of pictures and symbols this approach works. When it is applied to language, however, it encounters a problem: apart from onomatopoeia, whether a written word has any sensual equivalence with its referent is questionable. Benjamin, the romantic-pragmatist, does not restrict his sense of commensurability to the objects in and of themselves. He is also willing to extend his notion of similitude to forms of practice. There may be a tacit resemblance between the way we actually use
pictures and words. The method of disclosing this connection relies upon the pedagogical distinction between saying (diegesis: propositional argument) and showing (mimesis: revealing perspicuous connections).

Benjamin begins with the image of a constellation. The example is pedagogically unique because the normal circuit of recognition is time delayed. Initially the outline is hidden in the firmament; then a gestalt switch takes place, and the constellation suddenly appears:

This directs our attention to another peculiarity in the realm of similarity. The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities thus seems bound to a moment in time.21

Wittgenstein’s use of the duck/rabbit drawing—an outline that could represent either a duck or a rabbit, depending on the angle of viewing—in the Investigations also illustrates the process wherein a gestalt shift takes place. “I can,” Wittgenstein writes, “understand a whole thought in a flash in exactly the sense in which I make a note of it in a few words or pencil dashes.”22

What do these parallel examples of perceiving morphing gestalt reveal about the imagination in general? What do they disclose about our relationship to language? Wittgenstein and Benjamin both work against the Platonic distinction between the presence of an original and its representation in the form of a copy. When the new aspect dawns, we do not experience a dualism between form and content but, rather, what is given is the thing itself. As Mullhall notes, our speech acts confirm this intuition: we do not describe what we see as like Orion
or similar to a rabbit; we say, “There’s Orion!” These perceptions happen in the temporal gap between synchronicity and diachronicity. This advances the idea that we respond to pictures as faces, or expressive objects. One might object to this argument on the grounds that the experience of animism highlighted is at best temporary: Once the aspect has dawned and the surprise has subsided, we appear to return again to the belief that the image is a copy. Instead, however, imagine a world where physiognomic perception played no role in the cognition of images. When we looked at the firmament in this world, we would see the stars as stars and nothing more. In the case of the duck/rabbit, we would perceive only a set of black lines or geometrical extension. On one level perception would be completely transparent; on another level it would be blind to the presence of human form. If the visual field were cleansed of any imaginary interference, the very form of perception that orients human beings in the world would effectively be negated.

We respond to all images much like we respond to faces—that is, as expressive objects—although, as Benjamin posits, usually at the background of our thematized consciousness:

> It can be claimed of our contemporaries that the cases in which they consciously perceive similarities in everyday life make a tiny proportion of those numberless cases unconsciously determined by similarity. The similarities perceived consciously—for instance, in faces—are, compared to the countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all, like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg in comparison to the small tip one sees rising out of the water.  

These insights can be applied to the way we use language. Wittgenstein is extremely useful in elucidating Benjamin’s position because of their common intellectual influence, Werner, and their broader interest in the tradition of Gestalt psychology. Contrast these two remarks. Benjamin: “Nothing links a human being more closely to his language than does his name.” Wittgenstein: “Why should it not be possible that a man’s own name be sacred to him?” Both thinkers show that we individuate some classes of words to the point where they seem sensuously commensurable with their referents. But what does this tell us about language in general? Again we must try to envision a world where physiognomic perception plays no role in the reading process. In this paradigm the intellect would encounter black letters, signs given as pure geometrical extension, and nothing more. The fact that we do perceive gestalt switches in language and that they are integral to the way we use the medium shows that physiognomic perception is integral to language use. Consider reading the term...
blue. Like the stars/Orion example, the disclosure of a new aspect of a word’s meaning (seeing it as a color, seeing it as an emotional stance) is akin to watching a new form suddenly flash before our eyes:

So tempo, that swiftness in reading or writing which can scarcely be separated from this process, would then become, as it were, the effort, or gift, or mind to participate in that measure of time in which similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more.27

Wittgenstein furnishes parallel examples. We experience the changing form of terms like bank or till, he argues, much like the metamorphosis of the duck/rabbit image: “It is as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash.’ Like what e.g.? . . . It is just that this expression suggests itself to us. As the result of the crossing of different pictures.”28 Gestalt shifts play a key role in Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s understanding of images and language. For both thinkers the imagination is not to be conceived in a purely intellectualized sense (as a Kantian faculty premised on disinterested interest); rather, its anthropological value is connected to doing things with words and pictures.

One might suggest that the significance of apperception (an absence that is assumed in the perception of a presence) explains what the dialectical image is premised upon. What previously seemed like a set of incongruent perceptions (the stars as stars) is transformed via a paradigm shift into a completely new worldview (Orion). This can be said about conceptual thinking as well as sense perception. We can think about how we perceive philosophical problems in an analogous manner, such as in Thomas Kuhn’s example of paradigm shifts in science: “What were ducks in the scientist’s world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards. The man who first saw the exterior of the box from above now sees its interior from below.”29 In contrast, the dialectical image for Benjamin joins together something with its negation without cancellation: “The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of recognizability.”30 Dialektisches Bild could be translated as “dialectical form,” which operates more like a film montage than a still image to induce a gestalt shift.

Goethe, in his consideration of the identity of natural objects in their ongoing processes of formation, discusses the word “gestalt”:

With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character.

But if we look at these Gestalten, especially the organic ones, we will discover that nothing in them is permanent, nothing is at rest or defined—
everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently
and fittingly makes use of the word Bildung (formation) to describe the
end product and what is in the process of production as well.

Thus in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of Gestalt, or if
we use the term we should at least do only in reference to the idea, the
concept, or to an empirical element held fast for a moment of time.31

When setting forth a conception of the dialectical image, the same principles
apply: form is to be grasped as an ideal synthesis, momentarily held fast, through
which what has passed comes to light. Benjamin and Wittgenstein’s theories of
the image are premised on the same mimetic capacity.

The Third Formulation of the Mimetic Faculty:
Children, Norms, Communities

Benjamin’s preoccupation with how children experience the world (much like
Wittgenstein’s) stems from the question of how infants learn language in order
to clarify the basic structure of their community’s normative and linguistic prac-
tices. Children’s activities often involve mimicry, and Benjamin is specifically
interested in the parallels between imitating social roles and the environment
at large: “Children’s play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behav-
ighbour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in
another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a
windmill and a train.”32 Two semiautobiographical narratives at the heart of
Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s accounts of language acquisition highlight the
implication of authority and propriety in establishing these patterns. Recollecting
his childhood, Benjamin writes,

There is an old nursery rhyme that tells of Muhme Rehlen. Because the
word Muhme meant nothing to me, this creature became for me a spirit:
the mummerehlen. This misunderstanding disarranged the world for me.
But in a good way: it lit up paths to the world’s interior. The cue could come
from anywhere.

Thus, on one occasion, chance willed that the Kupferstichen [copper-
plate engravings] were discussed in my presence. The next day, I stuck my
head out from under a chair; that was a Kopf-verstich [a head-stickout]. If,
in this way, I distorted both myself and the word, I did only what I had to
do to gain a foothold in life. Early on I learned to disguise myself in words,
which were really clouds. The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact,
nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and
to behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words. Not those that made me similar to models of good breeding, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes.  

Everything Benjamin learned was the result of imitating something: he mimicked objects (“furniture, clothes”) in a reverse animism (where the human being becomes invested by the proper names of objects), he appropriated his elders’ language, and, finally, he subverted their notion of propriety. Yet, the most prominent feature of his tale is that the driving feature of acculturation and language acquisition is the capacity to respond to, and improvise around, an apparent breakdown in communication. The fact that we recognize what could be characterized as a completely new move in the language game shows that it is impossible to draw a boundary around a concept that would delineate all of its possible applications.

Wittgenstein begins the *Investigations* with an account that parallels Benjamin’s biographical reminiscences, quoting Augustine on his initiation into language:

> “When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as if it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper place in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.”

Wittgenstein contends that “Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one.” The child in this case already has a fully developed language, which is to be thought of as “the natural language of all peoples,” in the Platonic lexicon of universals. In effect, Augustine the child can understand what his community is doing because he appears to have always understood the basic structure of their conceptual scheme. Unlike the young Benjamin, Augustine has obeyed his elders and taken up their social cues. Intelligibility presupposes shared criteria of communal understanding. In this sense a community draws upon a stockpile of mimetic intuitions. This preunderstanding of the world might be described
as a “map” or a “constellation” that illuminates how to insert actions and utterances into their “appropriate” contexts. One could call it a linguistic—and, by extension, a political or ideological—unconscious.

The transposition of the adult world onto the child’s could stand in for the lost world of astrology, or storytelling. Even if we had a translator, we would quickly realize that the astrological community’s sense of its own language radically differs from our own rudimentary understanding of it. Patently they would see things differently (where they saw Orion, perhaps we would just see stars). In this sense the community would be drawing upon a different stockpile of mimetic intuitions. Wittgenstein famously remarks that to understand a language is to understand a form of life. In the case of Benjamin one could say that to comprehend a language is to comprehend a “mimetic community.” However, Benjamin’s interest in child psychology or historical anthropology should not be read as a form of developmentalism. Rather than pointing toward linear progress, it suggests commensurable temporalities.

**Toward a Fundamental Anthropology**

Marx’s description of the commodity fetish seems like a clear precedent for Benjamin’s notion of the auratic consciousness as the articulation of the numinous appearance of nature. One can argue, however, that Benjamin was actually recasting Werner’s ideas on physiognomic perception:

> Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.

Wittgenstein’s remark that “I must neither speak in defense of magic nor ridicule it” is comparable to Benjamin’s search for the “rationality” inherent in “magical influences.” Recall the two demands “On Astrology” makes upon its reader: first, to imagine a radically divergent worldview; second, to imagine within this paradigm a cohesive relationship between ostensibly dissimilar entities: “faces, buildings, cloud formations.” Benjamin realizes that this exercise is possible only if we have had similar experiences with other sets of entities. The intellectual imperative he puts before his reader is to **look**—to analyze whether our prediscursive knowledge fits within perceptual norms: some form of mimetic regulation must be behind contemporary practices. In *The Arcades Project*, his study of belle époque Paris, Benjamin asks his reader to imagine how a “constellation” might have appeared at an earlier point in the history of capitalism:
“This research . . . deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements, and so on.”

In turn he hopes that his own mimetic intuitions will disclose how his readers’ worldview, or ideology, is constituted by similar mimetic practices: “I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only possible way, to come into their own: by making use of them.” This is the telos of Benjamin’s anthropological Marxism: to show, like a haruspex of modernity, the present through the past.
Notes


7. Plato, 514a–518d.

8. This correspondence theory of truth rests on the supposition that universal essences exist behind humankind's given experience and on the belief that the mind is endowed with the intellectual capacity, when properly educated, to mirror the real world as it really is. The philosopher's task, the theory holds, is to uncloud the mirror (the intellect) from received opinion (the doxa) in order to refract the deep ontological structure of reality. Benjamin, however, replaces the epistemologist's preoccupation with truth, originals, and mirroring with an anthropological framework where the exercise of the imagination is posited as the driving force of understanding.


10. Werner, 72.


and based on a popular cartoon from an 1892 Harper's Weekly and, before that, the German comic Fliegende Blätter.

23. Mulhall, 162.
35. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, sec. 32.
41. Benjamin, Arcades Project, N1a, 7.
42. Benjamin, Arcades Project, N1a, 8.