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THE ABSORPTION OF THE EXPRESSIVE VALUES OF THE PAST.
Introduction to Aby Warburg's *Einleitung*

Matthew Rampley

Warburg's Introduction to the Mnemosyne Atlas offers the most extensive outline of the basic concerns that motivated his work, from his doctoral thesis published in 1893 until his death thirty-six years later. Little of this was made explicit in the writings he published; his 1920 essay on the use of astrological woodcuts in the Reformation comes closest, perhaps, to offering a programmatic statement of the ideas informing his historical theory of culture (*Kulturwissenschaft*) [1]. In general, his published articles are more notable for their marshaling of large quantities of historical source material—images, personal letters, wills, journals, poetry—rather than for any engagement with sustained theoretical reflection.

The Mnemosyne Introduction in contrast presents a sequence of ungrounded speculations about social memory, the origin of artistic expression and the psychological drama driving the history of European culture from classical antiquity onwards. At the heart of Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas is the attempt to spell out what it might mean to apply the aesthetic ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche to the understanding of visual imagery. Warburg attempted to distance himself from the superficial appropriation of Nietzsche that had become increasingly common following the latter's death. However, the basic outline of Warburg's *Kulturwissenschaft* is fundamentally Nietzschean; for both writers the reading of classical culture is oriented around the meaning of the Dionysus–Apollo duality. They are also both concerned with the legacy of classical antiquity for the present; Nietzsche believed he had found a source of aesthetic redemption of the present in the rebirth of tragic drama and, in his early writings at least,

identified this with the operas of Wagner. This he opposed to the Socratic culture of ancient Athens, which lay at the root of modern scientific inquiry. For Warburg it was the Apollinian dimension of classical culture, its values of self-control, rationality, and its sublimation of primal trauma into symbolic myth, that was to be emulated. Warburg's reading of Nietzsche was enriched by an immersion in ideas derived from empathy theory, contemporary anthropological thought, evolutionary theory, the study of mythology, and biological conceptions of memory. The Apollo-Dionysus opposition was thus redescribed in terms of the contrast between the maintenance of rationalizing distance and empathic absorption in the objects of perception.

As he states in the opening to the Introduction, it is the maintenance of Apollinian distance that constitutes the emergence of culture, and this implies distance not only towards the percepts of the present but also towards the inherited collective memories of the past. It was a central aspect of his theory of culture that the conflicting responses to the legacy of classical antiquity, and the psychic energies sustaining them, directly informed the expressive styles of the visual arts, from the realism of Burgundian and Netherlandish art to the heroic forms of the Italian High Renaissance. Many of the ideas Warburg explored were also being explored by other art historians of the period. In his doctoral thesis Heinrich Wölfflin had attempted to apply empathy theory to the understanding of architecture; the opposition of distance and proximity had been translated by Alois Riegl into the duality of optical and haptic vision [2].

A concern with the origins of art was also a common preoccupation for art historians of the late nineteenth century, and was frequently informed by concepts from contemporary anthropology [3]. The originality of Warburg's thought lay in his combining all these different strands, which he coupled with a theory of social memory, to form a historical anthropology of the Classical tradition. In this sense the more speculative aspects of his thinking were highly unorthodox, and stood at odds with the disciplinary norms of Renaissance art history of his time. This undoubtedly explains why his far-reaching speculations, though substantial in quantity, were almost entirely restricted to the unpublished notebooks he had compiled since the late 1880s; only occasionally does one gain a glimpse of these thoughts in the texts he submitted for publication. In the final years of his life he clearly decided finally to order his speculative ideas and to present them to the public; although the Mnemosyne

Atlas was incomplete at his death, it was his intention that it should be published, and this project occupied his final years from 1926 until 1929 when he died. It was planned as a series of annotated plates illustrating the transformation of classical myth and imagery as documents of “the stylistic development of the representation of life in motion in the age of the Renaissance.”

The format of the pictorial atlas was an established practice; one of the most widely read art historical publications in the nineteenth century was Ernst Seeman’s picture atlas used for schools, which appeared in numerous editions [4]. Warburg’s Atlas differed, however, in that it did not straightforwardly document the history of Renaissance art, but rather traced the migration of classical symbols across space and time, charting the changes in function and meaning they underwent in the process. In keeping with his deeper speculative thinking, the examples he chose were not meant to demonstrate stylistic developments but rather the evolution of human cognition and its shifting systems of spatial and temporal orientation; examples ranged from ancient Greek cosmology to contemporary newspaper reports on the airship Hindenberg. Such a vast project explains, perhaps, why he never arrived at a definitive version of the Atlas. The edition published in 2003 represents the most coherent version of the work, but there remain numerous drafts and variants of both the plates and also the Introduction [5]. If Warburg’s inability to complete the project was a reflection of its massive scope, it also indicated his difficulty in finding a satisfactory language to describe it. The tortured syntax and complex sentences of the Introduction betray the extent to which he was constantly wrestling with the resources of the German language, and present an extreme challenge to the translator. The same can be said of his choice of vocabulary, in which he exploited the ability within German to form compound nouns to the full, creating novel expressions that can often only be rendered in English by means of lengthy circumlocutions. In part this was a particular stylistic trait of Warburg’s writing, and can also be observed, albeit to a lesser extent, in his published works. In part, however, it was a reflection of Warburg’s intellectual development.

Although the Introduction was written in the late 1920s, it relied on the same intellectual sources—Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, Richard Seimon’s account of memory, and Tito Vignoli’s ideas of myth—that had first propelled him into the study of the Renaissance in the late 1880s.

Warburg's ideas had since outstripped his original sources, but he also remained peculiarly bound to them, and in particular he allowed himself to be governed by their same conceptual vocabulary. The language of the Introduction thus represents the conflict between Warburg's attempt to summarize his project on the one hand, and his reliance on an inadequate set of terms on the other. The fields of aesthetics, psychology, and mythology had undergone enormous changes between the 1880s and the 1920s, but Warburg seemed oblivious to such conceptual and terminological developments. The Introduction therefore presents the reader with an argument the tenor of which, in its emphasis on the fragility of subjectivity, the psychological dynamics of the visual symbol, and the semantic variability of the image, is strikingly contemporary. Yet it also seems to be backward-looking, rehearsing debates from forty years previously. As such it provides a succinct image of Warburg in general. On the one hand, a scholar immersed in the values of nineteenth-century bourgeois humanist learning, on the other, an intellectual whose preoccupations still have a resonance for the present

1. Aby Warburg, *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther*, in Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), pp. 597–698.
2. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*, in Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, trans. and eds, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1994), pp. 149–190; Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004).
3. See, for example, Ernst Grosse, *The Origins of Art* (New York: D. Appleton, 1928). First published in 1894.
4. Ernst Seeman, *Kunsthistorische Bilderbogen: für den Gebrauch bei akademischen und öffentlichen Vorlesungen, sowie beim Unterricht in der Geschichte und Geschmackslehre an Gymnasien, Realund höheren Töchterschulen zusammengestellt* (Leipzig: Seeman, 1879).
5. Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 2nd edn (Akademie Verlag: Berlin, 2003).



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