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**Aby Warburg:  
His Aims  
and Methods**

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# Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods

edited by  
Monica Centanni and Giulia Zanon

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monica centanni

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*sede legale*  
Engramma  
Castello 6634 | 30122 Venezia  
edizioni@engramma.it

*redazione*  
Centro studi classicA luav  
San Polo 2468 | 30125 Venezia  
+39 041 257 14 61

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L'editore dichiara di avere posto in essere le dovute attività di ricerca delle titolarità dei diritti sui contenuti qui pubblicati e di aver impegnato ogni ragionevole sforzo per tale finalità, come richiesto dalla prassi e dalle normative di settore.

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I feel the best tribute I can pay him is to explain to the best of my power, *sine ita et studio*, how he saw in the purpose of art history and the methods it should employ, for I find that people tend to have the weirdest ideas about his aims and methods (Gombrich 1999, 268).

In his Lecture, Gombrich takes cue from the programmatic conclusion to Warburg's essay on Schifanoja frescoes.

I need hardly say that this lecture has not been about solving a pictorial riddle for its own sake especially since it cannot here be illuminated at leisure, but only caught in a cinematographic spotlight (Warburg *Renewal*, 585, quoted in Gombrich 1999, 270).

In the same paper, Gombrich enthusiastically welcomes the publication of Warburg's writings in English that very year, 1999, edited by Kurt W. Forster and translated by David Britt. However, even on this occasion Gombrich avoids explaining why, despite having been hired at the Warburg Institute in London back in 1936 precisely with the task of publishing in English Warburg's writings (and the *Mnemosyne Atlas*), and subsequently having directed the Warburg Institute from 1959 to 1976, he had not considered as his first duty to accomplish that task.

In this short piece of writing from 1999 (particularly short, in comparison to its title and to the ceremonial occasion), Gombrich once again, after his *Intellectual Biography*, demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding of Warburg's thought, the reduction of Warburg's method to the application of "positivism" to art history and his stigmatisation of opening the way to "a psychological history of human expression", which was for Gombrich generic and vague. These few pages are the final evidence of Gombrich's inability to grasp the philosophical nature of the methods and the aims of the pioneering research that Warburg had inaugurated.

It is Gombrich himself who admits, in the course of his Lecture for the centenary of Warburg's death, "I fear that by now you will think that I have come to bury Warburg, not to praise him!". And it is true that the mood of the text goes somewhat in that direction. At the end of his "tribute", so to speak, Gombrich saves the scope of Warburg's thought only insofar as it reflects and expresses the crisis of his time, between the 1910s and

1920s. To support this idea, Gombrich resorts to a very generic quotation “All history is contemporary history” taken from Benedetto Croce, an author disliked by Warburg and therefore ungentlemanly to be quoted in a Anniversary Lecture devoted to him.

Hence, recycling Gombrich’s title is here to be intended as a provocation. In our idea, to banish from one’s mind the above-mentioned “weirdest ideas” means interrogating once again the fundamental epistemological questions raised by the Warburgian corpus. What is certain is that to set as the theme of a Lecture (Gombrich) or the issue of a journal (Engramma) Warburg’s aims and methods is a disproportionate and titanic undertaking and one can only proceed, as Warburg wrote about the Schifanoia frescoes, by partial illuminations, by zooms, by details.

This issue aims to present a series of exercises that, by focusing on specific themes, seek to apply and frame the methodological legacy of the scholar from Hamburg: a playing field that also offers the rules, if we know how to look for them. The fact that all contributions included in this issue are in English implies the intention of disseminating Warburgian studies as widely as possible. It is also intended as a tribute to the English edition of Warburg’s writings prompted by Kurt W. Forster in 1999 for The Getty Institute in Los Angeles, thus echoing the homage that Gombrich himself paid to that edition in the Lecture from which we have borrowed our title. Conversely, the actual Tribute to Kurt Forster for his new essay on Warburg included in this issue speaks the five languages of the scholars who agreed to participate in this choral reading.

A first section of this issue is dedicated to analyse specific aspects of the Panels from the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

In her contribution *Zooming Mnemosyne*, Giulia Zanon investigates the use of detail as a scholarly tool in Warburg’s *corpus*. In the first phase of an ongoing study, the author makes a recognition of the cases in which the detail of an image in the *Atlas* is enlarged and juxtaposed to its original, highlighting the different visual strategies exploited by the scholar to develop and expose his research themes.

In *Collateral effects of the “visibile parlare”* ( *Dante*, Pg. X, v. 95), Monica Centanni reconstructs the hypothesis of a visual model for the legend of Trajan’s Justice and Warburg’s intuition—borrowed from excerpts of lectures and, in particular, the notes left about Panel 7 and 52 of his *Bilderatlas*—that a Trajan’s relief reused in the Arch of Constantine could be the visual matrix of the Legend. Centanni reviews the hermeneutical steps necessary for the formulation of “energetic inversion”. The image from which inspiration is drawn is no longer that of the kneeling Province and the merciful Emperor, but that of the leader who “overwhelms by riding”.

In his illustration for Canto X of *Purgatory*, Sandro Botticelli draws the legendary episode of the Justice of Trajan. In order to illustrate the legend, Botticelli apparently takes inspiration from the bas-relief in the fornix of the Arch of Constantine with the inscription LIBERATORI URBIS. This is a bas-relief that, thanks to modern archaeological studies, is known to come from a monument of Trajan. Filippo Perfetti in *Dante, Botticelli, and Trajan. An Open Note* questions how Botticelli could have known the Trajanian origin of the bas-relief. The analysis is carried on by surveying all the sources and critical studies available at the time. At this point in the research, a provisional conclusion is that the identification of the bas-relief as pertaining to a Trajanian monument could have derived from a *vox populi*.

A second section includes essays that take a broader perspective on Warburg and the intellectuals connected to him.

The contribution by Dorothee Gelhard, *Gertrud Bing’s Scientific Beginnings* traces the intellectual history of Gertrud Bing’s doctoral thesis by highlighting the first phase of her scientific life, which is still largely underestimated. The thesis, titled *The Concept of the Necessary in Lessing. A contribution to the historical-intellectual problem of the relationship between Leibniz and Lessing*, links German Literature, Psychology and Philosophy. and, among its merits. It acutely establishes an important dialogue with a great German scholar, highly important for Bing’s and Warburg’s thought: Ernst Cassirer. The author traces the history of the dissertation, by evidencing Cassirer’s recommendation for Bing to

join the KBW and the profound influence Lessing and Leibniz had in the Warburg circle.

The essay by Matilde Sergio, about *Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, and the Memory of Images* focuses on the connection between the two thinkers through the detection of some direct references to Aby Warburg's essay *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther* in one of Walter Benjamin's most important early works, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Starting with these quotations, the author attempts to offer a glimpse of Warburg's legacy in Walter Benjamin's later reflection on the relationship between historical time and image.

From the last contribution in this section, we learn that a stellar friendship unites Aby Warburg and Anselm Kiefer and the hallmark of this relationship is the energy of inversion. *Anselm Kiefer's Logic of Inversion* is Salvatore Settis' opening speech for Anselm Kiefer's exhibition *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (Andrea Emo) on display at Sala dello Scrutinio in Palazzo Ducale, Venezia from March to October 2022. Taking his cue from Kiefer's title, Settis underlines "a logic of inversion between space and time, as well as a staggering fluctuation between preservation and destruction, between memory and oblivion", and questions the meaning of an "interval in a work of art". Settis recalls Warburg's definitions of *Zwischenraum* (intermediate space) and *Denkraum* (space of thought) extending them to contemporary art, in an extraordinary short-circuit of memory.

The third section of the issue presents some recently published volumes in Italy and the United Kingdom, and an exhibition in Hamburg, that have particular consonances with Warburg's research aims and methods.

The first is presentation of *La Dialettica del Denkraum in Aby Warburg* by Clio Nicastro, published by Palermo University Press in 2022. The volume investigates the concept of *Denkraum der Besonnenheit* as "the name of the constellations of methods, concept, forms of expression, and personal challenges that distinguish Aby Warburg's research programme". The book includes a Foreword by the author, an Afterword by Salvatore Todesco, and four chapters: 1. *The Shifting Boundaries of the Denkraum der*

*Besonnenheit*; 2. *The Corporeal Roots of Sophrosyne*; 3. *The Hospitalization in Bellevue*; 4. Table C: *An Elliptical Space for Reflection*.

Katia Pizzi introduces “Cultural Memories”, the publishing project of the Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory at the University of London. The Centre promotes research with a focus on interdisciplinary approaches to Memory. The series, published by Peter Lang, Lausanne, embraces new methodological approaches, encompassing a wide range of technologies of Memory in cognate fields, including comparative studies, cultural studies, history, literature, media and communication, and cognitive science.

*Mary Hertz Warburg: Free and Unconventional* by Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino is the review of the exhibition *Auf Augenblicke frei und glücklich MARY WARBURG (1866-1934)* at the Barlach Haus in Hamburg until 12 June. The exhibition is intended to be an homage to the artist—Mary Warburg, Aby’s wife—and displays around fifty selected works, including drawings, pastels and plastic works, covering a period of five decades.

In *The Choral Reading of Il metodo di Aby Warburg* by Kurt W. Forster. *L’antico dei gesti. Il futuro della memoria*, Barbara Baert, Victoria Cirlot, Georges Didi-Huberman, Michael Diers, Andrea Pinotti and Ianick Takaes deal, more or less directly, with the *Nachleben* of Warburg’s thought, starting from the Italian edition of Forster’s monograph on Warburg. The book, published in German in 2018, has recently been translated into Italian and published by Ronzani Editore. The scholars involved in this Tribute give us a polyfocal and heterogeneous view of the themes introduced by Kurt Forster in his book. This represents a new and fundamental approach, an illuminating interpretation in the labyrinth of Kulturwissenschaft of which Warburg was a pioneer.

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### English abstract

In this issue of Engramma: Giulia Zanon’s *Zooming Mnemosyne* deals with the use of details in Warburg’s *Bilderatlas*, Monica Centanni’s *Collateral effects of the “visibile parlare” (Dante, Pg. X, v. 95)* reconstructs the hypothesis of a visual model for the legend of Trajan’s Justice, according to Warburg intuition about it; this

contribution is connected to the paper by Filippo Perfetti's *Dante, Botticelli, and Trajan. An Open Note* where the author investigates how Botticelli could have come to know that the bas-relief of the Arch of Constantine LIBERATORI URBIS was related to an episode in Trajan's life". The focus of this issue is then extended to Warburg's cultural environment. Matilde Sergio's *Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, and the Memory of Images* investigates the influence of Warburg's essay about Luther, on Benjamin's thought, while Dorothee Gelhard's *Gertrud Bing's Scientific Beginnings* reconstructs the intellectual history of Bing's doctoral thesis and its influences on Warburgian work. The theme of Warburg's *Denkraum* is the focal point of Salvatore Settis' *Anselm Kiefer's Logic of Inversion*: a fundamental overview of Kiefer's *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (Andrea Emo) on display at Sala dello Scrutinio in Palazzo Ducale, Venezia from March to October 2022. The third section of the issue is dedicated to new publications and exhibitions. Echoing Settis' reflection on *Denkraum*, we present Clio Nicastro's *La Dialettica del Denkraum in Aby Warburg*, published this year for Palermo University Press; an introduction to *Cultural Memories*: a series published by Peter Lang and edited by Katia Pizzi. Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino with *Mary Hertz Warburg: Free and Unconventional* reviews the exhibition of the artist Mary Hertz Warburg. The issue closes with the important *Choral Reading of Il metodo di Aby Warburg* by Kurt W. Forster. *L'antico dei gesti. Il futuro della memoria*, where Barbara Baert, Victoria Cirlot, Georges Didi-Huberman, Michael Diers, Andrea Pinotti and Ianick Takaes offer us their personal reading of Warburg's life and thought as they are presented by Forster's newly translated book, edited by Ronzani editore.

*Keywords* | Aby Warburg; Mnemosyne Atlas; Denkraum; Walter Benjamin; Trajan; Anselm Kiefer; Kurt W. Forster.



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Monica Centanni, Giulia Zanon

**Zooming Mnemosyne**

Giulia Zanon

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Monica Centanni

**Dante, Botticelli, and Trajan. An Open Note**

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**Gertrud Bing’s Scientific Beginnings**

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**A Presentation**

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Barbara Baert, Victoria Cirlot, Georges Didi-Huberman, Michael Diers,  
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