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Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods

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Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods

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Matilde Sergio

¿Y si la muerte es la muerte,
qué será de los poetas
y de las cosas dormidas
que ya nadie las recuerda?
Federico García Lorca, *Canción otoñal*, 1918

The possibility of making a comparison between the figures of Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin is a fascinating subject for researchers who are familiar with their works, especially in the perspective of shedding light on the reflections of two of the least 'classifiable' thinkers in the history of German culture in the twentieth century. This attempt, however, often fails to indicate the basis upon which such a comparison should be established, not highlighting the important differences that mark two authors belonging to different generations and cultural environments (Pisani 2004). First, what is problematic is the lack of a solid ground on which to base the hypothesis of a concrete affinity between Warburg's art history research method and Benjamin's historical-philosophical speculation. It is known that the two scholars never met. The time frame when this might have happened was short: Benjamin graduated in Berne in 1919, and only a few years later he would begin to seek contact with the German cultural circles of his time. Only after his failed attempt to obtain a professorship at the University of Frankfurt (for a reconstruction of the 'sad affair', see Schiavoni 2016, 121-140) he entertained the idea of contacting the Warburgkreis. A letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal dated 30 October 1926 expresses for the first time Benjamin's desire of getting in contact with this circle:

> Later I may also be able to hope for the interest of the Hamburg circle around [Aby] Warburg in addition to the sympathy of [Walther] Brecht. In any case, I would first expect to find academically qualified and, at the same

> time, sympathetic reviewers among the members of that circle (with whom I myself have no contact); as for the rest, I do not expect very much goodwill, particularly from the official representatives of the scholarly profession (Benjamin [1910-1940] 1994, 310).

This happens just a few months after the 'Frankfurt affair' had ended with the withdrawal of his application to the university, following the advice of the faculty itself. In his letter Benjamin rejoices for the early publication in Hofmannsthal's *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* of the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspiels*'s section dedicated to Baroque melancholy. The book was the same famous text that Benjamin had written for the Frankfurt University and that had been the object of such an embarrassing refusal. Hofmannsthal, trying to comply with Benjamin's wishes, sent the published essay to Erwin Panofsky with a letter in the Autumn of 1928 (the letter is quoted in Kemp 1975). We do not have Panofsky's reply, but we do know that it appeared to Benjamin not only indifferent, but even hostile, as he reported to Gershom Scholem in January 1928:

> You will be interested to hear that Hofmannsthal, who knew I was interested in establishing a connection to the Warburg circle, sent the issue of the *Beiträge* containing the preview of the *Trauerspiel* book to [Erwin] Panofsky with a letter, perhaps somewhat prematurely. This kind act, meant to be of some use to me, has – *on ne peut plus* – *échoué* (gone awry, and how!). He sent me Panofsky's cool, resentment-laden response to his parcel (Benjamin [1910-1940] 1994, 325).

Despite this total failure Benjamin did not give up hope of establishing relations with the Warburgkreis, attempting to get in contact with its members again a few months after the troubled publication of his work on Baroque drama, this time through Scholem's intercession with Fritz Saxl (Benjamin [1910-1940] 1978, I, 470). Yet, even Saxl's response in the Summer of 1928 didn't go beyond a mild recognition of Benjamin's book. He confirmed the impression that the text, described by the Frankfurt University as incomprehensible, was not easy to read:

> Das Buch von Benjamin hat mich sehr interessiert, wenn es auch wahrlich nicht leicht zu lesen ist. Aber der Mann hat doch etwas zu sagen und kennt sein Material.

> [Benjamin's book interested me a lot, even though it is not easy to read. But this man has something to say and he knows his material (Author's translation)].

Nevertheless, this timidly positive comment cheered the author up. In fact during July of the same year, Benjamin wrote to his friend Siegfried Kracauer to thank him for the review of his writings, which had been published in the "Frankfurter Zeitung". In the same letter he points out the publication, in the same journal, of an article citing the studies of the Warburgkreis, in particular Panofsky's essay *Die Perspektive als symbolische Form*. The article defined the essay as the only noteworthy text in the panorama of contemporary literature on the art of Roman and Late Roman time, which Benjamin had approached through his reading of Riegl:

> Nun habe ich noch einmal die große Freude an Ihrer Rezension gehabt und will Ihnen das schreiben und Ihnen danken. Sie ist unter den vorliegenden die einzige, die nicht nur dies oder jenes hat beleuchten und darstellen sondern mir einen Rang in einer Ordnung hat anweisen können. Und als sollte ihr ein Glückssiegel anhängen ist sie genau an meinem Geburtstag erschienen […] übrigens war mir auch der Leitartikel in dieser Nummer des Literaturblattes [der Frankfurter Zeitung] wichtig. Er hat die Vermutung bestätigt, daß die für unsere Anschauungsweise wichtigsten wissenschaftlichen Publikationen sich mehr und mehr um den Warburgkreis gruppieren und darum kann es mir nur um so lieber sein, daß neulich, indirekt, die Mitteilung kam, Saxl sei intensiv für mein Buch interessiert (Letter to Kracauer of 21th July 1928, in Benjamin GS I, 910).

> [Now, I have once again had the pleasure of your review and I wanted to write to you to thank you. It's the only one that has not only been able to illuminate and illustrate this or that, but also to assign me a rank in an order. And moreover, as a benevolent sign, it appeared on my birthday [...] by the way, the lead article in the literary sheet [of the "Frankfurter Zeitung"] was also important to me. It confirmed the hypothesis that the most important scholarly publications from our point of view are increasingly gravitating around the Warburg circle, which is why I can only be glad that recently, indirect news reached me that Saxl would be intensely interested in my book (Author's translation)].

So Benjamin felt the affinity between his research and that of the Warburgkreis. Saxl's alleged interest in his work, however, never manifested itself. Benjamin therefore came to terms with remaining an intellectual outside of the academic environment. In 1924, however, his thought had already reached the turning point towards a materialist direction that would definitively distance him from academia (Rampley 2000, 12), marking a change in his own writing style, since the elaboration of the collection of aphorisms *Einbahnstraße*, published by the same publisher of the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspiels* in 1928. Not surprisingly, this period would coincide with the initial draft of the author's gigantic unfinished work: *Das Passagenwerk* (Benjamin [1910-1940] 1978, I, 459). Nevertheless, the figure of Warburg is still present in Benjamin's reflections many years later when, in his 1935 essay on Bachofen, he recalls him with these words:

> It would be worth tracing the type of the lordly scholar, splendidly inaugurated by Leibniz, down to our day, where it still gives rise to a number of noble and remarkable minds, such as Aby Warburg, who founded the library which bears his name and has just left Germany for England (Benjamin [1935] 2002, III, 15).

Even if we can just talk of a missed encounter between these two authors, the persistence of the Hamburg scholar's figure in Benjamin's essay up to 1935 seems to be the symptomatic result of a deep fascination that perhaps went beyond the author's simple awareness. This affinity, moreover, was felt in several studies concerning the two scholars, particularly within a perspective that questions both the relationship between historical time and image (Didi-Huberman 2000) and the dynamic and collective nature of the memory deposited within the works of art (Rampley 2000, 101-102; Zumbusch 2010, 117). It is not possible for us to retrace the steps of these theoretical approaches here: although illuminating at a hermeneutical level, these parallels may risk to appear forced from a strictly historical-biographical point of view. For this reason, we have chosen to address the theme of this 'problematic affinity' within an extremely tight framework, that is, by trying to locate the only direct quotations from Warburg in Benjamin's work. In fact, it seems important to us to note that in the very book that should have earned Benjamin the professorship at the Frankfurt University there are several quotations,

eight of them, from Warburg's essay published in Heidelberg in 1920, *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*. These quotations are, therefore, prior to that radicalization in a political sense of the Berlin writer's reflection, which constitutes an objection to the comparison between his work and Warburg's, as Scholem himself has argued (Campanini 2015).

However, only in abstract terms it is possible to separate Benjamin's reflections on the Baroque from his later writings which, as we shall see, take up some essential elements from the 1928 text, for instance the figure of the saturnine acedia (Bertozzi 2010, 86) and, above all, the theoretical results of the reflection on allegory's nature (Pinotti 2010, 157). Precisely for this reason, in order to attempt determining the importance of Warburg's contributions within Benjamin's text on Baroque drama, we will then try to identify how his influence could also be traceable in the development of certain concepts that Benjamin addresses in later texts, such as *Das Passagenwerk and the last Über den Begriff der Geschichte* thesis (Zumbusch 2004, 268). Not wishing to dwell further on this subject here, we want to point out that although the existence of references to Warburg's work in Benjamin's text on German Baroque drama has been noted by various interpreters, it seems that no one wanted to analye their possible function within the structure of Benjamin's book. Actually, the majority of studies have concentrated on the presence of Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl's essay published in 1923, dedicated to Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*. This work was in fact already mentioned by Benjamin in 1924 in two letters, where he writes that it was so fundamental that he had to slow down the drafting of the first version of the text on the Baroque drama (letter to Salomon of 29 December 1924, reported in Schiavoni 1999, XIII).

For this reason, in order to establish a comparison between Benjamin's studies and Warburgkreis' work, the attention of researchers has been primarily focused on the interpretation of the winged figure of Dürer's *Melencolia I*. It is worth noting that in Benjamin's book Warburg's text is quoted even more often than Panofsky's and Saxl's (8 versus 7 times): it seems strange, then, that Warburg's essay is not mentioned in the correspondence concerning the progress of the work. And yet the function of these references within Benjamin's book is not of a mere academic

quotation. They are in fact intimately involved in the development of the author's representation of the Baroque period as well as in his reflection on the mechanisms of transmission of the pagan tradition through the medieval and Renaissance periods. This issue in particular is addressed in the last paragraph of the text, that touches very closely the central themes of Warburg's reflection. The contribution of Warburg's work in Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspiels* does not end with the iconographic interpretation of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, but, as we will try to show, it plays a central role in the overall structure of the text, and perhaps is also of significant importance in Benjamin's subsequent speculation.

Aby Warburg and the German Baroque Drama

The book on the origin of German Baroque drama has been considered a difficult text to read since its inception. It is possible that the professors at the University of Frankfurt who had to evaluate it had not even read it, or discouraged, they had given up after leafing through the introduction, the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede* that, in Scholem's words, plays the role of "the angel with the flaming sword at the entrance into the Paradise of writing" (Scholem [1968] 2001, 148). Still, the text would be incomprehensible without this introduction, as it defines the intention of the entire work: to represent the idea of German Baroque drama (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 218). Nothing could therefore appear further from Warburg's 'philology of detail', that requires slowness, thoroughness, attention and respect for the details where 'God hides' and caution against any temptation of hermeneutic closure" (Centanni 2002, IX). And yet it is exactly in what Benjamin defines as the representation of the idea, where truly the very task of philosophical speculation lies, that an assonance with Warburg's thought and research 'method' is concealed: the need to overcome the generalizations by which the work of art of the past was stripped of any properly historical content and subjected to a purely aestheticising classification (Gombrich 1970, 39-40).

Even though the project outlined by Benjamin in his gnoseological preface is rooted in some theoretical postulations, peculiar to the author, linked to his youthful speculation on language (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 215-218), it is nevertheless clear that the procedure that leads his analysis of texts and images of Baroque dramaturgy has several similarities with the one

implemented by Warburg in his essay on the age of Reformation. Primarily an initial and fundamental claim to the legitimacy of their object of investigation is common to both studies: the fact of taking into consideration materials usually regarded as marginal by aesthetic research. Thus Warburg, at the beginning of his text *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*, warns that in the course of the essay images unrelated to the purely formal speculation of art history will be examined, for two essential reasons: first, because they are indissolubly dependent on the content, and second, because they are aesthetically unattractive (Warburg 1920, 4). In fact, the objects of Warburg's essay are xylographic representations of images that are, at first glance, void of any artistic connotation, linked to the monstrosities of Reformation's astrological speculation and political propaganda. These materials, by the author's own admission, would have normally attracted the attention of religious scholars rather than art historians. He however points out that:

> It is one of the prime duties of art history to bring such forms out of the twilight of ideological polemic and to subject them to close historical scrutiny. For there is one crucial issue in the history of style and civilization – the influence of antiquity on the culture of Renaissance Europe as a whole – that cannot otherwise be fully understood and resolved (Warburg [1920] 1999, 598).

From the very beginning of his book, Benjamin asserts with equal strength his choice to study an era where art-historical research had always been burdened by "prejudices of stylistic classification and aesthetic evaluation" (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 239). The same prejudices that had prevented any access to a real understanding of Baroque dramatic literature. Since the *Vorrede*, in fact, the author criticizes the artistic theory that had dismissed the historical specificity of the Baroque drama by an inductive procedure which, through a mere psychological reaction, had ended equating it with ancient tragedy. In the same way, Benjamin attacks those who, by invoking the need for an undetermined artistic development, had reduced its peculiarity to an inevitable period of decadence of the Renaissance drama, if not to a necessary transitional phase towards German Neoclassicism (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 232-234). On the contrary, Benjamin is convinced that baroque drama can find its

own internal coherence; but in order to define its true value it should have been examined through a stylistic criticism that did not consider the whole except in its determination through details, and by which "the Non-Renaissance, not to say the Baroque features, appear everywhere" (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 240). It is precisely in this attention to detail that the representation of the idea shows a deep affinity with Warburg's 'method' (Desideri 1980, 131). Indeed, it is not accomplished by means of abstract concepts, but only "im Mittel der Empirie" (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 214), that is, having become aware of the incongruity of a merely inductive or deductive procedure:

> The impossibility of the deductive elaboration of artistic forms [...] provides the spur to a productive scepticism. This can be likened to a pause for breath, after which thought can be totally and unhurriedly concentrated even on the very minutest object without the slightest inhibition. For the very minutest things will be discussed wherever the work of art and its form are considered with a view to judging their content (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 45).

Therefore, the representation that is philosophy's task to trace is only realised through the abandonment of abstract thought in favour of a descent into the objective particulars of the world (Barale 2009, 61), immediately taking on a micrological dimension:

> Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate [...] the relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 28-29).

As mentioned, such reflections do not find a place in Warburg, but they lead at least to an incredibly similar writing style in the two texts: the difficulty within the body of Benjamin's work is in fact mainly due to a 'mosaic' composition that has been repeatedly attributed to Warburg's work as well (Gombrich 1970, 59). The text of the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspiels* appears almost hermetically sealed "in the inlay of its more than six hundred quotations" ("*nell'intarsio delle sue oltre seicento*

citazioni": so Schiavoni 1980, 201), the collection of which Benjamin boasted as an essential effort for the purposes of his work. He maintained this restless research and accumulation of materials as a constant in his style of thinking and writing: a characteristic, therefore, not dependent on his materialist turning point. On the contrary, it appears fundamental for understanding the particular declination that his adhesion to Marxism assumed in the years following the work on the Baroque drama (Arendt [1968] 1970, 322-325), and that, in our opinion, finds a counterpart in the research style of Warburg's work. This methodological affinity testifies to a closeness that cannot be explained in terms of dependencies or borrowings between the two authors: however, it is perhaps due to having the same strand of thought.

In Warburg's as in Benjamin's case, it is always the analysis of detail, delved into with philological love, that replaces the great points of view of universal art histories. As in Benjamin's opinion, this was the only way to ensure that the major developmental processes were illuminated in their connections (Warburg [1912] 1999, 585). Furthermore, for both scholars only the 'infinite' analysis of the image, often and indeed especially of works considered less artistically relevant, would have made it possible to read "what had never been written". This is why the investigation focuses, in Benjamin as in Warburg, on the territories left 'uncultivated' by traditional historiography (Warburg [1920] 1999, 651). The same territories where, as Benjamin would have said some years later, only madness had reigned (Benjamin [1927-1940],1999, 456). The very material chosen by Warburg in his study on the Reformation seems to be in fact in stark contrast with the traditional image of an age of rationalistic enlightenment, which had seen Luther as its protagonist. On the contrary, the analysis of the texts and images presented shows the physiognomy of a profoundly contradictory age, divided between magic and science, pagan divination and mathematical calculation (Warburg [1920] 1999, 599).

This era thus presents the ambiguous figure of that 'two-faced herm' in whose irreducible polarities Warburg had seen the fundamental legacy of 'schizophrenic' Western civilization throughout its history: the influence of antiquity. It is of these polarities that the memory of images, the *Bildgedächtnis*, an expression Benjamin takes from Warburg's essay without mentioning it, preserves the memory. This polarity allows Warburg

to sketch, in his text on Luther, the hypothesis of a "more profoundly positive critique of a historiography that rests on a purely chronological theory of development" (Warburg [1920] 1999, 599). This is an intuition that Benjamin would have ended up elaborating on years later, thanks to the discovery of what he would have called dialectical images, as we will try to suggest. However, we would like to avoid referring to these later developments of the author's reflection here. Benjamin's study on the Baroque already states:

> In literary-historical analysis differences and extremes are bought together in order that they might be relativized in evolutionary terms; in a conceptual treatment they acquire the status of complementary forces [...] They do not make the similar identical, but they effect a synthesis between extremes (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 38-41)

Thus, it is not the masterpiece that guides Benjamin's art-historical research, but precisely what is first and foremost unattractive in the light of an aesthetic consideration and simply incomprehensible for a linear conception of history: the apparent excesses of artistic development (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 227). Such premises suggest that the representation of the Baroque drama's idea would force the research:

> Rather will it be guided by the assumption that what seems diffuse and disparate will be found to be linked in the adequate concepts as elements of a synthesis. And so the production of lesser writers, whose works frequently contain the most eccentric features, will be valued no less than those of the great writer (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 58).

Although Benjamin here explicitly refers to Riegl's teaching, that, as mentioned, was to become a constant point of reference for his theoretical reflection on art (Kemp 1973), it is clear that the attempt made in his book on the Baroque goes far beyond the Viennese master's work. This is evident in the curriculum where in 1928, the author tries to retrospectively summarize the programmatic intent of his own art-historical research method:

> To open a path to the work of art by destroying the doctrine of the territorial character of art [...] through an analysis that would regard the work of art as

> an integral expression of the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of its age (Benjamin [1928] 1999, 78).

It is therefore this attempt, that Benjamin already implied in his work on German Baroque drama, that will be of fundamental importance for his subsequent historiographic reflection. This attempt allows us once again to approach Warburg. In order to understand the value of Baroque poetics, it would have been necessary to identify the context of autonomous significance in which it had been created (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 255). This meant, in contrast to the unitary approach of formalist aesthetic doctrine, to initiate research that, like Warburg's, did not disdain:

> The labor of examining the individual work of art within the immediate context of its time, in order to interpret as 'causal factors' the ideological and practical demands of real life (Warburg [1902] 1999, 186).

It is precisely in the light of such a quest that Benjamin finds it necessary to note how, even against the declared Aristotelian poetics of the Baroque poets, the elements of modern drama differ totally from those of ancient tragedy. The Baroque production's predilection for depicting the ruin of royal dynasties, for example, could not be considered a simple characteristic derived from ancient tragedy, but must have belonged to a far more essential order of considerations; because, unlike tragedy, the object of the Baroque drama appears to Benjamin not to be the myth, but history. It is precisely this interest in the world's history that determines Baroque poetics entirely: "das geschichtliche Leben wie es jene Epoche sich darstellte ist sein Gehalt, sein wahrer Gegenstand" (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 242-243) ["historical life, as the era conceived it, is its content, its true object" (Author's translation)], to the point that, as the author underlines, the term 'Trauerspiel' could be used to indicate both the Baroque drama and historical events (It is this representation of history as 'Trauerspiel', as a mournful play of events that finds no dissolution and no redemption, that has to be explained. The cause of the sovereign's ruin, as a representative of the historical world, does not seem to be the ethical transgression that determines the tragic hero's extraordinary end:

> It is the very estate of man as creature which provides the reason for the catastrophe. This typical catastrophe [...] is what the dramatists had in mind

> when – with a word which is employed more consciously in dramaturgy than in criticism – they described a work as a *Trauerspiel* (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 89)

The ruin of princes, and with them of the entire human community, is thus for the Baroque era the 'natural side' of the historical process (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 267). In this representation of the world's history as a purely creaturely state marked by guilt emerges how Baroque drama shows its affinity not so much with the Renaissance as with liturgical-medieval drama. Yet this affinity is called into question by the 'irredeemable despair' in which the last word of the baroque drama consists, that is to say, by the total lack of an eschatology. As Benjamin states:

> For the decisive factor in the escapism of the baroque is not the antithesis of history and nature but the comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of creation (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 92).

While in the Middle Ages the creature's ruin marked by sin was nevertheless a necessary stage on the road to salvation, the Baroque drama sinks completely into its earthly constitution, and "the rash flight into a nature deprived of grace" is moreover, according to Benjamin, "specifically German" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 81). The formal language delineated in his literary production must therefore find the explanation "as the emergence of the contemplative necessities which are implicit in the contemporary theological situation" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 80-81). Benjamin's art-historical consideration is therefore not limited to the mere ascertainment of 'facts' uncritically immersed in a chronological-causal relationship, but questions first and foremost the reason for the presence of a certain image in a certain age, in order to unfold the dialectic of representation and self-representation within a certain historical period (as Elena Tavani notes, this is precisely one of the possible meanings of the subsequent concept of 'dialectical image': Tavani, 2010, 165). In similar terms to Warburg's reflection on the significance of the Renaissance reinterpretation of the ancient figurative repertoire (Bing [1960] 2014), Benjamin expresses himself regarding the presence of medieval imagery within Baroque dramaturgy, when, in a letter to Rang in November 1923, he writes:

> I ask myself, to what should you attribute the fact that the Protestant writers in particular […] exhibit a wealth of ideas that are medieval to the highest degree: an extremely drastic concept of death, an atmosphere permeated by the dance of death, a concept of history as grand tragedy. Of course, I am familiar with the differences between this and the Middle Ages, but I still ask, why is it that precisely this highly medieval range of concepts could have such a spellbinding effect at that time? […] I suspect that the state of Protestantism at that time, which is not accessible to me, would shed light on this question (Benjamin [1910-1940] 1994, 216).

The identification of this link will play a fundamental role in Benjamin's text, particularly in the last paragraphs of the chapters dedicated to tragedy and allegory: not by chance, those places of the book where most of the Warburg's quotations are concentrated. It is therefore in a world scenario perceived as condemned to pure immanence, to the blind mechanism of a nature devoid of grace, that the Baroque scene is set: this is the same landscape that will be revealed before the wide-open eyes of the angel of history in the 9th of the *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* thesis of 1940; but here it is above all the spectacle that unfolds in the infinite brooding of Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*:

> The images and figures presented in the German *Trauerspiel* are dedicated to Dürer's genius of winged melancholy. The intense life of its crude theatre begins in the presence of this genius (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 158).

The Winged Melancholy

The survival of the medieval figurative repertoire within Baroque literary and artistic production can be explained by the relationship that Benjamin develops between melancholy and Protestantism in the last part of the chapter dedicated to the comparison between Trauerspiel and tragedy. According to the author, the Protestant Reformation establishes a deep bond with the medieval world and, from Luther's rejection of 'good works' value for religious life, ends up instilling:

> [The Lutheranism instilled] into the people a strict sense of obedience to duty, but in its great men it produced melancholy. Even in Luther himself […] there are signs of a reaction against the assault on good works. 'Faith', of

> course, carried him through, but it did not prevent life from becoming stale (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 138).

The condemnation of good works results in an absolute separation between profane and divine worlds: since human actions are stripped of any value:

> Something new arose: an empty world [...] those who looked deeper saw the scene of their existence as a rubbish heap (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 139).

With the Reformation, therefore, the hierarchical trait of the Middle Ages returns to impose its dominance on a world which is denied any direct access to the afterlife (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 259). Therefore the theory of mourning that essentially characterises the 'mournful play' of German Baroque drama is developed "in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 139), so much that the figurative and textual heritage focused on the melancholic's figure provides, according to Benjamin:

> The philosophical ideas and political convictions which underlie the representation of history as a *Trauerspiel* (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 142).

Here, then, emerges the essential meaning of Dürer's *Melencolia I* engraving, that, according to the Berlin writer, anticipates the Baroque in many respects (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 319). The millenary codification of the complex of symptoms attributed to the melancholic temperament in fact

> Could not but make an impression on the baroque, which had such a clear vision of the misery of mankind in its creaturely estate [...] to which the speculative thought of the age felt itself bound by the bonds of the church (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 146).

The ancient tradition referred precisely to the depth of the creaturely state to codify the melancholy's physiological origin, but not only. Benjamin remarks, in fact, that in the Middle Ages the doctrine of humors had returned to Europe through the mediation of Arabic science, but also that:

> Arabia preserve the other Hellenistic science which nourished the doctrine of the melancholic: astrology (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 148).

With this remark, the author refers to a fundamental field of Warburg's studies, that resulted in his famous speech at the Tenth International Congress of Art History in Rome in 1912: the research on the survival of the ancient pagan gods within the late antique and medieval astrological tradition. Like Warburg and Panofsky and Saxl before him, however, Benjamin refers here first and foremost to Giehlow's findings (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 327-328) to show how ancient cosmological wisdom had found in the mediation of Marsilio Ficino's *De vita triplici* the missing link of a long chain of survivals that from Greece had brought the ancient Hellenistic cosmological order up to the circle of Emperor Maximilian I (Wedepohl 2015). Through these steps, the theory of the melancholic temperament had maintained a deep connection with the doctrine of astral influences, to the point that:

> According to Warburg, in the Renaissance, when the reinterpretation of saturnine melancholy as a theory of genius was carried out with a radicalism unequalled even in the thought of antiquity, 'dread of Saturn […] occupied the central position in astrological belief' (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 151).

It is here that Benjamin encounters Warburg's interpretation of Dürer's work, that the Hamburg scholar had linked precisely to the revival of pagan demonic antiquity in the age of the Reformation. As Alice Barale has already pointed out in her essay *La malinconia dell'immagine*, the interpretations of the two scholars in relation to Dürer's engraving do not coincide, but rather in some points take antithetical directions (Barale 2009, 62). Yet in Benjamin's reflection, the issue that the melancholic's figure poses to the Baroque is in Warburg's view the fundamental problem of any image: "the question of how it might be possible to discover for oneself the spiritual powers of Saturn and yet escape madness" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 151). Saturn's children show in fact to the highest degree the signs of those multiple polarities that distinguish the 'god of extremes', and that render him, in turn, the figure of a 'saturnine dialectic' present within each image. In this *Dialektik des Monstrums* that Warburg would have planned to include as the title of a possible supplement to his essay on Luther, is shown how the symbol is not:

> Une synthèse abstraite de la raison et de l'irrationnel, de le forme et de la matière, etc., mais […] le symptôme concret d'un clivage sans cesse à l'œuvre dans la 'tragédie de la culture' (Didi-Huberman 2002, 284).
>
> [An abstract synthesis of reason and the irrational, of form and matter, etc. – but […] the concrete symptom of a cleavage incessantly at work in the 'tragedy of culture (Author's translation)].

In the specific case of the saturnine melancholy, as Warburg writes and Benjamin faithfully reports, in order to access its 'positive' side, the 'illa eroica' melancholy sought by Melanchthon, the ancient tradition envisaged a precise diet for body and spirit, together with a kind of astrological magic that was described in detail in Ficino's *De vita triplici* and thereafter taken up in the iconographic program of Dürer's engraving (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 329). Thanks to these indications Giehlow and then Warburg were able to interpret all its figurative elements. The scales as well as the magic square hanging on the table above the figure of the winged melancholy were thus revealed as objects capable of evoking the benevolent influence of Jupiter. Under this, according to the Hellenistic astrological tradition of the great astral conjunctions:

> Harmful inspirations are transformed into beneficial ones, Saturn becomes the protector of the most sublime investigations (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 151).

This residue of Hellenistic-medieval cosmology was thus the true subject of the engraving: only its understanding could allow the full appreciation of Dürer's genius. For both Benjamin and Warburg, the drawing ends up representing the very image of contemplation, transforming the figure of the planetary child-devourer demon into the:

> The image of the thinking, working human being (Warburg [1920] 1999, 644).

However, in Benjamin the contemplative dedication of the melancholic retains a disturbing aspect since it remains inexorably bounded to the dimension of creaturely things – indicated by Warburg relives –, to the

depths of earth recalled by the downward gaze of the saturnine man and where:

> The Greek god of time and the Roman spirit of the crops (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 151).

Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, engraving (24 x 18,8 cm), 1514.

Since the tenacity expressed in the intention of mourning stems from an extreme fidelity to the world of things, the melancholic continually recalls around him the fragments of a landscape from which all relations to transcendence have been removed. His sinking ad infinitum in a world separated by God finally reveals the demonic side of this gaze. It is for this reason that the mournful mask by which the melancholic attempts to restore meaning to the world coincides with the most arrogant of ostentations, with his absolute separateness from God (Benjamin [1928] 2018, 318-319 and 333). Indeed, the anguish of the loss of meaning inevitably induces the melancholic to bind himself to such emptied appearances, to which he arbitrarily assigns purely exterior meanings, ending up magnifying and endlessly repeating them. As Warburg notes with regard to the Baroque:

> One aspect of the development towards the Baroque consists in the fact that expressive values were cut loose from the mint of real life in movement. Here the task of social memory as a mnemonic function emerges clearly. Through renewed contact with the monuments of the past, the sap should be able to flow directly from the subsoil of the past to impregnate the classicizing form in such a way that an energetic creation should not become a calligraphic dynamogram (Warburg [1927-1928] 1970, 250).

The distancing of the image from the vital experiences whose the symbols of the past are bearers (in which, as we shall see, allegoresis consists: Rampley 1997), represents the first form of exorcism from the magical identification of the image with its meaning (Wind [1931] 2009,

83-111). But for both our authors an excessive distance between the image and its meaning makes the appearance of the image increasingly consistent, until it reaches the threatening dimensions of a fetish, an idol.

As Alice Barale writes:

> La riflessione benjaminiana permette allora di intravedere un motivo teorico implicito, come si vedrà, già nell'analisi di Warburg. Dietro alle fisionomie agitate dei drammi e dei quadri barocchi non si cela un semplice disinteresse per l'interiorizzazione, ma il caos, l'angoscia per la perdita del significato. Nella dilatazione della forma si esprime per l'io lo smarrimento di una distanza prospettica nei confronti del mondo, il sottrarsi di quest'ultimo a quella possibilità di configurazione la quale soltanto, come si vedrà, garantisce dalla malinconia. L'eccessivo allontanamento di immagine e contenuto riconduce così allo stesso risultato della loro primitiva, magica identificazione: il significato a cui la rappresentazione dà corpo, il suo 'eidos', 'si oscura' e rimane soltanto il potere soggiogante di un eidolon non più interrogabile, di una datità immodificabile (Barale 2009, 65).
>
> Benjamin's reflection allows us to glimpse an implicit theoretical motif, as we will see, in Warburg's analysis. Behind the agitated physiognomies of baroque dramas and paintings lies not a simply disinterest in internalization, but chaos, anguish of the loss of meaning. In the expansion of form, the ego expresses the loss of a perspective distance from the world [...] the excessive distancing between image and content thus leads back to the same result of their primitive, magical identification: the meaning to which the representation gives body, its '*eidos*', 'obscures' and only the subjugating power of an *eidolon* that can no longer be questioned, of an unchangeable datum remains (Author's translation)].

Indeed, the traits of medieval acedia prevail in Benjamin's interpretation of the Baroque melancholy, since it remains inexorably bound to the creaturely dimension of a world that appears in ruins. Precisely in Dürer's engraving:

> The concept of this pathological state, in which the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us, was set in an incomparably productive

> context It accords with this that in the proximity of Albrecht Dürer's figure, *Melencolia*, the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation. (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 140).

This is why, in the author's reflection, Baroque melancholy is essentially linked to what he considers to be the main form of expression of the time:

> This 'ripest and most mysterious fruit of the cosmological culture of Maximilian's circle', as Warburg has called it, may well be considered as a seed in which the allegorical flower of the baroque, still held in check by the power of a genius, lies ready to burst into bloom (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 154).

Allegory and the Survival of the Ancient Gods

Benjamin's reflection on Dürer's *Melencolia I* leads to the book's chapter dedicated to the comparison between Trauerspiel and allegory. In fact, it is in this expressive form that the only divertissement of the melancholic consists. It is around it that the representation of the historical-cultural connections that define the particular context of the birth of the Baroque drama 'gather' in its own idea (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 361-390). We want to argue that this is precisely the place where it is possible to measure a true affinity between Warburg's and Benjamin's thought. It is here that most of the direct quotations from Warburg's text can be found. All of them are dedicated to a reflection on the mechanisms of transmission of the pagan tradition in the age of the Reformation and in the Renaissance in general. Therefore, this chapter takes on paradigmatic importance in order to implement a comparison between the thought of the two authors. Once again, Benjamin's study on the allegorical claims the legitimacy of a choice that is in clear disagreement with the classicist aesthetic canon that finds in the symbol the centre of every philosophy of art. Yet for Benjamin, this is the domain of a usurper, since the concept of plastic symbol proposes a coincidence between sensible and supersensible that belongs only to the theological symbol, the Adamitic name (Benjamin [1928] 1991, I, 336-337). Once again, these reflections refer to some peculiar premises of the author's philosophy of language, according to which every language is constituted, after the paradisiacal fall, also as a sign convention destined to refer to something other than itself. In this form, language is

degraded to a mere means of communication of purely external meanings, thus to be fundamentally allegorical (Benjamin [1916] 1991, 152-157). Allegory is therefore the fundamental corrective of classicism (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 351): it clearly shows the intrinsic separation between appearance and meaning that takes place in every profane language, of which art is only one of the various expressions. And yet in Baroque allegory, this separation becomes radical, abysmal. It is in fact the result of an age that feels its own separation from God as absolute, the fruit of the same vision of history that opens up before the eyes of the melancholic. Since everything appears emptied of meaning, as we have mentioned, the melancholic binds himself to the fragments of a world that appears as a heap of ruins. For this reason, as Benjamin writes that "Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things" (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 354). The image in the realm of allegorical intuition in fact is:

> A fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 176).

Precisely for this reason, Baroque allegory once again shows a deep connection with the medieval world:

> In comparison to the symbol, the western conception of allegory is a late manifestation which has its basis in certain very fertile cultural conflicts (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 197).

To the point that it is identified by Benjamin as the typical expressive form of the periods of so-called 'decadence'. Allegory shows that level of meaning in which the images of the past, no longer believed to be true, are finalized to the exposition of a sense that is totally external to them. Benjamin, not by chance, quotes Usener, one of Warburg's masters, to investigate the mechanism through which, starting from the Hellenistic age, the ancient symbols of the pagan gods become means of allegorical expression:

> Usener writes: 'To the extent that the belief in the gods of the classical age lost its strength, the ideas of the gods, as shaped by art and literature, were released and became available as suitable means of poetic representation This process can be traced [...] from Horace and Ovid, to Its peak in the later Alexandrian school [...] Small wonder that with these writers there is more room even for abstract concepts; for them the personified gods have no greater significance than these concepts; they have both become very flexible forms for the ideas of the poetic imagination' (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 223).

And yet, even if the existence of the ancient gods in their late antique and medieval allegorical guises appears to be ghostly, Benjamin notes that:

> In the course of such a literature the world of the ancient gods would have had to die out, and it is precisely allegory which preserved it. For an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 223).

The absolute separation between form and meaning that allegory exhibits shows how allegoresis triggers a contradictory dialectic in which: "the harmonious inwardness of classicism plays no role" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 160). On the one hand, since allegory shows each image as equivalent to any meaning and wrenches it from its original context, the allegorist humiliates the images of tradition, 'empties' them of meaning (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 350-351). Yet, on the other hand, he saves them from dispersion. The Baroque 'winged melancholy' therefore accomplishes a truly dialectical leap, central to understanding the affinity between Warburg's and Benjamin's thought, since "in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 157). In addition to the explicit eschatological meaning attributed to allegoresis in the book's closing, which once again refers to the author's theological reflection, such 'salvation' can also be read in a properly historical sense when approached to Warburg's concept of survival. In fact, also in Warburg's view allegoresis appears to be one of the vehicles through which the memory of the ancient gods' Pantheon is preserved since the Hellenistic age. Although destined to lose, together with the reference to the original experiences from which they arose, even

their own specific traits, only in this way the ancient gods were able to carry out their existence banished from the church and survive their own end (Warburg [1913] 2010, 328). Warburg, starting in these pages a reflection similar to Benjamin's, had in fact pointed out how:

> Evidence of the survival of the ancient gods was of two kinds. Firstly, they survived in the austere guise of moral allegories, in medieval descriptions culled from late antique sources and prefixed to allegorical interpretations of Ovid (Warburg [1908] 1999, 557).

The allegorical disguises of the ancient gods had thus represented, as Benjamin writes, the only possible salvation in a context such as the medieval Christian one (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 398). For the Berlin author indeed:

> It was absolutely decisive for the development of this mode of thought that not only transitoriness, but also guilt should seem evidently to have its home in the province of idols and of the flesh. The allegorically significant is prevented by guilt from finding fulfilment of its meaning in itself [...] this view, rooted in the doctrine of the fall of the creature, which brought down nature with it, is responsible for the ferment which distinguishes the profundity of western allegory (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 224).

This 'doctrine' once again links the Baroque world to the medieval one. But if, on the one hand, "the deadness of the figures and the abstraction of the concepts are therefore the precondition for the allegorical metamorphosis of the pantheon into a world of magical, conceptual creatures" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 226), on the other hand, Benjamin notes how it is on these very transformations that "their survival (*Fortleben*) in an unsuitable, indeed hostile environment" (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 226) is based. Allegory is therefore one of the means of ancient gods' survival up to the Renaissance. It is precisely at this point that Benjamin's thought intersects with Warburg's, whom the author quotes several times precisely during these reflections:

> The classically refined world of the ancient divinities has, of course, been impressed upon us so deeply since the time of Winckelmann, that we entirely forget that it is a new creation of scholarly humanist culture; this 'Olympic'

> aspect of antiquity had first to be wrested from the traditional 'demonic' side; for the ancient divinities had, as cosmic demons, belonged among the religious powers of Christian Europe uninterruptedly since the end of antiquity, and in practice they influenced its way of life so decisively that it is not possible to deny the existence of an alternative government of pagan cosmology, in particular astrology, tacitly accepted by the Christian church' (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 226).

Although the existence of the ancient gods in their allegorical guise appears emptied, phantasmal, Benjamin shows that the allegorical intention remains extremely faithful to its objects (Pezzella 1982, 61): as Warburg points out, the very selection of the pagan figurative repertoire in the medieval period:

> They did not depend on learned recollection alone but on the attraction of their own intact astral-religious identities [...] seemed to the astrological believers of the day like the fateful hieroglyphs of an oracular book (Warburg [1912] 1999, 564).

This is another reason why, against any abstractly aestheticizing perspective, such 'abstruse allegories' could have interested the Renaissance period. Indeed it was through them that the memory of a genuinely ancient symbolism could be preserved since the Middle Ages (Warburg [1908] 1999, 559-560). Therefore, while getting control of the magic potential of the image, the allegory keeps its memory alive (Barale 2009, 67), to the point that even in the Renaissance:

> European antiquity was divided and its obscure after-effects in the middle-ages drew inspiration from its radiant after-image in humanism. Out of deep spiritual kinship Warburg has given a fascinating explanation of how, in the Renaissance 'heavenly manifestations were conceived in human terms, so that their demonic power might be at least visually contained'. The Renaissance stimulates the visual memory [...] but at the same time it awakens a visual speculation which is perhaps of greater import for the formation of style (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 221).

It is precisely for this reason that the *Bildgedächtnis*, the memory of images, an expression that Benjamin takes from the conclusions of Warburg's text, always requires us to remember that:

> Athens has constantly to be won back again from Alexandria (Warburg [1920] 1999, 650).

Indeed, even Dürer's work, which for Warburg represents the triumph of artistic and humanistic genius over the monstrosities of the Reformation era, does not seem safe from the *monstra* of astrological imagination:

> Dürer's Melancholy has yet to break quite free of the superstitious terrors of antiquity. Her head is gar landed not with bay but with *teukrion*, the classic herbal remedy for melancholy; and she follows Ficino's instructions by protecting herself against Saturn's malefic influence with her numerological magic square (Warburg [1920] 1999, 647).

Even what for Warburg represents the liberation from the dread of Saturn (Warburg 1920, 61) shows again in action his definition of antiquity as 'a two-faced herm' of demonic and olympian. These conclusions, that Benjamin faithfully reports in his book, oppose to a purely positive interpretation of Warburg's reading of Dürer's engraving (Bertozzi 2015, 18):

> For the Baroque, even for the Renaissance, the marble and the bronzes of antiquity still preserved something of the horror with which Augustine had recognized in them 'the bodies of the gods so to speak'. 'Certain spirits have been induced to take up their abode in them, and they have the power either to do harm or to satisfy many of the wants of those who offer them divine honours and obedient worship'. Or, as Warburg puts it, with reference to the Renaissance: 'The formal beauty of the figures of the gods, and the tasteful reconciliation of Christian and pagan beliefs should not blind us to the fact that even in Italy around 1520, that is at the time of the most free and creative artistic activity, antiquity was venerated, as it were, in a double herma, which had one dark, demonic countenance, that called for a superstitious cult, and another, serene Olympian one, which demanded aesthetic veneration' (Benjamin [1928] 1998, 225).

It is precisely around this investigation on the "polar functioning of the empathetic pictorial memory" (Warburg [1920] 1999, 650) that the comparison between the two scholars' research can take place. In the dialectical ferment between appearance and meaning that allegory exhibits, works the same historical memory that Warburg had pursued in the migrations of the ancient pagan gods up to their humanistic resurrection. Benjamin would have sought a similar dialectic in every image of the past, which, precisely, for this reason, he wanted to call a dialectical image.

Conclusions

As we have seen, Benjamin's reflections on allegory intersect with what we might call the fundamental program of the Hamburg scholar: the survival of the ancient gods (Didi-Huberman 2002, 51). Indeed, Benjamin uses the term "Fortleben" several times in the last part of the chapter dedicated to Baroque allegory, which corresponds to the term used by Warburg in his text on the Reformation age, where the canonical term "Nachleben" never appears. It is precisely the understanding of the fundamental historical dialectic that takes place, in the memory of images, between appearance and meaning, form and content, that brings the two authors together. We would therefore like to suggest how the contribution of Warburg's reflection in Benjamin's work might not be limited to his book on German baroque drama. It could in fact had assumed an important role in the development of the author's subsequent historiographic reflection, first and foremost for the formulation of that concept of dialectical image that stamps both the writing of *Das Passagenwerk* and the last and desperate *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*.

The reflection that Benjamin develops in these works cannot be abstractly separated from the previous speculation on the Baroque: on the contrary, it appears decisive for understanding the 'turn' in a materialist sense of his historical reflection. The vision of history that he unfolds in his later writings appears substantially analogous to that shown before the gaze of Baroque melancholy: the spectacle of a process that uninterruptedly accumulates 'rubble upon rubble'. This is the same desolate landscape that is revealed before the wide-open eyes of the angel of history (Benjamin [1940] 1991, 697). According to the author, this vision is the

result of a certain conception of history, omnipresent in the nineteenth century of which the work on the Parisian *passages* deals with, and that still constitutes one of the main cultural backgrounds in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Benjamin refers to that historicism of positivist matrix which interprets the historical course as a linear, infinite and necessary process. This particular conception of history, according to Benjamin, in addition to being absolutely false, had also actively contributed to build the catastrophe that was taking place in his own time in Europe, on the eve of the Second World War. According to the author, the tendency to conceive historical knowledge as a scientific one had led to understanding the becoming as a necessary object of pure contemplation in relation to which no action, no decision was possible.

In this view, the past ends up appearing as a givenness to which one can reserve just a mere erudite interest. In the immediate identification with the fragments of a world emptied of any different meaning from the narration of the modernity's '*magnifiche sorti et progressive*', Benjamin detected the saturnine traits of that *acedia* which he had defined as the main characteristic of Baroque man. *Acedia* that now reveals itself as the very 'mortal sin' of modern historicism (Benjamin [1940] 1991, 696-697). What allows the materialist historian to challenge such a conception of history, inseparable, as the author points out, from a vision of the historical process as proceeding through a fundamentally 'homogeneous and empty' time (Benjamin [1940] 1991, 700-701), is precisely the dynamic of recovery, reinterpretation and reconstitution of meaning that takes place within each image that the author defines as dialectical. As we suggested, the detection of this process owes a lot to the author's previous reflection on Baroque allegoresis. In fact:

> Il contesto consolidato della storia imprigiona le immagini del passato, consegnandole ad un unico, immodificabile significato e privando così il presente di ciò che, in esse, attende di trovare espressione. In questa immobilizzazione, che si cela dietro alle spoglie del divenire, consiste la 'catastrofe' a cui l'angelo assiste (Barale 2009, 113).
>
> [The consolidated context of tradition imprisons the images of the past, forcing them to assume a single, unmodifiable meaning and thus depriving the present of what, in them, is waiting to find expression. This

immobilization, which hides behind the remains of historical becoming, is the 'catastrophe' the angel witnesses (Author's translation)].

Against such immobilization, Benjamin notes that:

> The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has 'determined' remembrance can modify (Benjamin [1927-1940] 1999, 471).

In these words emerges the necessity to change the very vision of history through a view capable of seeing that what is indicated as 'progress' is actually an immense catastrophe. But this view is impossible without a thought embracing what is forgotten and hidden by the historiographic narrative of historicism. It is here that allegory shows itself as an essential dialectical tool of the author's reflection (Pinotti 2018, 5): the violence by which it rips the images of the past out of their original context in fact shows how:

> Allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all 'given order', whether of art or of life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem endurable. And this is the progressive tendency of allegory (Benjamin [1927-1940] 1999, 331).

Although this characterization of allegory emerges with particular clarity in Benjamin's studies on Baudelaire (Zumbusch 2004, 267-273), it appears already contained in the book on German Baroque drama, as we have seen. The 'tear' that allegory produces in the consolidated context of tradition is precisely what allows us to interrogate what in the memory of its images remains as an unexpressed possibility, as 'desire betrayed' by the narrative of progress. The allegory, therefore, ends up representing the destructive moment of a dialectic of reconstitution of meaning in which the images, although separated from their original context, are at the same time saved from the 'garden of the thus it was' in which historicism condemns them to absolute immobility and to insignificance (Rella 1980, 22). Nevertheless, allegoresis cannot be considered as the ultimate method and object of Benjamin's speculation (Solmi 1959, XV;

Becker 1992, 64-89). As several authors have pointed out, it is only the previous moment of an operation of reconstitution of meaning that does not renounce to "the effort to reconstruct the natural unity between word and image" ("*la fatica di ricostruire la naturale unità fra parola e immagine*", so Ferretti 2010, 121). It is an interpretation of Adorno that allows us to approach the author's reflection on allegory to his elaboration of the dialectical image's concept. In a letter that Benjamin reports in *Das Passagenwerk*, he writes:

> With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of them insofar as it invests them with intentions of desire and fear [...] dialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning, are instantiated in the moment of indifference between death and meaning. (Benjamin [1927-1940] 1999, 466).

Although in the following lines Adorno criticises the ambiguity that this kind of image ends up exhibiting, it is precisely this fundamentally ambiguous structure that characterizes Benjamin's dialectical image in an essential way, and that once again brings our author close to Warburg's reflection on the heritage of antiquity as 'a two-faced herm'". The dialectical image in fact is something that should be sought "Where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest" (Benjamin [1927-1940] 1991, 595). This not only makes it the true 'Urphänomen' of history (Benjamin [1927-1940] 1991, 592) and the main epistemological category of a form of historiography based on visual concreteness. It represents a 'true synthesis' since it shows a co-presence of opposites where past and present coexist so that the transitional state between them remains visible. As it has been noted, Benjamin's dialectical images end up presenting a structural ambiguity common to the images considered by Warburg's studies on the Italian Renaissance (Zumbusch 2010, 120-124). For Benjamin, in fact, the dialectical potential of this kind of images lies in their ability to maintain the polarity that constitutes them, that is, in their ability to overturn their meaning (Agamben 2004). As Warburg wrote in 1927, we could say that also for Benjamin the images of the past:

> Are handed down in a state of maximal tension but unpolarized with regard to the passive or active energy charge to the responding, imitating, or

> remembering artists. It is only the contact with the new age that results in polarization. This polarization can lead to a radical reversal (inversion) of the meaning they held for classical antiquity (Warburg [1927] 1970, 248).

It is therefore the Warburg's discovery of the polar function of the 'memory of images' that we can perhaps see as a decisive inheritance for the development of Benjamin's subsequent reflection, even if declined within a materialist historiographic framework. An inheritance that has suggested to many interpreters the 'elective affinity' between these scholars (that finds in Goethe's morphology an important common reference: Pinotti 2001). What is decisive here, and differentiates the dialectical image from Benjamin's reflection on Baroque allegory, is that the polarities that run through every image necessarily presuppose not only the triggering of a fundamental dialectic between form and content, appearance and meaning but also of a temporal dialectic between present and past, ancient meanings and forms of current interest (Zumbusch 2004, 292-293). This dialectic, that actually subverts the foundation of chronological time (Pezzella 1982, 118) indeed constitutes the very historical object:

> It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice, at each moment, to the concrete historical situation of its object. But that is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the interest taken in the object. And *this* situation is always so constituted as to be itself preformed in that object; above all, however, the object is felt to be concretized in this situation itself and upraised from its former being into the higher concretion of now-being [*Jetztsein*]. In what way this now being (which is something other than the now-being of the present time [*Jetztzeit*]) already signifies, in itself, a higher concretion – this question, of course, can be entertained by the dialectical method only within the purview of a philosophy of history that at all points has overcome the ideology of progress [...] its own higher actuality, is something determined and brought to pass by the image as which and in which it is comprehended (Benjamin [1927-1940] 1999, 857).

This dialectic between then and now that finds its constitutive place in the image defines the temporality of both Warburg's Nachleben and Benjamin's dialectical image, resulting in the paradox that the

anachronistic collision between present and past represents an opportunity for the style to change, to open up to its future (Didi-Huberman 2000, 235). It is only in this encounter, which in Benjamin's case would be configured as a real 'appointment' between generations, that the past can mean something for the present and turn to the future. Precisely for this reason, for both our authors, the image becomes the place where it is possible to challenge the historicist narrative rooted in a rectilinear conception of history (Di Giacomo 2010, 75). And yet to do so it is necessary not to stop at a mere acceptance of the images of tradition: allegorical melancholy, while representing a fundamental step to the awareness of the falsity of the progress' idea (Pezzella 1982, 54-56) cannot be the last word, but must proceed dialectically to its own overcoming. Thus, when Benjamin defines his book on the Baroque as not yet materialist, but already dialectical:

> Il termine 'dialettico' sta a significare che, dopo aver attraversato la malinconia barocca, non ci si poteva arrestare in malinconica contemplazione del vuoto in cui questa sfocia. [...] 'dialettico' vuol dunque forse dire la capacità di avvertire le impercettibili vibrazioni del vuoto 'barocco', saperne comporre 'nuova' musica (Desideri 1980, 128).
>
> [The term 'dialectical' means that, after passing through Baroque melancholy, one could not stop in melancholic contemplation of the emptiness into which it leads [...] 'dialectical' thus perhaps means the ability to feel the imperceptible vibrations of the 'Baroque' void, to compose 'new' music for it (Author's translation)].

It is in fact only in the reinterpretation, in the re-appropriation of the vital contents of tradition for the present, that new history and authentic progress are generated. In Benjamin and in Warburg both the historian and the artist move within this dialectic. For both of them tradition and its transmission are constituted "only as new *writing*, new *representation*, new *interpretation"* ("*solo come nuova scrittura*, nuova *rappresentazione*, nuova *interpretazione*": so Desideri 1980, 137, emphases in the text). As Benjamin wrote in a letter to Rang in 1923, thus at the beginning of his work on German Baroque drama:

> We know of course that the past consists not of crown jewels that belong in a museum, but of something always affected by the present (Benjamin [1910-1940] 1994, 215).

It is only the contact with the present that decides the ambiguity of the image, whether the prophesying monsters of the past will be transformed into idols or into decisive life guides for the future (Warburg [1929] 2017). Or, for Benjamin, whether the images of consciousness subjugated to the progress' narration will serve to prolong its unstoppable continuity or will reveal the cracks that lurk in it. For both our authors, the memory of images is not expressed in terms of a passive acceptance of tradition, but the encounter that it makes possible between past and present is the place of a fundamental choice, the elusive threshold on which one must decide as much about the past as about the future (Barale 2009, 32).

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English abstract

This work intends to underline the connection between Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin's thought through the detection of some direct references to Aby Warburg's essay *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung* in *Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* in one of Walter Benjamin's most important early works, the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspiels*. Taking off from these Warburghian quotes in Benjamin's book about the Baroque drama we will try to take a glimpse of the legacy that Warburg's thought would develop in Walter Benjamin's subsequent reflection on the relationship between historical time and image.

Keywords | Walter Benjamin; Aby Warburg; Warburgkreis; Trauerspiel; Baroque; Bildgedächtnis.

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