



# The Optic of Walter Benjamin

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**Archives of Memory: Walter Benjamin's Arcades  
Project and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas**

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In early September 1929 the airship *Graf Zeppelin* docked in New York en route to Lakehurst, New Jersey, where it began its second round-the-world flight promoted by the celebrated media mogul William Randolph Hurst. Although still a luxury mode of transport, the development of long distance passenger flight presented striking confirmation of the shrinkage of space in the modern world, and was the culmination of a process set in motion by the invention of the steam train nearly a century before. Of equal importance was the fact that the *Zeppelin's* second visit to America coincided with the setting-up in New York of a station capable of the telegraphic transmission of images. Invented in 1792, the telegraph had been in general use since the 1830s and the invention of Morse code, but the ability to transmit images as well as text constituted a dramatic shift in its significance. More ominously, the installation of the telegraph station can be seen as looking forward to the much more dramatic case of the *Hindenburg* in 1936, which, on its arrival in Lakehurst, burst into flames. It was the first disaster in history to be caught by eyewitness

photographers and, equally, was the first headline news photograph to be transmitted telegraphically.

The significance of the arrival of the *Graf Zeppelin* might be confined to the history of journalism, telecommunications and aeronautics, were it not for the interest taken in it by Aby Warburg. He had already expressed an interest in the airship some time before. In particular, his essay "Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination" had analysed the meaning of the myth of Alexander the Great's flight in an airship drawn by griffons.<sup>1</sup> The dirigible also occupied Warburg's attention in the final year of his life; he included press photographs of the voyage of the *Graf Zeppelin* on one of the first plates of *Mnemosyne*, his unfinished pictorial atlas. The same plate included a diagram of the solar system from Kepler's cosmological text *Mysterium Cosmographicum* of 1596, and also an image of Mars from a medieval astrological manuscript in Tübingen.

The sense of this juxtaposition of modernity, Renaissance and the Middle Ages was multiple. First of all it could be read as tracing the transformation of the cosmos of zodiacal astrology into the astronomical universe of modernity. As has often been recognised, Warburg was thereby following well-established notions of the growth of Enlightenment rationality, in which a personalised mythical world order gives way to the rule of abstract logical thought. The arrival of the *Zeppelin* was thus a potent symbol of modernity's conquest of space which, no longer the domain of mythic demons, followed physical laws open to manipulation and control. It is clear, too, that Warburg took an interest in telegraphic transmission; he notes on one of the photographs that a telegraphic station had been set up. It is possible to discern a similar preoccupation with space, and the representation of space can be seen in the projected first plate of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which includes a sixteenth-century zodiacal map of the heavens, a map of Europe and the genealogical tree of the Tornabuoni family. Again the contrast between the personalised schema of the cosmos and the abstraction of modern cartographic

representation is striking, and furthermore the inclusion of the family tree highlights the mapping of a chronological succession (the generations of the Tornabuoni) on to a set of spatial relations.

This shift in orientation towards the cosmos, beginning in the Renaissance, was also remarked on by Warburg's younger contemporary, Walter Benjamin. As he noted some four years before Warburg compiled the plates of his *Atlas*, "Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods. Its waning is marked by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age. Kepler, Copernicus and Tycho Brahe were certainly not driven by scientific impulses alone. All the same, the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe ... contained a portent of what was to come."<sup>2</sup>

Both Warburg and Benjamin recognised that the advent of modernity entailed a radical reorientation in the representation and experience of space and time, in which both material and conceptual shifts had brought about a collapsing of space (and time) into a visual simultaneity. For Warburg, it could be seen in the invention of the aeroplane or the telephone, which threatened to collapse the reflexive space he regarded as the principal achievement of civilisation. Most famously, in the conclusion of his study of the Pueblo Indians, Warburg claims, "the culture of the machine age destroys what the natural sciences, born of myth, so arduously achieved ... the modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus, Franklin and the Wright brothers, who invented the dirigible airplane, are precisely those ominous destroyers of the sense of distance, who threaten to lead the planet back into chaos."<sup>3</sup> This is of special significance for Warburg given that he regards "the acquisition of the sense of distance between subject and object" as "the criterion of progress of the human species."<sup>4</sup>

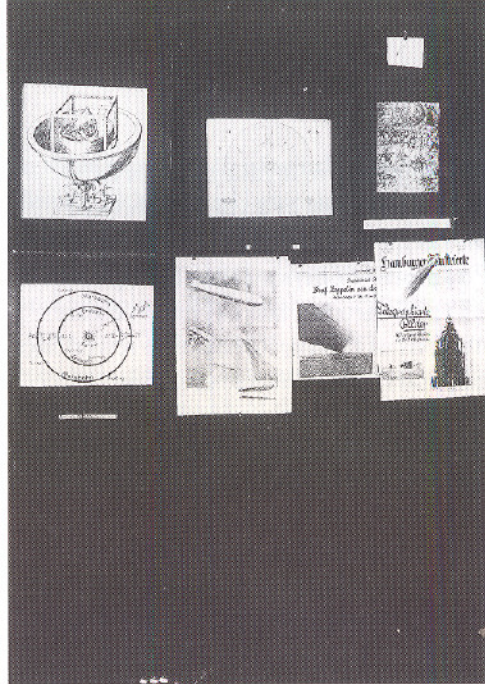
For Benjamin, the question of modernity was framed by the discourse of "aura." Modernity heralds the demise of auratic distance, and this occurs most noticeably in the aesthetic sphere in the growth of the

reproductive technologies of the photograph, film and the record. The decline of aura can be registered in the decline of distance marking out the work of art as something apart. The authoritarian relation of the pious spectator to the venerated relic or image, which persists in the cult of aesthetic beauty, is gradually replaced with a "sense of the universal equality of things," a dispelling of aura intimately connected with the advent of mass society. As Benjamin notes, "Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction .... To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose sense of the universal equality of things has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics."<sup>5</sup>

The shared discourse of spatial loss in Benjamin and Warburg might easily be read against the background of many other contemporary accounts of modernity, were it not for the centrality of spatial metaphors to their conceptions of history and of cultural critique. In particular, while both recognised that shifts in the material conditions of contemporary life were leading to a profound change in the perception of space, this recognition also led to a change in the logic of cultural representation. As a consequence of the general preoccupation with space, culture itself came to be considered in primarily *spatial* rather than historical terms. The importance of this substitution cannot be overestimated. For both Benjamin and Warburg the inherited dominant model of cultural history was governed by the Enlightenment notion of linear progress. The significance of a cultural formation was read in terms of its place within a genetic development, an interpretation which Darwin had even extended to the supposedly ahistorical domain of nature. In contrast, both Benjamin and Warburg were attempting to transform this dominant notion of history. Instead of the narrative of historical development one finds the idea of a cultural space, in which metaphors of vision become prominent. That both Benjamin

and Warburg were working towards a similar notion is, of course, more than coincidence. Benjamin was acquainted with the work of Warburg; indeed, wished to gain access to the Warburg circle. This desire remained unfulfilled. Benjamin's friend Hugo von Hofmannsthal sent a copy of the manuscript of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to Warburg's former student Erwin Panofsky, whose response was distinctly unenthusiastic.<sup>6</sup> This effectively put an end to Benjamin's hopes, even though subsequently Fritz Saxl, Warburg's successor as Director of the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, bought a copy of the work for the library when it was published. It is ironic, therefore, that the return of critical attention to the work of Aby Warburg owes more to the continuing prominence of Benjamin, than to a resurgence of interest in Warburg *per se*.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the significance of such parallels should not be misread. Benjamin's concerns originated in the effort to visualise the dialectic of history, a process leading up to his embrace of Marxism and avant-garde montage. For Warburg, on the other hand, the telescoping of history stemmed from his engagement with psychology, and in particular his Nietzschean recognition of the persistence of the "primitive" irrational. Hence the possibility of recidivism undermined the neat linear model of progress. In this regard one should also avoid too hasty an identification of the pictorial montage of the *Mnemosyne* with Benjamin's interest in montage. The idea for the *Atlas*, a visual archive of the processes of sublimation and de-sublimation, was actually suggested by Fritz Saxl, who had used the technique when an educational instructor in the Austrian army.

Such reservations notwithstanding, the most inviting parallel to be drawn between Warburg and Benjamin lies in a comparison of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and Benjamin's *Arcades* project. The former, in many respects a summary of all of Warburg's interests, was envisaged as a series of between 60 and 70 plates, each of which consisted of a montage of images of classical motifs and their reappearance and transformation in the Renaissance and also during Warburg's own



Aby Warburg,  
*Mnemosyne Atlas*,  
Plate C. All images courtesy  
of the Warburg Institute.

lifetime. They included cosmological maps, classical myths such as the legends of Heracles or the Judgement of Paris, and the integration of classical forms into Christian narratives. These plates were to be accompanied by a textual commentary on each plate, a general introduction and other texts the precise function of which remains slightly unclear. At the time of his death in 1929 it remained unfinished; having embarked on the project in 1927, Warburg could never decide on a definitive layout or order of plates, and consequently a number of versions of each plate exists, and in addition the texts remained fragmentary. The only substantial texts were an introduction and an essay on Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. However, the general logic of the work and its form is clear.<sup>8</sup> The use of photographic montage was to enable Warburg to offer a graphic presentation of his project of an "iconography of the interval," in which iconography was less a process of identifying visual texts than of mapping out their trans-

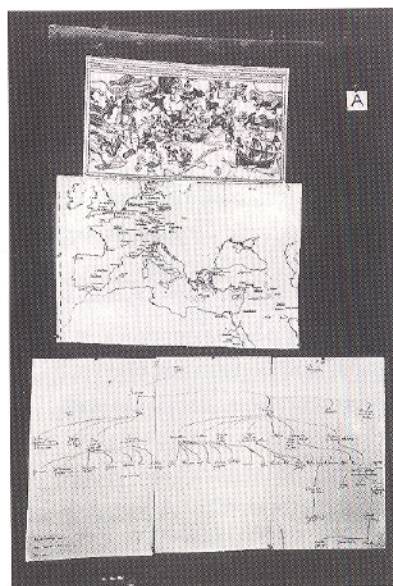
formation and sublimation – from primitive mythic symbols to abstract allegories. The *Atlas* thus functions as a visual archive of European cultural history. Of this the juxtaposition of the *Zeppelin* images with the astrological manuscript offers a prime example. An even more dramatic example can be seen in Plate 64, on which are juxtaposed classical representations of Helios, Renaissance reworkings of the same motif, and contemporary images including stamps, advertisements encouraging the consumption of fish, and a poster for the Schneider Trophy. As in the *Zeppelin* plate, so here the plate outlines the metamorphosis of the chariot of Helios into the Supermarine seaplane, classical myth into modern technology. In his introduction, Warburg refers to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as “an inventory of pre-coined classical forms that inform the stylistic development ... of the Renaissance”, but it is clear that his interests extended beyond the Renaissance to include the present.<sup>9</sup> This is evident both in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* fragment on Manet’s reception of classical myth<sup>10</sup> and also, as Charlotte Schoell-Glass has recently shown, his recurrent interest in contemporary anti-Semitism.<sup>11</sup>

Parallel to Warburg’s pictorial *Atlas*, Benjamin’s *Arcades* project aims to undertake the same visualisation of history. The *Arcades* project remained even more incomplete than the *Mnemosyne*; while the amount of material Benjamin gathered for the *Arcades* project far exceeds that associated with Warburg’s *Atlas*, its eventual form is far less certain. Benjamin’s account of nineteenth-century Paris consists of a vast collection of texts, painstakingly filed and documented, from 1928 until his death in 1940. They consist of a wide range of literary sources, ranging from his own notes on the various topics included, quotations from primary sources, quotations from contemporary critical literature and also personal correspondence. In addition there are various more substantial texts, such as “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”,<sup>12</sup> two pieces entitled “Paris Arcades”<sup>13</sup> and finally a short essay on “The Rings of Saturn or Something about Iron Construction”.<sup>14</sup> The *Arcades* project appears to have been formulated

in three stages, each of which was distinct in character.<sup>15</sup> However, despite such internal heterogeneity, the material as a whole is organised according to one overriding method. Benjamin notes in a well-known summary of the work, “Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to tell. Only to show.”<sup>16</sup> An earlier note in the same folio states that “It’s a matter, in other words, of attempting to grasp an economic process as a visible [*anschauliches*] originary phenomenon from which stem all of the features of the life of the arcades (and to this extent of the nineteenth century).”<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin’s choice of literary montage as the vehicle for his account of the Parisian arcades can be viewed in a number of ways. Most obviously, perhaps, it can be placed alongside his interest in the role of montage within avant-garde practice since the First World War, and his recognition of the loss of auratic distance takes up the theme of spatial disruption in the collages of Picasso and Braque, or the poet Blaise Cendrars’ paean to modernity, *La Prose du Transsiberien*.<sup>18</sup> One can triangulate this relation by including Warburg’s actual use of photographic montage plates in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. In addition, one can point to the affinity between the *method* of representation and the substance of the *Arcades* project, namely, the process of the transformation of Parisian capitalism into spectacle. In this regard the method of this work invites comparison with the methodological considerations of *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, according to which “the total elimination of the problem of representation” as a *mediating* process, “is the sign of genuine knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> Benjamin’s use of montage thus mirrors the generation of phantasmagoria in the capitalism of nineteenth-century Paris, and constitutes one such attempt to overcome the problem of representation. Benjamin was aware of the attendant difficulties of this project – in particular one can cite his well-known correspondence with Adorno over his putatively undialectical and untheoretical method.<sup>20</sup> Yet Adorno crucially misunderstood the problem with which Benjamin was wrestling, namely “in what ways it is possible to hold to a heightened

sense of the visible while pursuing a Marxist method.”<sup>21</sup> The solution to this problem lay in the abandoning of a key tenet of Marxist theory; it lay in “a historical materialism ... that has annihilated the idea of historical progress.”<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Benjamin recognised in this process an important shift in the spatial metaphors used to describe history. Presenting history as montage involved “Telescoping the past via the present,”<sup>23</sup> whereby the linear notion of history was replaced by the idea of the dialectical image. As Benjamin noted, “While the relation of past and present is a purely temporal one, that of the ‘has-been’ [*das Gewesene*] to the ‘now’ is a dialectical one: it is iconic, not temporal in character.”<sup>24</sup> Metaphors of narrating are replaced by ones of seeing; as Benjamin notes in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, “It is only as an image ... that one can hold



Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Plate A.

on to the past.”<sup>25</sup> Instead of retelling the *succession* of events, historical knowledge for Benjamin compresses them into a semantically dense iconic simultaneity. Again the precedent of the study of *Trauerspiel* can be invoked in this context, specifically Benjamin’s interest in the use of allegorical images such as that of the fragment or ruin to express the baroque idea of history.

Benjamin’s contrast between the past and the “has-been,” and between the present and the “now” introduces a distinction between the public abstract time of history as linear succession and an alternative temporality which, I shall argue later, throws up further significant parallels with Warburg. A fundamental part of Benjamin’s exploration of the Parisian arcades is attention to the process of regression to archaic myth; the phantasmagoria of consumption and the resurrection of a dreamscape of primitive fantasy are opposites within a dialectic of modernity. As Benjamin notes, “Only the thoughtless viewer can deny that there are correspondences at play between the world of modern technology and the archaic world of mythic symbols,”<sup>26</sup> and in his essay on art and reproducibility he regards the cult of celebrity in cinema as an example of the reactivation of primitive fantasy.<sup>27</sup> At the root of this dialectic of the archaic and the contemporary is Benjamin’s recognition of the role of recollection as a determinant of temporality. His model of materialist historiography aims to emulate such a dialectic of temporal experience: “The historical articulation of the past ... involves becoming master of a memory as it flares up at the moment of danger.”<sup>28</sup> This conception of the past as a site of remembrance, and of history as a process of recollection, also informs Benjamin’s notion of the meaning of tradition. Tradition no longer consists of the dead weight of events past; rather, “in every epoch one must make the effort to wrest tradition away from conformity.”<sup>29</sup> Most immediately, Benjamin makes these comments in the context of class struggle and the appropriation of history, but it is clear that this informs his general conception of cultural critique. It informs his criticisms of the reactivation, in Hollywood cinema, of the archaic

through the “fake” aura of movie stars, against what he saw, albeit naively, as the emancipatory potential of the medium of film.

At the root of Benjamin’s account of the arcades is a spatial mapping of the culture of nineteenth-century Paris, which he describes with predominantly visual metaphors or simply *presents* as a dialectical image. Historical method consequently aims to reproduce the temporality of subjective experience, in which memory erases the gap between past and present. This linking of space and time is crystallised in the metaphor of aura. In his essay on the history of photography, aura is defined, in purely spatial terms, as “the unique appearance or semblance of a distance, no matter how close the object may be.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the essay on technical reproducibility defines aura primarily in temporal terms: the aura of the work of art stems from its age and the indices of the passage of time, which function as the guarantees of its authenticity. Aura thus possesses a temporal and a spatial axis, and Benjamin’s “auratisation” of history, his emphasis on the correspondences between the archaic and the contemporary, introduce the metaphor of history as a space of remembrance.

Benjamin’s notion of history as recollection, indeed his picture of capitalism as a vast reactivation of auratic experience, echoes Warburg’s account of historical memory. The latter’s reading of the Renaissance as a cultural *space*, into which is telescoped chronological time, draws its force from his theory of cultural memory. At the heart of Warburg’s theory of cultural memory are ideas drawn from Richard Semon’s book *Die Mneme*.<sup>31</sup> For Semon, using a well-established metaphor, stimuli inscribe themselves on the memory and remain as traces, termed “engrams” by Semon, which can be reactivated under certain circumstances. Warburg adapts Semon’s theory to explore the specifically *visual* forms of the engram, which he sees in visual representations. These he terms “dynamograms”. The dynamogram is a visual inscription of primal experience; in keeping with nineteenth-century discourses of the primitive, particularly Tito Vignoli’s *Myth and Science*, Warburg regarded these as essentially

traumatic and laden with fear.<sup>32</sup> Fundamental to this originary experience is a primitive physics according to which natural events are motivated by personalised animating forces. The plate illustrating the flight of the *Graf Zeppelin* indicates how for Warburg this “primitive” theory of natural causation, manifest, for example, in the interpretation of natural disasters as acts of divine wrath, becomes transformed into the abstract world-picture of modernity, in which nature is governed by impersonal laws.

The symbol constitutes a visual imprint of primal trauma, and as such also preserves a memory of the experience that gave rise to them. Warburg notes in the Introduction to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* that “It is in the area of orgiastic mass seizure that one should look for the mint that stamps the expression of extreme emotional seizure on the memory with such intensity that the engrams of the experience of suffering live on, an inheritance preserved in the memory.”<sup>33</sup> Following Semon, Warburg also held to the notion that exposure to such dynamograms constituted an unmediated encounter with the original phobic and irrational memories embodied in the representation.

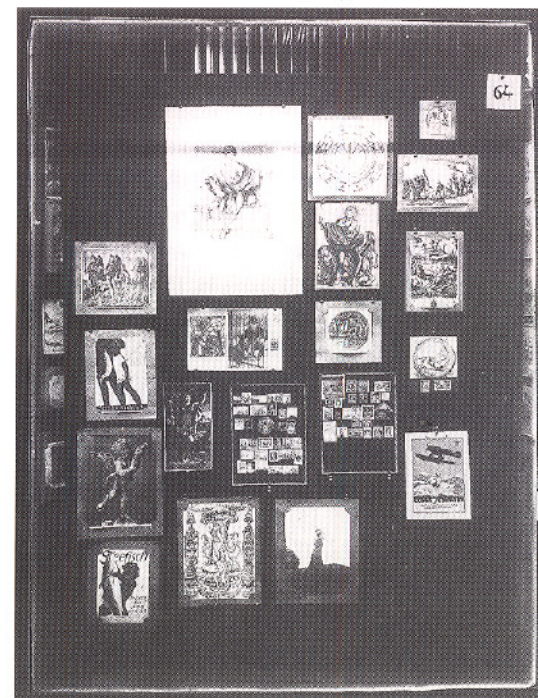
In keeping with his Enlightenment sympathies, Warburg regarded it as the task of the artist to sublimate the primitive memories of inherited dynamograms through semantic transformation, a task parallel to the scientific disenchantment of nature. In his essay on Manet he regards *Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* as such a transformation of a motif from a classical sarcophagus, namely, the Judgement of Paris. The world of primitive violence, rape and war is transformed into one of contemporary urban leisure. One can only speculate, but the most significant reworking of this motif during Warburg’s lifetime, Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, would have been regarded unambiguously by him as an example of aggressive desublimation. Within this dialectic of sublimation and desublimation, Warburg appears to have accorded special significance to individual artists, who stand in contrast to the predominantly collective basis of primitive orgiastic experience. The influence of Nietzsche is at its clearest here, for in *The Birth of*

*Tragedy* the primal ecstasy of Dionysus is intimately connected with the loss of self. Against the regressive pull of collective memory, therefore, certain figures stand out as exemplars of the progressive appropriation of the past, prominent amongst whom are Albrecht Dürer, Sandro Botticelli and Piero della Francesca. Warburg's longest single essay consists of an analysis of Dürer's critical response to the widespread belief in astrology in sixteenth-century Germany, in particular his transformation, of what was widely held to be a demonic omen, namely, a pig born with eight feet, into an object of scientific observation, or his reworking of the zodiacal demon, Saturn, as an allegory of intellectual absorption and melancholy.<sup>34</sup>

The bulk of Warburg's scholarly work was devoted to the Renaissance, which he regarded as a liminal culture. It constituted for Warburg the threshold of modernity, a view he inherited from Jakob Burckhardt. But at the same time its "rediscovery" of classical antiquity potentially opened the way for regression to the originary violence of classical antiquity. In this he was profoundly influenced by Nietzsche's emphasis on the Dionysian undercurrents of ancient Greek culture, and mapped Nietzsche's dialectic of Apollo and Dionysus on to the Renaissance itself.<sup>35</sup> The Renaissance thus formed a cultural space for Warburg, in which were played out various conflicting impulses, and it is important to note that he also interpreted this quite literally in terms of geographical spaces. For example, a recurrent concern in his writings is the relation between the Florentine Renaissance, with its idealising recall of classical culture, and the culture of Flanders and Burgundy, which appeared so much more wedded to the late Gothic, pre-Renaissance, concern with naturalism.<sup>36</sup> This conflict between idealism and naturalism is interpreted as one of a set of mutually contradictory impulses within one cultural space; Warburg referred to the early Renaissance of the fifteenth century in particular as a "spatial totality [*Gesamtgebiet*] in the cultural history of Europe."<sup>37</sup> Moreover the naturalism of Burgundian and Flemish art, in which figures from classical legend are depicted in fifteenth-century costume,

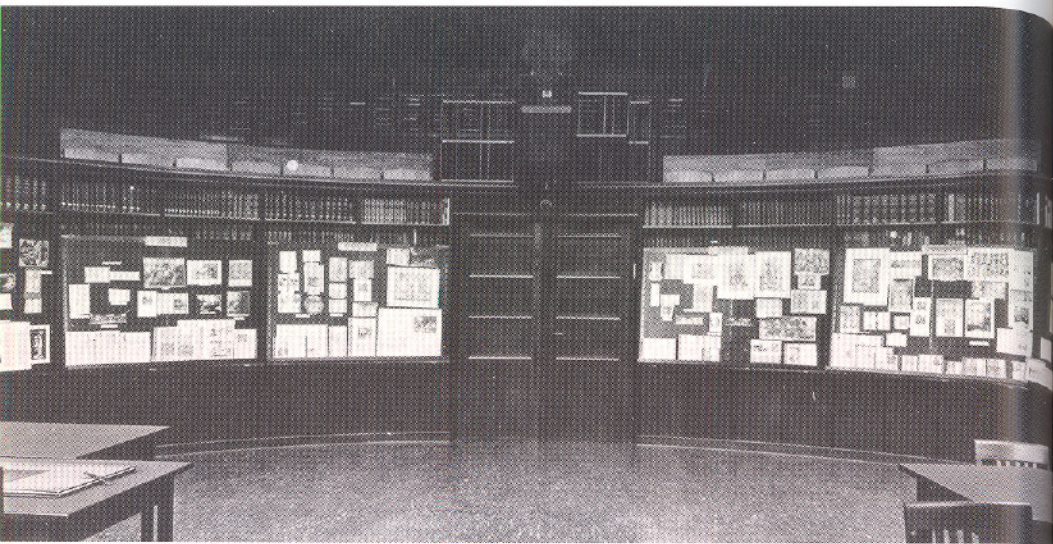
is seen as the expression of the lack of a sense of historical space on the part of the artists concerned. The construction of a linear chronology, together with a sense of the "otherness" of the past, are only achieved by the establishment of a space between "then" and "now."

However, it is important to note that while Warburg's primary interest was in the significance of the Renaissance, this was intimately connected to his concerns with the present. An example of this can be found in the materials he gathered for a lecture on the Death of Orpheus that he gave in 1905, subsequently published as "Dürer and



Aby Warburg,  
*Mnemosyne Atlas*,  
Plate 64.





Aby Warburg's library in Hamburg, 1926. Many of the books are covered by the pin-boards that hold the images of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

Italian Antiquity".<sup>38</sup> The myth of Orpheus presents an exemplary case of what Warburg regarded as the violence at the root of Greek violence; he was torn to pieces by women who, according to one version, were jealous of his love for Eurydice, and according to another, were punishing him for his refusal to honour Dionysus. The recurrence of the myth in the visual culture of the Renaissance counted as testimony, for Warburg, of the persistence of primitive Dionysian memories amidst the putative "civilisation" of the Renaissance. Of equal significance is the fact that the archive material associated with this paper includes a cutting from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from 1905, recounting a particularly brutal murder following the abortive revolution in Russia of the same year. It concerned a young teacher in Stavropol who,

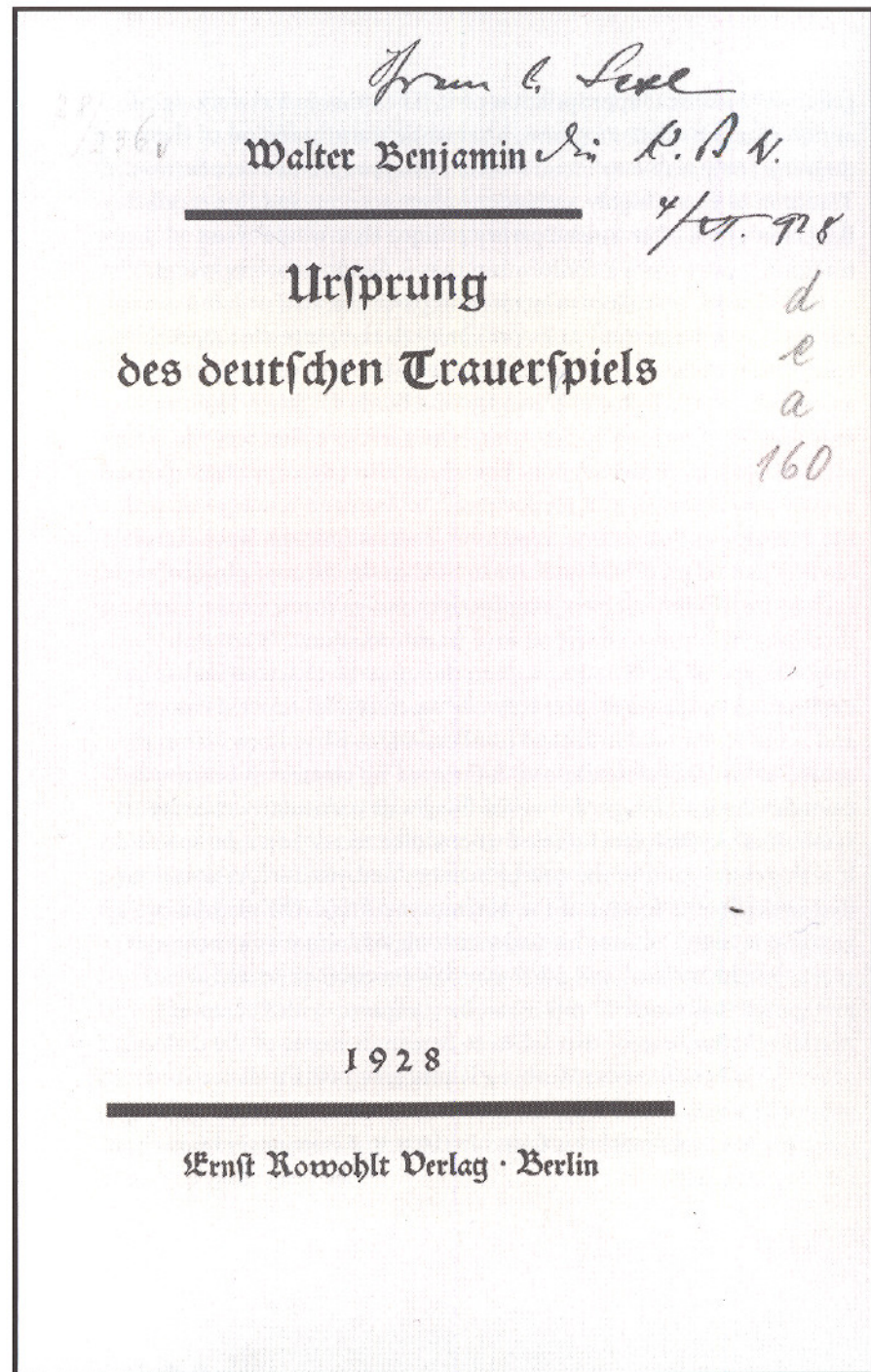
approaching a band of cossacks for protection from a mob led by the local priest, was trampled to death under the suspicion of being an anti-Tsarist intellectual "like the Jews."<sup>39</sup> Quite apart from Warburg's specific interest in the anti-Semitism apparent in the episode, it was also read as one more example of the general persistence of Dionysian violence. The newspaper cutting was annotated by Warburg: "The Death of Orpheus. The return of the eternally same beast, genus: homo sapiens."

The strikingly Nietzschean tone of Warburg's annotation indicates the wider meaning of this episode, for it invokes Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, the primary aim of which was to counter the optimistic belief in historical progress. Underlying Warburg's observations therefore is a profound scepticism towards the legacy of the Enlightenment. Parallel to Benjamin's notion of history as a dialectical image, Warburg regards culture as the site of a dialectic of progressive differentiation (the establishment of reflective space) and regressive de-differentiation. Although he held to the *ideal* of cultural progression, and in this sense was a product of the Enlightenment, he also could not believe in the Enlightenment understanding of history. This is evident in his profound ambivalence towards the technologies of modernity. While the establishment of reflective space is the prerequisite of cultural progress in general, and science in particular, scientific "progress" has led to inventions such as the telephone, the aeroplane and others which he argues are in the process of breaking down the fragile space achieved since the Renaissance. Enlightenment is thus collapsing in on itself, a notion which Adorno and Horkheimer would later examine at much greater length.<sup>40</sup> It is because of his sense that modernity is introducing a regressive collapse of inversion that Warburg juxtaposes the contemporary seaplane with classical coins bearing the chariot of Helios. The brave new world of modern technology, specifically the air speed competition of the 1920s, is intimately connected for Warburg with a regression into myth. This sense of the evaporation of historical distance underpins his use of

the deliberately anachronistic terms “airship” and “submarine” in his paper on the tapestry illustration of the legend of Alexander, and one can find contemporary parallels in Filippo Marinetti’s mythification of the automobile in the *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909 or Charles Sykes’s *Silver Lady* that has adorned the radiator of every Rolls-Royce since 1911.<sup>41</sup> Most immediately, it raises obvious parallels both with Benjamin’s emphasis on the correspondences between modernity and the archaic dreamworld, and also with his well-known critique of Ernst Jünger’s mythification of the First World War.<sup>42</sup>

Warburg’s interest in collective memory, and in the role of dynamograms as the vehicles of cultural transmission can also be brought to bear on his concept of history, using, as an intermediary, Freud’s work on repetition and recollection. In his paper of 1914 on “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through”, Freud distinguishes between repetition-compulsion and recollection.<sup>43</sup> The compulsion to repeat, though it reiterates past experience, functions within a perpetual present; it thus cancels out the temporal basis of memory and acts in the place of what Freud regards as memory proper. This theme is taken up in the later essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, where Freud stresses the link between repetition-compulsion and death.<sup>44</sup> Recollection, in contrast, arises through the phenomenon of transference. This enables the individual to construct a narrative in which experiences are no longer isolated, iterable events, but instead take their place within a personal life history. I believe Warburg was struggling towards a similar view of collective memory, though using the completely inadequate vocabulary of Semon and Vignoli. Specifically, he distinguishes between the compulsive repetition of the primitive psychic engraving, and its sublimation into the narrative of cultural progression. It is this set of concerns that frames his study of the Renaissance, for the latter is most commonly identified by its retrieval of classical antiquity, and as such it is caught between two contradictory impulses. One is the drive simply to repeat the primitive engravings and dynamograms of antiquity, and thereby to cancel a

Front page of the original edition to Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* with Fritz Saxl’s inscription to Warburg.



genuinely historical appropriation of it. The other is a reworking of antiquity and its dynamograms, a semantic transformation of their meaning comparable to Freud's notion of appropriative recollection. Tradition is thus a highly ambiguous phenomenon, and this recalls Benjamin's idea of an emancipatory critique that would wrest tradition "away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."<sup>45</sup>

Recent work on collective memory, in particular, that of Jan Assmann, has also drawn attention to its proximity to the process of repetition-compulsion outlined by Freud.<sup>46</sup> Specifically, collective memory, as opposed to the historical memory of a literary culture, relies on structures of repetition such as rituals and festivals that serve to secure the basis of a collective identity but which also telescope chronological history into an atemporal mythic past. As Assmann has argued, with the development of writing, repetition loses its function since cultural identity can be preserved and transmitted in the form of physical texts, such as inscriptions, tablets, manuscripts and so forth, whose meaning then becomes open to interpretative transformation.<sup>47</sup> Warburg's own analysis of the Renaissance can therefore be characterised as an exploration of the oscillation between repetitive collective memory and transformational historical recollection, as played out within the sphere of visual representations. Influenced by nineteenth-century empathy theory, he regarded visual images as particularly effective symbols of psychological states that could be recreated in the spectator. It is this conception of the role of memory and visual representations that underlies the format of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The method of pictorial montage reflects his understanding of culture as a memorial space, in which visual and other symbols function as an archive of juxtaposed memories. In this it can be compared with Benjamin's *Arcades* project, except that whereas Benjamin writes of the dialectics of vision in figural terms, Warburg is concerned with a dialectic of images in a very literal way; the most economic vehicle for exploring the process of sublimation is found in the actual juxtaposition of visual representations.

It has often been argued that the spatialisation of culture and history is to be linked with the rise of Saussurean methodologies in the human sciences. In particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss is often credited with the introduction of the spatial metaphor of culture as a structure, which he analysed through topological notions of spatial relations and structural transformations.<sup>48</sup>

This metaphor is carried through most consistently in the work of Michel Foucault, whose analysis of discursive formations speaks of mapping the "surfaces of their emergence" or of the "grids of specification" by which those various discourses are structured.<sup>49</sup> This is also paralleled by Foucault's interest in vision as a cultural determinant, from the panoptic surveillance of modernity analysed in *Discipline and Punish* to the disentangling of vision and language in the Classical Age explored in *The Order of Things*.<sup>50</sup> As I have indicated, however, the emergence of the notion of a cultural space, and the replacement of a concern with temporal diachrony by one of spatial synchrony can be traced back to Warburg and Benjamin. At the same time, however, it is important not to elide the enormous differences between Warburg and Benjamin on the one hand, and the more recent work of Lévi-Strauss and Foucault on the other. For Warburg and Benjamin, the central factor in the birth of the idea of a cultural space was the role of cultural memory and its residues, which contradicted the Enlightenment belief in unhindered historical progression and which could telescope linear chronology into a dialectical simultaneity. Memory plays no such role in the thinking of those later figures, which derives its force from the application of a particular linguistic theory to the study of social phenomena. Nevertheless it is of no small significance that their intellectual ancestry finds its origins in the work of a Swiss linguist approximately contemporary with Warburg himself. One can thus observe a striking parallelism, at the beginning of this century, between a material change in the experience of time and space, and an epistemic shift in historiographic method.

## Footnotes

- 1 Aby Warburg, "Luftschiff und Tauchboot in der mittelalterlichen Vorstellungswelt", *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Gesammelte Schriften*, B. G. Teubner, 1932, pp. 243-249
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, trans., Edmund Jephcott, NLB, 1979, p. 103.
- 3 Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. Michael Steinberg, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 54.
- 4 Aby Warburg, "Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer (monistischen) Kunstpsychologie", Warburg Archive, Warburg Institute, London, III No. 43.2, Section 328.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, trans., Harry Zohn, Fontana, 1973, p. 217.
- 6 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans., John Osborne, Verso Books, 1985.
- 7 The volume of literature on Warburg has grown enormously since the late 1980s. See, for example, A. Meyer, "Aby Warburg in His Early Correspondence", *The American Scholar*, vol. 57, 1988, pp. 445-452; Carlo Ginzburg, "From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method", Ginzburg, *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, trans., John & Anne Tedeschi, Hutchinson Radius, 1990, pp. 17-59; Edgar Wind, "Warburg's Concept of *Kulturwissenschaft* and its Meaning for Aesthetics", *The Eloquence of Symbols*, ed., Jaynie Anderson, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 21-35; Sigrid Schade, "Charcot and the Spectacle of the Hysterical Body. The 'Pathos Formula' as an aesthetic staging of psychiatric discourse - a blind spot in the reception of Warburg", *Art History*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1995, pp. 499-517; Kurt Forster, "Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents", *October*, vol. 77, 1996, pp. 5-24; Matthew Rampley, "From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Theory of Art", *Art Bulletin*, vol. LXXIX, no. 1, 1997, pp. 41-55. The literature in German is even more extensive. For a comprehensive bibliography see Dieter Wuttke, *Aby M. Warburg-Bibliographie 1866 bis 1995. Werk und Wirkung*, Valentin Koerner Verlag, 1998; Christine Brosius, *Kunst als Denkraum. Zum Bildungsbegriff von Aby Warburg*, Centaurus, 1997; Jürgen Habermas, "Ernst Cassirer und die Bibliothek Warburg", *Vorträge aus dem Warburg Haus*, eds., Wolfgang Kemp et al, Akademie Verlag, 1997, pp. 3-29; Bernd Roeck, *Der Junge Aby Warburg*, C. H. Beck, 1997; Dorothea McEwan, *Ausreiten der Ecken. Die Aby Warburg - Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz*, Dölling und Gallitz Verlag, 1998.
- 8 A detailed account of the atlas can be found in Dorothée Bauerle, *Gespenstergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene. Ein Kommentar zu Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Lit Verlag, 1987.
- 9 Aby Warburg, "Introduction" to *Mnemosyne*, Warburg Archive, no. 102.1.1 p. 4.
- 10 Aby Warburg, "Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. Die vorprägende Funktion heid-

nischer Elementargottheiten für die Entwicklung modernen Naturgefühls", ed., Dieter Wuttke, *Kosmopolis der Wissenschaft. E R Curtius und das Warburg Institute*, Valentin Koerner, 1989, pp. 262-72.

- 11 Charlotte Schoell-Glass, *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus*, Fischer Verlag, 1998. See too Schoell-Glass, "An Episode of Cultural Politics during the Weimar Republic: Aby Warburg and Thomas Mann Exchange a Letter Each", *Art History*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1998, pp. 107-128.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, "Pariser Passagen I & II", *Passagenwerk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991, pp. 993-1059.
- 13 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, pp. 45-59.
- 14 Benjamin, "Der Saturnring, oder Etwas vom Eisenbau", *Passagenwerk*, pp. 1060-1063.
- 15 The complete account of the genesis of the work can be found in Rolf Tiedemann's notes in *Passagenwerk*, pp. 1067-1205.
- 16 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 574.
- 17 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 574.
- 18 For a concise study of this theme, from early modernism onwards, see Margery Perloff, *The Futurist Moment. Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre and the Language of Rupture*, University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- 19 Benjamin, *Tragic*, p. 27.
- 20 The correspondence in question can be found in *Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Ronald Taylor and Fredric Jameson, Verso, 1979, pp. 110-41.
- 21 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 575.
- 22 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 574.
- 23 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 588.
- 24 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 578.
- 25 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, p. 247.
- 26 Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, p. 576. Susan Buck-Morss has explored in depth the motif of the archaic dreamscape of modernity. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, MIT Press, 1989.
- 27 Benjamin, "Reproduction", pp. 211-244.
- 28 Benjamin, "Theses", p. 247.
- 29 Benjamin, "Theses", p. 247.
- 30 Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography", *Street*, p. 250.
- 31 Richard Semon, *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens*, B. G. Teubner, 1904.
- 32 Tito Vignoli, *Mythus und Wissenschaft, eine Studie*, B. G. Teubner, 1880.
- 33 Warburg Archive, no. 102.1.1, 6.
- 34 Aby Warburg, "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten", *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, [ASW], ed., Dieter Wuttke,

Valentin Koerner, 1992, pp. 199–304. This was later explored by Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl in *Dürers "Melencolia I", eine quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Bibliothek Warburg, 1923. Panofsky and Saxl's study informed Benjamin's account of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. See Benjamin, *Tragic*, pp. 149–50.

35 On Warburg's relation to Burckhardt and Nietzsche see Yoshihiko Maikuma, *Der Begriff der Kultur bei Warburg, Nietzsche und Burckhardt*, Hain bei Athenäum, 1985. See, too, Helmut Pfotenhauer, "Das Nachleben der Antike: Aby Warburg's Auseinandersetzung mit Nietzsche", *Nietzsche Studien* vol. XIV, 1985, pp. 298–313.

36 See, for example, Warburg's essays on "Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstiles in die Malerei der Frührenaissance", *Warburg Archive* III 88.1; "Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum", *ASW*, pp. 65–102; "Flandrische Kunst und Frührenaissance", *ASW*, pp. 103–24.

37 Warburg, *ASW*, p. 130.

38 Warburg, "Dürer und die italienische Antike", *ASW*, pp. 125–130. The illustrations for the lecture "Der Tod des Orpheus" are included as an appendix on pp. 132–135.

39 Warburg Archive no. 61. The entire article is quoted in Schoell-Glass, pp. 88–89.

40 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans., John Cumming, Verso, 1979.

41 Filippo Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, Basil Blackwell, 1992, pp. 145–149. On the Rolls Royce see Erwin Panofsky, "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator", *Three Essays on Style*, ed., I. Lavin, MIT, 1995, pp. 129–164.

42 Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism. On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior* edited by Ernst Jünger", *New German Critique*, vol. 17, 1979, pp. 120–128.

43 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Hogarth Press, 1953–1974, vol. XII, pp. 147–156.

44 Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", *The Standard Edition*, vol. XVIII, pp. 1–64.

45 Benjamin, "Theses", p. 247.

46 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, C. H. Beck, 1997. See, too, Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory", *Memory*, ed., Thomas Butler, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 97–113; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

47 On the specific subject of writing and memory see eds., Aleida and Jan Assmann, *Schrift und Gedächtnis*, Willhelm Fink Verlag, 1983. See, too, eds., Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg and Hansjörg Reinau, *Vergangenheit in mündlicher Überlieferung*, Teubner, 1988.

48 Lévi-Strauss has asserted that in general "we are concerned with the spatial

distribution of social phenomena." *Anthropologie Structurale*, Plon, 1958, p. 320. In *Tristes Tropiques* he notes of his intellectual development that "like a city-dweller transported to the mountains, I became drunk with space." *Tristes Tropiques*, trans., John and Doreen Weightman, Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 59.

49 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans., Alan Sheridan, Tavistock, 1974, pp. 41 and 42.

50 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans., Alan Sheridan, Penguin Books, 1977; *The Order of Things*, Tavistock, 1970. On the role of vision in Foucault see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press, 1994, pp. 381–416.