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*Itching Powder or “How much harmony”?:*

*Entanglement, Symbiosis, Porosity and Irritation:*

*The Crawl Space of Transdisciplinary Collaboration*.

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**Warburg’s Trans-disciplinarity:**

**the iconographic and technical apparatuses**

This paper will address the historical context of the emergence of transdisciplinarity in Aby Warburg’s methodology and the relationship to the technical apparatus he employed *Kulturwissenschaftlich,* translated as cultural science or cultural studies, and not art history was the nomenclature in 1926 that Warburg assigned to his new library building in Hamburg, as the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* (KBW). As an art historian Warburg’s engagement in fields such as philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, anthropology, linguistics and fashion were directed at forming a comprehensive practice of cultural analysis. This would not just offer up localised contextual frameworks from which to analysis specific works of art but instead mapped panoramic, temporal spaces, with the aim of understanding major cultural transitions. This was most famously the case in Warburg’s central interest in the transition from the pagan to the renaissance, alternatively expressed as an examination of pagan culture’s *nachleben*; its survival, after-life or metamorphosis, within the renaissance and beyond. Successive images of gestures of self-defence represented a vast pictorial manifestation of social memory and the research demanded a broad iconological basis and the means to capture the flows and superimpositions of pictorial migration. His methodology progressively moves from compilations of research material, in the form of final academic texts, to privileging alternative forms of monstration. This movement seems to be linked to his crucial identification of the mobility of images as *the* driving force in the renaissance that facilitated pagan *nachleben*. From the early years of the 20th century until his death, Warburg can be seen to be managing an image-led methodology as a means to focus on objects of cultural transmission and in turn creating topologies that map their interactions and specific shape clusters. Even before the construction of the KBW he had not only established a considerable library but also a technical apparatus serving the projection and production of photographic images. From the 1900s he was staging exhibitions which foregrounded photographs and other reproductions of key primary material and where text took the back seat, operating as secondary notation that served the images.

His lecture at the Herziana Library in Rome in 1929 is the most famous case of this. The event was a public lecture but it was equally, and more importantly a display, of more than a hundred photographs presented on three sides of the hall of the Herziana (Fleckner: 31). Uwe Fleckner describes Warburg’s preferred lecture technique as being improvised, with a small audience and in front of a display:

“Whereas pictures usually only serve as illustrations even in books, essays or lectures by art historians, the simultaneous argumentation of his plates with their oscillations and interferences is based on a genuinely visual and discursively only approximately comprehensible structure, a structure without words.’ (Fleckner: 26)

Fleckner likens the library and the reading room of the KBW, that was so often the site of his de-monstrations, to a ‘library laboratory’ (Fleckner: 31). The KBW’s reading room was even configured to serve such a purpose being based on an oval floor plan mirroring the false, glass ceiling whose form resembles planetary orbits.[[1]](#endnote-1) The space has a curious decentred quality inviting circulation and displacement. The many functions that the reading room served (a library, study room, a lecture theatre, a photographic studio) also incorporated the peripatetic aspect of both Warburg’s didactic method as well as the technical aspect of how he manipulated his material.

What has this to do with Warburg as an earlier adopter of a trans-disciplinary practice? The clue is present in the allusion to the laboratory, not in terms of a comparison to scientific method and experimentation but more as a space where the complexity of the relationship between heterogeneous material can be manipulated, visualised, understood and narrated. In *Visualistaion and Cognition: Drawing Things Together* (Latour: 1985) Bruno Latour discusses the divide between prescientific and scientific culture. The emergence of the latter he attributes, in great part, to the emergence of inscriptions as ‘immutable objects’ in terms of which he says:

“…you have to invent objects which have the properties of being *mobile* but also *immutable*, *presentable*, *readable* and *combinable* with one another.” (Latour: 7)

He goes on to say:

“More exactly, it is possible to overestimate the inscription, but not the setting in which the cascade of ever more written and numbered inscriptions is produced. What we are really dealing with is the *staging* of a scenography in which attention is focused on one set of dramatized inscriptions. The setting works like a giant “optical device” that creates a new laboratory, a new type of vision and a new phenomenon to look at. …Boyle, for instance, in the fascinating account of his vacuum pump experiment…, had to invent not only the phenomenon, but the instrument to make it visible, the set-up in which the instrument was displayed…” (Latour; 17-18)

A set-up here is analogous to a dispostive. Warburg’s focus upon the migration of images in many ways necessitated the construction of dispositives that function as optical devices, in a way that can be equated with Latour’s description. Like a 17th century scientist, Warburg is confronted by cascades of inscriptions of different orders. They are in turn re-combinations of appropriated artefacts. This spoliation is central to Warburg’s tracking of the afterlife of pagan culture. At heart, it is the engrammatic transmission of gestures through the medium of the image that marks his methodology. Warburg’s concerns differ from a scientific relationship to the ‘cascade of inscriptions’ that Latour describes. Warburg is interested in the relationships and intervals between images and their clustering within cultural contexts. His concern is with transmission and migration as forces that underpin iconographic transformation as a complex form of cultural memory. Warburg’s scenography of inscriptions is in turn the result of a greater force that is also echoed in Latour’s observations. In 1902, Warburg returned to Hamburg after a period of five years living in Florence where he was in close proximity to the primary material of his studies. His return to Hamburg signals his need to assemble secondary sources as his research material. Increasingly his methodology was defined by the production of immutable mobiles, not just as reference tools but as the means by which knowledge production took place. His library played an important role in this process and is conventionally how a repository of secondary sources is imagined in an academic context. Progressively, photography became of crucial importance. It can be more precisely stated, that not only photography became important but the ability to organise several photographic images on a single plane became the synoptic optical device that has popularly defined Warburg, namely in the form of his final unfinished and undefined project, the Mnemosyne or Bilderatlas. Similarly Warburg’s increasing uses of public lectures using displays of photographs, book illustrations and prints as key material within a scenography, progressively became the dispositive that rendered the means that organised and transformed his ideas. Thus, this optical device was as much at the heart of his methodology as it was a means of presentation.

In many ways the Atlas was an anomaly amongst the dispositives that Warburg had developed since the early years of the century and even in terms of the Herziana lecture of 1929. He was striving to produce definitive topologies of his ideas, organised onto boards, or tafeln, that were composed onto the black clothed boards, photographed, taken apart and reassembled to construct the next board. Often the images are of maps, diagrams or charts, astronomy and astrological. The synoptic aspect here has the characteristic of flattening different orders of representation within one manipulable and navigable space. The boards for the Bilderatlas were never made to be displayed but just to be photographed as material toward a future publication that never came to fruition due to Warburg’s death in 1929[[2]](#endnote-2).

At this point it seems important, but is almost as an aside, to make an allusion to Leo Steinberg’s essay, *The Flatbed Picture plane* (Steinberg: 1972). Of Rauschenberg’s practice he says:

“…Rauschenberg’s picture plane had to become a surface to which anything reachable-thinkable would adhere. It had to be whatever a billboard or dashboard is, and everything a projection screen is, with further affinities for anything that is flat and worked over—palimpsest, cancelled plate, printer’s proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane—radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man’s visual field. And it seemed at times that Rauschenberg’s work surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field. “ (Steinberg: 63).

However, the switch here from a perspectival, viewer-based representation of the world, to something akin to a desktop where any order of information is possible as juxtapositions within a single plane, is fundamental in understanding the nature of the synoptic means that Warburg was utilising. Scrolling back from the sensorium that Rauschenberg was working within to the period from around 1900 – 1929 that corresponds to Warburg’s cultural space, we find ourselves in a space akin to Cubist practice where African artefacts are squarely on the horizon and the perspectival, viewer-based world view is being fundamentally challenged. Perspective cannot maintain the emerging world view, be it Braque and Picasso likening themselves to the Wright Brothers , manifested in Picasso’s *Notre Avenir est dans l'air* from 1912 or the many collage works where different orders of appropriated reprographic material are combined within the same frame. This even challenges Latour when he says

“The importance of this cascade of inscriptions may be ignored when studying events in dally life, but it cannot be overestimated when analyzing science and technology.” (Latour: 17)

The reality seems to have been the contrary. By the early 20th century the cubists were inventing a multi-view point, synoptic-like pictorial system in relation to the most mundane genres, squaring daily life with commensurate means. By the first decade of the 20th century immutable mobiles had entered into the lexicon of artistic, pictorial systems but more importantly through the material processes of collage and montage.

Around this same period Warburg was clear that the pathos-formula was a process of transmission catalysed by the movement and migration of images, a phenomenon that is akin to Latour’s ‘cascade of inscriptions’ within the scientific context. The 80 boards of Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas, photographed between August 1928 and October 1929 have the quality of a topology. Each board is a discreet set, addressing a particular thematic that brings together groupings of discrete heterogeneous images, demonstrating connectedness. The final collection of panels can be thought of as representing a continuum plotting transformations, convergences and connectedness. The typologies have the quality of a montage, the spacing between each is like an interval that constitute jump-cuts between the significant aspects of each image. *Panel A* of the 1929 series is an overarching schema that signals the ambition of the entire Atlas and includes 3 images:

* a representation of the sky and its constellations from a 1684 etching by Remmet Backer,
* a map showing migration routes in terms of northern, southern, eastern and western cultural exchange, drawn from Warburg’s instructions,
* a genealogical tree showing the Medicis and Tornabuoni families, drawn by Warburg himself.

This is a key topology, denoting the cosmic, earthly and genealogical domains that in his notes Warburg described as an act of thought that can be expressed as ‘1) Orientation, 2) Exchange,

3) Place in the social order.’ (Bordignon, G., Centanni, M., De Laude, S., Sacco, D.:2016)

*Panel A* functions as three data sets that establishes the key boundaries that are at work throughout much of the Atlas. These boundaries function in a disciplinary way, as data sets within a series of apparatuses across temporal, geographical and ideological topologies. Ideology here is the invention of the human and it’s relation to the pagan. As Agamben says about apparatuses in this context:

“… objects that belonged in some way to the gods were considered sacred or religious. As such, these things were removed from free use and trade amongst humans…While to ‘consecrate’ (*sacrare*) was the term that designated the exit of things from the sphere of human law, ‘to profane’ signified, on the contrary, to restore the thing to the free use of men.” (Agamben, 2009: 17-18)

This seems to function as one description of Warburg’s preoccupation with the pathos-formula and the transition from the pagan to the renaissance. The panels are akin to schemas of apparatuses that are the means through which to manage the profanation of objects that were formerly consecrated to the gods. The panels as apparatus-schema are the means to plot, represent and display displacements, transitions, migrations, circulations and continuities within a vast temporal, terrestrial and cosmological heterogeneous panorama.

What lay behind *Panel A*, and the Atlas in general, was a vast activity of indexing and schematising toward the sourcing and production of the material used in the Atlas and other visualisations.   
Warburg kept a card index system that included bibliographic references and notes. By his death this amounted to 80 boxes of index cards. In addition he drew diagrams about his thoughts in relation to the actual panels of the Atlas or of configurations of migration, noting flows and relationships, as schematic visualisations in advance of the panels being complied. The production of photographs as secondary material can be seen as an aspect of this process. Aside from their status within the Atlas montages they are also manipulable in a manner akin to playing cards and he constantly reordered image sequences as autonomous thought experiments.

Latour is worth recalling here when he says

“…on paper, hybrids can be created that mix drawings from many sources. Perspective is not interesting because it provides realistic pictures ; on the other hand, it is interesting because it creates complete hybrids : nature seen as fiction, and fiction seen as nature, with all the elements made so homogeneous in space that it is now possible to reshuffle them like a pack of cards.”   
(Latour: 80)

Playing and Tarot cards often recur as material in the Atlas, representing configurations of the cosmological world, activated through shuffling the pack and laying them out, to make readings and divinations from the resulting configurations. Warburg’s methodology is in many ways a form of cartomancy and not simply because he historically references playing and tarot cards. The reduction of his primary sources into secondary artefacts as photographs indicates a similar mechanism to a deck of cards. He reordered and reshuffled them so as to divine new relationships, unfold new orderings.

The art historian/connoisseur, Bernard Berenson was a contemporary of Warburg’s who by 1900 had amassed a collection of 15,000 photographs (Superbi: 292) and by his death in 1959 it amounted to 150,000 (Superbi: 293). His early motivation for collecting and commissioning photographs of works of art was because they were his tool kit for the attribution of works in his use of the Morelli system. This is a forensic system that identifies key characteristic of the ‘hand’ of the artist derived by comparing the way, for example, ears are rendered rather than comparing more overarching aspects of a work, such as composition. The increasing developments of the camera, its portability and the developments in the quality of photographic reproduction were essential here. By the turn of the 20th century the connoisseur’s task could be executed remotely through the comparison of details of works in relation to the subject of an attribution of a work of art. In short the forensic process could be accessed through the synoptic possibilities that a comprehensive photo collection provided. Berenson was extraordinary engaged in this endeavour, specifying in detail what he wanted photographed and the quality he demanded from the resulting prints (Superbi:298). The prime objective of Berenson’s investment in the apparatus of this secondary material was to monetise the knowledge it produced. He became the major authority for attributions of Italian works of art and was central to the commerce it involved in terms of advising the great American fortunes in purchasing their vast collections from the first decade of the 20th century onwards. In a way Warburg and Berenson’s motives were reversed in relation to their photographic collections. Warburg spent a part of his fortune to form his collection while Berenson amassed a fortune as a result of his collection. There is a power to knowledge involved here that characterises Berenson’s project more of one of speculation than divination. Again here, there is a curious reversal in that Warburg used the accounting and speculative bureaucratic processes that he would have been familiar with, due to his family’s banking background, in using data-sets and ledger systems to arrive at a methodology of divination. Berenson, forensically instrumentalising comparable tools enters into the banking system as an outcome of his method. To push this analogy further, Warburg enters through a back door of art history into a complex interdisciplinary field and Berenson becomes the connoisseur art historian who places the discipline at the centre of economic exchange, igniting a further episode of a massive migration of Italian works into the great collections owned by the American industrial fortunes of the time. Perhaps it’s just simply clearer to see with Berenson that the photographic means and tool-kit he used, that is comparable to that of Warburg’s, was engaged within a wider apparatus, leading to power, esteem, notoriety and wealth. It also led to the redistribution of the artefacts of the renaissance humanist project to steel barons and industrialists, identifying themselves as latter day Medicis, as another unfolding chapter of the nachleben that Warburg was observing around the same moment in time.

To be fair to Berenson there does seem to have been wider motives to his photographic collection. His interests extended to classical, Byzantine, Oriental and Islamic art, most notably in terms of his purchase of the Cresswell archive that has recently become so important after the destruction of Aleppo during the Syrian conflict.

If Warburg and Berenson, as voracious users and collectors of photographs, are polar opposites it does beg the question of where Panofsky stands in relationship to secondary material and such archives? His application of Kunstwollen manifested in considering images not in relationship to things outside themselves but solely within their own structure. As Johnson says when refereeing to Panofsky:  
“Briefly put, artistic volition must be dis-covered in the artwork, not outside it.” (Johnson: 81)

Panofsky appears firmly rooted in the discipline of art history in contrast to Warburg in way which Agamben describes:

“What is unique and significant about Warburg’s method as a scholar is not so much that he adopts a new way of writing art history as that he always directs his research toward the overcoming of the borders of art history” (Agamben, 1999, 90).

However, Agamben does not enter into a speculation about what the tools of that methodology are, that behind an iconology of the pathos-formula resides a series of archives, image production processes, visualisation dispositives – in short a vast technical apparatus. As far as I can see Panofsky’s methodology did not involve such an apparatus unless it was in terms of him accessing the resources of the museum and the university; the library, print collections and ithe slide archive that increasingly became at the centre of the discipline of art history where slides were organised on a light box and packed into a projector’s slide tray or carrousel? Being passive to such institutional technical apparatuses adds up to them being technical silos, determining a discipline’s methodology and maintaining its borders.

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1. The KBW’s architect, Gerhard Langmaack, 1925 sketches for the reading room Fleckner describes as being designed ‘in the form of an expressionist stage set’ suggesting that it was thought of as a scenography that could accommodate Warburg’s lecture method. (Fleckner: 28) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There have however been many publications about the Bilderatlas, using the material from photographic series made between 1927 and 1929. It is worth noting that the Bilderatlas was definitely photographed in the Reading Room of the Warburg Haus. The bookshelves visible behind the boards and the distinctive latch of the Reading Room’s central doors tell us this and even the exact position the boards were in when photographed. Each board was photographed in the same place. It can be assumed that boards were also assembled in the Reading Room and that there were perhaps very few boards used for this purpose. Perhaps there was only one. The process of production was thus one of making photo-ready material, the resulting product being photographic images. This was not a process of assembling panels for an exhibition. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)