

## II · Warburg's Concept of *Kulturwissenschaft* and its Meaning for Aesthetics

MY task is to describe to this Congress on Aesthetics the problems of a library which defines its own method as that of *Kulturwissenschaft*.<sup>1</sup> I ought first, therefore, to explain the relationship between aesthetics and *Kulturwissenschaft* as it is understood in this library. With this purpose in mind I shall refer to the changes which the relationship between art history and the history of culture has undergone in recent decades, and explain, with reference to one or two episodes in the history of these changes, how the development of these studies has generated problems which the library seeks to cater for by providing both material and a framework of thought. In explaining this need I shall concentrate on three main points: Warburg's concept of imagery, his theory of symbols, and his psychological theory of expression by mimesis and the use of tools.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Concept of Imagery*

If we consider the works of Alois Riegl and of Heinrich Wölfflin, which have exercised such a decisive influence in recent years, we see that, despite differences in detail, they are both informed by a polemical concern for the autonomy of art history, by a desire to free it from the history of civilization and thus to break with the tradition associated with the name of

<sup>1</sup>[Warburg called his library 'Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg', and Wind's lecture was intended as an introduction to Warburg's theory of imagery. Wind is here attempting to put into systematic order the basic ideas he had learnt from Warburg in long conversations. On the meaning of 'Kulturwissenschaft' and the difficulty of rendering it in English, see Wind's introduction to the English edition of *A Bibliography on the Survival of the Classics*, 1 (1934), pp. v. f. The background to Warburg's concern with *Kulturwissenschaft* is to be found in late nineteenth-century writings by Windelband, Rickert, and Dilthey on the relationship between history and the natural

sciences, cf. Wind's German introduction to the Bibliography, 1 (1934), pp. vii–xi, for his 'Kritik der Geistesgeschichte', not included in the English version. Warburg's particular contribution to historical method was to conceive of the humanities not only in their specificity and their totality, but primarily in their inter-relation. See below, pp. 106 ff.]

<sup>2</sup>[*Psychologie des mimischen und hantierenden Ausdrucks*: Warburg's elliptic use of 'hantierend' for 'functional' or 'artefactual' expression derives from Carlyle's definition of man as a 'Tool-using Animal (*Handthierendes Thier*)'. Cf. *Sartor Resartus*, 1, v; also below, pp. 31f. and 113.]

This paper was delivered in Hamburg in October 1930 for the fourth Congress on Aesthetics, concerning 'Time and Space', at a special meeting held a year after Warburg's death in the library that he had founded. The lecture was then published in the proceedings of the society as 'Warburgs Begriff der Kulturwissenschaft und seine Bedeutung für die Ästhetik', in *Beilageheft zur Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, xxv (1931), pp. 163–79, and is here reprinted in translation with additions to the notes.

Jacob Burckhardt. I shall try briefly to summarize the reasons for this struggle and its consequences for the methodology of the subject.

1. This separation of the scholarly methods of art history from those of cultural history arose from the artistic sensibility of an age which was convinced that it was of the essence of a pure consideration of a work of art to ignore the nature and meaning of its subject-matter and to confine oneself to 'pure vision'.

2. Within the history of art this tendency was given added impetus by the introduction of critical concepts which converted the shift of emphasis from the artistic object itself to the manner of its depiction into a clean break. Thus Wölfflin, for example, makes use of the antithesis between subject-matter and form. Since he includes on the side of form only what he calls 'the visual layer of style',<sup>3</sup> everything else, which is not in this radical sense visible, belongs under the heading of matter — not only representational or pictorial motifs, ideas of beauty, types of expression, modulations of tone, but also the differences resulting from the use of different tools which cause gradations in the representation of reality and different artistic genres. It was as though Wölfflin had set himself to discover, in a mathematical manner, the most general characterization of a particular style that it is possible to conceive of. But just as a mathematical logician states in formal terms a general propositional function which only becomes a meaningful proposition when the variables are replaced by words of determinate meaning and names for particular relations, so Wölfflin defines the 'painterly' mode of perception as a general stylistic function which can be variously instantiated according to what needs to be expressed, leading now to the style of Bernini, now to the very different style of Terborch.<sup>4</sup> And this general formula, whose logical force undoubtedly lies in its ability to unite such contrasting phenomena under one head, so as to distinguish them as a whole from a differently structured formula, which in turn classifies as 'linear' such contrasting phenomena as Michelangelo and Holbein the Younger — this general formula is now suddenly reified as a perceptible entity with its own history. The logical tendency towards formalization, which lends to the theory of aesthetic form a degree of precision which it cannot justify in its own right, is thus combined with a tendency towards hypostasization which turns the formula, once it has been established, into the living subject of historical development.

3. The antithesis of form and matter thus finds its logical counterpart in the theory of an autonomous<sup>5</sup> development of art, which views the entire developmental process exclusively in terms of form, assuming the latter to be the constant factor at every stage of history, irrespective of differences both of technical production and of expression. This has both positive and negative consequences: it involves treating the various genres of art as parallel with each other — for, as far as the development of form is concerned, no one genre should

<sup>3</sup>[For Wölfflin's earliest definition of these 'optische Schichten', or visual layers of style, see the final chapter of *Die klassische Kunst* (1899), which anticipates the principles as defined in *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (1915). See also Wind, 'Zur Systematik der künstlerischen Probleme', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, xviii (1925), pp. 438 ff.; *Art and Anarchy* (3rd edn., rev., 1985), pp. 21 ff. and 109 ff.]

<sup>4</sup>*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. *A Bibliography on the Survival of the Classics*, 1, pp. vi ff.

be any less important than another; it also involves levelling out the differences between them — for no one genre can tell us anything that is not already contained in the others. In this way we attain, not a history of art which traces the origin and fate of monuments as bearers of significant form, but, as in Riegl, a history of the 'autonomous formal impulse' (*Kunstwollen*),<sup>6</sup> which isolates the element of form from that of meaning, but nevertheless presents change in form in terms of a dialectical development in time — an exact counterpart of Wölfflin's history of vision.<sup>7</sup>

4. Finally, it is not just the various genres within art that are treated as parallel with each other; art itself is treated as evolving in exact parallel to the other achievements within a culture. This, however, only means a further step on the path to formalization; for the same antithesis of form and content, which at its lowest level brought about the rift between the history of art and the history of culture, now serves at this higher level to re-establish the relationship between the two. But the subsequent reconciliation presents just as many problems as the original division; for the concept of form has now become, at the highest level, just as nebulous as that of content, which at the lowest level united the most heterogeneous elements in itself. It has become identical with a general cultural impulse (*Kulturwollen*) which is neither artistic nor social, neither religious nor philosophical, but all of these in one.

There is no doubt that this urge towards generalization gave the art history confined within this scheme grandiose perspectives. Wölfflin brought this out graphically when he declared that one can as easily gain an impression of the specific form of the Gothic style from a pointed shoe as from a cathedral.<sup>8</sup> However, the more critics learnt in this way to see in a pointed shoe what they were accustomed to seeing in a cathedral, or to see in a cathedral what a shoe could perhaps have told them, the more they lost sight of the

<sup>6</sup> [On the origins of Riegl's method and the term 'Kunstwollen' or, as rendered by Wind, 'autonomous formal impulse', see E. Heidrich, *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, xix (1920), pp. 321–39; also Wind (1925), pp. 442 ff., and *Art and Anarchy*, pp. 111 f., and 140 f. On the difference between 'Kunstwollen' and 'Kunstwillen', see O. Pächt, 'Alois Riegl', *The Burlington Magazine*, cv (1963), pp. 188–93.]

<sup>7</sup> Of course, this conceptual scheme is quite different from Wölfflin's. There is no simple division of form and content, but a complex relationship of dynamic interaction between a conscious and autonomous 'formal impulse' and the 'coefficients of friction' of function, raw material, and technique. However, on closer inspection the dynamic element suddenly disappears from Riegl's method of procedure. For, in order to show that within a given period the most diverse forms of artistic phenomena are informed by the same autonomous 'formal impulse', Riegl can only resort to formalization. In the study of the history of ornament he explicitly bids us to abandon analysing the ornamental motif for its content and to concentrate instead on the 'treatment it has received in terms of form and colour in plane and space'. And in the study of the history of pictorial art in the wider sense, he similarly demands that we disregard all

considerations of subject-matter which place the picture in a cultural-historical context, and concentrate instead on the common formal problems which link the picture with all other forms of visual art. 'The iconographic content', he writes, 'is quite different from the artistic; the function of the former, which is to awaken particular ideas in the beholder, is an external one, similar to the function of architectural works or to that of the decorative arts, while the function of art is solely to present objects in outline and colour, in plane or space, in such a way that they arouse liberating delight in the beholder.' (A. Riegl, *Die spät-römische Kunstindustrie im Zusammenhange mit der Gesamtentwicklung der bildenden Künste bei den Mittelmeervölkern*, I, 1901, pp. 119 f.) In this antithesis of utilitarian and artistic functions only what is literally 'optical' is allocated to the artistic, while the utilitarian is held to include not only material requirements, but also the ideas that are awakened by the work of art and are supposed to play a part in any contemplation of it. With this we come full circle to Wölfflin's point of view.

<sup>8</sup> Wölfflin, 'Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur', in *Kleine Schriften 1886–1933*, ed. J. Gantner (1946), pp. 44 f.; cf. *Art and Anarchy*, pp. 22 and 109 ff.

elementary fact that a shoe is something one slips on to go outside, whereas a cathedral is a place one goes into to pray. And who would deny that this, so to speak, pre-artistic functional differentiation constituting the essential difference between the two objects, arising from man's use of different tools for different purposes, is a factor which plays a decisive part in their artistic formation, giving rise to aesthetic differences in formal content in relation to the observer?

I mention this elementary fact not because I believe it would ever have been completely overlooked, but because by stressing it I can get to grips with the present problem. We must recognize that the refusal adequately to differentiate artistic genres, and the consequent disregard of the fact that art is made by tool-using man, are both derived from the conjunction of the formalist interpretation on the one hand and the 'parallelizing' historical view on the other. This fuses into an indissoluble triad the critical study of individual works of art, aesthetic theory, and the reconstruction of historical situations: any weakness in one of these enterprises is inevitably passed on to the others. We can therefore apply constructive criticism in three ways. First, by reflecting on the nature of history it can be shown that, if the various areas of culture are treated as parallel, we shall fail to take account of those forces which develop in the interaction between them, without which the dynamic march of history becomes unintelligible. Or, secondly, we can approach the problem from the standpoint of psychology and aesthetics, and show that the concept of 'pure vision' is an abstraction which has no counterpart in reality; for every act of seeing is conditioned by our circumstances, so that what might be postulated conceptually as the 'purely visual' can never be completely isolated from the context of the experience in which it occurs. But, thirdly, we can also approach the problem by taking a middle course, and instead of positing *in abstracto* that inter-relationships exist, search for them where they may be grasped historically — in individual objects. In studying this concrete object, as conditioned by the nature of the techniques used to make it, we can develop and test the validity of categories which can then be of use to aesthetics and the philosophy of history.

This third course is the one Warburg adopted. In order to determine more thoroughly the factors which influence the formation of style, he took up Burckhardt's work and extended it in the very direction that Wölfflin, also in the interests of a deeper understanding of the formation of style, had deliberately eschewed. When Wölfflin called for the separation of the study of art and the study of culture, he was able, with a certain amount of justification, to cite the example of Burckhardt.<sup>9</sup> However, if in Burckhardt's *Cicerone* and *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* there was a separation of the two disciplines, this was not based on principle, but dictated by the demands of the economy of the work. 'He did nothing more', Warburg writes, 'than first of all observe Renaissance man in his most highly developed type and Renaissance art in the form of its finest creations. As he did so he was quite untroubled by whether he would himself ever be able to achieve a comprehensive treatment of the whole

<sup>9</sup>[On their relationship see *Jacob Burckhardt und Heinrich Wölfflin. Briefwechsel und andere Dokumente ihrer Begegnung 1882–1897*, ed. J. Gantner (1948); also Wölfflin's obituary

notice of Burckhardt, *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, xx (1897), pp. 341 ff., reprinted in *Kleine Schriften*, pp. 186 ff.]

civilization.<sup>10</sup> In Warburg's view, it was the self-abnegation of the pioneer which caused Burckhardt, 'instead of tackling the problem of the history of Renaissance civilization in all its full and fascinating artistic unity, to divide it up into a number of outwardly disconnected parts, and then with perfect equanimity to study and describe each one separately'.<sup>11</sup> But later scholars were not free to imitate Burckhardt's detachment. Hence what for him was simply a practical problem of presentation became for Wölfflin and Warburg a theoretical problem. The concept of pure artistic vision, which Wölfflin developed in reaction to Burckhardt, Warburg contrasts with the concept of culture as a whole, within which artistic vision fulfils a necessary function. However, to understand this function — so the argument continues — one should not dissociate it from its connection with the functions of other elements of that culture. One should rather ask the twofold question: what do these other cultural functions (religion and poetry, myth and science, society and the state) mean for the pictorial imagination; and what does the image mean for these other functions?

Characteristically, Wölfflin and Riegl, having explicitly declined to answer the first question, could not help overlooking the second. 'To relate everything solely to expression', Wölfflin writes, 'is falsely to presuppose that every state of mind must have had the same means of expression at its disposal'.<sup>12</sup> But what does 'every state of mind' really mean here? Is it that states of mind have remained the same and only their means of expression have changed? Does the image only depict states of mind? Does it not at the same time also stimulate them?

A very similar sort of observation can be found in Riegl. 'The visual arts', he says clearly, 'are not concerned with the What of appearance, but with the How. They look to poetry and religion to provide them with a readymade What'.<sup>13</sup> But what does 'provide readymade' mean here? Does the image have no effect on the poet's imagination, or play no part in the formation of religion?

It was one of Warburg's basis convictions that any attempt to detach the image from its relation to religion and poetry, to cult and drama, is like cutting off its lifeblood. Those who, like him, see the image as being indissolubly bound up with culture as a whole must, if they wish to make an image that is no longer directly intelligible communicate its meaning, go about it in a rather different way from those who subscribe to the notion of 'pure vision' in the abstract sense. It is not just a matter of training the eye to follow and enjoy the formal ramifications of an unfamiliar linear style, but of resurrecting the original conceptions implied in a particular mode of vision from the obscurity into which they have fallen. The method used for achieving this can only be an indirect one. One must study all kinds of documents which methodical historical criticism can connect with the image in question, and prove by circumstantial evidence that a whole complex of conceptions, which must be established individually, has contributed to the formation of the image. The scholar who

<sup>10</sup> *Bildniskunst und florentinisches Bürgertum. Domenico Ghirlandajo in Santa Trinità: Die Bildnisse des Lorenzo de' Medici und seiner Angehörigen* (1902), Vorbemerkung, p. 5, reprinted in *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen*

*Renaissance*, ed. G. Bing in collaboration with F. Rougemont, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I (1932), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Die spättrömische Kunstindustrie*, I, p. 212 note.



thus brings to light such a long-lost complex of associations cannot assume the task of investigating an image is simply a matter of contemplating it and of having an immediate empathic sense of it. He has to embark upon a conceptually directed process of recollection, through which he joins the ranks of those who keep alive the 'experience' of the past. Warburg was convinced that in his own work, when he was reflecting upon the images he analysed, he was fulfilling an analogous function to that of pictorial memory when, under the compulsive urge to expression, the mind spontaneously synthesizes images, namely the recollection of pre-existing forms. The word ΜΝΗΜΟΣΥΝΗ, which Warburg had inscribed above the entrance to his research institute, is to be understood in this double sense: as a reminder to the scholar that in interpreting the works of the past he is acting as trustee of a repository of human experience, but at the same time as a reminder that this experience is itself an object of research, that it requires us to use historical material to investigate the way in which 'social memory' functions.

When Warburg was studying the early Florentine Renaissance he came across just such concrete evidence of the operation of 'social memory' — in the revival of imagery from antiquity in the art of later ages. Thereafter, he never ceased to inquire into the significance of the influence of classical antiquity on the artistic culture of the early Renaissance. Because this question always contained for him another more general one, namely, what is involved in our encounter with pre-existing images transmitted by memory, and because his personal work was bound up with this general question, the question of the continuing significance of the survival of classical antiquity became in an almost magical way a question about himself. Each discovery regarding the object of his research was at the same time an act of self-contemplation. Each traumatic experience in his own life, which he overcame through reflection, became a means of enriching his historical insight. Only thus, in analysing early Renaissance man, could he penetrate through to that level at which the most violent conflicts are reconciled, and develop a 'psychology of equilibrium' (*Ausgleichspsychologie*) which assigns to opposing impulses different psychological 'loci', poles between which the subject oscillates, whose distance from each other is the measure of its oscillation. And only thus can we explain how the answer which he found in this theory of the polarity of psychological behaviour to his fundamental question concerning the nature of the response to the pre-existing forms of ancient art was developed into a general thesis: namely, that in the course of the history of images their pre-existing expressive values undergo a polarization which corresponds to the extent of the psychological oscillation of the transforming creative power. It is by this theory of polarity that the role of an image within a culture as a whole is to be determined.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Theory of the Polarity of the Symbol*

Warburg acquired his conceptual framework by studying the psychological aesthetics of his day, and above all by coming to terms with the aesthetics of Friedrich Theodor Vischer.

<sup>14</sup> *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, p. 158; II, pp. 534, 565.

Vischer's essay, 'Das Symbol',<sup>15</sup> which Warburg cited in his very first work, the dissertation on Botticelli,<sup>16</sup> he read again and again, thinking through for himself the principles that Vischer had developed in the essay, testing them on actual material, and building upon them in his own way. Vischer's work therefore offers the best approach to the study of Warburg's conceptual system as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Vischer defines the symbol as a connection of image and meaning through a point of comparison. By 'image' he means some visible object, and by 'meaning' some concept, no matter what area of thought it may be drawn from. Thus, for example, a bundle of arrows is a symbol of unity, a star of fate, a ship of the Christian Church, a sword of power and division, a lion of courage or pride.

This definition, however, is only a provisional one, serving no more than to outline the problem of 'distinguishing the main types of connection between image and meaning'; and as will be seen, the concept of the image and the concept of the meaning both alter as the nature of the connection varies.

Vischer goes on to distinguish between three kinds of connection. The first, which belongs entirely to religious consciousness, he calls 'darkly confusing',<sup>18</sup> the type that Warburg later called the 'magical-linking'.<sup>19</sup> Image and meaning become one and the same thing. The bull, Vischer says, because of its strength and procreative powers, comes to symbolize the primitive life-force; but it is also confused with this force and consequently worshipped as divine. The snake, to take one of Warburg's examples, because of its shape and dangerous nature, comes to symbolize lightning; but during a snake-dance which is meant to bring on vital rainstorms it is grasped and put into the mouth.<sup>20</sup> The palpable substance of the object which symbolizes the power one wishes to appropriate is physically taken into the body through eating and drinking — symbols of assimilation. 'The pupa of the butterfly', Vischer writes, 'is a resurrection symbol, a symbol of immortality. As it happens, it is not worshipped as a religious symbol. But if it were, I am sure that in accordance with the principle of assimilation the custom would be to eat pupae, so as to get inside oneself the stuff of immortality.'<sup>21</sup> Vischer points out with special emphasis that the Christian doctrine of the

<sup>15</sup> In *Philosophische Aufsätze. Eduard Zeller zu seinem fünfzigjährigen Doctor-Jubiläum* (1887), pp. 153–93.

<sup>16</sup> Sandro Botticelli's 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'. Eine Untersuchung über die Vorstellungen von der Antike in der italienischen Frührenaissance (1893), Vorbemerkung (*Gesammelte Schriften*, I, p. 5).

<sup>17</sup> [On the importance also of Robert Vischer, F. Th. Vischer's son, and the theory of empathy in Warburg's psychology of art, *Einfühlung als stilbildende Macht*, see now Wind's review of E. H. Gombrich's biography of Warburg (appended below, pp. 106 ff.), where he points to the significance of Robert Vischer's paper, *Über das optische Formgefühl* (1873). By 1887 F. Th. Vischer had incorporated and expanded his son's observations with proud acknowledgement in 'Das Symbol', which became a sort of breviary for Warburg. In the preface to the dissertation Warburg gave Robert Vischer pride of place, putting the younger Vischer's work before that of his father. Later in a note

Wind described Warburg's theory of polarity as 'F. Th. Vischer applied *historically*'.]

<sup>18</sup> F. Th. Vischer, op. cit., p. 160: 'die religiöse, dunkel verwechselnde'.

<sup>19</sup> ['die magische Handlung, die real verknüpft'; see Warburg's informal lecture, given in unusual circumstances at the Heilanstalt, Kreuzlingen, in 1923, vividly describing his experiences among the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico in 1895–6: 'Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika', in *Schlangenritual. Ein Reisebericht* with 'Nachwort' by U. Raulff (1988), p. 37; trans. G. Carchia, 'Il rituale del serpente', *aut aut*, 199–200 (1984), p. 29; trans. W. F. Mainland, *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, II (1938), p. 285.]

<sup>20</sup> [Ibid. (1988), p. 43; (1984), p. 31; (1938), p. 237. See below, p. 111.]

<sup>21</sup> [The source of the quotation on the butterfly and the resurrection has not been identified.]

Eucharist, the distribution of bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ, conforms completely to this pattern.

It is precisely here, however, with the theological interpretation of the doctrine of the Eucharist, that the problem begins to bifurcate. The controversy over whether, at the moment of the distribution, the bread and wine actually are or merely symbolize the body and blood of Christ, in other words whether Christ's words, 'This is my body . . .', are to be understood figuratively or metaphorically — this controversy reflects a crisis in which two conflicting conceptions of the nature of a symbol have arisen: the one, the magical-associative which joins the image and meaning together; the other, the logically-dissociative, which explicitly introduces the 'like' of comparison. For the first conception religious ritual is indispensable. It requires a priest, whose word has the necessary magic power to effect transubstantiation. It, therefore, gives a miraculous connotation to bread and wine, substances which in themselves, as Vischer points out, are quite neutral.<sup>22</sup> The second conception restores the neutral status of these objects, for it does not tie the religious experience to the ritual. It holds bread and wine to be signs which can be intellectually comprehended, not powers which work mysteriously. The symbol, in the sense of an indissoluble unity of object and meaning, has turned into allegory, with both sides of the comparison conceived of as clearly distinct entities. The image has been transformed from a magical force in a ritual into a token of a theological concept.

Between these two extremes, however, lies a third type of connection, which Vischer calls a 'connection with reservation'. It occurs when the beholder does not really believe in the magical animation of the image, but is nevertheless bound to it — for instance, when the poet speaks of the 'ominous' light of the setting sun. But even the unpoetic language of everyday life is constantly personifying inanimate objects in the same way: 'Grapes like to be warm', 'The nail doesn't want to come out of the plank', 'The packet won't go into my pocket.'<sup>23</sup> Were we to dissolve all such metaphors without exception, language would turn into a lifeless system of allegorical signs. Were we, on the other hand, to let the enlivening power of metaphor affect us so powerfully that we were no longer aware of its non-metaphorical meaning, we should fall victims to the magical mode of thought. The more the poet comes to believe in the heroes and gods whose images fill his mind, the nearer he approaches to the priest. However, he totally succumbs to the enchantment only when he either makes sacrifices to the god who is the subject of his poetry or compels him to sacrifice himself.

We have, then, a whole spectrum of possibilities. At one extreme lies the pure concept, expressed by an arbitrary, lifeless, and unambiguously determinable sign which is connected with the extension of the concept only by convention. At the other extreme lies the ritual act, which, dominated by the power of the incarnate symbol, literally grasps the symbol, consuming it, or being consumed by it.

The critical point, however, lies in the middle of spectrum, where the symbol is under-

<sup>22</sup> 'Das Symbol', p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 167.



stood as a sign and yet remains a living image, where the psychological excitation, suspended between the two poles, is neither so concentrated by the compelling power of the metaphor that it turns into action, nor so detached by the force of analytical thought that it fades into conceptual thinking. It is here that the 'image', in the sense of the artistic illusion, finds its place.

Both artistic creation, which employs its tools to maintain this intermediate state in the realm of 'appearance', and the appreciation of art, which re-creates and experiences this intermediate state by contemplating the 'appearance', draw, according to Warburg, on the darkest energies of human life, and remain dependent on them and threatened by them even where harmonious equilibrium has — for the moment — been achieved. For even harmonious equilibrium is the product of a confrontation engaging the whole man, with his religious urge for incarnation and his intellectual desire for enlightenment, with his impulse to commitment and his will to detachment.

If we reflect on just how much these forces war with one another, we can well understand how Warburg, when working on his history of the reanimation of past images by the European mind, grouped them in a chapter of the still unwritten book 'The Lack of Freedom of Superstitious Modern Man'.<sup>24</sup> And when he took as the connecting thread of his book, the mnemonic recovery of ancient imagery, it is clear that by 'ancient' he did not mean 'ancient' in the same sense as Winckelmann, as referring to a world of noble simplicity and serene grandeur, but rather in the same sense as Nietzsche and Burckhardt, as connoting a Janus-face of Olympian calm and daemonic terror. However, mention should also be made in this context of Lessing: for Lessing's refutation of the reasons Winckelmann gave for Laocoön's suffering in silence contains in embryo the whole problem that Warburg was investigating.<sup>25</sup> The notions of the 'transitory' and of the 'pregnant moment' contain an intimation of that crisis in which the tensions embodied in a work of art irrupt and threaten to destroy the actual artistic achievement.<sup>26</sup>

To describe the method of inquiry that Warburg practised and taught I can hardly do better than quote a passage from Schleiermacher's essay 'On the Extension of the Concept of Art with Reference to the Theory of Art':

Thus we will for the present confine ourselves to an old notion, restated, however, by some modern experts, that all art springs from inspiration, from the lively awakening of the innermost emotional and intellectual faculties, and to another equally old view, profoundly rooted in our habits of thought, namely that all art must bear witness to the process of its creation. The next step would then no doubt be to observe to what extent the work of art springs from inspiration in the same manner in the different arts. On account of the difficulty of the enterprise, however, it might be advisable to begin by investigating those arts in which the distance between both points — inspiration and the

<sup>24</sup> 'Von der Unfreiheit des abergläubigen modernen Menschen', see *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* (1920), pp. 4 ff. (*Gesammelte Schriften*, II, pp. 490 ff.).

<sup>25</sup> *Laokoön*, I, iii, also xvi (*Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. K. Lachmann and F. Muncker, IX, 1893, pp. 19 ff. and 95). [Cf.

Wind, *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1931-1931* (1932), p. 188; and now *Hume and the Heroic Portrait*, (1986), p. 24 note.]

<sup>26</sup> At the Hamburg Congress on Aesthetics (see above, p. 21, note 1). Warburg intended to discuss 'das Problem des "Transitorischen"' (see p. 3 of the Proceedings).

from a gesture of seizing and appropriating something to one of relinquishing it and letting it go free, from an act of persecution and conquest to one of hesitation and generous pardon.

Likewise the tool, too, points beyond itself to a stage at which man creates objects not only so that he can do things with them (as with a stick) or put them on (as he puts on clothes) and not only so that they can help him to extend the possibilities of mimetic expression of his own body, but also so that he can set them up apart from himself and contemplate them from a distance. For Schleiermacher it is at this stage that art begins: for only at this stage does the retarding element in artistic expression appear in the form of *conscious reflection*. One need not dispute whether Schleiermacher's theory correctly circumscribes the domain of art. But one should point out that between the two stages of greatest detachment and closest connection — that is, between the level at which the stimulation of movement seems to have been almost entirely transformed in the act of contemplation, and the stage at which stimulation and expression become almost one and the same in the precipitated action — there lie two intermediate stages: that of the expressively charged muscular movement, whose two poles are the states of being mimetically tense and of being physiognomically relaxed, and that of the expressive use of an implement, which oscillates between the poles of the social urge to appropriate a thing and the social will to distance oneself from it.

Warburg showed how important just these two intermediate levels are for the theory of the formation and the recall of images, once again referring to the example of the continuing vitality of features of the ancient world. For time and again it was the expressive gestures of antiquity or, to use Warburg's words, the 'pathos formulae' of that civilization, which were taken up by later art and polarized in being redeployed.<sup>31</sup> But when they were rediscovered in works of art or handed down, these ancient emotive formulae always appeared in a form which was tangible: in the form of sculptured stone or painted paper — in any case as objects which stand in a technological relationship to tool-using man. The spatial and tangible form in which an epoch admits these emotive formulae — whether a classical work of art is an object of specialized archaeological interest added to a collection, an *objet d'art* built into a garden wall to satisfy its owner's pride of possession, or reproduced in miniature, no more than a mere ornament for the mantelpiece — is of crucial significance in determining the relationship of that epoch to classical antiquity. The degree of involvement men have in these objects can be measured in terms of the use they make of them, in the sense of the way they handle them. Nothing is more characteristic of the development of the early Renaissance than the first form in which it incorporated into its art the emotive formulae of classical antiquity, to whose stimulus it was so highly responsive, that highly distancing mode of representation, *grisaille*.<sup>32</sup>

It follows that, even if we define the notion of aesthetics in the narrowest sense, as the

<sup>31</sup> See 'Dürer und die italienische Antike', in *Verhandlungen der achtundvierzigsten Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner in Hamburg vom 3. bis 6. Oktober 1905* (1906), pp. 55–60 (*Gesammelte Schriften*, II, pp. 443 ff.).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. 'Francesco Sassettis letztwillige Verfügung', in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Beiträge August Schmarsow gewidmet* (1907), pp. 145 f. (*Gesammelte Schriften*, I, pp. 157 f.) [now also Warburg's notes on *grisaille* in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography* (1970), pp. 246 f. and 296 f.]

theory of the conscious cultivation of taste and of the abstract perception of beauty, we cannot fully develop this theory without taking into account these more elementary forms of expression — mimetic expression and the extended form of expression achieved with tools. For these are, so to speak, the fertile soil lying at the roots of those more refined creations (just as verbal magic lies at the roots of metaphor), a basis out of which they must develop in order to acquire their distinguishing characteristics, but from which they cannot entirely detach themselves without wilting or dying.

Because this relationship of relative dependence and independence is a relationship of tension, the problem of the polarity of the psychic reaction has always been conceived of and analysed in the history of aesthetics, from Plato down to Lessing, Schiller, and Nietzsche, as the central problem. It is only by going back to this basic problem as Warburg does that we can also tackle the problem of periodicity in the development of art, a problem with which Riegl and Wölfflin wrestled in vain. But we can, with Warburg's help, turn their formal insights to good account. For we can invest them with a genuine significance by taking what is no more than an abstract antithesis as an actual indication of two poles of an oscillation which can be rendered intelligible in geographical-historical terms as a process of cultural interaction. When Wölfflin, to go back to our first example, defines a particular concept of the painterly as a single stylistic principle, comprising such heterogeneous phenomena as Terborch and Bernini, this can only be taken to refer to a process of interaction between the North and the South in the age of the Baroque that has its concrete and geographical aspect. And the names of Bernini and Terborch would indicate the range of an intellectual movement of which the historical subject, conceived of as a social unity, would be the cultural community of seventeenth-century Europe.

I have tried to convey some idea of the nature of Warburg's method of inquiry; but my words must necessarily remain somewhat abstract and lifeless without concrete illustration. Indeed this lecture is intended as an introduction to the display of pictures set up here, in the hall,<sup>33</sup> and also to the library itself, which is expressly arranged to bring out the particular problems that were Warburg's concern.

You will there clearly see the great extent to which Warburg, in pursuing his theory of polarity, was obliged to forsake the traditional domains of art history and to enter into fields which even professional art historians have tended on the whole to fight shy of — the history of religious cults, the history of festivals, the history of the book and literary culture, the history of magic and astrology. However, it was just because he was interested in revealing tensions that these intermediate areas were of great importance to him. It is in the nature of festivals to lie between social life and art; astrology and magic lie half-way between religion and science. Warburg, intent on probing further, always chose to study those intermediate fields in precisely the historical periods he considered to be themselves

<sup>33</sup> [Warburg himself habitually arranged and rearranged on portable screens the photographs of material he was studying; and such photographic demonstrations remained

for some years a characteristic feature of the Warburg Institute's public exhibitions.]

times of transition and conflict: for example, the early Florentine Renaissance, the Dutch Baroque, the orientalizing phases of late classical antiquity. Furthermore, within such periods he always tended to apply himself to the study of men who, whether through their profession or their fortune, occupy ambiguous positions: for example, merchants who are at the same time lovers of art, whose aesthetic tastes mingle with their business interests; astrologers who combine religious politics with science and create a 'double truth' of their own; and philosophers whose pictorial imagination is at odds with their desire for logical order. In dealing with the individual work of art, Warburg proceeded in a way which must have seemed somewhat paradoxical to the student of art with a formalist training; his practice of gathering together pictures in groups gave his work its peculiar stamp: he interested himself just as much in the artistically bad picture as in the good, and indeed often more so, for a reason which he himself explicitly acknowledged — because it had more to teach him. In his study of the iconographic meaning of the cycle of frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia — a pictorial enigma which he solved brilliantly<sup>34</sup> — he went first to the master who seemed to him to be the weakest. And why? Because the flaws that in a sense conferred on the bad work an advantage over the good revealed the problem that the artist had to wrestle with: the complicated structure of the major work made the problem much harder to pick out, because the artist resolved it with such virtuosity.

The same applies to other branches of learning. Physicists were able to analyse the nature of light by studying its refraction through an inhomogenous medium. And modern psychology owes its greatest insights into the functioning of the mind to the study of those disorders in which individual functions, instead of harmonizing, are in conflict. To proceed only from great works of art, Warburg tells us, is to fail to see that the forgotten artefact is precisely the one most likely to yield the most valuable insights. If we go straight to the great masters, to Leonardo, Raphael, and Holbein, to works in which the most violent conflicts have been most perfectly resolved, and if we enjoy them aesthetically, that is, in a mood which is itself no more than a momentary harmonious resolution of opposing forces, we shall spend happy hours, but we shall not arrive at a conceptual recognition of the nature of art, which is, after all, the real business of aesthetics.

Warburg adopted the same kind of approach in assembling his remarkable library. Compared with other specialist libraries, it must appear peculiarly fragmentary, for it covers many more areas than a specialist library normally seeks to do. At the same time, its sections on particular fields will not be found to be as complete as one would normally expect of a specialist library. Its strength, in short, lies precisely in the areas that are marginal; and since these are the areas that play a crucial part in the progress of any discipline, the library may fairly claim that its own growth is entirely in keeping with that of the particular field of study it seeks to advance. The more work that is done in those 'marginal' areas classified by the library, the more the corresponding sections in the library will automatically fill up.

<sup>34</sup> 'Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara', in *L'Italia e l'arte straniera, Atti del X. congresso internazionale di storia dell'arte*, 1912

(1922), pp. 179–93 (*Gesammelte Schriften*, II, pp. 459 ff., see especially p. 464).

This means that it depends upon collaborative effort. That is why the library welcomes the opportunity this Congress offers us to learn something of the problems with which aestheticians are concerned: for, in Warburg's own words, it is 'a library eager not only to speak, but also to listen' — *eine Bibliothek, die nicht nur reden, sondern auch aufhorchen will.*



## THE ELOQUENCE OF SYMBOLS