"A Singular Dossier of the Undiscovered": Intersections between Hans Blumenberg and Aby Warburg

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Introduction

In his speech "In Memory of Ernst Cassirer" on receiving the Kuno-Fischer Prize in 1974, the laureate Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) made one of his rare references to the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW), praising the private book collection-turned research institute as a "singular dossier of the undiscovered" (Blumenberg 2022: 217). Aby Warburg's (1866–1929) library was "singular" indeed: It served not only as the centerpiece, laboratory, and vehicle of his new critical method of cultural science[1] but also as a meeting place and training ground for "the next generation that would carry the torch of German-Jewish intellectuality"[2] (Warburg 2007: 263), as Warburg put it in the library's diary on May 30, 1928.[3] The KBW also owed its uniqueness to its interdisciplinary collection, encompassing history of art, cultural and religious history, astrology, ethnology, psychology, and philology among others. Funded

1 The term *Kulturwissenschaft* is notoriously difficult to translate as it falls somewhere between cultural study and cultural science but also refers to Warburg's specific method of psycho-historical research and enquiry. This unique oscillation between theory, practice, and diagnostic tool links Warburg's cultural science to his contemporary Sigmund Freud, who also conceived his Psychoanalysis as a mode of cultural critique, a method of treatment and a theory of psychodynamics.

2 "[…] Vertreter der nächsten Generation würde[n] die Fackel deutsch-jüdischer Geistigkeit weiter tragen." All translations of Warburg's quotes in the text are my own, unless otherwise stated.

3 Examples of recent publications that focus on Warburg's relationship to Judaism include: Treml/Meyer 2005; Levine 2015; Pollock 2016; Rinner 2022.

by his family's banking business, it grew out of Warburg's private library and expanded in line with his changing research interests to comprise some 60,000 volumes by the time of his death in 1929 (cf. Diers 1995). As such, it represented the spatial externalization of Warburg's cultural science.

The KBW offered "practical help in the fight against chaos through systematic book guidance for everyone"[4] (Warburg 1928), equipped with the latest technology and implementing a unique classification system he called the "law of the good neighbor"[5] (quoted in: Saxl 1970: 327), meaning that "the book of which one knew was in most cases not the book which one needed" (ibid: 333), as his assistant and successor as institute director Fritz Saxl explained. Books were not arranged chronologically or along strict disciplinary boundaries but instead around questions and problems. Publications on alchemy neighbored works on chemistry, volumes on astrology shared shelves with books on mathematics. Thus, by using the library to trace the development of natural science from magical thinking, the readers were also inadvertently trained in Warburg's method. The aim was not to find answers to predetermined questions, but to practice open and unbiased, self-critical thinking and interdisciplinary research in order to sharpen one's awareness of problems and develop what Warburg called "antennas" for cultural symptoms of psycho-historical crises. As an "arsenal" (cf. Johnson/Wedepohl 2012), the KBW provided the necessary weapons to "seek out our ignorance and fight it wherever we find it"[6] (Warburg 1905–1970: fol. 21), as he put it. At Heilwigstraße 116 in Hamburg, everything revolved around the problem of the afterlife of antiquity, i.e. the continuing influence and impact of paganism, superstition, and irrationality in a self-proclaimed enlightened and rational modern Europe.

Unfortunately, we can only speculate about the fruitful exchange that might have developed between Warburg's "problem library" (Saxl 2023: 44) and the young Blumenberg during his student days in Hamburg. In December 1933, only four years after Warburg's death, the KBW and its staff were forced to emigrate to London – just in time before the Nazi authorities shut down this option for good. Under the direction of Warburg's most important colleagues, Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, the library developed into one of the most significant research institutes for art and cultural studies in Great Britain and –

4 "Praktische Hilfeleistung im Kampfe wider das Chaos durch systematische Buchweisung für Jedermann."

5 "Gesetz der guten Nachbarschaft" (Saxl 1996: 337).

6 "Wir suchen unsere Ignoranz auf und schlagen sie, wo wir sie finden."

thanks to personalities such as Erwin Panofsky and Raymond Klibansky – also in America and Canada.

While Warburg came from an orthodox, or rather orthoprax (Warburg Spinelli 1990: 43), family home and was deeply shaped by the history and traditions of Judaism – although he himself wasn't religious and vehemently rejected orthodoxy since his student days –, Blumenberg grew up in a Catholic household. His mother was Jewish but had converted and his Jewish heritage didn't seem to have played a role in his upbringing. Following the Nuremberg racial laws passed by the National Socialist regime in 1935, Blumenberg was barred from continuing his studies of Catholic theology. He lost his library in the Allied bombing of Lübeck in 1942 and was assigned as a compulsory worker first to an airplane manufacturer, then to a large-scale producer of gasmasks. In February 1945, he was sent to a Nationalist Socialist work camp but was later released. He survived the last month of the war in hiding in the attic of his future wife's family home in Lübeck (cf. Nicholls 2015: 11–13). Incidentally it was Warburg's nephew, Eric M. Warburg, who had worked to ensure that Lübeck was spared further bombing raids, a feat he is still remembered for in local newspapers to this day (cf. Bahnsen 2012; Kabel 2017). When Blumenberg picked up his studies in philosophy, German and classical philology at the University of Hamburg in 1945, the KBW, now called the Warburg Institute, had already been permanently incorporated into the University of London for a year. It is not clear exactly when and how Blumenberg encountered Warburg's work – most likely he was introduced to it through the cultural philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. The latter had not only written his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer 1923–1929) largely at the KBW, but had also been a close friend and academic colleague of Warburg's since Cassirer's appointment to the University of Hamburg in 1920 (cf. Levine 2013).

Warburg and Blumenberg as "Good Neighbors"

It remains unclear whether Blumenberg's praise was intended to highlight the KBW's unique methodological orientation towards the yet "undiscovered," or whether the philosopher was primarily drawing attention to the almost nonexistent research on Warburg at the time. Comprehensive research on Warburg and the work of the KBW only began in the 1970s, after Ernst Gombrich's influential but controversial *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, which was not published in German until 1980 (Gombrich 1970). What also seems to

have remained largely "undiscovered" to this day, however, are the thematic and methodological similarities between Warburg and Blumenberg – not least because there a few direct references to Warburg in Blumenberg's work. Taking the title of this volume as a starting point, I would like to present some points of intersection between Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology and Warburg's anthropological cultural science. One reason for this comparison is the observation that Blumenberg's philosophy is generally not seen from a Jewish perspective, although the significance for his work of Jewish thinkers such as Warburg (and Cassirer), whose philosophical concepts and cultural-historical questions are rooted in the history, culture, and tradition of Judaism, is beyond question. Additionally, such a comparative perspective also serves to highlight the philosophical aspirations and foundations of Warburg's method, of which he himself was well aware: "When I look back on my development it becomes clear that it was based primarily on my will to philosophy, and that I arrived at the visual element secondarily, as a substrate of this thinking."[7] (Warburg 1928) Finally, with the emigration of the KBW and the expulsion of its staff, the tradition of German-Jewish cultural science in Germany was broken off for decades. In view of this caesura, the essay aims to show that a transdisciplinary perspective can reveal hitherto undiscovered forms of afterlife, to use Warburg's expression, of Jewish thought.

I will begin by pointing out some "family resemblances" – to borrow Wittgenstein's term – that are apparent even at a cursory glance. Then I will track down specific traces of Warburg in Blumenberg's work and offer some reflections on common methodological and ethical aspects, before concluding with an actual Blumenbergian take on Aby Warburg. This essay is only a first attempt towards a comparative perspective, which, in true Warburgian manner, proceeds associatively rather than systematically. It doesn't seek to hide the differences between Warburg's cultural-scientific "psycho-history" (Warburg 2007: 429) and Blumenberg's phenomenology of history, but does aim to highlight the multitude of aspects connecting them, thereby opening up new perspectives on the relationship and continuities between the two thinkers.

7 "Wenn ich einen Blick auf meine Entwicklung werfe, so ist es klar, dass sie primär getragen wird vom Willen zur Philosophie und sekundär als Substrat des Denkens auf das bildliche Element gekommen ist."

Family Resemblances

Given the scarcity of Blumenberg's direct references to Warburg, it is all the more surprising how many similarities can be found between the two in anthropological, methodological, and thematic terms. Both defined fear of the indifference of the cosmos and powerlessness in the face of the forces of nature as the fundamental human condition. For both, the existential need for meaning and consolation stands at the beginning of any human relationship to the world. "The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization"[8] (Warburg 2017: A1), Warburg wrote programmatically in the introduction to the *Bilderaltas Mnemosyne*, his unfinished magnum opus, a visual map of European cultural memory comprising images from over three millennia (cf. Warburg 2012; Johnson 2012).

For him, the fear of disorientation in the cosmos was the fundamental traumatic experience that drove human beings in their struggle for self-location and self-assurance, and to which they gave expression in myths, metaphors, symbols, and, above all, images, thereby removing its horror. Thus, Warburg described himself as a "image historian" (quoted after McEwan 2004: 12), not an art historian: As he was interested in images as an expression of psychological behavior towards the world and the memory of these attempts to gain orientation, he did not differentiate between everyday images and "masterpieces," but examined newspaper photographs, advertisements, stamps, and pamphlets with the same attention as works of supposedly "high art." Similarly, in his *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg (1985: 16) speaks of "the gaining of a distance, of a moderation of bitter earnestness" through myths and metaphors, through "*Kunstgriffe*" (Blumenberg 1979: 11, original emphasis), i.e. "through devices like that of the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar, of explanations for the inexplicable, of names for the unnameable" (Blumenberg 1985: 5).

The process of this struggle for relief from the "absolutism of reality" (ibid: 3) could thus be traced along works of art of all kinds, according to Blumenberg; for "to have a world is always the result of an art, even if it cannot be in any sense a 'universal artwork' [*Gesamtkunstwerk*]" (ibid: 7). Warburg also emphasized the importance of artistic expression and creation in the cultural-historical analysis of the changing forms these interpretations of reality took: "When this in-

8 "Bewusstes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Außenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen" (Warburg 2012: 3).

terval [between oneself and the outside world] becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions have been fulfilled for this consciousness of distance to achieve an enduring social function […]."[9] (Warburg 2017: A1) Likewise, Blumenberg aimed to understand human reality through metaphors and involuntary expressions and also emphasized the importance of image creation, when he spoke of "*Homo Pictor* [man the painter] [as] the creature who covers up the lack of reliability of his world by projecting images" (Blumenberg 1985: 8, original emphasis).

As is well known, Blumenberg concentrated primarily on written or literary works, on rhetoric, while Warburg dealt with works of visual art, although finding the "word to the image"[10] (Warburg 1928) was always his motto. However, the category of "non-conceptuality" (*Unbegrifflichkeit*) could be taken as a unifying element that links the two. For Blumenberg, metaphors and myths, even though they are themselves results of conceptual thinking, remain examples of non-conceptuality because, unlike abstract concepts, they preserve the connection between human beings and the world by preserving their rootedness in the living world, thus offering the world in a "tangible" form, so to speak. An analogous position between magic and logic, between "grasping animal" (*Greiftier*) and "conceptual human" (*Begriffsmensch*) is what Warburg ascribes to the image.[11] "You live and do nothing to me"[12] (quoted in: Fehrenbach 2010: 124) was his formula to describe the specific mode in which humans refer to the world through images, a "harmless" liveliness, a balance between closeness and distance, in which physical experience and reflective rationality participate in equal measure. Thus, what Warburg emphasizes in the image and Blumenberg in myths and metaphors is a form of understanding and rationalizing the world that reflects "both the human thirst for knowledge, and the limits of human knowledge" (Ifergan 2023: 1240).

Both thinkers also shared the Renaissance and the Modern Age as their central research interests. For Warburg, the main task of the KBW was to explore and uncover the "afterlife of antiquity" and its imagery in European cultural

9 "[…] wird dieser Zwischenraum das Substrat künstlerischer Gestaltung, so sind die Vorbedingungen erfüllt, daß dieses Distanzbewußtsein zu einer sozialen Dauerfunktion werden kann" (Warburg 2012: 3).

10 "[…] die allgemeine Bedeutung des von mir seit den Anfängen meiner Tätigkeit vertretenen Grundsatzes 'das Wort zum Bild'."

11 In German, the relationship between "greifen" (to grasp for sth) and "begreifen" (to grasp sth in the sense of understanding sth) is much more direct.

12 "Du lebst und thust mit nichts."

history; Blumenberg's specific form of "work on myth" also revolved around the phenomenon of the enduring attractiveness and historical impact of Greek mythology and its figures such as Prometheus or Orpheus, its zodiac signs, and planetary gods.[13]

Pendulum vs. Progress

It seems, however, that Warburg also remained a "dossier of the undiscovered" for Blumenberg himself, as his statement in the above-mentioned speech seems to indicate, namely that "the library's theory, if one may say so, and later that of the eponymous institute, was Cassirer's three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*" (Blumenberg 2022: 217). However, a systematic examination quickly brings to light the subtle but decisive differences between Warburg's method of cultural science and Cassirer's philosophy of culture. Blumenberg criticizes Cassirer's concept for clinging to the hope that it should be possible to compile a complete and conclusive list of all symbolic forms, analogous to Kant's table of categories:

> In spite of all the affirmations of the autonomous quality of this symbolic system of forms [i.e. myth], it remains, for Cassirer, something that has been overcome […] My opinion, in contrast to this, is that in order to perceive myth's genuine quality as an accomplishment one would have to describe it from the point of view of its *terminus a quo* [limit away from which the process is directed]. (Blumenberg 1985: 168, original emphasis)

Therefore, according to Blumenberg, Cassirer's "ideas of the kind that seek to promote 'the Education of [Humankind]'[14] defend the meaning of history at

13 For a comprehensive discussion of Blumenberg's theory of myth, cf. Nicholls 2015; Ifergan 2016; Ifergan 2023. Likewise, one of Warburg's main research interests was ancient astrology and its afterlife in the age of the Reformation and the Peasants' Wars through to the war superstitions of the First World War, cf. McEwan 2006; Newman 2008.

14 The 2022 translation of Blumenberg's speech uses the expression "Human Race" instead.

the expense of those born too early already to be 'well-brought-up'" (Blumenberg 2022: 220).[15]

The importance of Cassirer for Warburg and vice versa is beyond question and will not be discussed here. However, Blumenberg's hasty conflation of the projects of the cultural philosopher and the cultural scientist is surprising, not only in view of the differences between their anthropological and cultural-historical approaches, but also in view of the similarities that exist between Warburg and Blumenberg himself.

In fact, for Warburg, myth was by no means a system of thought that could be overcome or brought to an end, as shown by one of his amusing and self-reflexive bon mots, which is preserved in a posthumous collection of proverbs entitled *Warburgisms*: "Give me this day my daily illusion!"[16] (Warburg 1905–1970: 10) Already here it becomes clear that Warburg was just as aware of the necessity to clarify the historical and psychological conditions of the emergence of mythical interpretations of the world as he was of the impossibility of dispensing with mythical thinking if one was to succeed in gaining intellectual distance. Warburg coined the neologism "*Denkraumschöpfung*" (quoted in: Wedepohl 2014: 47) for this, which could be translated as "creation of the conceptual space" or "thinking space."

The impossibility of having the world as a whole, so to speak, was captured by Warburg in the figure of the pendulum of consciousness, always swinging back and forth between the poles of myth and logos, "oscillating between the religious and the mathematical world view"[17] (Warburg 2017: A2). The phobic energies could only ever be reconciled temporarily; reason, rationality, and contemplation had to be fought for again and again – a program that is closely related to Blumenberg's concept of the "work on myth" as an "endless task" (Blumenberg 1985: 164) that could never be brought to an end: "The boundary line between myth and logos is imaginary and does not obviate the need to inquire about the logos of myth in the process of working free of the absolutism of reality. Math in itself is a piece of high-carat 'work of logos.'" (ibid: 12)

15 The question of the validity of Blumenberg's verdict in view of Cassirer's later writings such as "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths" (1944) or *The Myth of the State* (1946) cannot be pursued here.

16 "Meine tägliche Illusion gib mir heute!"

17 "[…] zwischen religiöser und mathematischer Weltanschauung schwankend" (Warburg 2012: 3).

The two thinkers share the diagnosis that the paradoxical relationship between myth and logos cannot be rationalized as a linear history of progress or decay; rather, it is necessary to focus on the different interpretations of the world humans construct and transmit in order to make plausible and legitimize their own systems of belief and knowledge. It should be pointed out here that for Warburg, antisemitism – the irrational and hostile exclusion of Jews and Judaism as something alien to European or German culture – was a clear and incriminating symptom that there could be no talk of steady progress towards reason and rationality in the process of European civilization (cf. Schoell-Glass 2008). Thus, Warburg deliberately spoke of the "attempt at self-education of European humankind"[18] (quoted in: Bauerle-Willert 1988: 4), a creative endeavor that had to be taken up again and again and was always in danger of failing.

Metaphor and Pathos Formula

Blumenberg's use of Warburgian concepts, such as that of "afterlife," which he refers to in "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos" to characterize the "secularization of Christianity," as well as his reference to the "afterlife of ancient mythology" (Blumenberg 1971: 27), shows that he was certainly aware of Warburg's work. This becomes even clearer in *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* when he uses Warburg's concept of the "pathos formula" (*Pathosformel*) to describe specific forms of "absolute metaphors" – in this case the metaphor of the "infinite task" (Blumenberg 1986: 359).

In the context of his metaphorological work, Blumenberg uses the term to describe affect-laden special cases of concepts of totality, problematic ideas or figures of thought, such as "change of consciousness" (*Bewusstseinswandel*), "life," or "zeitgeist." On the latter, he says in *Begriffe in Geschichten*:

> Zeitgeist research should not investigate what zeitgeists contain and demand to receive, not to say: infiltrate or impose; it should describe *how* zeitgeist-ness (*Zeitgeistigkeit*) exercises its dominance, through which transmission channels it induces itself, how it achieves devotion and frowns upon

18 "Selbsterziehungsversuch des europäischen Menschengeschlechts." Like Blumenberg and Cassirer, Warburg also refers to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780).

> aversions. The gestures and gesticulations of submission, the rituals and ceremonies of the profession of irresistibility, the "pathos formulae" of their conformities would be the subject of research.[19] (Blumenberg 1998: 248, original emphasis)

Anyone who is even superficially familiar with Warburg will immediately recognize here the familiar vocabulary: In Warburg's sense, "pathos formulae" are "ancient superlatives of the language of gestures," i.e. manifestations of the greatest sufferings and passions, of extreme physical or psychological experiences, which have been both imprinted and expressed in images. As artistic expressions, they have a calming potential, because they capture the overwhelming emotions in images; at the same time, they possess a tremendous inciting potency, because as "formulae" they can be revived and semantically recast in different constellations and for different purposes at any given time, which is particularly dangerous if the historical transformation processes that these images have already undergone remain unknown or unconscious. In Warburg's words: "Only contact with time causes polarization," i.e. the "incitement" to violence or a calming of the emotions. "This can lead to the radical reversal (inversion) of the true ancient sense."[20] (quoted in Raulff 2003: 136)

The prime example of this "inversion" is Warburg's favorite pathos formula, the nymph or Ninfa, who appeared in antiquity as a raging, bloodthirsty maenad and was recast since the Renaissance as a mourning Mary Magdalene under the cross, a dancing muse, or as an allegory of Fortuna, always keeping the same gestures and physical expressions but with radically transformed meaning (cf. Baert 2014).

Another of Warburg's examples that illustrates the threatening potential of such preconceived image formulae is the political instrumentalization of ancient Roman symbols of power, the *fasces*, as party insignia of Mussolini's Na-

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19 "Zeitgeistforschung sollte nicht untersuchen, was Zeitgeister enthalten und zu rezipieren aufgeben, um nicht zu sagen: infiltrieren oder oktroyieren; sie sollte beschreiben, *wie* Zeitgeistigkeit ihre Dominanz ausübt, auf welchen Übertragungswegen sie sich induziert, wie sie Zuwendungen bewirkt und Abwendungen verpönt. Die Gebärden und Gesten der Unterwerfung, die Rituale und Zeremonien der Bekundung von Unwiderstehlichkeit, die 'Pathosformeln ihrer Konformitäten wären das Thema der Erforschung" (transl. ER).

20 "Erst der Kontakt mit der Zeit bewirkt Polarisation. Diese kann zur radikalen Umkehr (Inversion) des echten antiken Sinns führen."

tional Fascist Party. On this, Warburg's diary entry of December 31, 1926 reads: "It can be seen how the sovereign insignia's sublime antique style is replaced by the emblem of the inner dynamic of market value. Antiquity as a brand (*fasces*) leads to the revelation of the schizophrenic power mania in Italy."[21] (Warburg 2007: 39)

Warburg understood "pathos formulae", with their uncanny emotional charge and their readoption for different expressive needs, as symptoms of instances of unresolved psychological crisis, as windows into the "souterrain of psychic life"[22] (Warburg 1964/65: fol. 25). He traced their wanderings and transformations in the process of European civilization in order to expose the problematic, irrational parts of the conceptualization of national identity and history up to his own time. In this way, his agenda comes remarkably close to Blumenberg's call to question the "how" of their dominance and transmission:

> Metaphors can first of all be *leftover elements*, rudiments of the path *from mythos to logos*. […] Even absolute metaphors therefore have a *history*. They have history in a more radical sense than concepts, for the historical transformation of metaphor brings to light the metakinetics of the historical horizon of meaning and ways of seeing within which concepts undergo their modifications. […] [M]etaphorology seeks to burrow down to the substructure of thought, the underground, the nutrient solution of systematic crystallizations, but it also aims to show with what "courage" the mind preempts itself in its images and how its history is projected in the courage of its conjectures. (Blumenberg 2020: 173; 176)

Metaphorology and Mnemosyne

Similarities between the two can also be found in their methodological approaches. For example, there are parallels in the way Blumenberg traces the changing meanings of the metaphor of the shipwreck in different contexts, epochs, and genres, while retaining its fundamental structure in *Shipwreck with Spectator* (Blumenberg 1996), and Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (Warburg 2012), which showcases images from different artists and eras as variations on

21 "Es läßt sich zeigen, wie der erhabene antike Stil des Hoheitszeichens ersetzt wird durch das Sinnbild der Eigendynamik des Verkehrswerthes. Die Antike als Marke (fasces) führt in Italien zur Offenbarung des schizophrenen Machtfimmels."

22 "[…] das Souterrain des Seelenlebens […]."

specific pathos formulae. Warburg constantly rearranged his material from different artists, countries, and genres on large canvases in order to sharpen the eye for the deviating details and the transformations that the images had undergone on their wanderings.

Both approaches could be described as montages, as constellations that are based on a nonconceptual logic of similarity. Transformations and continuities across epochs are revealed but without abstracting from the concrete individual case or turning it into a mere intermediate step in a teleological narrative. Thus, both projects – Blumenberg's metaphorology and Warburg's Mnemosyne – remain necessarily and programmatically unfinished:[23]

> Common to all affinities to myth is the fact that they do not make one believe or even allow one to believe that anything could have been definitely "come through" in the history of mankind, however often people believed they had put it behind them. […] we have learned to regard "overcomings" of this and that with mistrust, especially since the conjecture, or the suspicion, of latencies has arisen. We are acquainted with regressions to early states, with primitivisms, barbarisms, brutalisms, atavisms. (Blumenberg 1985: 52)

Thus, the awareness of the limits of conceptuality, of the irrational parts of all human histories of the world and the recognition that the assumption of the possibility of a purely rational explanation of the world is itself mythological, can help to protect against ideologization and totalitarian systems of thought. In his speech on Cassirer, Blumenberg emphasizes the provisional nature of all history:

> This ethos, so proper to the historian, denies that any present state might ever be something like the goal of history or the preferred means by which such a goal might be approached […]. And we are better off for it, for there being no goal to history preserves us from remaining in 'anticipation' of such a goal, of being a means subservient to its fulfilment. (Blumenberg 2022: 220)

With this clear rejection of a teleology of history and its focus on a purely chronological sequence, Blumenberg not only pleads for an appreciation of the remote and the marginal, but also repeats the credo of Warburg's cultural science: an emphatic commitment to a principle of the provisional, and thus

23 On Blumenberg's metaphorology, cf. Ifergan 2015; Moyn 2000.

a mode of interpretation that does not seek the original text or the archetype, but understands each individual phenomenon as a symptom of a processing that has already taken place. Instead of linear historiography, Warburg considered the work of the cultural historian to be essentially one of continuous commentary, the telling of symptom histories. Thus, on antiquity and its persisting influence, he said: "This history should be told fairytale-like, a ghost story for fully grown-ups."[24] (Warburg 1925–1929: fol. 3)

Memoria and Afterlife

History invokes another field where Blumenberg and Warburg meet, that of memory. Mnemosyne, the patron goddess of memory and mother of the Muses, was not only the title of Warburg's *Bilderatlas* and the motto of his library, but also lay at the heart of the ethical orientation of his method of cultural science. In his words: "In the KBW, 'Mnemosyne' and 'Sophrosyne' should find the cult of silent readers."[25] (Warburg 1926) Self-cognition, contemplation, and prudence could only be achieved by remembering one's own prehistory, by preserving the memory of the painful attempts at orientation of previous generations and by locating oneself in the process of cultural history. Only through such a continuous work of remembrance could "the treasure trove of humanity's suffering become a humane possession"[26] (quoted in: Warnke 1980: 113), i.e. the experience of suffering in human history be understood in its humane dimension and retain "ethical and practical value for those who come after us"[27] (Warburg 1915). This ethical agenda was rooted in the historical experience of Judaism, not only in its rich culture and traditions developed in the millennia-long struggle for orientation in the cosmos and the world, but also in the continuing experience of discrimination and violent expulsion and the challenge of coming to terms with it culturally and psychologically, or, as Warburg put it: "We have been patients of world history for 2000 years longer."[28] (quoted in Bing 1992: 464)

24 "Vom Einfluss der Antike. Diese Geschichte ist märchenhaft to vertellen, Gespenstergeschichte für ganz Erwachsene."

25 "'Mnemosyne' und 'Sophrosyne' sollen in der K.B.W. […] den Kult stiller Leser finden."

26 "Der Leidschatz der Menschheit wird humaner Besitz."

27 "[…] für die Nachfolger ethischen und praktischen Wert behält."

28 "Wir sind eben schon 2000 Jahre länger Patienten der Weltgeschichte gewesen."

In the context of the "humanity of myth" (Blumenberg 1971: 33), Blumenberg also refers to "memoria" as a remembering reinterpretation and speaks of memory itself as work on myth, as an ongoing reception and transformation of great mythical narratives in specific historical-cultural contexts. Myths can provide orientation and comfort by fulfilling time- and situation-specific plausibility functions through their mutability. At the same time, for both Blumenberg and Warburg, they are grounded in the basic anthropological disposition, which accounts for their enormous power of attraction and connectivity for the specific contexts, as Blumenberg explains in *Work on Myth*:

> The fundamental patterns of myths are simply so sharply defined [*prägnant*], so valid, so binding, so gripping in every sense, that they convince again and again and still present themselves as the most useful material for any search for how matters stand, on a basic level, with human existence. (Blumenberg 1985: 150, original emphasis)

Warburg points to the same basic structure of mythical world-reference, which has its roots in the "torturing questions on the why and wherefore of things"[29] (Warburg 1938/1939: 291) that impose themselves on every individual, every generation everywhere, plunging people time and again into the "tragic struggle between imagination and logic"[30] (quoted in: Bauerle-Willert 2001: 249). Warburg's anthropological concept is echoed in Blumenberg's statement that "absolute metaphors 'answer' the supposedly naïve, in principle unanswerable questions whose relevance lies quite simply in the fact that they cannot be brushed aside, since we do not *pose* them ourselves but find them already *posed* in the ground of our existence" (Blumenberg 2010: 14, original emphasis).

In the face of existential questions, images and metaphors function as a source of consolation because they provide orientation and self-assertion. For Warburg, the prime example of this was Dürer's *Melencolia I*, because the engraving gives expression to the state of indecision between the modern claim to self-reliant subjectivity and the unbroken power of magic and superstition, thereby having a consoling effect: "The truly creative act – that which gives [it] its consoling, humanistic message of liberation from the fear of Saturn – can be

29 "Die quälende Frage nach dem Warum der Dinge" (Warburg 2018: 91).

30 "Der tragische Kampf zwischen Phantasie und Logik."

understood only if we recognize that the artist has taken a magical and mythical logic and made it spiritual and intellectual."[31] (Warburg 1999a: 644)

Thus, every age has its myths and remains dependent on them. In order to escape the rigidity of ideologization and dogmatization – this would be, in Blumenberg's words, "the work of myth" (*Arbeit des Mythos*) – their stories would have to be constantly rewritten and retold. For Warburg, this involves an element of personal responsibility towards tradition: How the ancient heritage is received and used does not depend on any fixed meaning of the "pathos formulae," but "on the subjective character of those who live after"[32] (Warburg 2016: 101). In this respect, as Warburg writes somewhat aphoristically: "Every age has the Renaissance of antiquity that it deserves."[33] (ibid: 101)

The agenda of his critical cultural studies was to counter the remythicizations of his time, which he registered with horror, with a different understanding of antiquity, its heritage, and its afterlife. Warburg wanted to counteract the nationalist myths and the irrational racist and antisemitic outbreaks of violence that went hand in hand with them by programmatically enlightening the transmission history of the ideologically used and unconsciously handed down image formulae, since only insight into one's own prehistory could "help them gain clarity about the mental place, in which they find themselves"[34] (Warburg 1929). For this specific mode of historical consciousness, Warburg coined the expression afterlife (*Nachleben*): the memory of the history of suffering of previous generations and its commemoration in the collective memory and in art as an "organ of social memory"[35] (Warburg 1999b: 715). For all their differences, in this Warburg echoes Blumenberg's call to make "a claim to the respect of those who are yet to come – by extending that respect to those who preceded us" (Blumenberg 2022: 222).

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31 "Der recht eigentlich schöpferische Akt, der Dürer's 'Melencolia I' zum humanistischen Trostblatt wider Saturnfürchtigkeit macht, kann erst begriffen werden, wenn man diese magische Mythologik als eigentliches Objekt der künstlerisch-vergeistigenden Umformung erkennt" (Warburg 1998a: 528).

32 "[…] der subjektive Charakter der Nachlebenden […]."

33 "Jede Zeit hat die Renaissance der Antike, die sie verdient."

34 "[…] dass historisches Bewusstsein […] ihnen zur Klarheit über den seelischen Ort verhelfen kann, an dem sie sich befinden […]."

35 "[…] als soziales Erinnerungsorgan […]" (Warburg 1998b: 586).

Conclusion

I will conclude with Blumenberg's only explicit engagement with Warburg that I know of, the miniature "Geschmacksurteil" ("Judgment of taste"), which first appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in March 1990 and was later published in *Begriffe in Geschichten*.[36] In his critique of the judgment of taste, this at first glance meaningless nobilization of subjective pleasure, Blumenberg comes to speak of the postage stamp and states: "Those who are sure of their taste rarely get excited when it comes to the most widely used object of trivial art. The 'recipients' silent adhesion has a discouraging effect." (Blumenberg 1998: 69)

As a "lone example of what is also possible," he cites Aby Warburg and his keen sensitivity to the impact of trivial everyday images. Warburg recognized the postage stamp, this "image vehicle"[37] (Warburg 2017: D6), as the first truly global image medium, as an act of world appropriation in miniature format, whose visual language and symbolism involuntarily provided a direct insight into the intentions and self-imaginations of its creator. "Precisely at the turn of the century, the mythological figure of Germania appeared serially on the stamps of the German Empire," Blumenberg says, and was thus sent out all over the world as an emblem of German sovereignty. Aby Warburg's reaction to the stamp was drastic; his indignant statement that this Germania looked like a costumed cook, is, in Blumenberg's view "a demonstration of utmost secureness in matters of taste" (Blumenberg 1998: 69).

The fact that the lady who posed for the stamp was not a cook, but an actress, does not detract from Warburg's intuition. His eye unmasked the theatrical pose aiming to establish itself as a symbol of national identity and the equally bland and pompous nationalistic self-dramatization revealed in it; elsewhere, Warburg also spoke of "German glory-exhibitionism under state protection"[38] (Warburg 1928). For Blumenberg, the anecdote not only confirmed Warburg's judgment of taste, but also the "triumph" of his method, which allowed him to recognize the stamp as a "metaphor of singular precision for an epoch that presents itself in a seemingly unspecific 'label'" (Blumenberg 1998: 69).

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36 The following translations from "Geschmacksurteil" are my own.

37 "Bilderfahrzeug" (Warburg 2012: 5).

38 "[…] deutscher Herrlichkeits-Exhibitionismus unter staatlichem Schutz […]."

Perhaps Blumenberg's unerring grasp of the core of Warburg's cultural science is rooted in the fact that they were working on the same problem from different angles and at different times – and he therefore perceived the other's work as, in Warburg's words, "a knocking on the other side of the tunnel"[39] (Warburg 1926).

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39 "[…] ich hörte ihn auf der anderen Seite des Tunnels klopfen." Warburg was referring to his friend and colleague, the historian of astrology and astronomy Franz Boll.

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