It is not difficult to understand why civil servants and academic managers are treating the Warburg Library with so little respect. They see it as a storehouse for books that is occupying an expensive patch of real estate, whereas its happy users see it as an enormous model of Aby Warburg’s mind and like to walk about inside that model. The Library could easily be stored in underground or compact shelving, or in Outer London, its contents ferried to Woburn Square on demand by minivan. But that arrangement would not at all be the same thing. Unless you are in the stacks, moving from book to book, retracing with your body the wiring of the very interesting brain, you are not really communicating with it. The library-brain is a bundle of nodes, each immediately linked to two other nodes by physical contiguity: one book to the left and another to the right. The leather-bound, sixteenth-century imprint finds itself cheek to cheek with the unprepossessing late-twentieth-century paperback. This is the aspect of the Library I find most delightful.

In the Library we tread paths that Aby Warburg himself, while alive, never followed. The quantity of nodes in the great leather-and-paper organism has grown, since the death of the founder in 1929, from 65,000 to 350,000. But the original wiring pattern is still in place. The mind of Warburg lives, but it no longer belongs to Warburg. That mind is now a coproduction of the dead and the living. The Library is interactive but, as an intelligent organism, it is not so easily instrumentalized. You succumb to its rhythms. The Library does not invite the
arbitrary, ludic leaps that Umberto Eco prized in “De Bibliotheca,” his paean to the open-stack university libraries of North America.¹

The Warburg Library is our Solaris. Stanislaw Lem’s ocean-planet was an organic plasma that “remembered” humankind. Solaris archived the contents of human imaginations and then projected those contents back into the human sphere, provoking but ultimately confusing the efforts of cosmologists and astronauts to grasp the planet-mind as a whole, objectively:

. . . any scientist who devotes himself to the study of Solariana has the indelible impression that he can discern fragments of an intelligent structure, perhaps endowed with genius, haphazardly mingled with outlandish phenomena. . . .²

Solaris was not a merely passive or reflective cognitive instrument, but rather active:

Not, it is true, according to human ideas [of activity]—it did not build cities or bridges, nor did it manufacture flying machines. It did not try to reduce distances, nor was it concerned with the conquest of Space. . . . But it was engaged in a never-ending process of transformation, an “ontological autometamorphosis.”³

The Library-user submits to the pull of the brain. The Library reaches inside you and materializes your memories in the form of the books it generates through you and then, in turn, absorbs back into its shelves. In this way, it mimics the imaginations of its reader-participants. To use the Library as it is meant to be used, moving sideways from book to book, is to retrace the circuitry of an externalized but still plastic memory.

Fifteen years ago, I spent a month in the Library of the Warburg Institute, studying externalized memory. My topic was the origins of archaeology and antiquarianism in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, mainly in northern Europe. The archaeologists hoped that material artefacts—buildings, images, or tools—might offer privileged access to the past. Such realia seemed to have been directly “extruded” by the societies that made them, so testifying more immediately to lost experience than do texts, whose messages were entangled in the conventions of language. The scholars and communities I was studying trusted material evidence, because they were confident that truth came from elsewhere and that one needed to open and maintain the channels that had a chance of delivering truth. The material thing seemed to remember better. Aby Warburg

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likewise believed that one could not count on texts to deliver the whole past. He understood images and rituals as the elements of a memory not only externalized but also suprasubjective. Memory, for Warburg, was something that happened outside of and beyond the individual subject. His Library, which is a collection of images as much as of texts, was designed not so much to help us remember, as to be the memory itself.

In the event, as the early archaeologists and art historians soon learned, images and buildings were subject to conventions of their own, and moreover were more likely to be damaged or unreliably replaced than texts. Artefacts were made by people and thus mimicked the individual creative imagination, even as they delivered sacred or historical content. Memory-systems, in other words, do not always remember what they were designed to remember.

Mnemosyne

The Warburg Library must never be dismantled or hidden away. It must retain its independence from other institutions and libraries—a status guaranteed, it would seem, by the trust deed of November 1944. The collection could easily be moved, as Anthony Grafton and Jeffrey Hamburger archly remind us at the end of their 2010 article in the New York Review of Books. Solaris could find a new orbit. When human imagination is extracted from bodies and stored in books and images, it becomes mobile in time and space: that is the great advantage of the disembodied memory. Some people had been wondering, even before the current crisis of the universities in the United Kingdom, whether the Library ought not to go home to Hamburg. Would that really be the best resolution of the budget crisis?

Hamburg has come around to remembering its Library. In 1995, after decades of private (non-Warburg, of course) ownership, the house in the Heilwigstrasse was purchased by the city. Today it is a research center, independent from but allied with the University of Hamburg. The research program of the new Warburg-Haus is loosely defined. The Hamburg institution is perhaps more likely than its London counterpart to embrace studies in the philosophy of history and culture, as opposed to empirical research in the classical tradition. When I visited in 1997, the rooms and shelves were mostly bare of books. Instead there was a clutch of desktop computers housing a bank of images under the rubric “Political Iconography.” This was the theme developed by Martin Warnke, the art historian and founding director of the new Warburg-Haus, whose 1980 essay on Aby Warburg had fueled the revival of interest in him in Germany. Interest in

Warburg’s writings in the English-speaking world was slower to ignite. In 1970 Ernst Gombrich published his great intellectual biography of Warburg, the only book that Gombrich ever published, other than his bestseller *The Story of Art*, that was not based on a lecture series. Gombrich was summoned by Fritz Saxl to London in 1935 to prepare Warburg’s papers for publication, and for this assignment he received a visa. But other than that book, originally meant to accompany a proper biography by Gertrud Bing, there was little written about Warburg in English before the 1990s, and almost none of his writings had been translated into English. The keepers and users of the Library in Woburn Square, their minds under the immediate sway of Solaris, were unable to clear enough distance *(Denkraum*, the mental space cleared out by rational differentiation; a key value for Warburg) to ask themselves what their mentor’s project was really about. Today, all that has changed. The flow of English-language publications on Warburg and his work swells. The once-esoteric cult of Warburg is now exoteric.

Warnke devoted the revenue of his Leibniz Prize, a prestigious research grant, to the reanimation of the Hamburg house. Warnke’s program of “Political Iconography” was grounded in his own pioneering work on medieval cathedral building, Renaissance court artists, and the political contents assigned to nature and images of nature in European modernity. These books were guided by a desire to rescue premodern art from the fiction of its transcendence of real economic and political circumstances. “Political Iconography” is the tracking of political ideas and passions from image to image. Warnke’s research plan and database perpetuated Warburg’s original brief insofar as they disrespected any traditional concept of the fine arts and instead focused on the potency of icons (in all media). And yet the theme of politics also signaled a break with Warburg, whose overall intellectual project moved within a different time frame. In the modern West, to think politically means to think about simultaneity: *this* is the moment of revolution or rupture, not for some but for all, all at once. Political action looks forward, not backward. “Let the dead bury the dead,” Marx had said. Whereas, for Warburg, the past was continually being delivered to the present by “pathos-formulas” or the concretized relics of primordial emotions: images of victors, mourners, sacrificial victims, celebrants. For Warburg, the dead are still quick, still on the move.

Warnke resutured the image to politics and to the linear time of modern progressive politics, in order to discredit the myth of the autonomous image. According to Ernst Cassirer, who delivered the first formal lecture in the Warburg-Haus in 1921, the image in civilization takes on “an immanent validity and truth . . . not aiming at something or referring to something

else.” For Cassirer, the spirit can only enter into a free, or aesthetic, relation with the image that is liberated from myth and ritual. Like Warnke, and against Cassirer, Warburg doubted that the historical being can ever enter into a free relation with the historical image.

The chosen theme of “Political Iconography” may thus be seen as a reassuring token that the reasons for the Library’s evacuation from Hamburg in 1933 were well remembered in Hamburg.

Or does it mean something quite different? Is not memory activated precisely when one is ready to transfigure the past and so prepare it for reclaiming? Not until 1981, after all, did anyone think to mount a plaque remembering the forced evacuation on the house in the Heilwigstrasse. Creative memory, which was my research topic at the Warburg Institute, is selective memory. “Political Iconography” is a strong, selective reading of Warburg’s legacy. The concern in the Warburg-Haus is no longer the survival of antiquity but rather the persistence of inequality and the endless contestation of rights. One might argue that Solaris should belong to whoever can come up with the best interpretation of it.

But Warburg’s own argument was that memory, externalized in images and other crystallizations of feeling, selects us. The past bears down on the present. We are not so free to transfigure the past. Warburg, in life, retreated from reality in order to stabilize himself and find some refuge from the present, and the future, in the hope of grasping it all. Unlike both Warnke and Cassirer, Warburg did not believe that the destiny of the image is to liberate us politically.

**Terminus ad quem**

Whither culture? In the 1920s, Warburg, Saxl, and Bing, in preparation for the transformation of Solaris from a quasi-public institution, housed in private rooms at 114 Heilwigstrasse, into a proper research library in the newly constructed building next door, devised a classification scheme that is also a theory of culture. “Orientation,” the theme of the ground floor, is the entry into civilization. The sky resolves into constellations. The body submits to towns and temples aligned by star and landscape. From then on up, floor to floor, it is all civilization: pattern holding the line against randomness and the surge of emotions. The second floor of the Library was given over to “Image,” the third floor to “Word.” This system is preserved in Woburn Square, more or less.

The uppermost of the four floors of bookstacks is governed by the rubric “Dromenon”; “the thing done,” the act. Since one might be forgiven for grasping the four-story shelving scheme as a mystical ascent, we can think about dromenon as a destination. The word was borrowed from archaic Greek religion. The Mysteries had involved legomenon, deiknymenon, and dromenon: words, images, and rites. The word dromenon is derived from dramein, to run. But dromenon, the running, designates not the bolt into futurity, nor the race to catch up with history, nor panicked flight, nor random errancy, but rather the repetitive action of ritual, whose meaning is not its destination but its patternedness. The ritual manages time. It is “a thing re-done, or pre-done.” It does not show but really reproduces, and produces. On the fourth floor of Warburg’s Library were books about history, law, social and political institutions, civic and court culture, and war, but also folklore, festivals, theater, music, costume, heraldry and genealogy, communication and travel. The dromena, the rites, contain the fear that threatens to break out in an open-ended, unguided running.

The Library’s top floor is an ambiguous destination. The overall schema is uneasily allied with modern projects seemingly parallel to Warburg’s, for example Cassirer’s philosophy of culture. For Cassirer, who prized but feared Warburg’s labyrinth, the destination of culture had already been marked out by the European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment project is the emancipation of man from myth and ritual. For Cassirer, the future is in sight because we have already imagined it. That future will involve a liberation from the mystification of repetitive action, linked to an invisible reality by the bonds of mimesis. Warburg did not necessarily share this confidence.

Warburg was interested in the ways antiquity persists. But then what? What happens finally? What are the limits on development and progress? They are set by the initial Orientation, the taxonomic rubric that embraced books about symbols, religion, magic, mathematics, divination, astrology, astronomy, and philosophy. Orientation for Warburg meant setting the limits in advance. In his lecture on the serpent ritual among the Pueblo, Warburg seems to keep a cool distance from the magical fusion with the animal produced by the dances of the indigenous Americans. But ultimately, myth, symbol, and ritual were less the problem for Warburg than the solution: “Mythical and symbolic thinking strive to form spiritual bonds between humanity and the surrounding world, shaping

11. Harrison, Themis, 43–44.
distance into the space required for devotion and reflection: the distance undone by the instantaneous electric connection.”

Technology was the problem. The Library in Hamburg was famously wired, with telephones, speaking tubes, conveyor belts, book elevators, and an “Epidiaskop” for showing slides. But Warburg worried that accelerated, electrically enhanced communication and transportation would collapse cognitive distance and pull us back into a primordial participatory mentality, a global village that encouraged a depatterning of will and attention.

Cassirer’s confidence in freedom, and lack of interest in ritual, were shared by Gombrich, the Institute’s director from 1959 to 1976. In 1961 Gertrud Bing, already registering a generation’s distance from Warburg’s death, not to mention the caesura of war, said that Dromenon was no longer a destination but rather was meant to be succeeded by reflection such that the whole cycle could begin again. In 1996 I found Gombrich sitting all alone in a large armchair in the basement of the Institute. He had just delivered a lecture but the students and researchers, in tea-drinking clutches, did not dare or care to approach the monument in three-piece suit and black gym shoes. We were at the farthest point in the building from the books devoted to “Action.” His mind at age 87 was sharp.

“Politics” as Warburg understood it was not so much a protest against civilization as it was a mode of civilization, another quest for pattern, and it was well-embedded on the fourth floor among the rites and customs. The individual agent, the potential political actor, was for Warburg hemmed in on the one side by Fortuna (the instability that foils intentions) and on the other by ritual (symbolic, noninstrumental action). For the truly modern thinker, ritual is no threat, because rationalism so quickly exposes it as empty repetition. The Protestant reformer Ulrich Zwingli explained that the Host was a symbol fixed in time—that is, a mere human artefact, product of a context and a worldview—and therefore that the sacrament of communion was only a ceremony. For Warburg, by contrast, ritual lived because his symbols, the pathos-formulas that preserved the emotions of the dead, never stalled in time.

So Warnke’s “Political Iconography” represents a lateral shift from Warburg’s project into a completely different temporality.

Reenactment

Once I gave a lecture on creative archaeology in the oval reading room at the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg. I spoke along the short axis of the ellipse. The lenses

of the slide projectors poked from the gallery above. Lectures were also delivered
in the oval reading room in Warburg’s time; the screen used to rise from the
floor. No lecture ever felt more like a rite of passage, an initiation—indeed, a
reenactment.

My lecture in Hamburg was based on the research I conducted at the
Library in London a year earlier. The topic was the ambivalent nature of the
material transmission of the past. For the early antiquarians, no document was
more vivid than an artefact or an image, but none was more vulnerable to deterio-
ration and replacement. Copies of images tended to drift ever farther from their
prototypes, unprotected by the diacritical system of the alphabet, a hedge against
unwanted corruption of message. The alphabet splits language from speech. The
printed word splits the text from handwriting. Digitalization splits the text from
a material artefact. The book can be lost, and yet the text survives. The vicissis-
tudes of textual transmission progressively diminish. The content of the textual
message is pried away from its material vehicles. The image, by contrast, seemed
to preserve the force of an originary moment in the deep past, and so became,
in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the key to the reenactments that knit
culture together.

In the Renaissance, the capacity of the handmade image to deliver the Real
from afar was increasingly doubted. The task of reference came to be assigned
to the mechanically replicated image. The magical-participatory approach to
knowledge of the past (trusting in artefacts or images) clashed with the literal-
rational approach (accepting that someone made this image, with all that implies).
The handmade image found a new identity as fiction, the unapologetic product
of the imagination.

Aby Warburg, who displayed relatively little interest in the modern fic-
tional image—the autonomous artwork—proceeded as if none of this had hap-
pened. He went on looking to images to deliver the past, fearing and trusting the
past’s tendency to pulse forward through images. The rites, the dromena, help us
absorb the impact of the bundles of energy hurtling toward us from the past. The
paratactic montage of images on the black panels of Warburg’s Memory Atlas
was a revelation of pattern. The patient assembly and mounting of the images
also belongs under Dromenon, on the fourth floor. So too does the building of
libraries.

Significant for me was the moment in London, a classic Warburg Library
moment, when I fell on an unexpected volume in the stacks. This was a bound
photocopy of an antiquarian manuscript in the Royal Library in Stockholm. The
volume is one of two surviving sylloges, or collections of ancient drawings and
inscriptions, compiled by the sixteenth-century French scholar Jean-Jacques
Boissard. I was in search of the possible model for a recently discovered drawing
of a soldier by Albrecht Dürer. The inscription in Dürer’s hand mentioned an
image “found in Celeia,” an ancient Roman settlement in Carinthia, now Slovenia. No such artefact seems to have survived. In a manuscript once owned by the antiquarian Conrad Peutinger in Augsburg, however, I had found a drawing of an ancient monument that resembled Dürer’s figure. Boissard’s Stockholm manuscript confirmed the identification: the same figure appeared, and this time the page was labeled “Cilia in Stiria.” Boissard was in Augsburg in the 1550s and had access to Peutinger’s materials. The Library pulled the photocopy of the Stockholm manuscript to its shelves, where it sat among the real books to its left and right, the unlikely projection of some other scholar’s intuition, waiting for the pounce of a future Solarian who, to be honest, would never have traveled all the way to Stockholm on the chance that the Boissard manuscript might yield the answer to the Augsburg puzzle. And if the Library were packed into trucks and removed to dark storage, that scholar would surely never have landed on the humble volume. As a matter of fact, I do not find the Stockholm photocopy in the current online catalog of the Library. . . . Perhaps it exists only for the physical visitor to the stacks, a book deaf to the thin call of the digital researcher.

I found embedded in the Warburg Institute not only books but also people, for example J. B. Trapp, who had succeeded Gombrich as director and had published several ingenious essays about the fictive tombs of ancient poets. Trapp’s basic insight was that erudition in the Renaissance generated its own peculiar forms of credulity, freakish projections of the historical imagination into the very formats devised to stabilize the past: the tomb monument, the epigram, the treatise. Trapp’s line—which he obligingly confirmed for me viva voce, in his Warburg Institute office—converged on the similarly paradoxical argument of Anthony Grafton, developed in Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship (1990), that the unscrupulous manipulators of tradition were often the very scholars who best understood the powers and limits of book-to-book transmission. Together, Trapp and Grafton marked the path I tried to follow from floor to floor in the Library.

Still another living text whom I sought out in a Warburg Institute office was Christopher Ligota. Like Trapp, he had sensed the ghostly presence of Fiction within the house of History. Ligota was the author of a brilliant essay on the historical method of Annius of Viterbo, the forger of ancient texts, pointing out that Annius had entered so deeply into his labyrinth of truth and falsehood that he used to point out philological problems in the very texts he had forged. Finally, among the index cards of the Census of Ancient Works Known to the

Renaissance, a vast and ongoing project under her joint supervision, I met Ruth Rubinstein, who initiated me into her still-handwritten arcana.

**Stargazing**

The Word is buried in the middle of the stacks, on the second floor. The placement hints at one of the paradoxes of the Library: Aby Warburg was really not so much a reader of texts. In his Library, the Word did not have the last word. Obviously, Warburg was well-read and moreover was a subtle interpreter of poetry: his analyses of Angelo Poliziano’s divergences from his source, the Homeric hymns, were the key to his dissertation on Botticelli, still read today.\(^\text{18}\) But Warburg was not so interested in the ways that texts disseminate. His Library grows, but we recall that it is an Oriented growth. The Library has its limits marked out on the ground, like a temple. Texts, if they are not Oriented, will generate new texts uncontrollably, ferrying us farther and farther from the concrete, the bodily, and perhaps also from the divine personages. Libraries can be a way not only of storing texts but also of managing them.

Warburg’s great contemporary, the Viennese art historian Julius von Schlosser (both were born in 1866), was pessimistically resigned to the waywardness of texts. Schlosser was a true reader and did not necessarily count on the serendipitous *trouvaille* in the stacks. He is supposed to have had a cart piled with books wheeled to his university office each morning, sending it back for replenishment at the end of the day. He wrote a history of writing about art, from antiquity through the eighteenth century, which is a chronicle of increasing alienation from artmaking itself. In the end, for Schlosser, the history of art merged with the history of art criticism and finally with art history, an academic discipline. Schlosser regretted the loss of an immediate relation to art, but accepted historywriting as the great task of the modern.

Warburg, by contrast, was not so interested in creating the past through writing. The past for him was already vividly present in those ciphers of condensed feeling—images of extreme passion, panic, willfulness—that stood out conspicuously on the screen of perceptions just as the constellations dominated the night sky. The model for Warburg was finally the sky-atlas, a field of constellations against a black background. In Gombrich’s account of Warburg’s thought, the constellations brought order to the archaic sky. They oriented.\(^\text{19}\) Orientation may be the ground floor of the Library, but it needs to be performed again and


again. The firmament, like the Library itself, is infinite but bounded. This is the quality of the Library that Cassirer noted.20

As the light fades, more and more stars—books—appear. We peer at the profusion of stars, a different kind of reading, in hope of glimpsing a future that the past has in store for us. Astrology, a science that Warburg by no means despised, revealed human action to be of dubious import. The paradoxes and limitations of action, explored in the volumes perched on the highest floor, were for Warburg the subject of deepest mystery and the source of his confusion in the face of the present.

This conception of a library is unorthodox. No one who regards a library as anything like a how-to manual could possibly comprehend it. We have not even begun to learn how to use Warburg’s Library. The irony is that the Library is now threatened by politics, exactly the lurching, reckless rhythm that the drom- ena were meant to neutralize.