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**Museum and Mnemosyne:  
Aby Warburg, André Malraux, and the re-/construction of  
art history as social history**

*« L'histoire de l'art depuis cent ans [...] est l'histoire de ce qui est photographiable. »<sup>1</sup>*

Aby Warburg and André Malraux – to many scholars of French literature and art history the topic of this article might sound strange. As far as I know, no one has ever drawn a deeper comparison between these two men who are counted among the most influential art historians and art theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Admittedly, their respective life, work, and character could not be more different, a discrepancy which is due only in part to the difference of generations and historical circumstances.

On the one hand, we have André Malraux (1901-1976), who broke out of his bourgeois environment quite early to become something of an adventurer, often living on the borderline of legality and the brink of bankruptcy. His life was spent in motion between the world of the Parisian avant-garde, the colonial society of French East Asia, the international communist revolution, the anti-fascist wars and post-war politics in France – an existence somehow held together by, but also mystified in his numerous novels, articles, and essays.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, there is Abraham Moritz Warburg (1866-1929), called Aby Warburg, who came from a dynasty of wealthy Jewish bankers in Hamburg and whose only revolutionary act was to become an art historian. Thanks to the almost inexhaustible monetary means of his family, he was able to spend his life as a private scholar commuting between Florence and Hamburg, where he founded the famous Warburg Library, now in London. He is renowned as a specialist in Italian Renaissance art and often mistaken for the inventor of iconology, a method actually developed by his assistants, Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky.<sup>3</sup> Though

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<sup>1</sup> André Malraux: *Les Voix du silence*, 1 : *Le Musée imaginaire*, 1. In : André Malraux : *Ecrits sur l'art I* (*Œuvres complètes*, IV), ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Paris 2004, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Todd: *André Malraux. Une vie*, Paris 2001. Jean Lacouture : *Malraux. Une vie dans le siècle*, Paris 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich: *Aby Warburg. Eine intellektuelle Biographie*, Hamburg 2006. Karen Michels: *Aby Warburg. Im Bannkreis der Ideen*, München 2007.

constantly engaged in research, he published very little, and most of his writings have remained manuscript notes and drafts.

In contrast to these obvious differences, a lot of similarities between Malraux and Warburg may also be noted. Above all, these concern their overall concept of art and art history as well as their approach to art. Firstly, both were never art historians in the traditional sense, instead, they were interested in the history of culture, social context, psychology and their respective impact on artists and the development of styles. Secondly, both looked beyond the “classical”, Western canon of art history and its genres, seeking to link it to Asian, African and American art and artefacts - Malraux with a focus on East Asia and Africa, Warburg concentrating on the Middle East and North America. Thirdly, both were highly aware of the role of the reproduction in art historical discourse. They became two of the first theorists of the impact of photographic reproductions on art history, society and cultural memory.

### **André Malraux and the idea of the “Musée imaginaire”**

*« Le musée sépare l'œuvre du monde 'profane' et la rapproche des œuvres opposées ou rivales. Il est une confrontation des métamorphoses. »<sup>4</sup>*

Malraux' “Musée imaginaire”, written for large parts between 1947 and 1951, as well as his book on the “Métamorphose des Dieux” are complex reflections on art, the different ways of looking at art and the changes in dealing with it throughout different times and cultures. Comparing the Eastern and Western, the ancient and the medieval perception of works of art, Malraux observes a fundamental shift towards an “intellectualization” which is closely related to the principle of comparison, especially the comparison of style, which in turn forms the basis of the modern “Western” museum. By incorporating an object into a museum, it is divorced from its original context and function in life and transformed into an abstract item in the imaginary museum of art history:

*«... si nous remplaçons la foi par l'amour de l'art, peu importe qu'un musée reconstitue une chapelle de cathédrale, car nous avons fait d'abord de nos cathédrales des musées. Si nous parvenions à éprouver les sentiments qu'éprouvaient les premiers spectateurs d'une statue égyptienne, d'un crucifix roman, nous ne pourrions plus laisser ceux-ci au Louvre. »<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> André Malraux: Les Voix du silence, 1 : Le Musée imaginaire, 1. In : André Malraux : Ecrits sur l'art I (Œuvres complètes, IV), ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Paris 2004, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 260.

Art history emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when photography, « *l'imprimerie des arts plastiques* », enabled art historians to establish a classification system of different styles and their development:

« *Car un Musée imaginaire s'est ouvert, qui va pousser à l'extrême l'incomplète confrontation imposée par les vrais musées: répondant à l'appel de ceux-ci, les arts plastiques ont inventé leur imprimerie.* »<sup>6</sup>

Photography is by definition a fragmentary reproduction and, according to Roland Barthes' "La chambre claire", an "instant" of reality. Just as real museums isolate objects from their original contexts, photographic reproductions always fragment an object and reduce its material quality, especially in the case of black-and-white photography:

« *Ces miniatures, ces fresques, ces vitraux, ces tapisseries, ces plaques scythes, ces détails, ces dessins de vases grecs – même ces sculptures – sont devenus des planches. Qu'y ont-ils perdu? Leur qualité d'objets. Qu'y ont-ils gagné? La plus grande signification de style qu'ils puissent assumer. [...] ... s'offre en marge du musée [imaginaire] le plus vaste domaine de connaissance artistique que l'homme ait connu. Ce domaine [...] c'est pour la première fois, l'héritage de toute l'histoire.* »<sup>7</sup>

Malraux' overview of art history in the "imaginary museum" enables him to discern a kind of universal, humanist "psychology of art" which transcends all traditions and national boundaries. The political impact of his point of view, which unites aesthetics with cultural and social history and criticism, is revealed in the course of the "Musée imaginaire". This concept had already been appeared in earlier articles and political speeches, such as his speech on "Cultural Heritage" in 1936. It was further developed in his other writings, especially the "Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale" and the "Métamorphose des Dieux".

"Cultural heritage" evolves into the "imaginary museum", that is, the body of works which helps men to live, « *l'ensemble des voix qui répondent à nos questions* ». For Malraux, art is the only way in which humans can oppose the "monsters" that threaten them – e.g. the silence of death, the dark, hell, all kinds of "demons". By opposing its creative force to these dangers, art enables mankind to survive. Art is a meditation on life, brought to a specific form by an artist who expresses himself in a particular style which reflects his perception of the world, albeit in an abstract, symbolic and substitute way. Thus, a work of art is always an expression of distance and rupture, of "invented forms against inherited forms". Art is both a reflection of and a constant question to the world and everything which transcends it:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 238-240.

*„We discover that art was never transmitted from mankind to God, but always from God to mankind; that the human being was never the subject of imitation, but always of conquest. [...] Style is no longer only a common characteristic of all works of a certain school or epoch – the result or ornament of a certain way of looking at things – instead, style is a phenomenon which expresses what a given era profoundly seeks and for which living forms only serve as raw material. There is actually only one answer to the question: ‘What is art? – That by which form becomes style.’ This is the starting point of the psychology of artistic creation.”<sup>8</sup>*

### **Aby Warburg – The “Atlas of Mnemosyne” (1924-1929)**

Malraux’ “imaginary museum” was to remain theory. His concept, however, bears interesting parallels to Aby Warburg’s “Atlas of Mnemosyne”, which was intended as a database of images from all times and cultures. It is the sum of Warburg’s life’s work, but was left unfinished when he unexpectedly died of a heart attack in 1929 at the age of 64.<sup>9</sup> The material gathered by Warburg consists of a draft introductory text, 63 plates with 971 illustrations, and draft commentary texts. Besides the so-called “Gombrich version” two earlier states of the plates can be traced, a first one dating from May 1928 and consisting of 43 plates and a second version consisting of 69 plates with approximately 1000 illustrations dating from 1929. Probable intermediary states have not been documented.

The original plates were made of wooden boards of ca. 1.7 x 1.4 meters covered with black canvas on which Warburg pinned all kinds of pictures, such as photographs, photographic reproductions of paintings, drawings, reproductions taken from books and material from newspapers. Each plate was dedicated to a specific subject reflecting the topics of Warburg’s research. Every plate then received a number and was photographed in the great hall of the Warburg Library. Warburg did not retain the original boards, instead, he constantly rearranged the images and added new boards and subjects. All that now remains of the plates are the different series of black-and-white photographs which now lie in the Warburg Institute in London.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Translated after the first version of the “Musée Imaginaire”, chapter 5,15.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Warnke (ed.): Aby Warburg. Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne (Aby Warburg. Gesammelte Schriften, 2. Abt., Bd. 2.1), Berlin 2000.

<sup>10</sup> For an exhibition in Vienna in 1993 Werner Rappl and Gerhard Fischer reconstructed 63 plates of the final version in their original size. See Werner Rappl et al. (ed.): Aby M. Warburg. “Mnemosyne” Materialien,

Since 1924, when Warburg started to work on the “Atlas” after his return from a clinic in Kreuzlingen where he had recovered from a mental break-down in 1918, he willingly presented some of the “Atlas” plates on various occasions, for instance a “Meeting of Orientalists” in Hamburg in 1926, an Ovid exhibition in 1927, or his *Biblioteca Hertziana* lecture in 1929, as documented by photographs. Physically the plates did indeed resemble either didactic exhibition placards or wall newspapers in the way they illustrated a given subject. However, the monumental display was never the ultimate purpose of the panels, but only a “side-effect”, which served as a kind of tentative presentation or test.

From the beginning, Warburg had planned his “Atlas” as a book, modeled after the “picture atlases” popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These large format books usually contained introductory texts and a series of plates with illustrations accompanied by more or less extensive commentaries. It has been suggested that Warburg was particularly inspired by the “*Bilderatlas zur Religionsgeschichte*” (“Picture Atlas of Religious History”), edited by Hans Haas from 1924 onwards.<sup>11</sup> In these picture atlases on cultural history, the illustrations are usually arranged according to the principle of “pendant hanging” found in Baroque galleries. The hierarchical display, descending from general views to details, gives a well balanced appearance to the page and serves the didactic purposes of the publication. In the “*Kulturhistorischer Bilderatlas*” (“Picture atlas of Cultural History”), first edited by Theodor Schreiber in 1882, for instance, the panorama of a Greek theatre as the largest illustration is placed in the top centre of the page, surrounded by details such as single figures and masks which somehow “animate” the architecture.

Looking at the plates of the “Atlas of Mnemosyne” it becomes obvious that Warburg has followed the traditional “pendant hanging” arrangement of the illustrations only to a certain degree. Instead, his plates reveal a much more liberal and even chaotic montage of images, reminding one of contemporary Dada and surrealist “picture walls”. However, there is neither proof that Warburg knew of these avant-garde exhibitions nor that he took them as a model. For Warburg, the plates were more than a mere medium of presentation, they were also a medium of investigation and understanding. In contrast to the surrealist “picture walls” or exhibition placards, the “Atlas of Mnemosyne” was always intended to be a book of several volumes, a “Warburg picture atlas” as one could call it. It reflects his method of work and way of thinking both in images and texts, uniting the fruits of his library and picture archive.

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München/Hamburg 2006. The reproductions and other pictorial material (stamps, clippings, drawings) though their have survived have mostly been re-incorporated into the Photographic Collection of the Warburg Institute.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Haas (ed.): *Bilderatlas zur Religionsgeschichte*, 9 vols, Leipzig/Erlangen 1924-1928.

When Warburg's assistant Fritz Saxl negotiated the edition of Warburg's complete works in 1930, he was talking of 300-350 plates and approximately 400 pages of text in a smaller format.<sup>12</sup> Warburg himself had planned an "atlas of ca. 100 plates, comprising ca. 500-600 illustrations (2 folders), 2 volumes of text: 1) explanations of the plates and documents; 2. exhibition."<sup>13</sup> The extensive commentaries were meant to recapitulate his published and unpublished research.<sup>14</sup> With regard to the content of the volumes and the sequence of the plates Warburg made the following, partially cryptic indications, which reveal the truly encyclopaedic objective of his work: „A. Sphaera barbarica: global topology in the sky. The banderol and its inscription of the globe: calender sheets, the book, the conversion into the oracle (fate, Padua). B. Gestus heroicus. C. Ascension to Olympus. D. Surviving demons. E. The Netherlands of Rembrandt and Italian antiquity. F. Controlling energetics: Advice and characteristics Goethe Barbados. – Immanent energy. The smallest invisible systems as causa (the Madeira slope) Eckener.“<sup>15</sup>

Mnemosyne – the name of the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the nine muses – is also the motto written above the entrance of the Warburg Library. The memory or afterlife of antiquity in art, especially Renaissance art, was the focus of Warburg's work. In addition to its main purpose as a survey of the collective memory of mankind as represented in pictorial symbols and its specific psychological expressions, the atlas is also a monument to the life, work, and ideas of its author – a figure of his "Denkraum" ("intellectual sphere" or "space") which unfolds before the beholder. When comparing the title to the series of plates and notes, one immediately notes that the „Atlas“ encompasses a much wider field than the relationship of Antiquity and the Renaissance, which are connected by the revitalization of classical

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<sup>12</sup> Letter by Fritz Saxl to the publishing house Verlag B. G. Teubner, Leipzig [ca. 1930], see: Martin Warnke, Editorische Vorbemerkungen, in: Martin Warnke (ed.): Aby Warburg. Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne (Aby Warburg. Gesammelte Schriften, 2. Abt., Bd. 2.1), Berlin 2000, S. XVIII-XX.

<sup>13</sup> Translated from: Folder "Mnemosyne. Basic Notions 1927", Warburg Institute Nr. 102.1.4, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter van Huisstede, Der Mnemosyne-Atlas. Ein Laboratorium der Bildgeschichte, in: Robert Galitz/Britta Reimers (ed.), Aby M. Warburg. "Ekstatische Nymphe... trauernder Flußgott". Porträt eines Gelehrten, Hamburg 1995, p. 130-171, p. 166-167, for a synopsis of Warburg's "Collected Writings" and the "Atlas". For Warburg's writings see the posthumous edition of Aby Warburg, Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 1: Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance, Leipzig/Berlin 1932.

<sup>15</sup> Translated from: Werner Rappl et al. (ed.): Aby M. Warburg. "Mnemosyne" Materialien, München/Hamburg 2006, p. 2.

“Ausdruckswerte” (“modes of expression”) or “Pathosformeln” (“pathos formulas”). In his introduction to the “Atlas” Warburg describes the goal of his project:

*“With the help of its pictorial material, the Mnemosyne Atlas aims to illustrate a process which could be defined as the attempt to adapt given modes of expression to the representation of animated life (“bewegten Lebens”). The atlas is first of all an inventory of ancient (“antikisierende”) models and their impact on the representation of movement (s.o.) in the Renaissance. Such a comparative way of research needs to restrict itself [...] to the analysis of the oeuvre of a few principal artists. In return it should try to comprehend the sense of these remembered modes of expression as a meaningful function of the mind through a thorough socio-psychological (“sozialpsychologisch”) investigation.”<sup>16</sup>*

The best known example is the “Ninfa” plate, which is based on Warburg’s doctoral thesis on Sandro Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” and “Primavera” as well as on his later studies of the role of the “pathos formula” and “modes of expression” in Renaissance Florence.<sup>17</sup> But the revival and transformation of Antiquity in Renaissance Italy was only one aspect of Warburg’s research. Even while in Florence, he turned towards the ambiguous relationship between the Italian and the Northern Renaissance as represented, among others, by Albrecht Dürer to whom he devoted two plates of the “Atlas”. Somehow surprising in a work which is supposed to deal with Renaissance art, a couple of plates show that Warburg was also concerned with his own time. In several plates he demonstrates the revival of classical “motifs of movement” by illustrations and newspaper clippings from the modern world of sports, transport, politics, and social life.

### **Malraux and Warburg: The re-/construction of art history as social history**

Just like Malraux, Warburg was interested in the psychological processes which determine both artistic and non-artistic imagination and expression, individual as well as collective visual memory, and finally both the effect and the reception of images. His “Imaginary museum of Mnemosyne”, as one could call it, is entirely based on the nature of the image as

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<sup>16</sup> Mnemosyne. Einleitung, in: Martin Warnke (ed.): Aby Warburg. Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne (Aby Warburg. Gesammelte Schriften, 2. Abt., vol. 2.1), Berlin 2000, p. 3-6, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Aby Warburg: Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 1: Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance, Leipzig/Berlin 1932, p. 1-60 („Sandro Botticellis ‚Geburt der Venus‘ und ‚Frühling‘“, 1893), p. 173-176 (= abstract of a lecture on „Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance“, 1914).

reproduction. Without photographic reproductions, Warburg's "Atlas" would not have been possible. They enabled him to relate and compare such materially distinct images as book miniatures and frescoes, panel paintings and sculptures, medals and newspaper clippings. From his earliest student days on, Aby Warburg had collected photographic reproductions. It is well known that young Aby had ceded his rights as a first-born to his younger brother Max for a blank check to buy as many books as he liked. When he started his studies he reminded Max of his given promise and wisely included photographs in his demand, an addition which was deliberately granted, resulting in an extensive picture archive becoming part of the Warburg Library.

Malraux' "Musée Imaginaire" and Warburg's "Mnemosyne Atlas" are related by the idea of art being a collective memory of mankind. Though both projects were developed independently of one another, their mutual source of inspiration can be traced to the increasing interest of social scientists, anthropologists, and historians, among others Emile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs and the members of the Annales School, in the history of mentality, especially in the concept of "collective memory". With regard to the history and theory of art and culture, Malraux and Warburg were interested in the role of images as representations and avenues of transmission of the psychological memory of societies, but also in the metamorphosis of shapes and modes of expression.

The result of their respective attempts to reconstruct these metamorphoses and transmissions is a construction of art history as a part of the social history of mankind, which is both reflected and materialized in the montage of images and reproductions in their publications and publication projects. As to the role of reproductions, an important link to German thought may be found in Walter Benjamin's article on the "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", which he had composed during his exile in Paris in 1935/1936, and of which Malraux owned a dedicated copy.<sup>18</sup> Another early and important link between Malraux and Germany, which needs further investigation, may be seen in his first wife Clara Goldschmidt (1897-1982) who was of German origin and who certainly opened his mind for German art, literature, and cultural theory. In contrast to the more Eurocentric view of the social scientists and historians, however, Malraux and Warburg should be given credit for having transcended national boundaries in order to describe art history as part of the global social memory.

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin: Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, in: Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften I, 2 (Werkausgabe Band 2), ed. Rolf Tiedermann/Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, p. 471-508. The original essay was published in an abridged French version in 1936 in the first volume of the "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung", the complete text was published posthumously in 1963.