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# Mnemosyne challenged

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# Mnemosyne Challenged

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# Ernst H. Gombrich, *To Mnemosyne* An Introduction to *Geburtstagsatlas* (1937). Original version and English translation of *Zur Mnemosyne*

Seminario Mnemosyne, coordinated by Monica Centanni, Anna Fressola,  
and Maurizio Ghelardi. English edition by Elizabeth Thomson

The Mnemosyne Seminar presents Ernst Gombrich's unpublished text of the Introduction to *Geburtstagsatlas für Max M. Warburg*. This was a private publication curated by the young scholar of the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne, and put together in 1937 on the occasion of the Max Warburg's seventieth birthday. It was conceived as a private gift (see, in this issue of *Engramma*, *Ernst H. Gombrich, Geburtstagsatlas für Max M. Warburg (5 June 1937). First digital edition*).

In the Warburg Institute Archive, two *testimonia* of the text are preserved: the preparatory draft [WIA.III.109.4], type-written, with various corrections and marginalia ink-written by Gombrich, which is presented here; and the final version, type-written, which partially includes the corrections made by Gombrich on the draft [WIA.III.109.5.1]. Gombrich's Introduction is accompanied by the first Italian translation – the work of many resulting from the last two phases of the Mnemosyne Seminar (June 2017, Palazzone di Cortona; November 2017, Warburg-Haus of Hamburg).

On Gombrich's Introduction to *Geburtstagsatlas*, see also the Commentary entitled *Note e appunti di lessico*, by Seminario Mnemosyne ("La Rivista di *Engramma*" 151, November/December 2017).

# Zur Mnemosyne

## I. Zur Erkenntnistheorie und Praxis der Symbolsetzung

Der Begriff Orientierung hat für Warburg im Anschluss an Kants Aufsatz "Was heisst sich im Denken orientieren?" sehr allgemeinen Charakter.

Er ist ihm der Überbegriff für jede bewusste Beziehungnahme [*sic!*] des Menschen als eines Individuums mit der Umwelt im engeren oder weiteren Sinn.

Erst dadurch, dass der Mensch eine Umwelt durch Zeichensetzung konstituiert – vermag er sein Ich von diesem "nicht Ich" zu distanzieren. Dieser Distanzierungsprozess, der das Bereich des Bewusstseins von dem der Aussenwelt scheidet und jedem seine immanente Gesetzmässigkeit zuweist, ist ihm das wesentliche Agent und Ziel der Phylogenese wie es das der Ontogenese ist.

"Denkraum" nennt Warburg diese gewonnene Distanz zur Umwelt, Denkraumschöpfung den konstituierenden Akt jeder ontogenetischen und phylogenetischen Entwicklung.

Zeichensetzung ist es, die diese Denkraumschöpfung einleitet, Missbrauch oder Verkennung der Zeichenfunktion die Gefahr, die der Kultur immer wieder drohte und droht.

Denn das ursprüngliche Zeichen, das Bild wie der Name, birgt in sich selbst die Gefahr der Hypostasis. Der Bildzauber wie der Namensfetischismus ist ein solcher denkraumzerstörender Kurzschluss des Denkens, in dem die orientierende Funktion des Abbildes verlorengelht: Zeichen und Bezeichnetes verschwimmen im magischen Weltbild zur furchterregenden Einheit.

Aneignung des Bildes – Kenntnis des Namens verleiht nicht mehr Distanz zum Bezeichneten, sondern Macht ueber das Bezeichnete.

Das Bild gewinnt über seinen Zeichen-Charakter hinaus oft drohende Wesenheit, der Name kündigt geheimnisvollen Sinn des Benannten. Es muss hier schon erwähnt werden, dass für Warburg nicht nur Wort und



Bild solche orientierende Funktion zukommt, sondern jeder Menschlichen Ausdrucksleistung, die sich eben bewusst an ein Aussen richtet.

Vor der Zeichenschöpfung im Bild, vor der Alloplastik, steht die Autoplastik der urtümlichsten Sprache: die Gebärde. Hier wird der anthropologische Ansatz in Anschluss an Darwin so tief angesetzt, dass nicht nur die eigentliche Ausdrucksgebärde, der Gestus im engeren Sinn darunter begriffen wird, sondern auch ausdrucksstragende Handlungen, die in ihrer Triebnähe zu "Urworten leidenschaftlicher Dynamik" werden; gemeint ist etwa der Griff nach dem Kopfe des Opfers, der triumphale Gestus, der den Unterworfenen mit Füßen tritt, und wie in der Sphäre des Bildes die Kulturentwicklung dahin tendiert, den Namen und das Benannte, Bild und Abbild in ihrer wechselseitigen Funktion klarzustellen, so ist die Kulturentwicklung der Geste darauf gerichtet, die Handlung von der Ausdrucksgebärde zu lösen.

Wenn wir etwa mit Piderit annehmen, dass der Ausdruck des Behagens ursprünglich die Muskel-Konstellation des Reflexes auf Süßlachgeschmack gewesen, dass das Faustballen des Zornigen ursprünglich Totschlag bedeute, dann vollzieht sich in diesem Ablösen dieselbe Distanzierung, Denkraumschöpfung, die auch am Material bildhafter Orientierung dargelegt werden soll.

Sie ist eng verknüpft mit der Loslösung von triebhafter Reflexbewegung, wann die Pause zwischen Antrieb und Handlung der besonnenen Vernunft Einfluss gewährt.

# To Mnemosyne

## I. For a theory of knowledge and the practice of symbolisation

The notion of orientation has a very general character for Warburg, in relation to Kant's essay "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking" [Note, Gombrich III, 109.1: the reference is to the edition of Kant edited by Ernst Cassirer].

For Warburg, it is a supra-notion to indicate every conscious relationship that Man as an individual establishes in a broad and narrow sense with the world around him.

Precisely because Man represents the world around him by marking it with signs, he can distance his 'I' from his 'not me'. This process of distance-taking, which separates the realm of self-consciousness from the outside world and assigns to each its own immanent law, is for Warburg the essential principle and purpose of both phylogenesis and ontogenesis.

Warburg calls the distance achieved with respect to the surrounding world, "Denkraum", and the "creation of Denkraum" the constitutive act of all ontogenetic and phylogenetic development.

Marking with signs is what introduces this creation of a space for thought, where abuse or disallowance of the function of signs constitutes a danger that threatens and continues to threaten culture.

The original sign, be it image or name, conceals within itself the danger of hypostasis. The magic of the image as well as the fetishism of names is a sort of short-circuiting of thought, which destroys the *Denkraum*, and in which the orientation function of representation is lost: in the magical conception of the world, signs and what has been assigned a name disappear in an alarming union.

Assimilation of the image – Knowledge of a name no longer allows a distance from what has been designated but is instead a power over it.

The image, beyond its character/sign, acquires an often-threatening entity; a name announces a mysterious sense of what is named. We must anticipate here that for Warburg, the orientation function does not only

pertain to word and image, but to every form of human expression that consciously turns outwards.

Before the creation of the sign in the image, before the act of shaping what is other than oneself, there is the autoplasmic act of primordial language: gesture. Here the anthropological approach is to be understood as being in such a close relationship with Darwin, that the notion includes not only expressive gesture – gesture in the strictest sense, but also all actions that are bearers of expression, as they are similar to impulse, and are converted into “original words of the dynamics of passions”; this means, for example, the grasping of a victim by the head or the gesture of the victor trampling underfoot those who have been subjugated. As in the sphere of images, cultural evolution tends to highlight a reciprocal function between name and what is named, between image and representation, so the cultural evolution of gesture tends to separate action from expressive gesture.

If, for example, along with Piderit, we assume that expressions of pleasure originally derive from the muscular apparatus that responds to a sweet taste with a smile reflex, and that the closed fist of an angry man is the sign of an originally murderous act, then, in this separation, the same process of distance-taking is carried out – the creation of a *Denkraum*, which must also present itself through the materials of imaginal orientation.

The creation of a *Denkraum* is closely connected to detachment from the motion of instinctive reflex, when the pause between a stimulus and the action deriving from weighted reason exerts its influence.

\*Seminario Mnemosyne, coordinated by Monica Centanni, Anna Fressola, and Maurizio Ghelardi, with Victoria CirLOT, Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino, Simone Culotta, Francesca Dell’Aglío, Silvia De Laude, Anna Ghiraldini, Clio Nicastro, Alessandra Pedersoli, Sergi Sancho Fibla, Elizabeth Thomson, Martin Warnke.

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## English abstract

Here, we present the original German text with a translation into English of Gombrich's Introduction to the *Geburtsstagsatlas*, edited by Seminario Mnemosyne (an Italian version has been published in Engramma no.151). It provides the basis for a first attempt at comparing Warburg's methodology with Gombrich's, thereby highlighting their different ways of thinking. This translation is the result of the collaboration carried out by the Seminario Mnemosyne at Scuola Normale Superiore in Palazzone di Cortona (June 2017), and at the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg (November 2017).



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