

Dr. phil. Isabella Woldt

Universität Hamburg

Aby Warburg's Theory of the Function of the Image Memory and the Renaissance Festivals Pictures

(Abstract)

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„Es ist vielmehr von Bilderreihen im Gehirn, als zum Denken verbraucht wird: der Intellekt wählt schnell ähnliche Bilder: das Gewählte erzeugt wieder eine ganze Fülle von Bildern: schnell aber wählt er wieder eines davon usw. (...) Das bewußte Denken ist nur ein Herauswählen von Vorstellungen. Es ist ein langer Weg bis zur Abstraktion.“

*Friedrich Nietzsche: Colli/Montinari: F.N. Kritische Studienausgabe, 1967 ff, Bd. 7 (1980),
Nachgelassene Fragmente, S. 445: 19 (77) und 19 (78).*

“There are many more sets of images in the brain than are consumed in thinking; The intellect rapidly selects similar images; the image chosen give rise, in turn, to a profusion of images; but again, the intellect quickly selects one among them, etc. (...) The conscious mind represents only a selection of perceptions. It's a long way to the abstraction.” – said the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. We don't know if Warburg knew these words by Nietzsche, but his works on picture series seem to exactly reflect his words.

Aby Warburg's aspiration was to observe the behavior of haptic cultural visual elements and to analyze their function in life. He found that there are special pre-shaped visual elements that continually reappear, which he called *pathos formula*. He looked for the order and the laws of that process. His investigation culminated in the idea of creating a theory of visual memory. Warburg didn't write any book to preserve his thoughts on that topic, but he presented his theory in picture series on screens and captured it in schemes and photographic documentation. Finally he planned to create a *Mnemosyne* Picture Atlas as a general expression of his investigation on that topic.

In my talk I discuss Aby Warburg's methodological work in picture series as a visualization of his theory of the function of image memory. Because Warburg didn't publish any text that presents the theory, my investigation should be understood as a contribution to the reconstruction of that theory. For that reason I will first contextualize Warburg's psychological background. That will be followed by the discussion of Warburg's talk before the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce on April 14, 1928 (Warburg Library) to provide a concrete example for understanding the operating principle of the picture series, because that is necessary to provide an explanation of the theory. This presentation represents only a part of my book which concerns the theory of image memory in an interdisciplinary, philosophical and empirical discussion, especially in relation to the Phenomenology of Knowledge by the German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer. I don't differentiate in that paper between *long* and *short memory*, as Warburg did not discuss it clearly either. In my opinion, both must have been known to Warburg because of his connection to the psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, who as a scientist differentiated between different the kinds of memory. That point will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming book.

Generally, it is important to understand this theory because Warburg not only constituted iconology as a main methodological instrument for art historians but, moreover, founded a real fundamentals of the modern *Bildwissenschaft*. Finally, the empirical references in his research to the function of visual memory provide an important contribution for current discussion about real and digital visualization, questions of memorizing, empathy, response and visual cognition.