‘Keep Your Distance’ Aby Warburg on Myth and Modern Art

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In Germany around 1900 the most sustained and convincing view of modern art was offered by Julius Meier-Graefe, who championed French Impressionist and Postimpressionist painting. Meier-Graefe emphasised that while art had once been in the service of the church and the state, modern art had increasingly become autonomous, or ‘abstract’, as he put it.¹ With this term Meier-Graefe referred not so much to modern art’s formal properties as to its status as a commodity. However, the increasing commodification of art clearly entailed formal changes as well; with Manet, the autonomous value of colour and form became a dominant concern and painting became a ‘Flächenkunst’, an art of the flat plane. The art of Manet, the impressionists, Cézanne and Van Gogh met with even fiercer opposition in Germany than elsewhere, as it was attacked by reactionary elements (including the Kaiser and his circle) as decadent French stuff, utterly alien to the German Geist. Aby Warburg developed his views on modern art in this highly charged climate, but he did not subscribe to any particular party line in the culture wars. He was on the side of those who defended modern art, and as a Jew he certainly had no reason to identify with those who extolled Deutschtum and attacked anything foreign to the Volk. In this nationalist culture, the positions of Jews remained precarious: when being offered the chair of an international art-historical congress that took place in Rome in 1912, Warburg declined and proposed an Aryan as chair instead – fearing that the appointment of a Jew might be so controversial that the congress’s success could be jeopardised.² However, as someone who was aware that even the shaky emancipation of the Jews in the Reich represented a palpable progress, Warburg did identify – and over-identify – himself with Germany and German culture. Time and again, especially when it comes to modern art, one can see him attempting to strengthen the more liberal elements of this culture.

Impressionism, Snake Dances and the Telegraph

One of the pages in the folder Critical Notes on Contemporary Art in the Warburg Institute archive shows a chart of modern art, drafted around 1900, when Warburg’s interest in the art of his own time was at its peak.³ Strictly speaking it is not a critical note; rather its shows a young art historian trying to get a grip on the field of contemporary art. There is one column with ‘painters’, one with graphic artists and one with sculptors and a final one with applied artists. The latter column only contains two names: Van de Velde and Behrens. Sculpture is represented only slightly more extensively, with Klinger, Meunier and Rodin. Klinger is the one artist who shows up in three different categories: he is also listed as a painter and as a graphic artist. In the latter case he is joined by

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¹ Meier-Graefe uses the term ‘abstract art’ to refer to commodified modern art in the introductory chapter of his Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst, ‘Die Träger der Kunst früher und heute’. This introduction is identical in the various editions that appeared from 1904 to the 1920s.


³ Warburg Archive, III.27.1.2, p. 2. I thank the Warburg Institute in London, and in particular Dorothea McEwan, Claudia Wedepohl and Susanne Meurer for their assistance in the archive.
only three others (Beardsley among them), but the list of painters contains some twenty names. It starts with Rembrandt and Velazquez, apparently listed as precursors, and then continues with Millet (between brackets; a borderline case apparently) and Manet, whose name is joined by Zola (between brackets), and a mention of the Frühstück, the Déjeuner sur l’herbe, which would more than twenty years later be the subject of one of Warburg’s last, unfinished texts. Although French art was being promoted in Germany by Meier-Graefe (who also advocated the work of Van de Velde, listed under applied arts) and others, Warburg goes on to list mainly non-French artists, including Zorn, Whistler, Böcklin, Segantini, and Liebermann.

Some other documents from the same period show Warburg fighting, in rather generic terms, for modern art as an expression of freedom and of the love of nature. Drafts of a didactic playlet from the late 1890s titled Hamburgische Kunstgespräche pit a conservative bourgeois against a progressive painter, his nephew. The painter explains that modern artists like the Scandinavian Anders Zorn work from overwhelming impressions, which they try to render by simplifying rather than concentrating on the minute details demanded by a philistine audience. The conservative Hamburger should look at some ‘landscapes by Böcklin or Klinger’s etchings’ rather than at some kitschy rendering of the setting sun near Capri. A final argument against modern art is easily refuted: should it not be feared that it corrupts innocent young girls? Some of Böcklin’s and Klinger’s scenes were evidently considered risqué, but Warburg’s mouthpiece responds by stating that art is intended for mature and healthy people. In such a text, cultural politics is clearly more dominant than Kulturwissenschaft. In a slightly later draft of a letter to a Hamburg newspaper, Warburg defends portraits by Max Liebermann and another painter in the Kunsthalle. The works had been under attack by a writer whom Warburg accuses of using ‘the imperial ideas concerning modern art’s marching route’ (die Kaiserlichen Generalideen über [die] Marschrichtung der modernen Kunst) for his own petty aversion to new art. Without attacking the Kaiser outright, Warburg’s ironic use of language ridicules the emperor’s attempts to prescribe the ‘Marschrichtung’ of art as if it were a division of the German army, of which he was supreme commander.

Another intervention from the same period involved the design for a Bismarck monument by Hugo Lederer which conservatives considered to be outrageous: it was too modern, too stylised. Something more naturalistic was expected and demanded. Warburg claimed that the monument represented a ‘turning-point in the history of German monumental art’; whereas other monuments used the means of variety and vaudeville to make a sentimental and anecdotal depiction of the man in question, the design for the Bismarck monument provides access to the man precisely by ‘keeping its distance and demanding a more profound objectivity’. ‘Distance’ is a crucial term for Warburg: in one of the notes in the Contemporary Art folder, he notes in English – as he did elsewhere – ‘Keep your distance’, also stating despondently, ‘Es gibt keine Entfernung mehr!’ (There is no more distance!). In his Bismarck intervention, Warburg contrasted the bourgeois ‘primitive’ desire to grasp things and to demand ‘palpable’, that is, a detailed and concrete art, with a more civilised attitude: ‘It marks the lowest stage of aesthetic culture when a work of art is used merely to gain possession of a lost object in effigy. The higher development of taste consists in keeping one’s
distance and trying to understand the object by means of comparisons within the field of vision. The commercial philistine does not like to be thwarted in his desire to gain possession by a closer approach (my Bismarck, our Bismarck) and if he is disturbed during his artistic feeding time he is irritated and becomes nasty.⁸ Seen in this light, Warburg’s defence of Zorn’s impressionism is less conventional than it appears: when the young artist tries to explain to his bourgeois uncle that modern artists simplify (‘verkürzen’) appearances to render impressions, rather than trying to render objects in as palpable a way as possible, Warburg is contrasting an advanced with a more primitive attitude, two approaches towards the world: one that keeps its distance, and one that tries to grasp, to possess. One can see the same juxtaposition at work more clearly in his discussion of the Bismarck monument.

Two crucial, much later, texts are the 1923 lecture on serpent ritual and the 1929 introduction to the Mnemosyne picture atlas. The latter begins as follows: ‘The conscious creation of distance between the self and the external world may be called the fundamental act of civilisation. Where this in-between space gives rise to artistic creativity, this awareness of distance can achieve a lasting social function – on whose success or failure as an instrument of mental orientation the fate of culture depends’.⁹ In his 1923 lecture, Warburg analysed rituals of American Pueblo Indians, some of which he had witnessed himself as a young man, and he notes that these Indians are no longer primitive ‘Greifmenschen’ (people focused on touch, on tactile possession) any longer, nor are they yet ‘Denkmenschen’, that is, ‘technologically secure Europeans’ (technologisch beruhigte Europäer).¹⁰ Between magic and science, they exist on an intermediary level of symbolic connections. Warburg used the term *symbol* in different ways, which can cause some confusion. He adopted Cassirer’s Kantian concept of ‘symbolic forms’, according to which myths and mathematical formulae are different symbolic forms through which mankind sees – or rather constitutes – the world. Warburg specifies that what we have in the Pueblo Indians is ‘one stage of symbolic thought and conduct’, the others being the magical one and the rational, mathematical one. The symbolic stage mediates between these extremes. But this specific phase in the development of symbolic forms is also called that of ‘symbolische Verknüpfung’ (symbolic interconnection) in a narrower sense. In this phase ‘symbolic’ rituals give man some degree of control over his environment; they create a certain – even if minimal – distance. The German bourgeois of his own time, who wanted to lay their hands on ‘their Bismarck’, has in a sense regressed to an even earlier level. Although Warburg was not systematic in this regard, he seems to have been attracted to a construction not uncommon at the time: a primitive ‘age of magic’ is followed by an age of myth in which the forces of nature have been abstracted and symbolised as gods.¹¹ The ‘symbolic phase’ proper would thus be the second, mythical stage of this development. It is also here, in ritual elaborated by dance, carvings and costumes, as well as by decorative—symbolic painting, that art begins to manifest itself, although still in a subordinated role.

When Warburg notes that animals played a central role in native American culture, especially as totem animals, he terms this – with a marvellous phrase that is difficult to translate – a ‘Darwinism of mythical elective affinity’ (*Darwinismus durch mystische Wahlverwandtschaft*).¹² Warburg had witnessed a totemic antelope dance, in which Indians dressed as antelopes; the dance of another tribe involved the handling of live snakes, and Warburg

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⁸ ‘Das Kunstwerk als Mittel zu gebrauchen, um ein verlornes Objekt im Bilde aneignend zu vertiefen, bezeichnet die unterste Kulturstufe in der Befriedigung künstlerischer Geschmacks, die höhere besteht darin, dass man in fest gehaltener Entfernung im Blickfeld das Objekt vergleichsweise zu begreifen versucht. Die kaufmännische Spiesser lässt sich in diesem Drange zu platter Besitzergreifung durch unmittelbare Annäherung (Mein Bismarck, unser Bismarck) nur ungern stören und wenn man ihn in seiner künstlerischen Futterstunde stört, wird er gereizt und unangenehm.’ Warburg Archive, III.27.2.2; trans. Gombrich, p. 288.


¹¹ Warburg, Images, p. 19.

considered this to be a mixture of a totem dance and a fertility dance. There was a myth about the tribe’s progenitor fathering snakes; on the other hand, since the snakes movements resemble lightning flashes, it is linked to thunderstorms and rain, and the Indians use magic-by-resemblance in handling the snakes to let it rain. Warburg was not blind to the fact that American Indian culture was not frozen in time, and that children were sent to modern schools. When asked to draw a thunderstorm, only two out of fourteen children drew lightning in the guise of snakes — for Warburg a clear, if melancholic, sign that the ‘evolution from instinctual, magical interaction to a spiritualized taking of distance’ was well on its way. But this apparent linearity was deceptive. Did not German Bürger prove to be distance-destroying savages on a much lower level than Pueblo Indians? And did not modern science, the fruit of the ‘mathematical mind’, threaten to cause a regression into a primeval world? In America, Warburg had made a snapshot of a man resembling ‘Uncle Sam’ in front a faux-Renaissance church and telegraph masts (Fig. 1). ‘Above his top hat runs an electric wire. In this copper serpent of Edison’s, he has wrested lightning from nature. [...] Natural forces are no longer seen in anthropomorphic or biomorphic guise, but rather as infinite waves, obedient to the human touch. With these waves, the culture of the machine destroys what the natural sciences, born of myth, so arduously achieved: the space for devotion, which evolved in turn into the space required for reflection’.  

Warburg went on to call Franklin (‘the modern Prometheus’) and the Wright brothers (‘the modern Icarus’) destroyers of Ferngefühl (the sense

Fig. 1. Aby Warburg, Uncle Sam, photographed in San Francisco in 1895, used in the 1923 lecture on serpent ritual. (Photo: Warburg Institute, London.)
of distance) who threatened to throw back the world into chaos. ‘Telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos’. Here we approach something like the obsessive core of Warburg’s thought: the fight for an Andachtsraum and Denkraum, which had been won from primitive immersion in the world by myths, rituals, images and (finally) by science, and which was under severe threat by the ‘Elektrische Augenblicksverknüpfung’. However, Ulrich Raulff is right to insist that one should not picture Warburg simply as a technophobe – his use of photography for his research and the installation of the latest technological gizmos in the library should be enough to warn one against such a characterisation. Technology was a double-edged sword; it could be a threat to civilisation, but it could also be used to further it. Like modern art, it could be used to create and expand a Denkraum and work against a relapse into the primitive magic from which symbolic rituals that were the beginning of art had once emancipated humankind.

Böcklin’s New Mythology

Among the few modern artists about whom Warburg attempted to write a monographic text was Arnold Böcklin. When German cultural nationalism reached a feverish height in the years around 1900, Arnold Böcklin became a German Kulturheros. Critics who wished to promote a strong indigenous art distinct from ‘decadent’ and ‘frivolous’ French Impressionism, eulogised Böcklin as a profound German artist equal to Dürrer (it mattered little that he was in fact Swiss). Böcklin was admired by a wide spectrum of critics, but when Julius Meier-Graefe, who had become increasingly critical of the master’s work, launched a full-scale attack in 1904–1905, people were forced to choose between Manet and Böcklin, between ‘French’ and ‘German’ art. Meier-Graefe’s first major attack on Böcklin came in the first edition of his Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst (1904), a book that would see several later editions and remains one of the crucial works of modernist art criticism and theory. But the real impact came with a separate book, Der Fall Böcklin und die Lehre von den Einheiten, in the following year. Meier-Graefe’s argument in this book is complex, but the main thrust is that Böcklin’s work, after promising beginnings, progressively came to lack aesthetic, painterly unity. Instead of achieving a painterly aesthetic harmony, it is merely decorative, like a failed mosaic, and theatrical – the compositions are based on narrative, anecdotal ideas. The argument revolves around medium-specificity: Manet is a real painter because he creates aesthetic unity with painterly means, whereas Böcklin has increasingly become a mere showman.

Meier-Graefe’s attack caused counter-attacks, among others by Henry Thode, a reactionary art historian and critic who was Wagner’s son in law – he was married to Cosima Wagner’s daughter from a previous marriage – and whom Warburg knew from his student days. Thode’s response was so full of vitriolic hate of anything foreign and of those who deal in foreign modern art that Max Liebermann felt compelled to reply, pointing out the anti-Semitic connotations of Thode’s rhetoric. Aby Warburg’s attempt to write about Böcklin came before all this – before the choice between Böcklin and French art became an existential one. Probably Warburg would not have felt forced to make a choice even later in his life, though he may have become less enthusiastic about Böcklin in retrospect, like many of his contemporaries; Warburg regarded contemporary art in other terms, according to other
criteria, than most art critics. What mattered were not isms or partisan camps, but art’s role in the wider scheme of things, in culture’s survival. As a German residing at the time in Florence, Warburg attended Böcklin’s funeral in Fiesole in 1901. Afterwards, he wrote several drafts of a text variously titled ‘Cimitero agli Allori am 18 Januar 1901’, ‘Arnold Böcklin’, or ‘Böcklins Heimgang 18. Januar 1901’ (Böcklin’s Homeward Journey, 18 January 1901). After more or less factual descriptions of the funeral, Böcklinesque characters and scenes take over Warburg’s text: ‘Will no mysterious pirates suddenly appear on the hills of Fiesole, pale, black-bearded, wrapped in ragged fluttering red cloaks, to carry him off on their shoulders at lightning speed to their ghost-ship and on to the dark-blue raging sea?’

Warburg here seems to continue a tendency in late nineteenth-century Böcklin criticism: the tendency to write narrative scenes based on the paintings, emphasising their anecdotal (or ‘theatrical’) side rather than analysing their visual structure. But Warburg’s little fantasy is not a response to a painting but to the painter’s funeral, and the point is the contrast between the disenchanted modern scenery of this funeral and mythic elements from Böcklin’s art: ‘Are there no silent bearded priests wishing to carry him across the green meadows towards the darkening evening skies, followed by softly singing white-clad women, to the burning pyre?’ The answer was obvious. Instead of mystical, bearded pagan priest, there was a clumsy Christian clergyman and a camera: ‘...no timid faun gazes with pity from behind the laurels and cypresses towards his master, the magician. Instead the open vault is faced by the impertinent one-eyed staring cyclops of the technical age, the photographic camera...’ Warburg goes on to pit Böcklin’s ‘pirate’s right of Romantic Idealism’, his use of the ‘mythopoetic power of the image’ (mythenbildende Kraft im Bilde) against the ‘distance-destroying chaos of our “age of traffic”’.

Here we see, in 1901, a topic that would haunt Warburg even twenty-odd years later, in the lecture on serpent ritual. It is intriguing that in both cases Warburg both evokes and obscures the role of photography. In the case of his allegorical interpretation of the ‘Uncle Sam’ photograph, Warburg focuses on the telegraph wire in the picture, and from there goes to Franklin and the Wright brothers, but what about the photograph itself? The ‘impertinent staring one-eyed cyclops of the technical age, the photographic camera’, surely worked in conjunction with other technologies to minimise distance. But we have noted that Warburg’s approach to technology was ambiguous rather than one-sidedly negative, and he used photography extensively in his lectures and articles, and above all in the Mnemosyne atlas, which preoccupied him late in his life. In Mnemosyne’s combinations of photographs of widely dispersed artworks, we see the destruction of distance in a nutshell. But on a more fundamental level, photography seems for Warburg to have fulfilled one of visual art’s essential tasks: the creation of distance (of an Andachtsraum, perhaps a Denkraum) through the creation of images. His use of news photographs in Mnemosyne strongly suggests so, as does his interpretation of his own Uncle Sam photograph in the serpent ritual lecture. Does not his own analysis of the image prove that while telegraphy and telephone were threatening to destroy the cosmos, photography counteracted this tendency by creating a distance between the observer and his surroundings, which are turned into an image?

Nonetheless, the cyclops of the technological age created different images than painting or drawing did. Romantic pirates evaporated before its clinical
gaze. Bernd Roeck has compared Warburg’s fantastic meditation on Böcklin’s
funeral with Marx’s meditation on Greek myth and modern technology in the
Grundrisse: ‘Is the view of nature that lies at the basis of Greek fantasy and
Greek mythology possible with self-actors and trains and locomotives and
the electric telegraph? How can Vulcan compete against Robert et Co.,
Jupiter against lightning-conductors, and Hermes against Crédit Mobilier?
All mythology overcomes, dominates and forms natural forces in and
through the imagination, and so must perish once genuine dominance over
these forces is established’. 23 But would Warburg really have agreed that
all myth disappears in the face of scientific-technological mastery over
nature? In an exalted sentence which is to be found in several versions of
the Böcklin draft, Warburg claims that Böcklin deflected his critics’
arrows with ‘the divine breath of your myth-making power’ (dem
Gottesathem Deiner mythenbildenden Kraft). 24 In the preceding decades,
several of Böcklin’s admirers had pointed out that the artist seemed to
have created a mythological universe of his own, a mythology dominated
no so much by Gods like the Greek Olympians or their Nordic
counterparts, but by hybrid creatures like fauns, centaurs and half-human
sea-creatures – what Henry Thode, who compared Böcklin with his myth-
making father-in-law Wagner, admiringly called ‘shaggy, bulky, desirous
hybrids’ (zottige, ungeschlachte, begehrliche Mischwesen). 25 An example of this
are the fauns in Sleeping Nymph Spied on by Two Fauns (1884), which one
could relate to Warburg’s evocative text (Fig. 2).

Although these hybrids had a long history, they necessarily gained new
notations in post-Darwinian modern culture, preoccupied with ideas of
evolution and the struggle for life. 26 Böcklin’s Darwinian mythology of
furry and fishy hybrids managed to be both primitive and peculiarly
modern; both archaic and Victorian. By Warburg, these hybrid creatures

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23. ‘Ist die Anschnauung der Natur und der
gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse, die der
griechischen Phantasie und der griechischen
[Mythologie] zugrunde liegt, möglich mit self-
actors und Eisenbahnen und Lokomotiven und
elektrischen Telegraphen? Wo bleibt Vulkan
gegen Robert et Co., Jupiter gegen den
Blitzableiter und Hermes gegen den Crédit
Mobilier? Alle Mythologie überwindet und
beherrscht und gestaltet die Naturkräfte in der
Einstellung und durch die Einstellung;
verschwindet also mit der wahren
Herrschaft über dieselben.’ Karl Marx,
Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie,
1857–1858 (Verlag für fremdsprachige
Literatur: Moskau, 1939), p. 30. See Bernd
Roeck, Florenz 1900. Die Suche nach Arkadien
24. Warburg Archive, 27.3.1. The entire
phrase is: ‘Schweiger Arnold! Der Du die
Spiesse der Kritik alle in Deiner Brust
sammeltest, und dann mit dem Gottesathem
deiner mythenbildenden Kraft die ganzen
Federspieder über den Haufen bliesest, Ave!’
25. Gretten, p. 87.
26. Andrea Linnebach, Arnold Böcklin und die
Antike: Mythos – Geschichte – Gegenwart (Hirmer
and their struggles and joys were also seen as heirs of the Dionysian side of Antiquity, the modernity of which had been sensed by Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{27} Like Nietzsche, Warburg partakes in the growing psychologisation of the theorising about myth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a tendency that would culminate in the works of Freud and his followers.\textsuperscript{28} Mythology was the product of the human psyche in an early phase of human development. Myth may have been preceded by an earlier ‘magical’ stage, with regard to which it represents progress, but myths and cults of the Dionysian variety were still dominated by irrational impulses, by a lack of distance. Böcklin’s primitive mythological creatures suggested that the artist was able to penetrate into something very old and wild lurking in the depths of the modern mind, very different from the ‘classical’ Olympian gods – although Warburg emphasised that these gods had at times reverted to the status of ‘planetary demons’ inciting superstitious fears and magic practices. But while Böcklin’s mythic creatures were ostentatiously archaic, Warburg sensed that they were no less modern. After visiting the museum in Basel, which houses the \textit{Plays of the Nereids}, also known as \textit{Play of the Naiads} (1886), Warburg noted in his diary: ‘Wonderful Böcklins, like a refreshing bath wind and waves: playing naiads’ (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{29} The painting referred to is exactly the kind of late Böcklin that Meier-Graefe abhorred: a highly theatrical arrangement of frolicking sea-creatures who do not blend into their environment in a painterly way, as the fauns and centaurs did in some of the early works of whom Meier-Graefe approved. But Warburg’s reference to the \textit{Luft – und Wasserbad} relates the painting to his interpretation of Manet and the impressionists: these painters achieved a Rousseauistic vision of nature as good and pure – a reconciliation with the

\textbf{Fig. 3.} Arnold Böcklin, \textit{Play of the Nereids}, tempera on canvas, 1886, 151 × 176.5 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel. (Photo: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Martin Bühler.)

\textsuperscript{27} Roeck, p. 219.


\textsuperscript{29} ‘Wundervolle Böcklins, wie ein Luft- und Wasserbad erfrischend, Spiel der Najaden’. Gombrich, p. 152.
external world, that was once seen as threatening and had to be symbolically pacified by myths. Böcklin’s *Play of the Nereids* achieved something similar to impressionism in its embrace of nature, without doing away with myth entirely. His playful naiads were *modern* hybrids: practitioners of a joyful *Freikörperkultur*.

If Böcklin’s art had such myth-making power, then why did no creatures come to his rescue in the cemetery, why did no timid faun peep from the bushes with pity? Obviously Warburg would not have expected a faun to look on even in antiquity; his point is that these creatures were now part of an individual artistic mythology without any moorings in everyday life and beliefs. This did not in any way belittle the ‘mythropoetic power’ of Böcklin’s images; it merely meant that Böcklin created in a phase of culture in which old religious-mythic beliefs and practices were to a significant degree superseded. But Böcklin’s individual artistic mythology, though not part of a collective, living religion, was nevertheless not purely artistic in the modernist sense: it used material from a time when art was still inextricably part of a religious and ritualistic context, as it was in the ritual dances of the Pueblo Indians. While Warburg was aware that modern art was a rather specialist and autonomous affair, he was most interested in the moments when the foundation of this autonomy in heteronomy became apparent; that is, when the myths that had once been the basis of art made – often unexpected – appearances in modern painting; when something that was supposed to be no longer relevant to an art of *plein air* and modern life reared its anachronistic head.

In the *Mnemosyne* introduction, Warburg defines ‘artistic man’ as someone who is oscillating between a religious and a mathematical view of the world: ‘What we call the artistic act is really the exploration by the groping hand of the object, succeeded by plastic or pictorial fixation equidistant from imaginary grabbing and conceptual contemplation’. In the course of artistic development, ‘demonic’ mythic impulses had been aesthetically pacified. As Cassirer put it in a text published by the Bibliothek Warburg in 1925, visual art had only become truly itself when instead of perceiving a ‘mythisch-magische Gestalt’ in a picture, people had come to see its unique, aesthetic ‘Form der Gestaltung’ as essential. Here Cassirer throws magic and myth together rather than differentiating them, something which Warburg occasionally did as well. Both magic and myth are being opposed to art as a formal affair, to an art that announces or partakes in the disenchanted, scientific world view. But for Warburg, more than for Cassirer, art always remained a field of oscillation. Whereas Cassirer describes how mythic metaphors return in poetry only in the form of aesthetic free play, Warburg was convinced that such play could always turn into something serious. He believed that artists handled dangerous, potentially explosive stuff; the *Erbmasse*, the mnemonic heritage, contained violent, Dionysian impulses. The artist’s task was to control them by imposing an aesthetic form.

In according a tremendous psychological effect to form, which could be classical and poised or ornamental and moving, Warburg not only psychologised myth but also formalised it. He was often distrustful of artists who gave in too much too the wild energy of ‘Pathosformeln’ such as that of the nymph with flowing garments, a motif that could be traced back to maenads in ancient depictions of Dionysian rituals. As a student Warburg already noted the waving drapery of a woman being abducted by a centaur (that highly Böcklinesque creature) on an antique

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In Warburg’s view, Böcklin’s tableaux seem to have been convincing confrontations with the darker side of Antiquity, the artist successfully working through impulses that might prove dangerous in lesser hands by imposing aesthetic unity on them. Such an art in a sense repeats on the individual level what happened in cultural history, the step from wild extasy and magic to mythic symbols and beyond. By creating a modern artistic mythology from distant impulses, Böcklin demonstrated art’s power to overcome primeval chaos.

Warburg commented sarcastically on Thode’s idolisation of Wagner, and he probably would not have agreed with his colleague’s tendency to equate Böcklin with Wagner. Contrary to Böcklin, Wagner wanted to turn his Musiktheater into a collective and quasi-religious experience. Meier-Graefe also compared Böcklin to Wagner, but in a pejorative sense, since he condemned Böcklin for being theatrical. Like many critics of modern art, Warburg often used the word ‘theatrical’ in a negative sense, but the connotations are different. Whereas Meier-Graefe and later critics such as Greenberg and Fried were preoccupied with defining the specificity of artistic media, above all painting, Warburg was preoccupied with civilising and counter-civilising forces in culture. Theatre, especially when encroaching on painting, threatened to reinforce a primitive desire to grasp things rather than contemplate them in a more distanced manner.

### Picnic of the River Gods

In the beginning (or rather, one of the beginnings) of his unfinished 1929 Manet text, Warburg notes that the *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* was a banner in art’s fight for ‘lichtwendige Erlösung’, ‘light-guided redemption’ from the ‘shackles of academic virtuosity’ (Fig. 4). The work is clearly seen,
then, as a herald of Impressionism. In Warburg’s view, impressionism had not just been a kind of superior shorthand that gives simplified impressions of things rather than trying to present them (as a more ‘primitive’ approach tried) as physically as possible. The new way of depiction stood in the service of a Rousseauist embrace of nature, a nature freed from all superstitious fears. As a supplementary theoretical note dealing with the relative values of sculpture, relief and painting puts it: ‘An education of the eye that took generations was required to transform the plastic wish-image into a painterly one, because only those gifted individuals for whom the plein-air symphony of coloured dots revealed the new totality of humankind and nature realized that this decrease of tactile possession contained an immeasurable enrichment’.36

And yet Manet, marching towards the light, had looked back to Giorgione for inspiration; the Déjeuner is after all a Giorgione-like fête champêtre. As Gustav Pauli had pointed out in an article from 1908, Manet had also based the group of people in the foreground on a couple of river gods and nymphs in Marcantonio Raimondi’s print after Raphael, The Judgement of Paris, who look on as the Trojan prince awards the ‘apple prize’ in this ‘ominous beauty contest’ (Fig. 5). Warburg then traces the composition to two antique sarcophagi, especially one in the façade of the Villa Medici, and he also discusses another Renaissance print, by Bonasone. Though its quality is lower than that of the Raimondi print, Bonasone is given credit for being more faithful to antiquity: Bonasone shows the return of Venus to Olympus, which was also shown on the sarcophagus, as a sign of hope for resurrection. Raphael and Raimondi do depict Jupiter and Sol in the sky, but these Gods have been ‘archeologically sterilised’, as Warburg puts it; they are no longer Gods with real demonic power over man, but aesthetic symbols. To complement this ‘aesthetisierende Vergeistigung’ of the Olympians, a significant change is also evident in the ‘Halbgöttterpublikum’, the lower mythological beings who look on, especially the three figures on the right. Two of these are bearded river

36. ‘Es bedurfte einer generationenlangen Erziehung des Auges, um das plastische Wunschbild durch ein malerisches zu ersetzen, denn dass diese Minderung des abtastbaren Besitzes eine unendliche Bereicherung in sich Schloss, konnte eben nur die Begnadeten bemerken, vor denen in der Symphonie der Farbflecken des plein air die neue Welt der Totalität zwischen Mensch und Natur aufging.’ (Author’s translation) Warburg Archive, III.16.1–2.
gods; they have become bearded modern bourgeois (or bohemians) in Manet’s picture. The third is a rather androgynous figure, identified as a nymph by Warburg, who became the naked woman in the Déjeuner. One could compare her to the sleeping nymph in Böcklin’s aforementioned painting, but while this elemental creature is sleeping, the Raimondi and Manet’s nymph is wide awake. In both Raimondi’s print and Manet’s painting, she looks out of the image, towards the viewer. For Warburg, this new kind of ‘narcissism of the people in the image’ (die Narzissität der menschen im Bilde) was crucial.

The lower mythological creatures are no longer melancholic, sad beings who look up to the terrible Olympians in the skies (although one god in Raimondi’s print still does so); they are more comfortable about their place in the world, and one even looks back at a viewer who is to be found ‘on earth’, rather than ‘in heaven’. In the Déjeuner, one of the men also looks out of the image, towards the viewer; Warburg insists that such a thing was unheard of in Antiquity, and that he has traced a progression ‘from Arcadia to Battignolles’, in which nature loses its threatening character, which gave rise to myths and gods, and becomes a pleasant place for a picnic. ‘Manet knew his Rousseau.’ Warburg was delighted to find a missing link between Raimondi and Raphael: a painting by a seventeenth-century Dutch Italianising painter, perhaps Nicolaes Berchem (or ‘Berhem’, according to Warburg). Here we have the judgement of Paris, but in a landscape setting without any Gods in the sky; the groups of the river Gods and nymphs is present, but the one river god who is still looking up does not see Jupiter, only a group of human travellers trying to cross a river in the distance.

Apart from the main body of the text, there are several notes with alternative drafts, additions whose place is sometimes unclear, and wide-ranging speculations (the seventeenth-century painting is not mentioned in the main text, but in these notes). Here Warburg affirms once more that ‘The astrological demonism of the heathen gods must be regarded as their oldest, their primeval function, which survives the period of their aesthetic spiritualization’. Thus the gods were born from an advanced form of magic, from astrology, and they never completely shed this dark side even in their brightest moments. In the Renaissance, the Gods had been aestheticised, a development that must be ascribed to the enlightened attitude that also ruled the work of the early modern scientists (Leonardo being both artist and scientist). Rousseau and in his footsteps the Impressionists finally faced nature directly, without anthropomorphic intermediaries. But history’s linearity was always opposed by various forms of Nachleben, of ‘survival’ of apparently anachronistic phenomena. In the age of abstract scientific concepts, ‘Begriffe ohne Begreiflichkeit’, visual art remained valid as a more immediate way of approaching the world. It might even be said to become more important as science and technology threaten to destroy the ‘Denkraum’ they have created.

Obviously, Warburg’s approach has its limitations; the thought that the Déjeuner sur l’herbe can also be seen as an avant-garde blague, an irreverent take on tradition from the age of Offenbach, was far from his mind. Warburg’s conception of myth likewise has its weak points. Any definition of myth is bound to be a projection of sorts, as modern western has elaborated the notion of ‘myth’ precisely in order to refer to what eludes its concepts and analytical distinctions. Warburg focused on the humanisation of nature through myth and art; he did not see that myth can
also be the naturalisation of human society, the projection of the social onto the natural world in order to give it an eternal, timeless status. Thus he overlooked that many of Böcklin’s paintings are patent mythologisations of nineteenth-century life: in *Meeresidylle* (1887) a bourgeois family is naturalised as sea-dwellers, including a pet seal. Warburg himself was clearly too much of a fin-de-siècle bourgeois to take note of this. But however dated Warburg’s vocabulary and the meanings he attaches to it may sometimes be, what remains important is his conviction – acted out time and again in his writings – that visual art, this anachronism, gains its force to a significant degree from its dialogue with its own past; and this own past contains much that has become alien to art. An art of the pure present, focusing only on the moment, would have been absurd for Warburg; time is never singular and simple, but layered. Art should not deny its repressed side, from which it has sprung in the first place: myth. While art may have emancipated itself from old mythological iconography under the influence of modern science and the Enlightenment, it can never be completely identified with reason and with the symbolic forms of modern science. Its logic remains one of symbolic connections, and thus akin to the mythic world from which it originated.

The most interesting art would indeed be one that strives for aesthetic unity, as Meier-Graefe demanded, but it should also be open to impulses that threaten to disrupt its autonomy; the resulting struggle creates an art that is fissured like time itself. This is radically different from the mythic Gesamtkunstwerk of Wagner, which would soon after Warburg’s death provide the model for the Nazi’s multimedia myth-making; the goal should not be the exploitation of myth to subjugate audiences and people, but the creation an artistic mythology that is transformative and reflexive rather than manipulative and regressive. Although modern painting is clearly the art of a scientific, disenchanted culture, it can never be a purely optical, painterly art of flat planes if it wants to have any relevance. In Böcklin’s modern mythology and in Manet’s reworking of elements from the artistic mythology of the Renaissance, modern art demonstrates the need to absorb elements that precede and contradict its autonomy. Only this dialectic could prevent it from becoming a merely formal affair, a toy for the ‘hedonistic aesthetes’ against whom Warburg railed so often.