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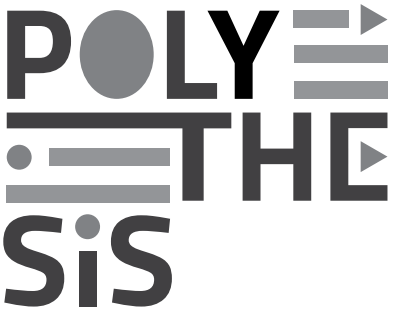

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Describing, Sampling, Collecting: Warburg, Wittgenstein and the Epistemology of Comparative Morphology*

Marco Brusotti
Sabine Mainberger

Abstract

In the period from around 1900 until the 1930s, there is a huge amount of friction between questions of form and questions concerning history. Various approaches attempt to overcome patterns of causal genesis and to develop different models of the relationship between history and form. In German-speaking Europe, Goethe's morphology proves to be exceptionally appealing in this context: it is seen as a possible solution to the conflicting relationship. We will take a closer look at two examples from a wide array of attempts to update Goethe's morphology: we will consider Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas and Wittgenstein's thoughts about Spengler's 'art of comparing' and James Frazer's evolutionary anthropology.

1. *Introduction*

When the humanities make comparisons during the nineteenth century, they are dealing with questions of origin; they are exploring geneses, developments, causal links, descents, or evolution. The same applies to art studies: for instance,

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architect and art historian Gottfried Semper is inspired both by the comparative anatomy of Georges Cuvier and by the search for the archetypal grammar in historical linguistics.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, by contrast, there is a huge amount of friction between questions of form and questions concerning history. For example, Alois Riegl's work is so strongly characterised by this friction that he is not easily classified in retrospect: the Viennese art historian is considered a Hegelian or a protostructuralist, depending on the focus. Formalism is also accompanied by a difficult relationship with history in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin. While historicism and evolutionary theory – the two dominant academic paradigms of the nineteenth century – still prevail, there is also a struggle for a different way of ordering cultural phenomena around this time. In the period from around 1900 until the 1930s, various approaches attempt to overcome patterns of causal genesis and to develop different models of the relationship between history and form.

In German-speaking Europe, Goethe's morphology proves to be exceptionally appealing in this context: simply put, it is seen as a possible solution to the conflicting relationship between genesis and form or historicism and formalism. Goethe introduces his morphology – which is less a theory of forms than one of transformations, of metamorphoses – as a non-causal approach. This is one of the reasons for the positive reception of his scientific texts in the decades following the *fin de siècle*[1]. Although the aim is not generally to call into question Isaac Newton's physical optics, many people are finding mechanistic approaches outmoded around this time, and anti-reductionist interpretations of living matter are in vogue, not only in philosophy. Cultural studies are also on the search for a non-causal approach. This often goes hand in hand with an overly hasty and misguided identification of the biological with the cultural; for instance, when cultures are understood as organisms. But above and beyond cultural morphology and philosophy of life, Goethe's morphology is consistent with widespread views: there is no mechanical determination in the field of humanities, there are no causal laws here, and the aim – as Wilhelm Dilthey put it – is understanding, rather than explaining.

Philosophy and extremely different areas of cultural studies turn their attention to morphology. However, what should – and can – the morphological method really achieve in these disciplines? The expectations are miles apart. Spengler settles for nothing less than a morphology of world history[2]. Cassirer draws on Goethe's ideas in his concept of a *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

1 Cf., for example, Maatsch 2014.

2 Another theory that deserves a mention on the list of 'cultural morphological' approaches is Leo Frobenius's *paideuma*.

Benjamin's 'prehistory' of the nineteenth century is set out as a morphology of the Paris Arcades. *The Morphology of the Russian Folk Tale* (1928) by formalist Soviet folklorist Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp regards itself as a morphology in the Goethean sense[3], and so on and so forth.

In the following, we will take a closer look at two examples from this wide array of attempts to update Goethe's morphology and to address twentieth century questions: we will consider Warburg's *Mnemosyne* Atlas and Wittgenstein's thoughts about two different comparative methods (Spengler's 'art of comparing' and James Frazer's evolutionary anthropology).

Warburg worked on his *Mnemosyne* project until his death in October 1929, and Wittgenstein wrote his first notes about Frazer in June/July 1931. Different though these two temporally contiguous approaches may be, they are both characterised by the Goethean intention to solve a problem by means of a perspicuous representation[4], as Wittgenstein puts it. Warburg tries to achieve this in his arrangements of pictures and in the order of the books in his library; the representation here is a visual one in the literal sense, though textual supplements were in fact planned for the *Mnemosyne* Atlas. Wittgenstein is not concerned with exhibition panels; his perspicuous representations are verbal arrangements of verbal material[5], and his aim is to put an end to certain conceptual misunderstandings.

Warburg never managed to finish his atlas. In the following, we will make an initial (still extremely tentative) attempt[6] to cast a new light on this project, with reference to Wittgenstein's insights into the possibilities and limits of Goethean morphology. In our view, this approach highlights the fundamental methodological problems of the *Mnemosyne* project more clearly than other perspectives have allowed in the past. Given that Warburg's atlas is just one of a number of projects to reference Goethe's sciences in this era, our investigation pulls together various lines of research which have been carried out independently of each other up until now. It thus contributes to the history of science in German-speaking regions during the early twentieth century.

[3] Propp makes a point of opening many of the chapters in the book with epigraphs from Goethe. Other works worth mentioning include Georg Simmel's *Goethe* (1913) and, of course, gestalt psychology. *Simple Forms* (1930), the major work of Dutch-German literary scholar and art historian André Jolles (with whom Warburg engaged in a playful letter exchange about the Nymph around the turn of the century), draws on Goethe's morphology, however, like many people he emphasises 'form' over 'transformation'.

[4] *Übersichtliche Darstellung*.

[5] Of course, the possibility of a visual – perhaps diagrammatic – element of this 'perspicuous representation', like the colour octahedron, cannot be ruled out as a matter of principle.

[6] The present paper is part of a bigger study that also considers other positions from this time (see above).

2. *Goethe and Haeckele*

The basic ambivalence of Goethe's morphology is what makes it so appealing around the *fin de siècle*[7]: the individual forms are linked to the 'type' (the idea, as Schiller termed it, or the archetypal phenomenon[8]), and the specific is linked to the general in a dynamic temporal way. 'Type' does not denote a classification; rather than describing something static or a list of similar characteristics, it stands for something that can only be represented in the multiplicity of shifting forms, in a sequence of metamorphoses. Hence, 'type' is not a perspicuous principle of order; it does not correspond to any concrete isolated phenomenon, and it only manifests itself as part of a series – and a temporal, procedural one at that. The formation of series thus plays a key role in morphological knowledge. Indeed, form is understood as something that exists in time, as something that changes continuously here; form is synonymous with transformation, and there can be no morphology without metamorphosis. A form can only be represented as a series of variations. The decisive epistemic function is thus performed by the series.

Goethe is primarily concerned with creating the densest, most plausible series possible. If an organised overview of individual phenomena can be created, it no longer makes sense to want to go any further; in such a case, the feat of knowledge has already been achieved, and it consists in precisely this organised overview or plausible series. This solves the problem – i.e. that of demonstrating the connection between the seeds and blossoms of a plant, bridging the «gulf between the *os intermaxillare* of the turtle and the elephant»[9] or creating links between cyanobacteria, age-old chestnut trees and dandelion stems which curl in spirals when torn[10]. The very grouping of these elements answers the question; their arrangement is the object of the search.

It may be tempting to say that one form 'leads to' another in Goethe's morphological series, or conversely, that one form 'results from' another here, but this is merely a *façon de parler*, since these connections are not actually causal links. Morphology is only intended to describe – and should only describe – non-causal connections. In *fin de siècle* biology, the assumption of specific processes which essentially evade any causal explanation is at the root of the popular variants of vitalism around this time. Revivals of morphology in cultural studies have their sights set on a non-causal approach. A purely formal

[7] The wider research into this area is beyond the scope of this paper. We will limit our discussion to a few aspects that are relevant to the statements on Warburg and Wittgenstein.

[8] *Urphänomen*.

[9] It is huge. «[…] and yet an intermediate series of forms can be found to connect the two!». From «An attempt, based on Comparative Osteology, to show that man shares the intermaxillary bone in the upper jaw with other animals» [1784], in: Goethe 1887-1919, II, vol. 8, III, 102 [transl. Goethe 1988, 115-116].

[10] See, for example: Mainberger 2010, 45-58.

approach is out of the question, however, since purely formal relationships like those found in logic or mathematics would not be processes. There is no desire to surrender any empirical or metaphysical aspiration, either. So what exactly are these relationships, if they are neither causal nor purely formal? During the early decades of the twentieth century, these concerns often still boil down to an idealistic position, since Goethe's morphology aimed to describe something akin to the unfolding of an idea in nature and history rather than a kind of causal development.

Haeckel's evolutionary theory and Spengler's speculative philosophy of history present two opposing interpretations of Goethe's morphology in this respect. With Spengler, the aspiration for a non-causal method – something which is alien to Haeckel – is elevated to metaphysical heights.

The nature of Haeckel's project is clear from the title of his 1866 book, which is known as the *General Morphology of Organisms* – the *organic form-science founded mechanically through the theory of descent as reformed by Charles Darwin*. Haeckel links morphology to Darwin's theory of evolution (or he believes that this rigorous application is partly anticipated or prepared for in Goethe's insights). The series of forms – ideally without any gaps – imply the emergence of one link from the other. In Haeckel's view, Goethe's 'development' collapses into Darwin's 'evolution', and morphology gives rise to statements of causal genesis.

Haeckel's *General Morphology of Organisms* and Spengler's *Decline of the West* are published over half a century apart, during which time the appeal of a mechanical explanation of biology has subsided due to the fundamental changes taking place in physics, the temporary 'eclipse of Darwinism' has not yet come to an end, and the cultural climate has changed completely. The two conceptions of morphology thus diverge: Haeckel regards morphology as a causal theory of nature, whereas Spengler sees it as the 'alternative' to a causal investigation[11]. Spengler draws contrasts between causal genesis and relations of forms: morphology refers to the things that constitute life and history in contradistinction to lifeless nature.

For all his biologism, Spengler is still loosely aligned with Goethe's morphology insofar as the latter aims to represent the unfolding of an idea in nature: Spengler intends to describe processes of development in which archetypal symbols[12] unfold through predefined stages according to an internal logic. Wittgenstein agrees with Spengler (whom he admires despite all his criticism) on the point that morphology is not a matter of causal connections; however, the Viennese philosopher also wonders the extent to which Goethe himself may have been

[11] Spengler is often left out of studies of morphology, and yet his historical significance was immense. For a discussion of Spengler as a morphologist cf. Merlio 2014, 267-292; also see Brusotti 2000, 41 ff.; Brusotti 2014, 264 ff.

[12] *Ursymbole*.

confused here. The peculiarity of Wittgenstein's perspective is that he believes Goethe is mistaken about his own views if he understands his morphology as an approach based on evolutionary history. It would not adequately serve as this kind of approach, since it cannot demonstrate historical connections – genesis and evolution – and is only capable of demonstrating a range of purely formal variations.

3. *Spengler (and Wittgenstein)*

Building on the work of Goethe, Spengler claims to have made comparing into a true art form. The morphologist, who compares phenomena from different cultures with one another, is forced to make a strict distinction between 'homologies' and 'analogies' here. Regarding cultures as organisms, Spengler uses these two biological terms in this context, insisting that they stand for two opposites which have already been identified by Goethe, and that this 'opposition' should not be understood in a causal sense[13]. The morphologist has to pay attention to the homologies and must not confuse them with analogies; in Spengler's understanding, homologous phenomena from different cultures are 'contemporary', even if they are separated by millennia; the reason being that they «occur in exactly the same – relative – positions in their respective cultures, and therefore possess exactly the same importance» (Spengler 1923, 112). Examples of such homologous forms include «Classical sculpture and West European orchestration, the Fourth Dynasty pyramids and the Gothic cathedrals, Indian Buddhism and Roman Stoicism» (*ibid.*, 111). The comparability of cultures is due to these homologies and is thus based on an inward necessity that applies equally to all cultures. Spengler's cultures develop like organisms: every era in world history goes through phases or stages of life similar to childhood, adolescence, maturity and old age, before finally going into decline[14].

Furthermore, the inter-cultural relationships are to be separated from intra-cultural relationships: the homologies between corresponding stages in the development of different cultures must be strictly distinguished from the

[13] «Biology employs the term *homology of the organs*, signifying *morphological* equivalence, in contrast with the term *analogy*, which relates to functional *equivalence*. This important, and in the sequel most fruitful, notion was conceived by Goethe (who was led thereby to the discovery of the *os intermaxillare* in man) and put into strict scientific shape by Owen; we shall incorporate this notion also in our historical method» (Spengler 1923, 111); on this point cf. Merlio 2014, 283. There is also a polemic aspect to the reference to Goethe: in order to introduce the difference between homology and analogy into his speculative historiography, Spengler – who polemicizes against Darwinism (cf. Spengler 1923, 111) – tries to free the two terms from any causal aspect.

[14] Cf. Spengler 1923, 21 f.

phenomena of the same culture. Spengler emphasises the «deep relations»[15] (*ibid.*, 47) between the various aspects of the same culture, as they are «identical expressions of one and the same spiritual principle» (*ibid.*). Spengler's cultures are therefore «great […] *groups of morphological relations*, each one of which symbolically represents a particular sort of mankind in the whole picture of world-history» (*ibid.*). The «*morphological relationship*[16] that inwardly binds the expression-forms of *all* branches of Culture» (*ibid.*, 6) is due to the fact that each culture has its own archetypal symbol[17] that sets it apart: for classical Apollonian culture, this is the individual body, whereas for the 'Faustian soul' of western culture it is pure, boundless space[18]. Thus all phenomena within a culture are connected by the archetypal symbol that only they share. All phenomena within a given culture therefore have something that distinguishes them, and only them – Spengler's approach is essentialist, and not only in this regard.

By way of contrast, the «master-traits of thought, life and world-consciousness» in different cultures are as varied as the «features[19] of individual men» (*ibid.*, 179). Not even 'homologous' phenomena bridge this divide.

In his *Anti-Spengler*, Otto Neurath remarks: «Contrasts! They are the why and wherefore» of *Decline*[20]. Spengler's tendency for pointed antitheses and juxtapositions – and not only that – is anything but Goethean. For Spengler, history is a perpetual recurrence of the same sort of structure; cultures take over from each other because they each emerge and perish, but one culture does not develop out of the other, and they do not merge; instead, each culture is monadically self-contained. Spengler's cultural essentialism, as it also appears in his theory of 'pseudomorphoses', ignores cultural mixing or transitions.

Wittgenstein appreciates Spengler's ability to find surprising common ground between things that appear to be (and really are!) miles apart. Still, this admiration does not prevent him from making some incisive critical remarks. His criticism is not without sympathy for its subject, however: Wittgenstein has no desire to completely discard Spengler's method; instead he simply intends to remedy a few fundamental errors that the method shares with Wittgenstein's own *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*[21]. Wittgenstein contemplates how the author of *Decline* could have altered the wording of his undertaking in order to make it more plausible. Spengler could thus say that he is comparing «different cultural epochs» with the «lives of families»; since «within a family there is

15 *Tiefe Verwandtschaft*.
16 *Verwandtschaft*.
17 *Ursymbol*.
18 Cf. Spengler 1923, 183.
19 *Gesichtszüge*.
20 Neurath 1921, 90 (transl.: Neurath 2012, 209). Cf. Brusotti 2011, 344 ff. For another of Neurath's objections against Spengler, cf. Brusotti 2014, 265.
21 On this subject, and for a discussion of Wittgenstein's critique of Spengler, cf. Brusotti 2014, 264 ff. and 24 ff.; also cf. Brusotti 2000, 41 ff.

family resemblance, though you will also find a resemblance between members of different families; family resemblance differs from the other sort of resemblance in such and such ways, etc.» (Wittgenstein MS 111, 119)[22]. Spengler could therefore compare the similarity of phenomena within *one* cultural epoch with a family resemblance and the similarity between phenomena from *different* cultural epochs with the «resemblance» between members of different families. The distinguishing aspects of these two types of resemblance could then be analysed in a further step.

What would this achieve?

– First, the image of «family resemblances» does not presuppose any commonality in the background: what connects the phenomena of *one* culture is rather a network of «family resemblances», and not some kind of common substance or essence. In this sense, these phenomena are not necessarily profoundly different to the phenomena in other cultures (phenomena which, in turn, are connected by networks of «family resemblances»). The «prototype»[23] of the «family» thus implies a view that differs considerably from Spengler's essentialist approach.

– Second, rather than simply *equating*, Spengler should have limited himself to *comparisons*. Yet the organism is not just a loose analogy for Spengler: cultures are not simply compared with organisms in a non-committal way in *The Decline of the West*; instead, they are actually defined as organisms. According to Wittgenstein, Spengler should simply have said «I am *comparing*» (Wittgenstein: MS 111, 119)[24]. Unfortunately, instead of acknowledging the comparison as what it is, Spengler «confuses» the «prototype» of his consideration of cultures (the organism) with its «object» (the cultures). Wittgenstein wants to maintain a rigorous distinction between «prototype» and «object» and thus avoid Spengler's reckless dogmatism. He opts for a morphology in which the relata of the comparison are not conflated: the morphological method can provide a clear overview of the similarities and differences between cultural epochs or phenomena if it does not equate the object with the object of comparison ('prototype'). The «lives of families» would be the form of this particular overview. However, this is by no means something that Wittgenstein himself wishes to take on; he is simply suggesting how the author of *Decline* might be «better understood» (*ibid.*).

[22] References to Wittgenstein's Manuscripts (MS) or Typescripts (TS) use the numbering system in G. H. v. Wright's catalogue (Wright 1993); pages are numbered according to the Bergen Electronic Edition. Wherever an English translation is available and known to the authors/translator, the source has been cited even if the translation may have been modified for the purposes of the present paper.

[23] *Urbild*.

[24] Transl.: Wittgenstein 2006, 21e.

4. *Warburg*

Hamburgian art historian and cultural scholar Aby Warburg employs the practices of comparative seeing, collecting and arranging in his work; there is tension between spatialization – which extends to the taxonomic tableau – and genealogy, between comparability or seriality and singularity, and he refers to key concepts from Goethe's theory of metamorphosis in order to interpret relationships that are *formal and at the same time dynamic*.

According to Fritz Saxl, Warburg's library is dedicated to one problem alone, i.e. the afterlife of classical antiquity. It enquires about the «function of the social memory of mankind» and, more precisely, it asks: «Of what kind are the forms imprinted by antiquity, for them to persist?» (Saxl 1980, 331). This question contains (*inter alia*) the famous Goethean notion of the imprinted form[25] and its dynamic development, to which Warburg himself alludes in some of the working titles for the *Mnemosyne* Atlas[26]. These forms only come to be pre-imprinted in their *after*life. And the one sole problem is dealt with in a way that is consistent with Goethean morphology: «Warburg's library […] serves to deal with a problem, and in such a way that […] through the selection, collection and arrangement of the books and pictures, it represents the problem it wishes to solve» (*ibid.*). The Hamburg «problem building»[27] (*ibid.*, 334) is thus a visible representation of the key question, answering this question through the very arrangement of the material. So in a manner of speaking, it *embodies* the cultural topic.

In view of the growing inventory of books in the library, this method could not be sustained for long and was modified after Warburg was admitted to the mental institution in Kreuzlingen[28]. The black and white photographs, however, which he mounted on panels upon his return and rearranged time and time again, do appear in series of pictures[29]. There is a clear parallel between these pictures and the 'problem building': as is the case with the book collection, the material here is also to be organised to focus on a problem; over a thousand pictures from Warburg's vast collection of photographs were to be arranged on the panels. The montage technique that was apparently proposed by Fritz Saxl[30] suited Warburg, who had always worked with diagrams. It allowed him to

[25] *Geprägte Form*.

[26] Cf. for instance: «Series of pictures for the investigation of the function of the pre-imprinted expressive values in the depiction of life in motion in European Rennaissance Art», Warburg 2010, 644; also see 643. However, he also denotes the pathos formula (*Pathosformel*) with this Goethean term; cf. Zumbusch 2004, 328.

[27] *Problemgebäude* (quotation marks in Saxl's version).

[28] Cf. Saxl 2006, 439 ff.

[29] *Bilderreihen*.

[30] On Saxl's role cf. Gombrich 2006, 376; Warburg 2010, 613.

temporarily work around some serious difficulties in the linguistic formulation of his propositions; the photographs were not even accompanied by captions.

Still, the question of how Warburg imagined the transition from the panels to the book has yet to be answered: did he intend the atlas to consist of panels that were formally similar to the photographic material with their loose, non-linear arrangement? Or does the discussion of 'picture series' indicate an intention not to reproduce the panels in the book in this way but rather to impose a linear order on the photographs assembled in each display panel, i.e. an order that does not exist on the panels?[31] For example, was the idea to publish just a few images (or just one) per page in a sufficiently large format? It is not known what exactly he intended, or whether he had already made any firm decisions in this regard at the time of his death. Reflections on the arrangement of the visual material (and those regarding linear arrangements in particular) are therefore generally made with reservations[32].

It is known, however, that Warburg's comparisons and formation of series caused him to keep changing the pictures around. New comparative relationships constantly emerged during the course of constellating; the relationships between the relata could not be stabilised. Warburg did not see this as a merit of his undertaking; he wanted to solve his problem and sought a definitive disposition right up until he died[33].

For Warburg, the problem of arrangement applies not only to images but also to concepts. Now and again, he thought he could describe the desired dynamic concept as a series at least verbally, for example (in this case, as a series that comes full circle): «The Nymph as conceptual determination finally completed. From Darwin via Filippino to Botticelli through Carlyle and Vischer to the festive pageantry to the Indians and through the Tornabuoni with Ghirlandaio again to the Nymph» (Warburg 2010, 625)[34]. But the situation repeatedly proved to be more of a «desperate fight with the company of spectres; 1051 pictures must be installed» (Huisstede 1995, 148). And with regard to the order of the library: «Often one saw Warburg standing tired and distressed bent over his boxes with a packet of index cards, trying to find for each one the best place within the system» (Saxl 1970, 329).

On the one hand, there is reason to doubt that Warburg would have decided to arrange his visual material in series. He has no interest in establishing a continuous linear progression which undergoes an uninterrupted series of gradual transitions and can be represented accordingly; he is not simply aiming for an «inadequate descriptive evolutionary theory» (Warburg 2010, 633). He

31 Cf. Rösch 2010, 97.

32 With 'atlas panels', we mean the three series of photographs that depict the different versions of the panels. Cf., for instance, Rösch 2010, 96 and 100-103.

33 Cf. Wedepohl 2009, 46.

34 This statement is from 1901. On the meaning of *Umfangsbestimmung* cf. Mainberger 2008, 141.

is looking for *missing links*; however, his idea of history is discontinuous, and the things he wishes to depict are very much mediated by theory.

On the other hand, and in a far more fundamental sense, one might say that even if Warburg had decided to arrange his visual material in series, he still would not have arrived at arrangements that would constitute the answer to the question posed[35]. This is because he is by no means disposed to translate the problem of the afterlife of antiquity into a purely formal problem. The search for purely formal relationships is not his intention, nor does it correspond to his self-understanding. Warburg's concept of cultural memory implies dynamics of losing significance and regaining significance (i.e. the restoration of pathos in the formula), combined with semantic inversion; he employs scientifically inspired energy-related metaphors such as polarity reversal, and virological metaphors like infection (two images which he does not merely regard as metaphors). These dynamics are historical, and 'historical' means not merely formal, not just 'temporal', and not just successive in a linear sense. History is about more than just temporal succession; it consists of (not only formal) connections to a narrative (in the broadest sense of the word). Above all, there is no such thing as a unified time when it comes to symbols, culture and memory; rather, different times overlap, as in the unexpected resurgence of something that supposedly belongs to the past. Warburg is concerned with stratified times and individual dramatic returns. Notes like the following from 15 January 1929 are significant: «from the human head via the basket with fruit to the fire fighting water jar and – back!» (Warburg 2001, 399). The syntagma «and – back» indicates that the chronological succession is interrupted by non-linear time. As we see it, this is not consistent with Goethe's morphology, where the resurgence is conceived according to the model of the plant or the vegetable cycle, hence it is undramatic – and indeed untragic. Wherever possible, Goethe takes irreconcilable contrasts out of his problem constellations and distributes them among several different positions. Warburg, on the other hand, thinks in terms of irresolvable polarities, so as far as he is concerned, rather than being reassuring, the emergence of a circuit is a cause for alarm. How could this mindset be integrated into a morphological series?

The fundamental question is this: how can the practice of comparing or comparatively looking at images – in particular, the practice of putting photographic images together to form morphological series – be combined with a historical approach in the sense described above? Warburg repeatedly

[35] Zumbusch holds that the *Mnemosyne* atlas is concerned with morphological series and metamorphoses in the Goethean sense; cf. Zumbusch 2004, 322, 324, 326. However, there is a degree of polyvalence at play here: Goethe's morphological series are either understood as a historical-genetic (i.e. *not* a purely formal) order or as a loose, flexible order, which constitutes an alternative to a systematic order, thus as a *formal* grouping of similar elements around a centre.

made this kind of connection without ever managing to make it theoretically consistent[36].

Indeed, setting aside the comparative series of pictures as a practice in art studies, and setting aside explicit cultural comparisons as an ethnological and historically speculative procedure, Warburg bestows an elementary, anthropological sense to the practice of comparing. His comparative work neither starts nor finishes with his panels. Rather, this procedure has further-reaching dimensions for him: it is based on empathy theory, which for all his eclecticism represents a key element of Warburg's thinking. Comparing, or 'symbolising' (as Friedrich Theodor Vischer puts it), is the key operation here, but this is to be understood in a specific sense: the self compares itself with the object and projects its own disposition onto it; these acts of 'comparing' give meaning to the world. Vischer's son, Robert, differentiates this on a theoretical level[37]. Against this background, all kinds of figures, images, signs, including metaphors and, indeed, concepts (!)[38] are results or manifestations of acts of comparison. Symbols and thus culture in general emerge from the act of comparing or symbolising.

This is basically a double-sided relationship with the world: as per the etymology (Greek: *symballein*, *join* or *put together*), it means connecting, uniting, converging with the world. But since Warburg is guided by F. Th. Vischer's so-called aesthetic symbol with its intermediate position between identification and rational distance, it also means placing something 'between' the subject and the object, standing back and thus opening up 'room for thinking'. Warburg refers to the latter as the «fundamental act of civilization» (Gombrich 1970, 288)[39].

36 Cf., for instance, the discussion of style as the product of conflicting forces and confrontations. The transformation of his ideas into a formalizable methodology (cf. Panofsky) means the dissolution of the extremely tense connection between academic work on individual problems and the axiomatic precondition of a tragic *conditio humana*.

37 Cf. F. Th. Vischer [1887] 1922 and R. Vischer 1873. Cf. Mainberger 2010 and 2014. Quite fundamentally, for Warburg symbolising here means setting signs in place of the object (a variation is the substitution by abbreviations). There are varying degrees of proximity or distance in this procedure; thus there are different types of symbols and – given that they appear simultaneously and successively – different types of cultures.

38 This is the most abstract sign, the third stage or the third type for F. Th. Vischer.

39 See the first sentence of the introduction of the *Mnemosyne* Atlas; Warburg 2010, 629. For Warburg, 'comparison' or 'comparing' is also synonymous with 'metaphor'. Given the use of the comparative 'like' (*wie*), which creates distance, he understands this as something that comes close to a concept or lays the groundwork for the concept. Cf. Wedepohl 2009. However, the dual nature of the act of 'comparing' or symbolising must be stressed: distance alone is not enough to create culture. It therefore makes sense to distinguish between the broad and narrow meanings of 'comparing' or 'comparison': in the broader sense, this refers to all kinds of symbolic connections or symbolisation, from identification through to the concept; in the narrower sense, it is limited to reflexive distance and counterposes this to identification.

According to Warburg, every cultural manifestation, every symbol – be it an action, i.e. a ritual, or an artefact, such as a picture – always strikes a new balance between these two opposing tendencies, or it is a way of suspending the pendulum halfway between the two extremes[40]. In this sense, comparing[41] also means establishing a balance[42]. Comparing thus has a double meaning: (1) the culture-constituting reference to the world, whereby the subject and object enter into an ambiguous relationship that both unites and divides them, or where they are 'compared', and (2) establishing equilibrium or a balance. In this elementary, anthropological sense, 'comparing', a philosophical concept of the two Vischers, takes on an existential dimension.

It follows that the relationship between forms and history must be accordingly complex: in Warburg's work, a scheme of chronological and genetic stages is repeatedly competing with a typology of kinds of symbolisation, the model of a historical sequence with that of a pendulum swinging back and forth. In keeping with F. Th. Vischer, the identification or confusion of the subject with the object is therefore the first, lowest symbolic stage, namely of the magic type, but this identification also occurs repeatedly over the course of history. Even if a culture has moved far away from the magic way of relating to the world, to some extent this relationship still erupts into the present day; even in enlightened times, we recognise re-actualisations of archaic impulses. Here, rather than being void or calligraphic, pathos formulae are filled with energy; they make us aware of original disruptions.

However, in the basic operation of comparison – i.e. in empathy or embodiment – the full scope[43] of the subject and of the object can never be congruent. Indeed, a living human being holds 'dead matter' within itself and produces the same paradoxical combination of living and dead matter in its acts of symbolisation. An impressive image of this is that of the individual who «finds herself in her body like a telephone girl during a storm or under artillery fire. A human being never possesses the right to say that its vital feeling coincides (through a constantly present system of signals) with the entire scope of the alterations taking place in its personality» (Warburg 2010, 581)[44]. The human relationship with the world is thus an intrinsically unhappy one, or as Warburg puts it, schizophrenic; that is to say, the relationship with the world is ultimately tragic[45].

The recurrences of catastrophic experiences from the history of mankind are at odds with the traditional notion of a historical graduated sequence of symbolisation or culture; with Warburg, the (threefold) pattern of a succession

40 Cf. Wedepohl 2011, 123.
41 *Vergleichen*.
42 *Ausgleich*.
43 *Umfang*.
44 Transl.: Michaud 2004, 312-313.
45 Cf. Mainberger 2014. Also see Mainberger 2010.

from identificational-magical to aesthetic and finally allegorical-conceptual symbolisation – a succession assumed by F. Th. Vischer and others – is intersected by the binary pattern of 'back and forth', the pendulum motion from ecstasy or disruption to detachment.

What implications does this have for the formation of morphological series? Warburg repeatedly arranges elements into groups of three in his theoretical considerations, but these groups have no definitive significance. Rather than serving as representations of history, they are models with a heuristic function. On the panels as they are known to us today, triads are only relevant to a certain extent: for example, they factor into the selection of antiquity, the early modern period and modernity. Warburg does, however, clearly denote a triad of the «classical antiquity model», «Italian intermediaries» (Warburg 2010, 647) and Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* as a morphological series. Warburg remarks on Nicolaes Berchem's *Judgment of Paris* (dated by him to 1630 or around 1630-1640): «for an art historian with evolutionist inclinations», «as an object, [it] serves the purpose of an intermaxillary bone» (*ibid.*, 654) because of its «symbiosis of ancient staffage and Dutch landscape» (*ibid.*); in this «wonderfully eclectic Italian-Dutch style» (*ibid.*, 657), the Paris Judgement represents «a missing link between the eating of the apple at Olympia and the French layman's breakfast» (*ibid.*, 656 f), i.e. between an ancient sarcophagus relief and Manet's painting. Warburg views the intermaxillary bone as a Darwinian *missing link*[46], and the morphologist is clearly in an evolutionary mood: Goethe's morphology and evolutionary theory are merged as a matter of course here. This triad is seen as a «development» which is to be understood in a «historical-psychological» sense (*ibid.*, 655), but the «psychohistorian» (*ibid.*, 645) Warburg can hardly ease the tension between the historical method and the speculative (sometimes even adventurous) psychological approach here. However, this triad is not the only one mentioned in his text, and it does not appear as a triad on atlas panel 55; rather it forms part of a more extensive installation that also includes other works that are not mentioned in the text. Clear filiations (Berchem from Raimondi and Raimondi from Raffael) and multifarious affinities (for which the evidence – if indeed there is any – is extremely diverse) stand side by side indiscriminately in this montage[47].

The pictures are arranged on Warburg's panels in open constellations of varying sizes and grades of cohesion, i.e. in expandable configurations, and he repeatedly talks about 'series of pictures' in his working titles for the atlas. However, as we have already noted, it is unclear whether the pictures were ultimately intended to be displayed in a linear order that was absent from the

[46] Also see Warburg 2010, 646; Warburg also talks about the «connecting link» (*das verbindende Glied*); Warburg 2010, 651.

[47] On the subject of this panel as a paradigm of a Warburgian series cf. Métraux 2005, 35-38. He says that the heterogeneity comes unstuck in the psycho-historian's «autobiographical reflex» (Warburg 2010, 645); Métraux 2005, 38.

panels. Based on how they are presented (in photographic reproductions), it is difficult to talk about series at all here – definitely not about morphological series, in any case. Indeed, they possess neither (1) the continuity nor (2) the self-evidence of morphological series: (1) they are not complete or uninterrupted because new links can always be inserted between them; this is the very nature of their openness, and they are more open in this sense than in the sense of being simply continuable. In addition to asymmetrical relationships (as is the case between the predecessor and the successor in a genetic series), there are also symmetrical relationships between the images on each panel. Most importantly, the connections are heterogeneous in their nature: borrowings and filiations, associative links, formal resemblance in the case of iconographic inversion, speculative relationships extrapolated from a theory, and so on. (2) The epistemic status of these relationships varies considerably. The heterogeneity of the connections is, however, consistent with the many concerns of this cultural scholar and 'psycho-historian' specialising in art studies. Generally speaking, the phenomena themselves are *not* the teachings here. Pathos formulae are often immediately discernible to the trained eye, but more often than not, the connections are not immediately apparent; they are not self-evident, but rather – and Warburg knows this – a beholder without any background knowledge must either be verbally informed about them or somehow deduce them. (This problem has to do with more than just the inadequacy of the visual medium.)

The available arrangement of the pictures is just one of a number of possibilities. Even when a panel has taken its definitive form (especially when it is not accompanied by text), there is no definite set 'reading' of the panel, since the way in which the pictures are arranged on the surface cannot rule out a change of observational direction. There is not just one single sequence in which the images can be observed. Morphological series, on the other hand, are a linear mode of organisation. Once this order has been established, there is no need for an alternative arrangement: the established order is satisfactory, and the problem has ceased to exist. This is not the case with Warburg. Both the disjunct nature of the pictures (the black spaces between them are also worth noting) and the possibility for the eye to jump back and forth between them point to a non-continuous conception of history. Still, if we deny the linear linkage and say that ascendency and descent are just one of a number of possible connections, the question of how the relationships between the individual elements should be understood remains to be decided. One may recognise the ancient Nymph in the female golfer, but what kind of dynamics have brought her into the 20th century? All the assumptions concerning memory, culture and *conditio humana* required in order for these constellations of images to speak to us cannot be conveyed by these photographs alone. The panels are thus far removed from the (desired) self-evidence of morphological series. And this has to do with more than just the mute, polyvalent character of images that require text for their interpretation. Rather, the excessively vague articulation

of images brings to light an unresolved contradiction of the Warburgian undertaking; even if the 'social memory of mankind' could be represented as a morphological series at the level of phenomenality, Warburg was not simply aiming at a «descriptive evolutionary theory» (*ibid.*, 633). His approach is not only committed to visuality and description, but also to depth hermeneutics and a dramatic concept of culture. The tragic element of history and the morphological series (either in the Goethean sense, or in both a Goethean and an evolutionist sense) are incompatible concepts. The task of arranging the pictures therefore becomes an interminable activity.

Warburg rarely reflects explicitly on his relationship to reference authors[48]. He does not ask whether Goethe's natural science can be interpreted in the way Haeckel read it; he sometimes[49] simply walks in the footsteps of the latter. Although Warburg's approach is not lacking in evolutionary aspects, he also goes against these ideas in his work. Formalism, on the other hand, is out of the question both in history of art and of culture. Tragedy is another point on which he disagrees with Spengler, whose sweeping, speculative ideas are diametrically opposed to Warburg's obsession with detail and the associated research methods.

5. *Wittgenstein on Frazer: the metamorphosis of the* Golden Bough

Goethe's poem *Metamorphosis of Plants* reads: «All forms are alike and none is quite like the other. And so the chorus points to a secret law, to a sacred riddle» (Goethe 1887-1919, II, vol. 6, I, 140). As Goethe looks at plants, the reader of the *Golden Bough* looks at the cruel customs here described: «And so the chorus points to a secret law one feels like saying to Frazer's collection of facts», writes Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein TS 211, 321)[50]. We may «feel like» saying this, but would we be right to do so, or should we resist temptation?

To return to Warburg briefly: is he suggesting that his images point to a secret law? What he is really looking for are 'psycho-historic' or 'psycho-social' laws, such as the principle of least action[51]. Through his 'series of pictures', he not only strives to illustrate the (tortuous) paths of the historical reception of

[48] Zumbusch 2004, 324, calls his relationship to Goethe a playful one. However, there are implications and preconceptions to be found in freely used citations, which are revealing for a reading of Warburg from the perspective of the history of science.

[49] Warburg's thoughts were not mapped out into a theory, so there will always be certain statements that stand in the way of a properly formulated hypothesis.

[50] Cf. Wittgenstein MS 110, 256. The aspects of Wittgenstein's analysis of Frazer that are highlighted in this discussion are based on the more in-depth reconstruction of this subject in Brusotti 2014. Cf. *ibid.*, 234 ff. for the remark cited here.

[51] Cf. Warburg 2010, 646.

certain motifs by bringing their changing fates – particularly inversions – to light. The arrangement of the panels is not simply intended as a contribution to a 'diffusionist' historiography of the transmission of images, as its subjects go beyond historically contingent influences, borrowings and processes of exchange. Warburg has higher ambitions: he intends to span an arc across the history of philosophy, across the history of the orientation and the liberation of the mind; furthermore, the whole is to be underpinned by a challenging (yet slightly confused) cultural psychology of collective memory, according to which pre-imprinted 'engrams' are activated and transformed sporadically, albeit according to laws.

According to the theory of 'engrams', the paths of the transmission of images have not emerged by chance over the course of history, on the go, as it were; rather they are traced in the collective psyche. But the philosophico-historical narrative does not dovetail perfectly with Warburg's equally ambitious cultural psychology; what is supposed to be the historical starting point in the rise of rationality still persists as a psychological force at the end. Warburg reminds us of Lévy-Bruhl, who starts by opposing 'our' logical mentality to the 'prelogical' mentality of the 'primitives', but ultimately admits the universally human coexistence of both poles. In a similar way, Warburg's 'series of pictures' are also designed to point to a law which is yet to be uncovered.

With this in mind, one may wonder whether Wittgenstein's comments on Frazer address similar problems as Warburg, even though the 'theories' of the *Golden Bough* are considerably simpler and far less fruitful than Warburg's efforts. Wittgenstein sees Frazer as a sort of reluctant morphologist: someone who works like a morphologist in some ways but in doing so misunderstands the scope, limits and achievements of morphology.

To what extent can this blame be attributed to the Scottish ethnologist?

Frazer is actually an exponent of the 'old' comparative method of evolutionary anthropology, albeit a late and rather idiosyncratic one at that. The *Golden Bough* intends to explain, in stages, a mysterious phenomenon from antiquity. The priest of Diana's temple in Aricia, near Rome, was a runaway slave who broke a branch – the golden bough – off a holy tree in the Nemi grove, then challenged the presiding high priest of the temple to a duel and killed him; he was then allowed to remain the priest until a stronger man came along and killed and succeeded him. The *Golden Bough* begins with an expression of mystification about the continued existence of this cruel custom amidst the flourishing Roman civilisation. How can the barbaric rule of succession for this priesthood be explained? Frazer artificially constructs a question of origin here and, in the absence of direct evidence, sets out to answer it in purely conjectural terms – aided by a comparative collection of ethnological facts. Similar rituals appear in other epochs and parts of the world; it can therefore be assumed that the rule of succession for Diana's temple came about on the same grounds: in ancient times, people regarded as divine beings were killed all over the world

in order to magically support the cycle of nature and bring forth the harvest. The comparative method could therefore be used not only to solve the riddle of the priest-king, but its application could also go much further and unveil the «first crude philosophy of life»[52] of mankind, which despite its many surface differences is essentially always the same[53].

In the *Golden Bough*, customs from various epochs and regions of the world are abstracted from their respective cultural context and grouped together in a line; these very lists of (supposedly) parallel examples give Wittgenstein the idea that Frazer's comparative method is, in fact, a sort of morphology that misunderstands itself. «And so the chorus points to a secret law»[54]. Like Goethe's plants, Frazer's rituals are similar in their nature and yet «none is quite like the other». So what is the secret law? Prior to Goethe's verse, Wittgenstein quotes Schiller's Kantian objections to the archetypal plant: «That is not an observation from experience. That is an idea. (Schiller)» (Wittgenstein MS 110, 256)[55]. At the time of this poem, the archetypal plant no longer represents the solution to the riddle for Goethe; so does Schiller's remark convey the opinion held by Goethe himself in later life? This is how Wittgenstein sees it in a later dictation: Goethe ultimately regarded the archetypal plant as «only an idea, not something real» (Wittgenstein and Waismann 2003, 310)[56]. Thus, rather than simply abandoning the archetypal plant, Wittgenstein's Goethe reinterprets it along the lines of Schiller: as something that is no longer historically given but which is instead an idea; the leaf of morphology is an archetypal phenomenon which, understood as an 'idea', is now a pure and thus harmless object of comparison. Wittgenstein also criticises Spengler for the mistake Schiller noticed with regard to the archetypal plant: an idea is confused with a real being; a mere object of comparison is conflated with the actual object of the investigation. Unlike Spengler, however, Wittgenstein's Goethe soon recognises that the archetypal plant is only a schema, an object of comparison, and ultimately registers this confusion. Goethe's morphology differs from Spengler's method in this respect.

52 Cf. Frazer 1911, 10; Frazer 1922, 2.

53 Certain distinctions would be required in this case: although the 'official' main problem – the riddle of the priest-king – is the leitmotif, it is not simply to be equated with the real agenda of the *Golden Bough*; over the complex editorial history of the book, the accumulation of material gains priority over the solution to the riddle and the theoretical aspirations; in fact, it becomes an end in itself. This must also be taken into account in any interpretation of Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer; cf. Brusotti 2014, 205 ff.

54 Wittgenstein 1993, 133. For further literature on Wittgenstein's reception of Goethe cf. Brusotti 2014, 234; see in particular: Schulte 1990b; Rothhaupt 1996, Schulte 2003 and other articles in the same volume; Schulte 2014. On Wittgenstein and Morphology see also Andronico 1998, Fabbrichesi Leo / Leoni 2005.

55 Goethe reports Schiller's oral objection to the metamorphosis of plants in fortunate encounter (*Glückliches Ereignis*). Cf. Goethe 1887-1919, II, vol. 11, I, 13 ff.

56 For this dictation to Friedrich Waismann («An overview removes disquiet» [F90]), cf. Brusotti 2014, 237 ff. and 248 ff.

As Wittgenstein sees it, Frazer actually assembles a 'chorus', the members of which are somehow alike. Yet the anthropologist confuses these formal similarities with historic and causal relations, with origins, descent and evolution, and believes that he has discovered the causal genesis and evolutionary history of the 'chorus'. Frazer – not Goethe – makes the mistake of thinking that the 'law' that ties the 'chorus' of phenomena is causal. There is however one misunderstanding they share, but which only Goethe went on to rectify. Goethe was also initially mistaken about the 'law' behind the 'chorus'; the 'law' is not a concrete phenomenon. Goethe acknowledged his misunderstanding after the fact. However, the same cannot be said of Frazer: indeed, the *Golden Bough* posits a concrete phenomenon, a hypothetical prehistoric human sacrifice which is alleged to be the origin of the customs handed down through history, among them the duel at the temple of Diana.

Wittgenstein sets out to draw a strict distinction between elements that belong together in Frazer's approach: while the latter's comparative method is at the same time causally explanatory, Wittgenstein's perspicuous representation is *only* intended as a means of comparing and describing, *not* as a means of explaining. According to Wittgenstein, Frazer dresses up a purely formal representation in terms of evolutionary history. Hence the entirety of the *Golden Bough* – Frazer's 'collection of facts' – *can* be converted back into a formal consideration by disregarding the 'evolutionary hypothesis' and expressing the 'idea', the 'secret law' of the religious ceremonies described by Frazer, «by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a 'perspicuous' representation» (Wittgenstein MS 110, 257)[57].

Wittgenstein's critique that Frazer's 'comparative method' in fact only shows formal similarities is on the mark; the customs grouped together in the *Golden Bough* are not really connected in a historical sense. As a rule, the similarities between these customs are only superficial: the rituals seem to be related, but only because Frazer isolates them from their real context, disregarding their complex texture.

The structuralists realised the outward, apparent nature of these similarities and saw no point in comparing the surface forms. They posited formal *and* causally effective deep structures underlying the phenomena and wanted to explore this theoretical order behind the processes. Conversely, Wittgenstein has no desire to find *the* order *behind* the phenomena: the phenomena themselves are supposed to be the teaching.

Any attempt to reformulate the comparative method in morphological terms would, however, most likely founder due to the superficial nature of

[57] Transl.: Wittgenstein 1993, 133. The final version of this remark is in § 122 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. For a discussion of the 'perspicuous representation' in general, and in the context of the analysis of the *Golden Bough*, cf. Brusotti 2014, 191 ff. and the literature referenced there.

Frazer's similarities, as highlighted first by the functionalists and then by the structuralists. What would be the point in ordering these allegedly similar ethnological fragments from disparate cultures as a 'chorus' or a series? The result would be 'a monstrous mosaic' (Evans-Pritchard), a random collection of customs uprooted from their intra-cultural context. 'Cutting' and 'pasting' – decontextualizing rituals and then 'organising' the fragments – would both be questionable here. It therefore cannot be said that such a perspicuous representation conveys 'facts', because the 'material' in question cannot be referred to as 'facts'. The 'comparative method' would still be empirically inadequate, even if it were to be reinterpreted in a morphological sense.

Wittgenstein surely cannot be completely aware of this problem in the early 1930s. Still, he is not trying to contrast Frazer's method with something akin to a 'morphological ethnology' which applies a method inspired by Goethe to the cruel rituals described in the *Golden Bough*. Again, «one feels like saying» that not just Frazer's comparative method, but even a perspicuous representation of his collection of facts «points to a secret law», albeit not an evolutionary one. Wittgenstein initially assumes that there really is a universal human «principle according to which these practices are ordered» (Wittgenstein: MS 110, 195)[58]; a principle that allows us to intuitively understand them and perhaps to make up the missing 'links'. However, Wittgenstein soon concludes that the secret law to which Frazer's rituals apparently point does not really exist; it is merely a mirage. In a nutshell: «*That* they point, is all there is to it» (Wittgenstein 2016, 352)[59].

The experience of reading the *Golden Bough* is not unlike the process of interpreting dreams in psychoanalysis. «Think of how puzzling a dream is. […] It is as *if* there were a riddle here; but it doesn't have to be a riddle. "All forms are alike, and none is quite like the other; And so the chorus points to a secret law"» (Wittgenstein MS 137, 97a)[60]. This secret law – the (alleged) riddle that psychoanalysis aims to solve – is just a mirage. We ask ourselves: «Where on earth did this image come from, & what has become of it?» (Wittgenstein MS 136, 137a)[61]. It gives an impression of being «a very *vivid*» «part of a story», «the rest lying in darkness», and this impression is what is subsequently «intriguing» about our dream (*ibid.*). But this story does not really exist; it is something we fabricate *in retrospect*; we bestow the material with a meaning and a profound aspect only in hindsight, when we look back. The same goes for Frazer's 'explanation': the collected rituals seem to tragically reprise a cruel primeval celebration which, like the archetypal plant, can be divined through

58 Transl.: Wittgenstein 1993, 127.

59 (= 10/7/9: 33). For an analysis of Wittgenstein's lecture in the May Term 1933 cf. Brusotti 2014, 274 ff.

60 Transl.: Wittgenstein 1982: § 196-197, 28-30.

61 Transl.: Wittgenstein 2006, 78e. On Wittgenstein's criticism of Freud cf. Brusotti 2014, in particular 327 ff.

countless variations; however, this archetypal celebration is an 'idea', a form of representation, and not a historical phenomenon.

According to Wittgenstein, the issue that Frazer presents as an empirical, historic problem – one that calls for a causal evolutionary response – is actually a completely different kind of 'difficulty'. An uncanny feeling comes over Frazer and his readers when the priest-king is killed; the gruesome custom impacts on, disturbs, and disconcerts the reader; the ritual is 'puzzling' in this sense – and not in the sense that its evolutionary causes are unknown. Frazer misconstrues this deep 'existential', 'ethical' disconcertment as a desire for scientific (causal) explanation. Though Wittgenstein's Frazer believes that he has found an explanation, he actually misses the point. Nevertheless he has not failed in his undertaking, because he really does say and show something and addresses his own disconcertment and that of his reader. One can use the term 'serendipity' here: Frazer actually achieves something, only something different to the evolutionary explanation he seeks. In other words: Wittgenstein's Frazer finds what he really seeks; he just isn't looking for what he believes he seeks. In any case, despite all the inadequacies and, indeed, annoyance, the reader – i.e. Wittgenstein himself – finds what he is seeking. This is because he knows what he should be seeking and can find in the *Golden Bough*: impressive descriptions and collections of rituals that initially inspire a feeling of unease or even uncanniness in the reader and speak to him on an existential level.

We approach these kinds of concerns in an ethical and/or aesthetic way: the arguments we exchange here and the reasons we give for our opinions are not strictly compelling; ultimately it is up to the interlocutor or the reader to decide whether or not they appeal. Wittgenstein thinks that the situation is similar in psychoanalysis – and philosophy. That is to say, philosophy is also concerned with deeply unsettling problems that should not be confused with causal, empirical issues, since they are in fact conceptual difficulties. We misunderstand our language; mistaken similes and misleading analogies confuse us because we are not in command of the 'grammar' of our language. The philosopher dissolves a certain conceptual problem by making the respective small part of our 'grammar' perspicuous. To do this, he devises simple 'language games' and compares the non-perspicuous grammar of our language with these models that are easily surveyable because they are fictitious.

In the first half of the 1930s in particular, morphological series or centres of variation serve as the model for this technique: the fictitious 'language games' are intended as the morphological environment in which the 'grammar' of our real language becomes perspicuous. A representation is perspicuous if it gives an overview and dissolves a conceptual problem. Only conceptual difficulties, and not an empirical problem, can be dissolved simply by grouping together linguistic material. The perspicuity Wittgenstein has in mind is not akin to the economy, coherence and systematicity of an empirical theory; perspicuous representations are not theories of any sort – neither empirical (for instance,

linguistic), nor philosophical theories. The Wittgensteinian philosopher neither proposes theses nor theories.

6. *A Wittgensteinian approach to Warburg: 'series of pictures' as perspicuous representations?*

Wittgenstein's analysis of Frazer's undertaking may be problematic, but it does not completely miss the mark. He projects his own experience as a reader of the *Golden Bough* onto the author. However, it is very difficult to ascribe such existential concerns to Frazer, as he is very deliberate in the use of his stylistic devices.

All the same, it is still worth approaching another author along similar lines to Wittgenstein's reading of the Scottish ethnologist: Warburg. The kind of emotion the philosopher thinks is implied by the 'dark' style of the *Golden Bough* can, in fact, be found in Warburg's work, forming an 'existential' background for his groupings of morphological series.

Frazer's curious combination of stylistic, literary and scientific aspirations led him to create a unique work – and a bestseller of its time. The *Golden Bough* made quite an impact on Wittgenstein, too. The ethnological classic he was dealing with was still extremely popular, despite being somewhat idiosyncratic and already rather outdated. However, the fact that it is possible to apply Wittgenstein's approach to Warburg's atlas, an almost contemporaneous project, shows that the problems arose in a far more general way and were highly topical[62]. Rather than confronting the beholder with a 'series of pictures', Warburg's panels present a 'chorus' of pictures, a chorus that is difficult to portray in a linear fashion. Are Warburg's arrangements perspicuous representations in Wittgenstein's sense of the term? Had Warburg been acquainted with the concept, he would have been forced to answer this question in the negative. Warburg – who, like Frazer, understands his problem as a scientific one – tends to interpret morphology in empirical, causal and sometimes evolutionary terms; he has no desire to restrict himself to descriptions. Wittgenstein intends to do precisely this, and he does not regard his descriptions as being empirical. His method (based on Goethe's morphology) of providing a perspicuous representation of the existing material is not intended to solve any kind of empirical problem. As Wittgenstein would have it, Frazer addresses his

[62] Warburg occasionally refers to the main protagonist of Frazer's *Golden Bough* while working on the atlas (cf. Gombrich 2006, 380). However, a more important ethnological role model for the atlas project is Adolf Bastian, who also belongs to the evolutionary tradition despite all the idiosyncrasies of his approach.

own disconcertment and that of his readers, but he only does this to the extent that the *Golden Bough* is more art than it is science.

Should we follow this assessment and consign Warburg's atlas to the field of art or aesthetics? Are we to conclude (once again) that art history becomes an art in its own right in the *Mnemosyne* atlas? Warburg's 'symphony of images' was interpreted in this way early on (Gombrich), and the atlas panels have also been associated with contemporary surrealist collages or analogised with modern poetry[63]. From this perspective, Warburg expresses his tragic anthropology more like an artist, rather than substantiating it like a philosophising scholar. The fascination that comes from the 'series of pictures' is therefore primarily aesthetic, and if these series seem perspicuous to the beholder, then the criterion is primarily an aesthetic one. This aspect cannot be avoided in his panel method. However, the historical components of Warburg's unconventional cultural exploration as a whole cannot be seen as relative to the same extent as with Frazer, and the problem of the afterlife of antiquity cannot be translated into a purely formal problem. Nevertheless, Warburg overloads his atlas panels with requirements that cannot be fulfilled by the 'series of pictures' and which, ultimately, are incompatible. Wittgenstein's scepticism against these kinds of amalgamations of the most heterogeneous requirements and his ascetic view of groupings of cultural phenomena clearly demonstrate the methodological problems here.

While Warburg connects diverse and diverging aims with his panels, Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is forced to admit that his conceptual investigations are «characterised by a certain kind of purposelessness» (Wittgenstein MS 134, 153 f). A philosophical, conceptual investigation fulfils more or less the same aim that Goethe sought to achieve: it sees «analogies which had never been seen before», replaces the old object of comparison with a new one («compare this part, not with this one, but rather with that!»), changes the aspect («Look at it like this!») and establishes «a new order» among the «descriptions» (*ibid.*). Now «the new arrangement might also give a new direction to scientific investigation» (*ibid.*). But this possible impact on empirical research is not the purpose of conceptual analysis. Wittgenstein «would not want to say» that his investigations are «a case of l'*art pour art*» (*ibid.*); indeed, this would sound «too arty», but even if, as he hopes, they are not necessarily «without any connection with the rest of life», they do not, however, have a «clear purpose» (*ibid.*).

Wittgenstein's investigations are similar to aesthetic investigations with regard to this curious kind of 'purposelessness'. Can we also apply the things that he says about himself here (and in other similar statements) to Warburg's *Mnemosyne* Atlas? Do his panels come close to Wittgenstein's conceptual investigations? This, admittedly, would be a disempowering reading of Warburg,

[63] Cf. Forster 1995, 190-193; Rösch 2010, 98 f.

but it does not have to imply a downgrading of his unusual project; indeed, any Wittgensteinian reading of this method and of its results is only justified if such a reading also takes into account the heuristic potential of the panels. Nevertheless, neither the panels nor Wittgenstein's philosophical techniques have a *primarily* heuristic function, albeit for conflicting reasons. Warburg has much higher aspirations. Wittgenstein's conceptual investigations, by contrast, can have a heuristic effect, but that is not their purpose; and this kind of fallout onto empirical research is not achieved by necessity but occurs only by chance.

The ultimate aim of Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations is to trigger a change of perspective. But this is also something that Warburg's panels try to do. As well as provoking a lasting sense of aesthetic fascination, they also develop their heuristic potential by paving the way for analogies that have not been seen before, allowing for new comparisons and even for something like a 'change of aspect'.

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