

## Intellectual Potential from the Other Side of Europe's Colonial and Nationalist Past: Cultural Science/Kulturwissenschaft around 1900 and its Relevance for Cultural Relations

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## Intellectual Potential from the Other Side of Europe's Colonial and Nationalist Past

Cultural Science/ *Kulturwissenschaft* around 1900 and its Relevance for Cultural Relations

Sigrid Weigel

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Currently cultural policy is increasingly determined by ideological controversies in which different theoretical programmes irreconcilably collide and Europe's history and culture – or more generally 'the West' – have become the most controversial subjects. After the past decades have witnessed a rapid sequence of different theories – critical theory, cultural studies, deconstructionism, new historicism, visual studies, post-colonialism, new materialism, to name just the most influential schools – the debate is presently becoming increasingly normative. It is morally charged by references to the European hegemonic and colonial past, and emotionally charged by identity politics and questions of belonging, based in ethnicity, gender, and origin. Against this background, this paper aims to remind us of the cultural-political and epistemological potential of a particular movement in intellectual history named *Kulturwissenschaft* (cultural science), which emerged from the reverse side of the nationalist and colonial European culture at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first third of the twentieth century, and was then abruptly interrupted by the rise of national socialism. Destroyed and dispersed in 1933, it today inspires artists and scholars in different regions and fields, who are attracted by the work of *Kulturwissenschaft* scholars – and, as a side effect, also gain a new interest in the German language.<sup>1</sup>

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### Culture as transformation and transgression

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The term *Kulturwissenschaft* – i.e. cultural science is not to be confused with cultural studies – goes back to the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Aby Warburg*, which was rescued from the Nazis by its transfer to London in 1933 and has recently evolved into a magnet for cultural theory and politics all over the world. Warburg's work proceeds from the resistance of images, symbols, and gestures against the standard categories of art history (such as epoch, genre, style and aesthetic value) and the divisions of museums into specific fields, and focuses on the migration of images,

symbols, and gestures through different cultures in time and space. Yet, only few of those who are attracted by the London archive with Warburg's books, manuscripts, slip boxes, and photo collection of his *Image Atlas Mnemosyne* know that Warburg's work stood in the context of a fascinating intellectual movement. This consisted of authors who at the time were geographically and institutionally dispersed, but shared several perspectives in their approach to subjects from the cultural past and present. In retrospect, their relatedness is recognisable in terms of their theoretical convictions, thought style,<sup>2</sup> and symptomatic thought figures beyond the taxonomic orders of

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the lecture by Sigrid Weigel at the Martin Roth Symposium on June 22th, 2018. YouTube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3GhXKDFogA>. A more comprehensive article by Sigrid Weigel, "Thinking in Transition", which addresses the 'first *Kulturwissenschaft*,' is forthcoming in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935), ed. T.J. Trenn, R.K. Merton; foreword Th. Kuhn, University of Chicago Press 1979.

knowledge, diverging from conventional methods and narratives that are based on chronology and typology. These scholars share a critical approach to modernity and the idea of progress underlying the then dominant image of European culture, referring to the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*), as Ernst Bloch called the juxtaposition of social phenomena characteristic of different historical steps. Whereas hitherto ‘culture’ was the opposite and/or complement to ‘nature,’ these authors sought to cast light on the survival (*Nachleben*) and enduring impact of elements of ritual or cult, myths, and religion in modern, secular Europe and in correspondences to non-European cultures. And, in this context, ‘culture’ is not represented by objects, arts and institutions (such as theatre, museums and the like), but rather manifested in particular human practices and expressions and those meanings that transcend their mere function. By examining culture from the perspective of human activity and cognition, attention is also paid to the role of experience, memory, and affect in cultural history.

In all of this the work of these thinkers is highly relevant for a contemporary transnational culture of collaboration, exchange, and translation, because it underlines the importance of *intellectual heritage*. This kind of heritage transgresses and resists the criteria of ‘world heritage,’ conceived as a *list* or *inventory* and regarded as national property. Intellectual heritage, in contrast, owns the potentiality to counter the conservative, petrifying tendency of heritage and to revitalise the remains of the past and the traces of their multiplicity and connectivity.

Helmuth Plessner’s 1936 inaugural address at Groningen University, where he lectured after his dismissal from the University of Cologne in 1933, brings this to the point. After formulating the insight that “our reason, our concepts, categories, principles, and the values by which we judge, do *not* constitute *the only possibility* distinguished by its truth,” he states:

“With such a widening of the field of vision to the *non-European languages*, cultures and religions, to the *pre-classical history*, to the pre-historical, pre- and extra-human forms of life, the European, the occidental consciousness lost its unselfconsciousness (*Unbefangenheit*) towards itself. It gained distance from its own standards of value, from the traditional superiority of its culture grounded in antiquity and Christian-Jewish religiosity, from the traditional assumption of the supreme position of man among living beings as a whole.”<sup>3</sup>

This self-distancing from the hegemonic narrative constituted the point of departure for the transgression of the European mono-cultural perspective and the focus on the exchange and transformation of symbols and practices between different cultures and religions. According to Franz Dornseiff’s statement “the world did not begin with the Greeks,”<sup>4</sup> the image of Europe’s cultural history was reconsidered through its entanglement with the Near East. And Aby Warburg’s journey to the Pueblo Indians is probably the most famous example<sup>5</sup> for the study of correspondences between the *Other of European cultural history* and other *non-European cultures*.

<sup>3</sup> Helmuth Plessner, Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie (1937), in *Conditio Humana. Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 8, ed. Günther Dux et al., Frankfurt/M. 1983, 31-51, here: 44f., emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Franz Dornseiff, *Die griechischen Wörter im Deutschen*, Berlin: de Gruyter 1950, p. 143. The scholarship of the classicist Dornseiff (1888-1960) who argued against the Nazi’s homogenisation- and purification-mania of the German language was dedicated to the oriental origins of European culture, sharing this focus with Warburg’s research in the symbolic world of pagan ancient times.

<sup>5</sup> Aby Warburg did not publish a text on the journey himself, and there are different manuscripts, three of them published in the edition of his *Werke in einem Band*, ed. M. Treml, S. Weigel, P. Ladwig, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2010, 495-600. For the best English translation cf. Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, transl. M. P. Steinberg, Ithaca, NY: Yale UP 1995; cf. Sigrid Weigel, Aby Warburg’s Serpent Ritual. Correspondences between Reading Cultural and Written Texts, in *New German Critique*, Nr. 65: *Cultural History/Cultural Studies*, Spring/Summer 1995, 135-153.

The scholarship of the authors involved in this kind of cultural science was not exercised as a mere academic or theoretical enterprise, but rather based on a cultural-political commitment. In this respect, the final paragraph of Plessner's lecture, which reflects the danger for humankind to 'send itself to the knife' with his own increased power of disposition, could just as well come from the current debate: "Man has become a threat to his future by his proficiency (*Können*), because he will overcome his proficiency only by increased proficiency (*Mehrkönnen*), but there is no guarantee that mankind will not fall by the wayside in the meantime."<sup>6</sup> These considerations were preceded and probably prepared by Plessner's book that later became famous under the title of *The Belated Nation* (*Die verspätete Nation* 1935/1959). It provides the most reasonable cultural-historical analysis of the rise of a German racial nationalism, written already in 1934, in the face of the beginning Nazi regime, analysing the compulsive obsession with the *Volk* (nation) during the historical period of a yet not existing nation state in Germany, which brought about the idea of a *Geistnation* or *Kulturnation* (nation unified by mind or culture).<sup>7</sup>

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### The Epistemology of "Border Areas" – An Interrupted Intellectual Heritage

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This movement of *Kulturwissenschaft* emerging around 1900 and pursued during the subsequent decades was developed by several authors who for the most part came from assimilated, secularised German-Jewish or Austrian-Jewish families, such as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Aby Warburg (1866-1929), Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), Helmut Plessner (1892-1985), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), Karl

Mannheim (1893-1947), Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and others. I refer to this movement as the '*first Kulturwissenschaft*' in order to differentiate it from the cultural turn of the humanities starting in the 1980s. It cannot be regarded as a precursor of contemporary cultural theory, since there is no direct path from the works of those intellectuals to present cultural theory, but rather ruptures, oblivion, and rediscovery – or even discovery. Moreover, many parts of their projects and manuscripts remained hidden or forgotten for many decades in scattered places, due to the authors being expelled from their professional positions, homes and cultures, and then landing up in different countries and languages. This exceptional configuration of intellectual history, whose enormous impetus has not yet been exhausted, anticipates several ideas of the present theoretical discourse. This pertains for example to the focus on 'travelling' or boundary concepts, on transgression, the corporeal expression and embodiment of symbolic meaning, material practices, the epistemic role of media and artistic practices as well as the (self-) critical approach to the universal pretension of European ideas.

Walter Benjamin was the first to talk of a movement in respect of this scholarship. In his review of a new yearbook of *Science of Art* (*Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*), published in 1933 pseudonymously (for obvious reasons) in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he talks of a 'new scholarship' or a 'new spirit of research,' the hallmark of which is "being at home in border areas (*Grenzbieten*)" and engaged with boundary cases (*Grenzfälle*); as an example, he mentions the stud-

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<sup>6</sup> Plessner, *Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie*, p. 51.  
<sup>7</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Die Lehre des leeren Grabes. Begründungen der deutschen Kulturnation nach 1871 und 1989*, in *Grundordnungen*.

*Geographie, Religion und Gesetz*, ed. Z. Andronikashvili and S. Weigel, Berlin: Kadmos 2013, 147-165.

ies on the history of religion in the Warburg Library “which fills the marginal areas (*Randgebiete*) of historical science with new life.”<sup>8</sup>

Benjamin’s term ‘movement’ has to be understood literally, because here everything is in motion. In contrast to both the concept of ‘boundary object’ in the current sociology of science, defined as an object *in situ* “with different meanings in different social worlds,”<sup>9</sup> and the ‘travelling concept’ represented by “cases of different forms of intercourse with and through concepts,”<sup>10</sup> in the first *Kulturwissenschaft* it is not only that the examined subject matters, that objects and cases are moving, but also thinking and the scholars themselves. Coming from very different fields such as psychology, art history, the history of religion, philosophy, sociology, and literature, they developed a kind of *working and thinking in transition*<sup>11</sup> – or a threshold knowledge (*Schwellenkunde*) as Benjamin calls it: at the threshold between different fields of research and disciplines, where new insights are gained through the transfer of methods and concepts.<sup>12</sup> The theoretical concepts of the first cultural science are grounded far more than current cultural theory in the research of concrete practices, images and texts from various cultural-historical constellations. Therefore, they provide more opportunities for cooperation and mutual learning, since the present theoretical discourse tends to detach itself from historical and social realities and their various specific conditions.

Other authors sought to understand ‘life’ beyond the dualistic paradigm, that is its separation between the natural sciences and the humanities, and they conceptualised life itself as a *borderline case*. Plessner, for example, emphasised the “other than measurable (*meßfremde*) characteristics of the body’s nature,”<sup>13</sup> while Freud introduced his concept of drive (*Trieb*) as a liminal concept (*Grenzbegriff*) between the psyche and the physiological; it determines “the amount of required work which is imposed to the soul because of its relation to corporeality.”<sup>14</sup>

The critical-epistemological border crossing of the first *Kulturwissenschaft* is based on knowledge about the ambiguous cultural, epistemic, and political significance of the border as a presupposition for every notion of movement, such as crossing, transgression, migration, or wandering. Thus, before talking about transgression, for example, one has to think through the multiple meanings and origins of ‘border’: the border as frontier, boundary, margin, limit (-ation), separation, and distinction. At stake is not only the boundary between academic disciplines that define themselves with reference to specific objects, lay claim to an exclusive interpretive prerogative of these objects, and in the process bring about a habituated demarcation compulsion. The authors of the first *Kulturwissenschaft* also examine the traces of fundamental material and symbolic acts of positing and drawing borders in cultural history whose ambivalence in mythical narratives and pre-modern practices is still clearly

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Strenge Kunstwissenschaft* [first and second version], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann, H. Schwepenhäuser, vol. III, ed. H. Tiedemann-Bartels (1972), Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1980, 363-374. In the following GW stands for *Gesammelte Schriften*.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Leigh Star, James R. Griesemer, Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39, in *Social Studies of Science*. 19, no. 4/1989, 387-420, p. 393.

<sup>10</sup> Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide*, Toronto UP 2002, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Kulturwissenschaft als Arbeit an Übergängen und als Detailforschung. Zu einigen Urszenen aus der Wissenschaftsge-*

*schichte um 1900: Warburg, Freud, Benjamin*, in Opitz (ed.), *Erfahrung und Form. Zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Perspektivierung eines transdisziplinären Problemkomplexes*, Trier 2001, 125-145.

<sup>12</sup> See Sigrid Weigel and Johannes Steizinger, *Schwellenkunde/Threshold Knowledge*, in *Schlüsselbegriffe der Kulturwissenschaft/Key Concepts of Cultural Science. Trajekte. Zeitschrift des Zentrums für Literatur- und Kulturforschung*, no. 30., May 2015, 26-37.

<sup>13</sup> Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928), Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1981, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Trieb- und Triebchicksale* (1915), in *Psychologie des Unbewußten*, Studienausgabe vol. III, ed. A. Mitscherlich, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 1989, p. 85.



apparent: as a fundamental cognitive and material cultural technique or also as a technique of power.

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## Thinking in Transition – Emerging from the Margins

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The ‘marginal domains,’ as the English edition translates *Grenzgebiete*,<sup>15</sup> are more applicable for the instable academic position of these scholars lacking equality and recognition. They found themselves either outside of academia or at the margins of their discipline,<sup>16</sup> so that they were less shaped by constraints of definition and demarcation within specialised disciplines. From this position, these authors started to transgress the borders between fields, subjects, and cultures, in this way transforming their marginal or outsider positions – and their exclusion from an established power to define the discipline – into an intellectual capacity and an exceptional way of thinking. “Not confined by professional obligation,” these intellectuals moved among the “border areas of multiple academic disciplines,”<sup>17</sup> as Benjamin put it in 1934. At that time, all then living authors of the first *Kulturwissenschaft* were already in exile or were about to escape: Benjamin to Paris, Bloch via Zürich and Vienna to Prag, Plessner to The Netherlands, Freud and Mannheim to London, Auerbach to Istanbul, Cassirer to Sweden after two years in Oxford, and Arendt to Paris, from where she later went to the USA, while Scholem had already migrated to Palestine in 1924 and Simmel and Warburg were no longer alive.

Karl Mannheim, who in *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) discussed the role of the recognising subject’s attitude for the production of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), also emphasised the attitude of “a peculiar wakefulness against the historical now.” For him, the best condition for “an always experimental attitude, developing a certain social sensibility” was a positionality in a “relatively classless stratum, which does not rest too firmly in the social space,” the “free-floating intelligentsia” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*).<sup>18</sup> Both authors, Benjamin and Mannheim, thus highlight the intellectual and epistemological advantage of an instable position within society and the lack of any firm affiliation to academic institutions without falling into the trap of essentialism through fixing this position again by tying it to origin, gender or skin colour. However, it needs to be emphasised that in their case their position was not a question of choice, but due to the racism of the increasing nationalist ideologies, which were also prevalent in academic circles. Several of the scholars concerned, who did not restrict themselves to just one discipline and were assigned to shifting fields by their colleagues,<sup>19</sup> are today renowned founders of new academic fields or discourse founders – Freud for psychoanalysis, Simmel for sociology, Warburg for critical iconology, Plessner for philosophical anthropology – or their work became highly influential in exile by shaping the methodology of certain fields in post-war academia, such as Auerbach who became a “pivotal figure” for comparative literature in the USA.<sup>20</sup> Several of them introduced new concepts for the investigation of cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Rigorous Study of Art*, in *Selected Writings 1927-1934*, vol. 2, transl. R. Livingstone et al., ed. M.W. Jennings et al., Cambridge/Ms.: Harvard University Press 1999, 666-672, 670. In the following SW stands for Selected Writings.

<sup>16</sup> Some of them never received an academic position (Benjamin), or refused an appointment (Warburg) or were appointed only after the Second World War (Bloch); others lectured over an extraordinarily long period as *Privatdozent* (“private lecturers” without salary) until being appointed as “extraordinary professor” (Freud 17 years, Simmel 15 years, Cassirer 13 years, Plessner 6 years), while only a few reached a full professorship

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Johann Jakob Bachofen*, in *GW* vol. II, 219-234, here: 224.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie* (1929), Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann 1995, 135.

<sup>19</sup> Simmel, for example, who graduated in philosophy and lectured on logic, ethics, sociology, psychology, while the application for his appointment concerned political science and sociology (*Staats- und Gesellschaftswissenschaft*), cf. *Buch des Dankes* 1993, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Ben Hutchinson, *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press 2018, 78; cf. Edward Said, *Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition*, in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Thought* (1946), Princeton UP 2013, ix-xxxii.

phenomena and practices. An example is Cassirer's theory of *Symbolic Forms*, introduced as a general theory to understand different forms of intellectual expression in their basic formative function, such as language, art, cognition, myth, and religion.<sup>21</sup>

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## Rethinking the Concept of Culture

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The conventional concept of culture, which stands for a number of institutions that serve the training, production and mediation of art or maintain and exhibit objects of 'cultural heritage,' is the product of a specifically European history. In this context, culture has a value of its own, with the flip side, though, that it is treated as negligible in times of crises and hardship. This idea of culture consisting of different genres, fields, and objects is mirrored in the conceptualisation of academic disciplines defined by their subject matter, as for example English literature, architecture, or African art. For the authors of *Kulturwissenschaft*, in contrast, the understanding of culture is based in cultural history's emergence from *cult* and *techné*; their studies focus on symbolic and material practices, with the arts being an integral part. What essentially belongs to the concept of culture, according to Simmel, is the fact that humankind includes in its own development 'something external,' since a human subject's development or state can be regarded as culture only in that the objects that constructed or processed by that human subject within its development are included in the idea of culture.<sup>22</sup> Or, as Hannah Arendt puts it, humans "are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence."<sup>23</sup> Simmel therefore assumes a necessary *duality of culture* – that is the interweav-

ing of the 'subjective soul' and the 'objective intellectual product' – and discusses the problem arising from this dual structure, since this implies the possibility that one of the two sides develops a life of its own. Simmel continues and strengthens this argument in his reflection on *The Concept and Tragedy of Culture*, the latter growing out of an evolving "discrepancy between the objective meaning (*Sachbedeutung*) and the cultural meaning (*Kulturbedeutung*) in one and the same object."

This Janus-faced nature of cultural objects is at the core of the current debate on restitution, since a product of human cultural activity – for example a sculpture which owns a ritual meaning – turns into a *document* of culture only when it is detached from its context in order to be exhibited in a museum, where it then represents a foreign culture, while the paths by which it got there remain obscure.

The interest of this kind of cultural science in the survival (*Nachleben*), transferal and modification of symbolic practices and meanings that seemingly had disappeared in modern secular society benefited from the growing body of ethnological and religious-historical scholarship at the end of nineteenth century. This context engendered various projects of a comprehensive theory and history of culture, for the most part determined by either an evolutionary or a comparative approach. In contrast to *grand narratives* that present a universal image of cultures, what Ernst Cassirer remarked about the real novelty of Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1725) also holds true for *Kulturwissenschaft*: it manifests itself "less in the solutions that the work presents than in the problems that it has posed,"<sup>24</sup> – for which *Kulturwissenschaft* explored new unconventional paths of inquiry.

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<sup>21</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 vols. (1923-29), New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1955-57.

<sup>22</sup> Georg Simmel, On the Essence of Culture (1908), in *Simmel on Culture. Selected Writings*, ed. D. Frisby and M. Featherstone, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications 2000, 40-45, here: 42, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago UP 1958, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaft* (1942), Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag 2011, 12; the first English translation in 1961 gave the title as *The Logic of the Humanities*, modified to *The Logic of the Cultural Science* in the new translation, Yale UP 2000.

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## New Thought Figures for Cultural Relations: Threshold Knowledge and “in between”

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One characteristic aspect of *Kulturwissenschaft* is the invention of interesting figures of knowledge, which open up a thinking space between conventional terminology and metaphors, namely thought figures that arise from the work in border areas or at points of transition: *neither* concept *nor terminus technicus* of a special discipline nor metaphor in the sense of figurative language – because of which they often get lost in translation.<sup>25</sup> In the first place, this concerns the approach to *time and space* diverging from the conventional developmental narrative – time conceptualised as chronological order, the succession of epochs, or the progression of past, present, and future – and from the mere physical and geographical meaning of space. Some authors invented figures of *time* that break with continuity, such as the already mentioned ideas ‘survival’ (*Nachleben*) and ‘non-simultaneity’ (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*), ‘posteriority’ (*Nachträglichkeit*), Freud’s vantage point of remembrance, ‘latency’ (*Latenz*), referring to something yet not recognisable or entirely evolved, and Benjamin’s now (*Jetztzeit*), the moment broken out of continuity forming a kind of intensified present that directly relates to certain images of past constellations. These figures do not only concern the temporal structure of certain phenomena alone, but also their status, their mode of appearance and existence. As a consequence of the disruption or *caesura* in temporal development, time is spatialised and, for example, transformed into a ‘constellation’ or scene/site (*Schauplatz*), in which the remnants and traces of the past are readable. The

geographical space is in this way regarded as the site of cultural memory, that is the topography of inscriptions and materialisations of human desires and activities where the traces of preceding generations and those of the living juxtapose, overlap and contradict, forming what Bloch called the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.”

Spatial figures beyond the mere physical concept of space receive special attention in the works of *Kulturwissenschaft*.<sup>26</sup> This concerns at first the intermediate space (*Zwischenraum*) between human beings, which constitutes the social function of space in Simmel’s inquiries into the forms of socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*).<sup>27</sup> And it relates as well to the ‘in-betweenness’ in Hannah Arendt’s *Human Condition*, that is the interspace between individuals forming the space of acting from which the political emerges.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, it refers to Warburg’s figure of ‘thought space’ (*Denkraum*), which evolves from the production of objects and the “logic of conceptual distinction and designation (*begrifflich sondernde Beschriftung*)” in order to create a necessary distance to the ungraspable forces of nature.<sup>29</sup> As a consequence of approaching space as the site of human action, the symbolic meaning of spatial figures in cultural science does not refer to the register of allegories or metaphors, but rather emerges from particular cultural activities in the spatial dimension. Prominent epistemological figures developed by these authors originating in concrete practices are, for example, wandering or *flânerie*, reading or dreaming, digging, and riddling. They are turned into *topoi* of a critical thinking that lead beyond the conventional order of scientific knowledge such as system, classification, rise and fall, cause and effect.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Sigrid Weigel, Translation as the Provisional Approach to the Foreignness of Language: On the Disappearance of Thought-Images in Translations of Benjamin’s Writings, in *Walter Benjamin. Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, Stanford UP 2013, 167-182.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Sigrid Weigel, On the ‘Topographical Turn.’ Concepts of Space in Cultural Studies and *Kulturwissenschaften*, in *European Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2009, 187-201.

<sup>27</sup> Georg Simmel, Der Raum und die räumliche Ordnung der Gesellschaft, in *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (1908), Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1995, 687-790.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago UP 1958.

<sup>29</sup> Aby Warburg, Heidnisch-antike Weissagungen in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten, p. 427.



In Warburg's work, for example, the figure of wandering evolved from his conceptualisation of cultural history as the 'wandering' (*Wanderung*) of images and symbols through different cultures in time and space – for example, between the ancient rod of Asclepius, the stellar constellation in mediaeval astrology, and the snake dance of the Hopi Indians whom he visited on his journey to New Mexico and Arizona in 1895 – to wandering eyes as agents to decipher the configurations of images on the tables of his *Image Atlas Mnemosyne*. His scholarship was dedicated especially to European cultural history in its entanglement with the culture of the Near East and to the aim of deciphering what he called "the unread documents of the tragic history of the freedom of thinking of the modern European."<sup>30</sup> One leitmotif of his writings is the figure of the "good European," a quotation from the paragraph "We Homeless Ones" in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, where those who are not at home in this presence and those who are not German enough to follow nationalism and racism are described as "good Europeans, the heirs of Europe."<sup>31</sup> Warburg's *Image Atlas* provides a formation of knowledge and a recognition technique at the same time, because it allows the configuration and reconfiguration of certain constellations of images in order to highlight hidden commonalities in different cultures and to uncover the metamorphosis of symbolic, visual, and corporeal expressions in seemingly unrelated and sometimes very distant sites of culture.

Benjamin's work is famous for his thinking in images, for the "dialectical image," and the figure of the "angel of history." Several figures of his reading of cultural phenomena originate in concrete cultural practices, such as *flânerie*, reading, and dreaming. He, for example, connects the

child's fascination for thresholds in the city's spatial topography (in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*) and the *flâneur's* similar attitude (in his *Baudelaire* book) with the thresholds of night and day and dream and consciousness, and he transforms this constellation into a "dialectic at a standstill" (in his notes on *Passages*).<sup>32</sup> This forms the basic figure of his threshold knowledge (*Schwelkenkunde*) as the central figure of his epistemology: an epistemic position of perception from which insight into two different, contradictory or irreconcilable sides is organised, which mutually exclude each other due to the order of things in conventional disciplinary scholarship. Trained in literary history, Benjamin transformed the reading of written texts into one of the central practices of *Kulturwissenschaft*, namely the *readability* of all kinds of cultural phenomena in different cultural-historical constellations. And reading culture does not mean understanding and decoding it according to established registers, but rather to tackle unfamiliar and indecipherable scriptures, multiple levels of cultural texts, hidden meanings, and traces of the repressed and excluded.

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## Conclusion

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The way the authors of this kind of *Kulturwissenschaft* approached culture has not yet sufficiently been exploited for the present discourse on cultural policy and theory, which is currently stuck in the stagnation of an ideological polarisation between identity politics and deconstructionism, between frameworks of ethnicity and/or origin and universality. Cultural science's *threshold knowledge* and its engagement in *border areas*, where it is possible to address *boundary issues* and different or even mutually exclusive fields of knowledge, provides impulses and perspectives

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 485.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft, Werke in sechs Bänden*. ed. K. Schlechta, vol. III, 5th. book, 377, Munich 1980, p. 251.

<sup>32</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images. Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History*, in *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Winter 2015), 344–366.

for transgressing existing frontiers. While the reformulation of space as a *topography of multiple cultural traces* resists the uncanny conjunction of geographical and ethnic unities, the exploration of correspondences between different cultural-historical and socio-cultural *constellations* further resists the normative idea of development and to the implicit hegemonic power of concepts such as integration and inclusion, which tacitly refer to an existing unity or majority. And, last but not least, it is the focus on *survival* of so-called pre-modern symbolic forms and practices as well as the reference to *correspondences* or hidden connections between distant cultures in time and space, between European and non-European cultures, which opens up perspectives for the cultural policy of entangled histories, transgressive and transnational exchange, and co-creative artistic research.

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