

AKC Essay Competition - Coversheet

- Complete all sections of this form and ensure it is the first page of the document you submit (either copy and paste this page into the front of your work, or begin your work on subsequent pages of this form).
- **DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON YOUR WORK.**
- Pages should be clearly numbered.

Student ID number (e.g. 1712345) NOT your K number	
--	--

Degree Programme (where applicable)	MA Christianity and the Arts
Department (where applicable)	Department of Humanities, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies
AKC Year (1, 2 or 3):	AKC Year 1

Essay question number:	No. 3 ('Visit one of the buildings discussed in this AKC series virtually (through, for example, a virtual tour and/or the building's website). Using material from the lectures, write a reflection on your visit.')
Essay Title:	Lessons for Lockdown and Beyond: Teachings from the Warburg Institute Library
Deadline:	23:59, Sunday 26 April 2020
Date Submitted:	Sunday 26 th April 2020
Word Count (max 1500 words):	1499

DECLARATION BY STUDENT

By submitting this essay, I declare the following:

This assignment is entirely my own work. Quotations from secondary literature are indicated by the use of inverted commas around ALL such quotations AND by reference in the text or notes to the author concerned.

ALL primary and secondary literature used in this piece of work is indicated in the bibliography placed at the end, and dependence upon ANY source used is indicated at the appropriate point in the text.

I confirm that no sources have been used other than those stated.

I understand what is meant by plagiarism, including self-plagiarism.

I understand that plagiarism is a serious academic offence that will result in disciplinary action being taken and may result in my withdrawal from the AKC programme.

I understand that essays which do not include references and a bibliography will not be read.

My word count is accurately stated above and I understand that essays which are more than 10% over the word limit may not be considered by the AKC Steering Committee.

Lessons for Lockdown and Beyond: Teachings from the Warburg Institute Library

I type into the library search bar. My eye quickly checks for spelling errors before I press 'Enter'. A brief pause. Then: '5,982 Results'. I scan the screen, flicking from one entry to the next as I assess which ones to explore further. Halfway down the page, I realise what I've forgotten: I slide my mouse to the left, and enable a filter: 'Full Text Online'. Now: '5,156 Results'. I continue to pore down the list...

This is currently a familiar scene for many students across the world. Carrying out research during lockdown is presenting a new challenge: given the limitations on accessing physical resources, how can we understand fully, and make an original contribution to, a specific academic field? The sceptics would say that this is an impossibility, that today's restricted access to academic materials will have a tangible effect on the work submitted by students in the upcoming months. In their eyes, even if the recipe for good scholarship can come in many shapes and sizes, reading widely remains an essential ingredient.

While this is a valid point, I think there is a way to lessen this negative impact of lockdown with the help of a little creative thinking. To this end, the AKC lecture on the Warburg Institute Library has encouraged me to think about how we can use the available library resources to produce scholarship that is as good as is possible under the current circumstances. I will first explain what initially sparked my interest in the Warburg Institute. I will then highlight the specific driving force behind the Warburg Library's collection. This will generate a first lesson for lockdown: in these days of using online resources from libraries and institutes with which we are maybe unfamiliar, becoming aware of the criteria determining their collections will render us more astute students. I will then present the Warburg Library's unique classification system, which will result in a second lesson: as there are many distinct – and equally valid – ways of connecting resources, so are there many distinct – and equally valid – ways of connecting ideas in scholarship; if one connection cannot be made due to the lack of a particular resource, then another can be, using a resource that *is* accessible. Finally, I will propose how both of these lessons can help us to work to the best of our abilities not only during this strange era, but also in the time beyond lockdown.

My curiosity about the Warburg Institute was first piqued by its highly interdisciplinary outlook,¹ which stems from founder Aby Warburg's multifaceted engagement with art history: "Warburg was at a frontier of the discipline of art history, his research overlapping with anthropology, ethnography, psychology and biology (to name but a few)."² This resonates with my own purpose for studying at the Centre for Arts and the Sacred at King's College, namely, to explore the interdisciplinary questions arising from the intersection of Christianity, art, and philosophy. I was also drawn to Warburg's desire to renew the methodology of art history by examining the cultural hotbeds underlying works of art, and by excavating the philosophical ideas hidden beneath their aesthetic

¹ See <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/about-us>

² Mick Finch, 'Dead and alive: Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*,' *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 15:2-3 (2016) 286-297, on 287.

façades.³ For Warburg, art was a vehicle for something more than the handiwork of artists.⁴ He wanted to rock the art historical boat, pushing the discipline out of its comfort zone by injecting it with a new method of analysis,⁵ one which better recognised the nature of art as he understood it. Concretely, Warburg wanted to shift “the focal point of research from the study of styles and aesthetic judgement to the programmatic and iconographic aspects of the artwork.”⁶ His revolutionary approach to art history has likely influenced much of the scholarship I now read as part of my research.

This project, however, was only the tip of Warburg’s iceberg. The Warburg Institute Library – born in the late 19th-early 20th century – began as his private collection motivated by a wider research question: how have images and ideas been transmitted over time?⁷ The collection was therefore assembled with the aim of responding to this question, rather than to gather an exhaustive stock of works in a select number of fields.⁸ Learning about the original policy which directed the acquisitions of the Warburg Library has prompted me to reflect on the importance of looking into the agendas behind *all* libraries’ collections, whether these be implicitly, or explicitly, stated. Although there are, of course, practical parameters which determine a library’s collection, such as available funds, I am referring here to something less logistical. In the case of a Theology library, for instance, a commitment to scholarship surrounding specific theological doctrines may prioritise purchasing certain works over others. Similarly, a university library may give preference to acquiring works authored by alumni.

Even though such policies may be hard to uncover, it is worth doing some detective work. For, given that the aims of a library shape its collection, and thereby determine its users’ exposure to scholarship in a particular subject area, they are important factors deserving of our attention. Many libraries are responsible for shaping students’ intellectual thought during their formative educational years – it therefore seems paramount that students develop an awareness of the agendas underpinning these libraries in order to grasp the bigger picture of their chosen subject. This kind of awareness is especially pertinent during times such as these, when resources may be acquired from collections or databases with which a student is unfamiliar; it is important to be discerning when accessing material. This could constitute a first lesson for lockdown.

But how can we deal with the current situation, where it is simply impossible for students to access certain resources? I think a reflection on the classification system of the Warburg Library can offer up a solution.

Unlike most other collections, the Warburg Library is thematically divided into categories of Image, Word, Orientation, and Action,⁹ aligning with Warburg’s understanding of the evolution of human awareness.¹⁰ Although the Institute has undergone slight modifications in its focus throughout the years¹¹, the preservation of this organisation of the Library’s growing collection testifies to Warburg’s attempt to bring together a wide variety of subjects under one, structural umbrella.

³ See John Tresch, ‘Warburg’s Library: Ark, Observatory, Laboratory,’ AKC Spring lecture 6 (24/02/2020).

⁴ See Adam Gopnik, ‘The World’s Weirdest Library: In the Memory Ward,’ *The New Yorker* (March 9th 2015) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/16/in-the-memory-ward>

⁵ See ‘Aby Warburg and the nameless science’ in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 89-103, on 90.

⁶ Agamben, ‘Aby Warburg and the nameless science,’ 89.

⁷ See ‘The Warburg Institute Library’ video guide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmAhxNzU41g>

⁸ See ‘The Warburg Institute Library’ video guide.

⁹ See <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/library-collections/library>

¹⁰ See ‘The Warburg Institute Library’ video guide.

¹¹ John Tresch, personal correspondence (14/04/2020).

Furthermore, the Library's shelving system – following a “good neighbour” strategy¹² – helps readers to understand how a subject has developed over time: primary sources have pride of place, followed by the corresponding secondary literature.¹³ The Warburg Library thus embodies one possible way of organising resources, but it is clear that other libraries work differently. Indeed, the diversity in classification systems struck me during my time working as a cataloguer in the Theology Library of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium): there is far more than one way to order a library.

Different classification systems therefore illustrate that it is possible to connect sources in different ways. Similarly, I think every student will agree that it is possible – and even encouraged – to connect *ideas* in different ways. Different ways of connecting ideas will produce many distinct kinds of insights, and, if they are all drawn coherently, they will be equally valid. And so, in these times of restricted resources, when it is not possible to access a specific book or article, but it is possible to access an alternative, a student may explore a topic via a route that is off of the beaten track. Alongside a flexible and creative mindset, this could result in a valuable insight. In other words, working with limited resources does not have to mean the total death of good scholarship. I believe this gives us a second lesson for lockdown, aimed especially at those students with essays for quarantine buddies.

Although both lessons are especially pertinent during this lockdown era, they can be usefully borne in mind during more ‘normal’ times. On the one hand, it is good practice to become aware of the aims driving a particular library collection: this is a useful addition to a student's academic toolbox. And, on the other, it is reassuring to remember that, if we can't quite access the exact book we want, it is still possible to make an interesting point using another resource: the road less travelled can nevertheless still be travelled.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio, ‘Aby Warburg and the nameless science’ in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 89-103.

Finch, Mick, ‘Dead and alive: Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*,’ *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 15:2-3 (2016) 286-297.

Gopnik, Adam, ‘The World's Weirdest Library: In the Memory Ward,’ *The New Yorker* (March 9th 2015) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/16/in-the-memory-ward>

Tresch, John, ‘Warburg's Library: Ark, Observatory, Laboratory,’ AKC Spring lecture 6 (24/02/2020).

The Warburg Institute website: <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk>

‘The Warburg Institute Library’ video guide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmAhxNzU41g>

¹² Tresch, ‘Warburg's Library: Ark, Observatory, Laboratory.’

¹³ See ‘The Warburg Institute Library’ video guide.