

## *Introduction:* *Hans Blumenberg at 101*

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The philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920–96) must count among the most prolific thinkers of postwar Germany. He also remains one of its most enigmatic figures and one of the last to enjoy the “transatlantic theory transfer” in which *New German Critique* has engaged over the last half century.<sup>1</sup> Compared with the reception of other members of what one could call “German theory” in America—Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the Frankfurt School, or even Niklas Luhmann and Friedrich Kittler—Blumenberg’s has gathered momentum only slowly. This special issue aims to contribute to its acceleration and place Blumenberg’s insights into dialogue with contemporary discourses.

While the erudition displayed in Blumenberg’s weighty tomes and dense essays may stagger the reader, the breadth of their topics is equally astounding, as is apparent from a survey of his most famous works. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966/1975–76, trans. 1983) not only defends modernity against its detractors from both right and left but also offers a functionalist theory of historical reception. *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (1975, trans. 1987) recounts the momentous loss of earth’s—and humanity’s—central position in the cosmos and reflects on its philosophical consequences. *Work on Myth* (1979, trans. 1985), beyond developing a theory of the persistence that mythical

1. See Huyssen and Rabinbach, “Transatlantic Theory Transfer.”

thought enjoys alongside the rationalism of modernity, is also a highly original contribution to “philosophical anthropology,” the study of the world relation of humans. To this list we might add *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960, trans. 2010), a theory of the uses of metaphor that suggests a surplus content irreducible to mere concepts, as well as more literary, late-style volumes like *Care Crosses the River* (1987, trans. 2010) or *St. Matthew Passion* (1988, trans. 2021) that place Blumenberg into a lineage of aphoristic philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Walter Benjamin.<sup>2</sup>

The overwhelming breadth of his output has made Blumenberg hard to place, a solitaire among the factions of Frankfurt School thought and Heidegger-inspired hermeneutics that dominated the German philosophical scene after World War II. Trained as a phenomenologist, he remained at a distance to this school, nor did he found one of his own, even if many of his former pupils now hold chairs in German philosophy departments. And while he was intent on growing his readership, and often complained to his publisher about its, as he thought, too modest size, he retreated from the public toward the end of his life and relegated the greatest part of his writings to his archive, to be edited posthumously.

As a result, there is a mystique surrounding Blumenberg’s name that extends beyond academe: a film about the notoriously reclusive thinker, *The Invisible Philosopher* (2018), as well as a novel by Sibylle Lewitscharoff, simply titled *Blumenberg* (2011, trans. 2017), testifies to a popular interest usually reserved for public intellectuals of towering stature and (at least relative) accessibility, like Hannah Arendt or Benjamin—as do the surprisingly brisk sales of some posthumously published books.<sup>3</sup> As the celebrations occasioned by his hundredth birthday in 2020 made amply clear, this mystique has also made Blumenberg a target for intellectual cathexis: he is feted in the feuillets as one of the last true universally learned scholars, a paragon of a bygone era of philosophers untethered from the drudgery of grant writing and managing “research clusters,”<sup>4</sup> ignoring the fact that already in the 1970s, Blumenberg complained to Reinhart Koselleck about the *Betrieb* of his profession.<sup>5</sup>

2. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*; Blumenberg, *Genesis*; Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*; Blumenberg, *Paradigms*; Blumenberg, *Care*; Blumenberg, *St. Matthew Passion*. Missing from this list of titles available in English are Blumenberg, *Shipwreck*; Blumenberg, *Lions*; Blumenberg, *Laughter*; Blumenberg, *Rigorism*; and, most recently, Blumenberg, *History, Metaphors, Fables*. More translations of his work, such as *Lesbarkeit* and *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, are planned.

3. Rüter, *Hans Blumenberg*; Lewitscharoff, *Blumenberg*. Denis Trierweiler called Blumenberg’s *Beschreibung des Menschen* (*Description of the Human*) a “quasi-bestseller” (“À propos de Hans Blumenberg”). See also Zill, *Der absolute Leser*, 365–78.

4. As only one example of this tendency, see Steinmayr, “Das große Ganze und dessen Reform.”

5. See Vowinckel, “Ich fürchte mich vor den Organisationslustigen.”

Even now, a quarter century after his death, rarely a year goes by without a new publication under Blumenberg's name. Indeed, the posthumous books now outnumber those published during his lifetime three to one. Peculiarly, this situation has partly hampered Blumenberg's reception by fostering the impression that a comprehensive picture of his scholarship remains to be discovered—not least in the vast and seemingly endless *Nachlass* of publication-ready manuscripts and in a slip-box catalog that rivals that of Luhmann.<sup>6</sup> But as the archival well slowly but steadily runs dry, Blumenberg's work has—at least in Germany—begun to resolve into a coherent and abiding whole, and the work of canonization has taken up speed: two extensive biographies, several new volumes dedicated to his work and life, and a generous *Handbuch* make his status as classic unmistakably clear.<sup>7</sup>

Yet as Paul Fleming remarks, Blumenberg's recognition in the United States has seen many delays.<sup>8</sup> While his major tomes have been available since the 1980s, anglophone readers have only begun to appreciate the breadth of his work in the past decade. Now, the wave of more recent translations mentioned above has made available Blumenberg's versatility, both in substance and in style. That his extended oeuvre has awakened academic interest among anglophones is evidenced by special journal issues, of which the latest was the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, devoted to the fiftieth anniversary of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, which remains Blumenberg's most influential book in the English-speaking world.<sup>9</sup> With the publication of *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, it is now possible to survey the vast body of essays, glosses, and feuilleton pieces that extends the range of topics from those he is known for—modernity, myth, and the history of science—to themes

6. The centenary alone saw two new books appear under Blumenberg's name: *Realität und Realismus* and *Beiträge zum Problem der Ursprünglichkeit*. For an overview, see Bajohr, "Gebrochene Kontinuität."

7. Zill, *Der absolute Leser*; Goldstein, *Hans Blumenberg*; Müller and Zill, *Blumenberg-Handbuch*. Important contributions to interpreting his work, albeit predating the centenary, are Flasch, *Hans Blumenberg*; and Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*. Among the increasingly numerous volumes devoted to Blumenberg's work, the last two years alone saw the following: Heidenreich, *Politische Metaphorologie*; Lederle, *Endlichkeit und Metapher*; Waszynski, *Lesbarkeit nach Hans Blumenberg*; Attanucci and Breuer, *Leistungsbeschreibung*; Steffens, *Auf Umwegen*; and Bajohr and Geulen, *Blumenbergs Verfahren*.

8. Fleming, "Verfehlungen." Commenting on the situation in France, where Blumenberg's work was subject to a similar delay, Trierweiler spoke of "un autisme de la réception" ("Autisme").

9. See Gordon, "Introduction"; Campe, Fleming, and Wetters, "Hans Blumenberg"; Savage, "Hans Blumenberg." In most publications, however, *Legitimacy* remains the center of attention, as in the recent volume by Bielik-Robson and Whistler, *Interrogating Modernity*.

he is less associated with, such as art and literature, fables and nonconceptuality, and politics and a theory of historical *episteme*.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of the *Reader* is the ideal occasion for this special issue of *New German Critique*, which examines his lesser-known contributions and invites a broader engagement with the complex whole of his oeuvre. It is not entirely inappropriate that this issue comes a bit late. The slightly ironic title, “Hans Blumenberg at 101,” reflects both the delayed reception that Fleming noted as well as the fact that anniversaries can only ever be a contingent occasion to consider a thinker’s work. This issue opens up a broad range of topics that defined Blumenberg’s writings, spanning technology, aesthetics, language theory, poetics, and politics, and brings his insights to bear on current debates, be it the Anthropocene, artificial intelligence, liberalism, spectatorship, art-historical modernism, or the uses of a specifically fabulatory philosophy for life. Finally, the issue includes two historical texts in translation, one by Blumenberg’s friend Odo Marquard and one by Blumenberg himself.

Leif Weatherby’s opening contribution, “Intermittent Legitimacy: Hans Blumenberg and Artificial Intelligence,” expands on Blumenberg’s philosophy of technology by investigating a little-known text on what one can plausibly call the first chatbot: Joseph Weizenbaum’s program ELIZA. For Weatherby, Blumenberg is instructive for second-wave AI philosophies, as he connects a phenomenological notion of consciousness to theories of the computer: both are the product of rhetorical interactions. The intermittence of consciousness—constituting itself, as Edmund Husserl had argued, but also continually restituting itself and correcting its interruptions—is for Weatherby structurally comparable to the intermittence between data and instructions in the otherwise unified architecture of computers. Bypassing the fruitless effort to distinguish between human and artificial semantics, Weatherby mobilizes Blumenberg for a critique of AI in which semiotics and rhetoric, not functional or anthropological theories, are the common plane of operation.

Technology and art, both rooted in the concept of *techne*, share for Blumenberg a close connection in Western intellectual history, as they both gain their autonomy in a postnominalist modernity. Yet while Blumenberg cites a surprisingly wide spectrum of topics in art, including pop art and abstraction, Barnett Newman and Paul Klee, little has been said about Blumenberg’s own conception of art history. In “A Well-Tempered Modernist,” Colin Lang shows that Blumenberg’s use of art to gain insight into the formation of epochs also

10. Blumenberg, *History, Metaphors, Fables*. For an accessible introduction to Blumenberg’s life and thought, see Bajohr, Fuchs, and Kroll, “Hans Blumenberg.”

includes a connection between his immanent theory of modernity and a philosophy of art that reveals him to be a theoretician of aesthetic modernism parallel to contemporaneous US formalist art critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Reading, among other things, Blumenberg's contributions to the Poetik und Hermeneutik research group of which he was a member, Lang investigates this surprising commonality that rests in a shared sense of the autonomy of the artwork and the distance its observer has to take on.

Blumenberg's aesthetics were, as for many other German postwar academics around the Poetik und Hermeneutik group, heavily influenced by Paul Valéry. In "Hans Blumenberg and Leonardo" Johannes Endres shows that Blumenberg's reading of Valéry aims at an aesthetic as well as at a scientific appraisal of the modern age. Both of these aspects are represented in the figure of Leonardo da Vinci, to whom Valéry repeatedly returned, as did Blumenberg through his study of Valéry. Focusing on the "window image," Endres demonstrates that at the center of Blumenberg's pictorial theory lies a critique of a mimetic aesthetics of images that contradicts both Valéry and Leonardo. The focus on textuality that Blumenberg cannot shed is, in Endres's estimation, in the end too uncharitable toward these thinkers and misses the mark of a truly comprehensive theory of the image—Blumenberg was an eminently textual thinker.

Since the posthumous publication of *Beschreibung des Menschen*,<sup>11</sup> the development of a "phenomenological anthropology" has emerged as a major project of the late Blumenberg. In her contribution "Working on the Myth of the Anthropocene: Blumenberg and the Need for Philosophical Anthropology," Vida Pavesich reconstructs this undertaking and its genesis and shows how it can be brought to bear on the planetary politics of climate change and the dawn of the Anthropocene. She makes this point by arguing for the necessity of engaging philosophical anthropology to theorize humanity's impact on earth. Against the backdrop of Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*, Pavesich both reads the Anthropocene as unprecedented and draws on Blumenberg's critical resources for separating modernist myths from necessary narrative.

Before he turned to his "phenomenological anthropology," Blumenberg worked on something he called a "historical phenomenology." Based on a historicized understanding of Husserl's life-world, it aims at reconstructing past realities not in their material content but in their "concept of reality," that is, the conditions of the possibility of their being experienced. Blumenberg applied this approach most famously to the theory of the novel, but also in the less-

11. Blumenberg, *Beschreibung*.

well-known “Concept of Reality and Theory of the State,”<sup>12</sup> his only direct engagement with political theory. My essay, “The Vanishing Reality of the State: On Hans Blumenberg’s Political Theory,” offers a detailed reconstruction of this rich and complex text and finds within it an anti-Schmittian, post-sovereigntist theory of liberal politics based on a non- and even antiperformative theory of language: “how to do nothing with words,” as Blumenberg puts it, becomes the central political question in the age of technology.

Blumenberg’s concern with language is attested most notably by his *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* from 1960. However, in Blumenberg’s studies of fables and their rewritings, begun in the early 1980s with the speech “Pensiveness”<sup>13</sup>—delivered when he received the Sigmund Freud Prize for academic prose—one finds an overlooked and radical reformulation of the metaphorology project, as Florian Fuchs argues in “Decoding Aesop: Blumenberg’s Fabulistic Turn.” In reading anecdotes and fables from the late work, a “fabulatory philosophy” emerges that surpasses even Blumenberg’s early opposition to the systematization and full terminologization of philosophy. Writing an alternative genealogy of thought that begins with Aesop, Blumenberg reminded his postmodern present that philosophy is always indebted to and in need of recourse to the primordial, antitheoretical *Unverstand* recorded in fables.

Blumenberg not only analyzed small forms like fables or anecdotes but also made them part of his writing practice. From the dense essays of his early career to the massive tomes of his middle period to the short forms of the late Blumenberg, he commanded a variety of genres, giving a formal complement to the thematic scope of his writing. In “No More Than Seeing: Hans Blumenberg’s Poetics of Spectatorship,” Daniela K. Helbig reads Blumenberg’s formal and genre choices alongside those of his contemporaries, chief among them Heidegger, and shows how these choices changed his conception of philosophy throughout his career. During his late phase, Helbig argues, the figure of the spectator becomes both a theoretical focus and a means of self-stylization for the increasingly withdrawn philosopher.

The issue concludes with two translations, both of them speeches. Blumenberg gave “In Memory of Ernst Cassirer” as the acceptance speech on the occasion of his receiving the prestigious Kuno Fischer Prize for philosophy in 1974. One of Blumenberg’s few explicit self-reflections on his intellectual

12. Blumenberg, “Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel”; Blumenberg, “Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State.”

13. Blumenberg, “Pensiveness.”

genealogy, the text gives a leading role to Ernst Cassirer and his philosophy of culture. Blumenberg both criticizes the particular execution and affirms the general impetus of this project and relates it to his own ideal of an anthropologically informed historicism. The speech, an ideal introduction to the late Blumenberg's self-understanding, illuminates an ethical approach to the history of philosophy that forgoes "the mediatization of history" for the sake of the present. That Blumenberg insists on the "elementary obligation of forsaking nothing that is human" puts him in surprising proximity to more left-leaning thinkers of history, such as Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. Joe Paul Kroll, who thoughtfully translated *Rigorism of Truth* and parts of the *Reader*, has rendered the speech into English.

The second translation, too, is one "in memory of"—this time, Blumenberg himself. The philosopher Odo Marquard wrote it as a eulogy after Blumenberg's death in 1996. Marquard, who had been a colleague for many years, gives one of the most well-known interpretations of Blumenberg's thought—that his main concern was the "unburdening from the absolute." Humans, as misfits of evolution but also as cosmological outcasts, need to conceive of devices to keep the "absolutism of reality" at bay, as Blumenberg put it in *Work on Myth*. Marquard, taking this idea as a shorthand for the theoretical stakes of Blumenberg's complete oeuvre, argues that it can be found in all of his texts in one guise or the other. Willfully reductive, Marquard's interpretation needs to be read with a grain of salt, as it ignores the early Blumenberg to whom the anthropological world relation is not yet a pressing concern. Marquard is perhaps responsible for some of the mystique surrounding Blumenberg, painting him as a driven recluse, sleeping only six days a week to make up for time lost during the war. Yet Marquard's text is also perspicacious and deeply sympathetic to his subject; it has drawn many into the orbit of the "Blumenberg galaxy."<sup>14</sup> It is a fitting conclusion to this issue, which hopes to bring into view a few of its multitudinous constellations.

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14. Brague, "La galaxie Blumenberg."

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