

Aby Warburg, *Homo victor**

Christopher S. Wood

Aby Warburg has been mostly misunderstood by the British hosts of his library. This essay will suggest that this misunderstanding has itself been misunderstood.

But first I wish to say something about art history's ancestor cult. The modern academic discipline of art history has built factions around prestigious patriarchal figures. For a long time, the focal points were the German, Austrian, and Swiss art historians who were working in the years around 1900: Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Julius von Schlosser, Aby Warburg, but also the American Bernard Berenson. Later, a younger generation, born between 1890 and the First World War, competed with the older figures for attention: Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich, Hans Sedlmayr, Otto Pächt, Meyer Schapiro, George Kubler. All the national schools of art historical thought, not only German but also American, British, Italian, French, and others, look to the same constellation of scholars. They are not admired at a distance, like the starry constellations, but are *read*. Students are expected to discern the principles concealed within their texts: ideas about art, about representation, about history and time; hidden correlations between academic scholarship and the political and aesthetic project of modernism.

Since the 1980s, amidst expressions of disenchantment with a cumulative, progressive model of scholarship and calls for an acknowledgment of the hermeneutic and interpretative nature of the enterprise, the study of the history of the discipline has proliferated. We have book-length studies of individual art historians; countless symposia, anthologies, articles; translations of German texts; and of course the *Journal of Art Historiography*. All this goes on in other disciplines, too, history, classical archeology, literary criticism; but not to the same extent.

The writing of the scholars listed above are the sites where suprapersonal systems of thought find their most powerful articulations. They are also the traces of

* This paper is a translation (back into English, and with some revisions) of the article that appeared in French: 'Aby Warburg, *Homo victor*', in *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 118, 2011/12, 81-101.

real personalities, and this existential dimension lends charisma to their ideas, even *exempts* their ideas from the ordinary processes of consumption, recycling, and rejection.¹

Everyone is seduced by Aby Warburg's personality. The few published photographs of Warburg are pored over just as are the photographs of Ludwig Wittgenstein or Walter Benjamin (fig. 1).²



Figure 1 Photo of Warburg and his children Frede and Max, ca. 1907.
Warburg Institute, London.

Warburg's historical project is considered inextricable from his life. Ernst Gombrich in his landmark study of 1970, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, commented cautiously on the interconnections between Warburg's ideas and what Gombrich called his 'psychological conflicts', his neuroses.³ Georges Didi-Huberman, impatient with Gombrich's discretion, wrote more recently that 'one doesn't separate a person from his *pathos*—his empathies, his pathologies, one doesn't separate Nietzsche from his madness nor Warburg from the "losses of self" which put him for five years behind the walls of a psychiatric asylum.'⁴ It is as if the ideas articulated in

¹ A recent study that replaces an episode in the history of ideas into its political, social, and interpersonal contexts is Emily Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

² There is a good selection in Karen Michels, *Aby Warburg—Im Bannkreis der Ideen*, Munich: Beck, 2007. To take the measure of the recent intensification of interest in Warburg, see Björn Biester and Dieter Wuttke, *Aby M. Warburg—Bibliographie 1996 bis 2005*, Baden-Baden: Koerner, 2007: 1269 entries in 150 pages.

³ Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London: Warburg Institute, 1970; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 9.

⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris: Minuit, 2002, 30-31.

Warburg's written texts were suspended in the liquid of his personality. This is a conception of humanistic research as a personal and inalienable creative project.

The ancestor cult re-enchants scholarship. The personalities persist; they are a 'standing over', a *superstitio*, in an otherwise rational discourse. In the premodern culture of authority, knowledge advanced by the accumulation of citations. That system was disabled by the Enlightenment. If one can no longer prove a point by invoking an authority, nevertheless the personalities of the authorities, the portraits, linger. The living presence of the scholars within scholarship is structurally analogous to the magical presence of the real Florentines inside the narrative frescoes of Domenico Ghirlandaio analyzed by Warburg: painted reports on the history of the Franciscan order, submitted to the new visual rationality of perspective and the unities of time and space. These are the paintings in the Sassetti Chapel in S. Trinita in Florence, painted in the early 1480s, the subject of one of Warburg's most significant essays, 'The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie', of 1902 (fig. 2).⁵



Figure 2 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Confirmation of the Rule of St. Francis*, ca. 1482-85.
Fresco. Florence, S. Trinita, Cappella Sassetti.

This fresco represents the Confirmation of the Franciscan Order by Pope Honorius III in 1223. Embedded within the historical narrative are portraits of the

⁵ Aby Warburg, 'Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum' (1902), in Warburg, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike, Gesammelte Schriften*, vols. 1-2, Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1932, 1: 89-126; *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999, 185-221.

patron Francesco Sassetti himself; his brother and his sons; his own patron Lorenzo de' Medici; the Medici sons Giovanni, who would one day be Pope Leo X, Piero, and Giuliano; and their tutor the poet and scholar Angelo Poliziano. The figures rise mysteriously and at the same time plausibly out of the ground, up a flight of stairs into the midst of a ceremony that took place 260 years earlier. Warburg explained their presence here: they are painted effigies, a transposition into two dimensions of an old quasi-pagan practice, the placing of wax effigies, a category of *ex voto* or offering made in fulfilment of a vow, in sacred spaces to guarantee the connection between the votary in this world and the other world. In the seventeenth century, the church of Santissima Annunziata in Florence housed more than six hundred such wax figures in actual size, many outfitted with real hair, beards, and clothes.⁶ The effigy of Lorenzo de' Medici himself was mounted in Santissima Annunziata only a few years before Ghirlandaio undertook his painting. 'This lawful and persistent survival of barbarism,' Warburg says, 'with wax effigies set up in church in their moldering fashionable dress, begins to cast a truer and more favorable light on the inclusion of portrait likenesses on a church fresco of sacred scenes. By comparison with the magical fetishism of the waxwork cult, this was a comparatively discreet attempt to come closer to the Divine through a painted simulacrum.'⁷

The realistic painting of Ghirlandaio, the power of portrayal that he learned from the Netherlanders, is here put to the service of a barbaric superstition. The Italians at first saw in Flemish painting the possibility of representing interior spaces, real and mental. But they quickly learned, according to Warburg, to put that art to their own uses, both more archaic and more dynamic.⁸ The portrait figures, 'filled with their own particular vitality, ...begin to emerge out of the ecclesiastical background.'⁹ The portraits give the impression of a direct, unmediated link to the world, a kind of super-representation, an indexical seizing of the world that punctures the screen of representation. The portraits guarantee that the historical individuals—Sassetti, Lorenzo, Poliziano, the children—remain for us far more vivid than any 'arguments' advanced by the paintings that contain them (fig. 3).

⁶ On the *ex votos* of Santissima Annunziata, see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 225-31, 235-37. On the 'iconology' of *ex votos*, see Hugo van der Velden, *The Donor's Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000, 191-285.

⁷ Warburg, 'Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum', in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 100; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 190.

⁸ Warburg, 'Flandrische und florentinische Kunst im Kreise des Lorenzo Medici um 1480' (1901), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 211-12; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 307.

⁹ Warburg, 'Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 116; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 204.



Figure 3 Ghirlandaio, Confirmation of the Rule of St. Francis, detail: Giovanni de' Medici, Piero de' Medici, Angelo Poliziano, Giuliano de' Medici.

The portraits of the art historians are similarly charismatic. Effigy-like, they occupy space within scholarship, keeping watch over the rituals of historical work; and they have the power to bend any thinking that ventures into their proximity. For several decades art historians have been competing for intellectual control of the legacy of Aby Warburg. He left few published and many unpublished texts, all highly suggestive, even open-ended, inviting misreading. The re-readings of Warburg's texts bring out all the fault-lines in the discipline of art history. Many thousands of pages were written about Italian Renaissance art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most of them completely forgotten. Yet Warburg's few pages are read over and over again. Warburg published only nine texts longer than ten pages, and no single text was longer than 70 pages. These gnomic utterances are studied not only for the historical theses they advance, but also in the hope of connecting to essential energies and rhythms of art historical thought that are gathered in the texts, densely clustered, dead but at the same time somehow more real than life, like the wax figures that Warburg glimpsed behind the frescoes.

The story mostly told today, in Germany, France, Italy, and the United States, is that after many years we are finally beginning to recover a more authentic Warburg. In the decades after his death in 1929 and the transfer of the Warburg Library to Britain in 1933, according to this narrative, Warburg's intellectual legacy survived only in a banal, institutionalized form as his work was interpreted by followers in Britain and in the United States. In London, the ambiguities of Warburg's thought began to fade behind the daily industry of the great library.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. Nicholas Mann, 'Kulturwissenschaft in London: englisches Fortleben einer europäischen Tradition', in Robert Galitz and Brita Reimers, eds, *Aby M. Warburg: 'Ekstatische*

Already by the 1950s Aby Warburg's private concerns and puzzlements, his delphic, idiosyncratic language, must have seemed remote. Warburg was born in 1866 and his questions had been framed deep inside a lost world, a world of privileged curiosity and northern longing for a Mediterranean vitalism.¹¹ The emigré scholars who ran the library in wartime and postwar London—Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing—protected but also strongly shaped the memory of the master. They were joined in London by Edgar Wind, Rudolf Wittkower, Otto Kurz, and Ernst Gombrich, all refugees from National Socialist Germany and Austria. Pioneering work was done at the Warburg Institute beginning in the immediate post-war period, above all the researches of Frances Yates and D. P. Walker into the marginal zones of medieval and early modern culture: the art of memory, the thought of Giordano Bruno, dynastic iconography, astrology, magic, and the occult. Saxl and Bing, who died in 1948 and 1964, respectively, maintained a stricter interpretation of the Warburgian project. Saxl promoted research into the fortunes of classical cultural forms, their journeys through medieval Western and Islamic culture. He trusted facts and mistrusted philosophy and risky speculation. Bing saw 'Warburgian studies', under Saxl's guidance, as having 'brought art history nearer to history.' Warburg and Saxl understood images as a form of 'visual evidence', Bing explained; they showed 'that images were not less secure guides to the actions, notions, and states of mind of those who used them than written documents.'¹²

It would seem, on the contrary, that the basis for recent interest in Warburg is the sense his writings give, not of the stability and reliability of images as documents, but rather of their lability and unreliability. The image in Warburg—the effigy-like portrait, the zodiacal sign or the image of the planetary god, the agitated nymph, the allegorical monstrosity of the theatrical spectacle—is a document in dynamic motion; not a secure guide at all to the states of mind of those who used it, but rather always escaping its historical anchoring and pointing forward and backward in time.

Bing's modest conception of art history as an expansion of the document-pool seems to have suited many of the library's English hosts, to whom the whole idea of art history as a research enterprise based in a university, and generally as an advanced intellectual project, was relatively new. In Germany art history had been taught at the universities since the 1840s. Not until 1932, with the founding of the Courtauld Institute of Art, was it possible to earn an advanced degree in art history in the United Kingdom. Oxford named its first professor of art history only in 1955.

Nymphe...trauernder Flussgott': Portrait eines Gelehrten, Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1995, 210-227. See also the website <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/>.

¹¹ See the comment by Michael Baxandall in his memoir *Episodes: A Memorybook*, London: Frances Lincoln, 2010, 118, on his own 'foreshortened' perspective on Gertrud Bing, whom he knew only in the end of her life, between 1958 and 1964: 'there might be a sense in which the Warburg lore itself is foreshortened like one's perspective on Bing, receding into an early twentieth-century German culture one is not equipped to penetrate.'

¹² Bing, 'Fritz Saxl (1890-1948): A Memoir', in D.J. Gordon, ed, *Fritz Saxl 1890-1948: A Volume of Memorial Essays from His Friends in England*, London: Nelson, 1957, 28.

Until then art historical research in Britain was mostly pursued by museum curators and private scholars, or sponsored by dealers and collectors interested in settling the value of a picture or a drawing.¹³ The most striking fact about the British afterlife of the Warburg Institute was that Warburg's collected writings, published in German in two volumes, in 1932, were never translated into English.¹⁴ 'Among Warburg's founders', observed Edgar Wind acidly in 1970, 'it has become a tradition to regard his literary formulations as a sort of arcanum, as an exceedingly fine but too highly concentrated elixir of learning which should not be served to British consumers without an ample admixture of barley water.'¹⁵ Warburg's legacy was defined pragmatically, in the course of research, not by pious reference back to the texts and to the man. This was not yet the era of meta-art history. Was there a British 'Warburg School'? A recent director of the Institute would not venture to say so, remarking in 1986: 'The Warburg School—or if you like, *Warburgianism*—is and was what is and was being done by the users of the books and photographs at any given time.'¹⁶

That is the true voice of British reductionism, a little depressing. But, in the context of the war, the émigrés and their English hosts had earned the moral right to control the Warburg legacy. And there is a positive dimension to the British stewardship of Warburgianism. The Institute in London represented an approach to art history free of any 'soft' aestheticism, or the cult of masterpieces and great artists sustained by an elite of art collectors and patrons and by an idolatrous bourgeois public. The Warburg Institute offered instead a model of art historical scholarship independent of class and market interests, a model that the discipline of art history has found extremely difficult to sustain, especially in the United States. Warburg

¹³ On art history in England in the 1930s and 1940s, see Dieter Wuttke, 'Die Emigration der Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburgs und die Anfänge des Universitätsfaches Kunstgeschichte in Grossbritannien', in Horst Bredekamp *et al.*, eds., *Aby Warburg: Akten des internationalen Symposions Hamburg 1990*, Weinheim: VCH, 1991, 141-163.

¹⁴ Only the lecture on the Pueblos was translated: 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual', *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, 1938-39, 277-292. Until 1999 the only other text by Warburg in English was 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara', in: Gert Schiff, ed, *German Essays in Art History*, New York: Continuum, 1988, 234-54. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, May 26, 1974, T.J. Clark complained about the absence of English translations of the principal German and Austrian art historians; cited by Richard Woodfield, 'Reading Riegl's *Kunst-Industrie*', in Woodfield, ed, *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001, 57.

¹⁵ Edgar Wind, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 25, 1971; reprinted in Wind, *The Eloquence of Symbols: Studies in Humanist Art*, Oxford: OUP, 1983, 106-113, here 113.

¹⁶ J. B. Trapp, cited by Salvatore Settis, 'Empfehlungen für eine Heimkehr', in Bredekamp *et al.*, *Aby Warburg*, 116. Of course Trapp was exaggerating for effect. See also the interesting passage in the autobiography of Kenneth Clark attesting to the impact of Warburg on Clark already in 1927; cited in Richard Woodfield, 'Warburg's "Method"', in: Woodfield, ed, *Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001, 266-67.

himself—here following the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt—had broken with an aesthetics of masterpieces and geniuses, replacing it with the more complex model of an art-producing process to which patrons contributed as much as artists.¹⁷

Warburg's social-process model of art production, directly or indirectly, found resonance in post-war England, where patronage studies and what became known as the 'social history of art' were more intensively cultivated than anywhere else: one need only mention such figures as Frederick Antal, Francis Klingender, Francis Haskell, Michael Baxandall, and T.J. Clark to make this point. But it is striking that Baxandall, who was a professor at the Warburg Institute, never mentioned Warburg in his pioneering book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972); and that Warburg's researches into astrology or the atavistic survival of the effigy cult into the fifteenth century found no echo in the materialist social history of art.

In the United States, meanwhile, the other main destination of scholarly refugees from Nazism, Warburg was almost completely absorbed into the person and project of Erwin Panofsky. At the beginning of his career Panofsky, an early user of the library in Hamburg, had a close relationship to Warburg. His article 'Dürer's Attitude Towards Antiquity' of 1922 was an elaboration—one can with justice say a complication—of Warburg's brief essay of 1905 on the same topic.¹⁸ In the United States Panofsky developed Warburg's coinage 'iconology' into a multi-institutional, interdisciplinary pedagogical and research program. His first letters back to Saxl in Hamburg, from the fall of 1931, convey Panofsky's sense of himself as an emissary and apostle:

Hier [in Princeton] zeigte ich auch einiges von unseren Sachen, und hier war man 'amazed', sodass ich gleich zu einem richtigen, längeren 'report' aufgefordert wurde, der wohl am Weihnachten herum steigen wird. 'That's iconography!' sagte [Albert M.] Friend, und auch [Charles Rufus] Morey...war anscheinend sehr begeistert.¹⁹

[I also showed them some of our things, and they were 'amazed', and I was immediately asked to provide a proper, longer report, which will probably

¹⁷ Martin Warnke, 'Vier Stichworte: Ikonologie—Pathosformel—Polarität und Ausgleich—Schlagbilder und Bilderfahrzeuge', in Werner Hofmann, Georg Syamken, and Warnke, *Die Menschenrechte des Auges: Über Aby Warburg*, Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1980, 74.

¹⁸ Erwin Panofsky, 'Dürers Stellung zur Antike' (1921/22), translated as 'Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity' in: Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955, 236-294; cf. Warburg, 'Dürer und die italienische Antike' (1905), in: Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 443-449; Warburg, *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 553-558. Cf. also the obituary of Warburg by Panofsky, *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 51, 1930, 1-4.

¹⁹ Panofsky, *Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1968: eine kommentierte Auswahl*, ed Dieter Wuttke, vol. 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001, 404, no. 277, October 21, 1931. See also the letter to William Ivins, no. 305, March 14, 1932.

happen around Christmas. *That's iconography!*' said [Albert M.] Friend, and [Charles Rufus] Morey, too...appeared very enthusiastic.]

But again, as in Britain, and despite Panofsky's endorsements, Warburg himself over time tended to disappear.²⁰ Warburg's own writings were judged too arcane to be read, and were instead decanted into Panofsky's project. The sharp contours of Warburg's own intellectual profile faded in the American memory. Panofsky's model of the afterlife of the classical tradition, meanwhile, became increasingly linear, with the ripples of anachronism that Warburg had given it smoothed out. The study of the irrational and the occult as developed in Britain, by Yates, Walker, and others, was completely absent from American iconology.

The re-reading of Warburg began, not in the United States nor in Britain, but in Italy in 1966, with the Italian translation of his writings and the publication of a long essay by Carlo Ginzburg, 'From Aby Warburg to E.H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method.'²¹ Here Ginzburg tracked the German scholarly project of art history as a mode of cultural history. Very often Italian scholars were the most inclined after the Second World War to carry on a conversation about humanism. By 'humanism' I mean the tradition, initiated in the Italian Renaissance, of understanding modernity as an agonized dialogue with ancient Greece and Rome whose content is mankind's

²⁰ Panofsky did not cite Warburg either in his seminal paper 'Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art' (1939), or in the later essay 'Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European' (1955). Warburg figures in the latter essay only in a list of important German-language art historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 26-54, 321-346. Cf. the influential article by William S. Heckscher, 'The Genesis of Iconology', in: *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes: Akten des 21. internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte, Bonn, 1964*, vol. 3, *Theorien und Probleme*, Berlin: Mann, 1967, 239-262, which associates, in a naive and anecdotal fashion, Warburg's introduction of the term 'iconology' with the 'spirit of synthesis' of the years just before the First World War. For Heckscher, Warburg's accomplishment was to have prepared the iconological work of Panofsky, G. J. Hoogewerff, Guy de Tervarent, and Jan Bialostocki.

²¹ Warburg, *La rinascita del paganesimo antico*, Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1966. Carlo Ginzburg, 'Da Aby Warburg a E.H. Gombrich: Note su un problema di metodo', *Studi medievali* 7, 1966, 29-106. Among the most important Italian commentaries on Warburg are: Giorgio Agamben, 'Aby Warburg e la scienza senza nome', *Settanta*, July-September 1975; republished with a postilla in the journal *aut aut*, 199-200, 1984, 51-66, and translated as 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', in Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 89-103; Silvia Ferretti, *Il demone della memoria: Simbolo e tempo storico in Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky*, Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1984, translated as *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989; and Salvatore Settis, 'Warburg continuatus: Descrizione di una biblioteca', *Quaderni storici*, 58/ a. XX, n. 1, 1985, 5-38. A valuable account of the reception of Warburg is Claudia Cieri Via, *Nei dettagli nascosto: Per una storia del pensiero iconologico*, Rome: Carocci, 2009.

capacity to create its own demons and gods—its own fate, as it were—and at the same time to discover the means of liberating itself from that fate, namely reason. The historical project of modernity, according to the humanist model, is mankind's approach to self-understanding through selective remembering and forgetting of the past.

The critique of humanism as a complacent, perhaps even bourgeois, model of modern culture is one of the major contexts for the re-embrace of Aby Warburg since the 1960s, begun in Italy but carried on especially in Germany, the United States, and France. Warburg is now commonly used as a wedge against what is seen as the excessively dominant humanist scholarship of the post-World War II period, represented by Panofsky and Gombrich, but also Wind, Wittkower, and others, and all their disciples in the United States and Europe who pursued a supposedly benign, disciplined, risk-averse historical scholarship.²²

In Germany, the reclamation of Warburg began in the 1970s as part of the delicate collective operation of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coping with the past: a process of repairing the psychological damage without forgetting the cataclysm that caused it.²³ In 1993 the city of Hamburg was able to acquire the original Warburg Institute in Hamburg, the townhouse that had housed the library. It soon re-opened as the Warburg-Haus Hamburg, a research centre under the direction of the art historian Martin Warnke.²⁴ Warnke, one of the pioneers of the Marxist mode of art historical scholarship developed in Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s, established in the house an image library and a centre for the study of what he calls 'political iconography.'²⁵ The library's famous oval reading room is intact and is used today as a lecture hall. Of course, the books are gone. Some German voices have called for a return of the library to Hamburg. It is true that the library's fate in London is at this very moment uncertain. The University of London has threatened to break its contract with the Library by charging high fees for the use of the building, thus possibly forcing the Institute to move and to house its library in an offsite storage facility, effectively ending the nearly century-old luxury of serendipitous browsing among the books, still shelved according to the original eccentric principles devised by Warburg.²⁶

It is politically awkward, if not impossible, for post-war Germans to attack the humanist scholarly tradition represented by Panofsky and Gombrich, who were

²² Christopher S. Wood, 'Art History's Normative Renaissance', *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century, Acts of an International Conference*, Florence: Villa I Tatti, 1999, Florence: Olschki, 2002, 65-92.

²³ Wolfgang Kemp, 'Walter Benjamin und Aby Warburg', *Kritische Berichte* 3, 1975, 5-25.

²⁴ Cf. the website <http://www.warburg-haus.de/>.

²⁵ See Warnke, Uwe Fleckner, and Hendrik Ziegler, eds, *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie*, 2 vols., Munich, C. H. Beck, 2011.

²⁶ For a recent collective defense of the beleaguered library, see *The Warburg Institute: A Special Issue on the Library and Its Readers, Common Knowledge* 18, 2012. As of November 6, 2014, the claims of the Library seem to have been sustained by the courts.

forced out of Germany and Austria in the 1930s. The humanist program of the émigré scholars was galvanized by their experience of war exile. The Hamburg scholars from the 1970s to the present are well aware of this.²⁷ They have stressed aspects of Warburg which had been neglected in post-war Britain, for example his engagement with technological modernity. Horst Bredekamp has pointed to the relevance of Warburg in an epoch—our own—when writing is on the decline and respect for images, or fear of images, is augmenting. He has called attention to Warburg's analyses of propaganda images of the Protestant Reformation as well as of the First World War.²⁸ But the German historiographers have left the more violent rejection of the humanistic tradition to American and French scholars.²⁹

The major American initiative in the last years is the translation of the *Collected Writings* published by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 1999. This monumental volume has attracted wide attention and is already a standard textbook in American seminars on methodology and historiography, not to mention Renaissance art. The momentum behind the Getty translation project was in a sense European, given that the previous directors of the Institute were the Italian art historian Salvatore Settis and the Swiss architectural historian Kurt Forster, who had both written important essays on Warburg in the 1970s.³⁰ But the re-reading of Warburg now has its own American momentum. Warburg's writings on German broadsheets and popular propaganda, anti-elitist in tone, find resonance in the United States. Warburg was quickly integrated into an American post-structuralist critique of the humanist tradition, Panofsky's tradition, that for so long dominated art history on that side of the Atlantic. That critique has involved a new estimation of formalism, and a revival of interest in the radical formalisms of the Viennese Alois

²⁷ The essay by Joseph Leo Koerner, 'Aby Warburg among the Hopis: Paleface and Redskin', *The New Republic*, March 24, 1997, addressing the impact of Fascism on Warburg's thought, resonated in the German discourse of the last several years. An expanded version of the essay appeared in *Common Knowledge* 18, 2012, 86-106.

²⁸ Bredekamp, "'Du lebst und thust mir nichts'": Anmerkungen zur Aktualität Aby Warburgs', in Bredekamp et al., *Aby Warburg*, 1-6.

²⁹ This apparent charity towards the humanist tradition left the Hamburg group open to critique from their left. O. K. Werckmeister, at the annual meeting of the College Art Association in Philadelphia in 2002, accused Warnke and Bredekamp of having repudiated their Marxist heritage in favor of Warburg's bourgeois humanism; the lecture was published as 'The Turn from Marx to Warburg in West German Art History 1968-1990', in Andrew Hemingway, ed, *Marxism and the History of Art*, London and Ann Arbor: Pluto, 2006. Benjamin Buchloh, for his part, criticized the readiness of German commentators after the war to see parallels between the *Bilderatlas* and such avant-garde practices as montage and collage, often at the expense of more subtle distinctions; 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive', *October* 88, 1998, 122-127.

³⁰ Kurt W. Forster, 'Aby Warburg's History of Art: Collective Memory and the Social Mediation of Images', *Daedalus* 105, 1976, 169-176; Settis, 'Empfehlungen für eine Heimkehr.' See also Forster's introduction to Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 1-75.

Riegl and Hans Sedlmayr; a shift of focus from the centred, integrated subject to the margins of society and of experience; and an attempt to locate art historical thought within the larger project of modernism. Finally, the Getty Research Institute, operating as an interdisciplinary workspace with art history at its centre, is today arguably the true institutional heir to Warburg and Saxl's original institute.³¹

But the most distinctive voice in the recent reception of Warburg is Georges Didi-Huberman, whose *L'Image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, published in 2002, is the most substantial study ever devoted to the thought of any single art historian, and the most stimulating. Extending a line of thought he developed in his *Devant l'image: Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (1990) et *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (2000), Didi-Huberman attacks what he considers the dominant tradition of writing on art, rooted in the humanism of Giorgio Vasari and culminating in the neo-Kantian anthropological optimism of Panofsky. In *L'Image survivante*, Didi-Huberman denounces a systematic occultation of Warburg's thought by academic institutions.³² He prescribes the writings of Warburg--'Homme du clair-obscur' rather than 'homme des Lumières'³³--as the most potent possible antidote to the sedimentation of empiricist routine, humanist dogma, and instrumental reason within the discipline of art history. Warburg, he says, grasped the capacity of images to breach the surface of rational thought and short-circuit linear time. In this way he correlates Warburg's project with the thought of Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin.

Nearly all the various voices who have contributed to this rereading of Warburg harmonize on two notes: Panofsky is judged guilty of having simplified Warburg; and everyone deplores the 1970 biography of Warburg by Ernst Gombrich. The defect of that book, supposedly, was that it exorcised all that was irrational or irresolvable in Warburg's conception of history and in his model of the image.³⁴

³¹ See the website www.getty.edu/research. Since the 1980s British scholars have tended to be less involved in the re-evaluation of Warburg than Americans. However, one will want to mention the texts by Margaret Iversen in Bredekamp et al., *Aby Warburg*, as well as 'Reviving Warburg's Tradition', *Art History* 16, 1993, 541-551; and the anthology of critical essays on Warburg edited by Richard Woodfield, *Art History as Cultural History*. Several texts in that volume, however, continue to adhere to the old theses of the Warburg Institute; an exception is the essay by Matthew Rampley; see also the monograph by Rampley, *Remembrance of Things Past: On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000.

³² For a concise and amusing list of the guilty parties, who are not all art historians, see the introduction by Didi-Huberman to Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement*, Paris: Macula, 1998, 8, n. 4; 9, n.2; translated as *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, New York: Zone, 2004. Michaud's study ingeniously connects Warburg's thought to the histories of early cinema, dance, Renaissance theatre, and the serpent ritual of the Hopis.

³³ Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante*, 443.

³⁴ Edgar Wind said the same thing in his 1971 review of Gombrich's monograph, reprinted in Wind, *Eloquence of Symbols*, 106-13. All the critiques underestimate the novelty and richness of Gombrich's study.

There has always been a certain degree of impatience, on the part of non-British scholars, with the empiricist, often merely antiquarian or pedantic, and undertheorized scholarship sponsored by the Warburg Institute. But a special animus is reserved for Gombrich, whose sympathy for methods of the natural sciences, and his apparent willingness to reduce culture to what is provable and testable, finds almost no resonance outside of Britain.³⁵

I would suggest that the charge that Panofsky or Gombrich lacked understanding for, or tried to repress, the irrational in Warburg has to be handled with care. It would seem to go without saying that the emigré scholars require no lessons about the terrible force of the irrational, regression, the fantastic imagination, and the unconscious. It seems equally clear that Warburg himself was drawn to an Apollonian ideal of serene triumph over those forces. 'I despise the man who loses sight of the ideal *homo victor*', he once wrote.³⁶ The phrase *homo victor* is an image of the ideal, and an expression of liberal hopefulness, that is hard to assimilate to the prevailing new vision of Warburg.³⁷ Warburg's direct comments in this vein, on ideal form and the triumph of reason, were more explicit and more naïve than anything found in the writings of Gombrich and Panofsky. Yet today one tends to find ways of ignoring this and many other idealistic passages in Warburg's writings.

There is no way out of this paradox, because Warburg *is* a humanist, and at the same time he is humanism's opponent. Humanism contains its own opposite. Reason can only be understood, Warburg once suggested, as a negative recoil from unreason: 'The struggle with the monster', he wrote in one of his notebooks, 'as the germ of logical construction.'³⁸ Humanism is precisely an elaborate system of defences designed to neutralize and compensate for the destabilizing force of the unconscious, the negative, or what used to be called the 'demonic.'³⁹ In that view, the will to harmony and order of humanist doctrine is exactly the measure of humanism's respect for the forces of disorder. Ultimately the negation of humanism is a critique already contained dialectically within humanism. This is why the discussion often seems to turn round and round, from censure of the émigrés for

³⁵ In his subtle reading of the reception of Warburg, Spyros Papapetros drily points out that Didi-Huberman is heavily dependent on quotations from Warburg's unpublished writings provided by Gombrich himself in his biography; 'The Eternal Seesaw: Oscillations in Warburg's Revival', *Oxford Art Journal* 26, 2003, 169-76. Papapetros makes a plea for less commentary on Warburg and more publication of primary material from the archive; a wise warning that is ignored one more time by the present essay.

³⁶ Letter of 1896 on the subject of d'Annunzio, cited by Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 322.

³⁷ Warnke, following Gombrich, recognized Warburg's liberalism and placed him in the wider framework of the rationalist cultural project, comparing him to Freud, Max Weber, and the Institute for Social Research, known as the 'Frankfurt School.' Warnke, 'Der Leidschatz der Menschheit wird humaner Besitz', in Hofmann et al., *Die Menschenrechte des Auges*, 163.

³⁸ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 251.

³⁹ See Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg*.

having succeeded in repressing their fear of the irrational, to praise for Warburg for having failed to repress *his* fear of the irrational.⁴⁰

Warburg, however, cannot very easily be drafted into a conventional disciplinary critique of humanism. He may be better understood as an archaic thinker who eludes both humanism, and humanism's own internal, 'demonic' antagonist. The radicality of Warburg is that he is *affirmative*: his thought is vitalist, enthusiastic, dionysian. Didi-Huberman, hyperbolic and himself an enthusiast, often pushing his apologia for Warburg too far, is the only one who seems to grasp the affirmative Warburg.

The British Warburgians—including and perhaps especially Gombrich—may have already understood this aspect of Warburg, in their own way. For strict empiricists are also always looking for ways out of the great cliché of humanism. They find it in the natural sciences; but then in a sense so, too, did Warburg. The smooth assimilation of Warburg into post-war British intellectual life, usually dismissed as a misreading, may be a measure of a hidden affinity.

Warburg broke with the mainstream tradition of art historical thought by refusing to take the *work of art* as the elemental analytical unit of his art history. This central tradition—what Michael Podro called the 'critical history of art'—combines an idealist philosophical conception of art with empirical scholarship. Riegl, Wölfflin, Panofsky, and in fact most art historians take as their starting point the work of art conceived as a formal unit, as if it were a literary text. A more strictly materialist social history of art might take the *artist*, a social category constructed by modernity, as its elemental unit. A sociological or systems-theoretical approach might focus on *art* itself as the object of inquiry. Warburg avoided the artwork—and 'art' and 'the artist', for that matter—because he wanted to escape the conventional thought patterns of art history. At one level, Warburg was simply asserting that what he called the 'onesidedly aesthetic' approach to Renaissance art needed to be 'adjusted' by hard work in the Florentine archives.⁴¹ But he was also ready to carry through this abandonment of the aesthetic in a more profound sense. Warburg took as his elemental unit of analysis the 'heightened emotional gesture' (*pathetisch gesteigerte Mimik*)⁴²: the abandonment of composure in fear, self-defence, confusion, desire, or anger; or the agitation of limbs, drapery, hair, even foliage in the emblematic projection of emotional states. He called these gestures *Pathosformel*, or 'pathos-formulas.'⁴³ Warburg often described his project as a tracing of the hieroglyphs of

⁴⁰ Cf. Papapetros's analysis of Warburg's concept of a polarity which is never resolved; 'The Eternal Seesaw', 168.

⁴¹ Warburg, 'Francesco Strozzi's letztwillige Verfügung' (1907), in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 158; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 249.

⁴² Warburg, 'Dürer und die italienische Antike', in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 445; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 553.

⁴³ Warburg first used this term in 'Dürer und die italienische Antike' (1905); in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 446; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 555. Cf. Warnke, 'Vier Stichworte.'

strong emotions passed down from picture to picture through history. The pictures within which the hieroglyphs appeared were in a sense accidental way-stations, stopping-places. Any frames surrounding the pictures were permeable.

These 'phobic-ecstatic'⁴⁴ gestures were not culturally coded; beholders do not need keys to decipher them. For Warburg, everybody reacts the same way to gestures. He rarely historicized the beholders. In painting, the pathos-formulas are dense focal points of direct, uncoded signification. Since the formula is the carrier of a real life-force, it has the power to persist through all the corruptions of contingent history, and art history. In the essay of 1912 on the astrological frescoes at the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, for example, Warburg speaks of the salvaging of the Greek archetypes in the Renaissance: 'The new, grand style, the gift of the artistic genius of Italy, was rooted in the social will to extract Greek humanity from its shell of medieval, oriental-Latin "Praxis".'⁴⁵

Warburg also abandoned 'art' in the sense that he downplayed the distinction between art and life. The pathos-formulas were not transfigurations of life, but *samples* of heightened movement and experience, already potent even before they appeared in paintings. As Michael Podro astutely noted:

Under the guise of giving archaeological or philological explanations, Warburg sets up circuits which pass through the work; these are never mere solutions to iconographic or stylistic questions. It is not so much that we confront the work but, rather, that we are allowed to enter and leave it as part of the conduct of a wider life.⁴⁶

In his Botticelli essay of 1893, his doctoral dissertation, Warburg seems to be saying that the mimic gestures or the fluttering drapery represented in the paintings would have the same effect on beholders if perceived in real life. He treats costume, coiffure, grace of movement, or the heightened gesture as if they were all already 'works of art', already representations of some inner spiritual reality. In the Botticelli essay, Warburg traces the drapery effects through a whole range of art forms, in theatrical pageants and in poetry, as much as in the paintings. Speaking of the *Primavera*, Warburg in effect minimizes the input of Botticelli, the supplement of pure creativity:

⁴⁴ See Warnke, 'Der Leidschatz der Menschheit wird humaner Besitz', 130.

⁴⁵ Warburg, 'Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara' (1912), in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 479; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 586.

⁴⁶ Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, 161; also p. 158, contrasting Warburg with Wölfflin and Riegl. See also the commentary by Werner Hofmann, 'Die Menschenrechte des Auges', 89. Cf. Edgar Wind, who already in 1931 distinguished Warburg from Riegl and Wölfflin, seeing him as the true disciple of Jacob Burckhardt; 'Warburgs Begriff der Kulturwissenschaft und seine Bedeutung für die Ästhetik', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 25, 1931, Beiheft, 163-79; republished in Ekkehard Kaemmerling, ed, *Ikonographie und Ikonologie: Theorien – Entwicklung – Probleme*, Cologne: DuMont, 1979, 165-84.

'If one accepts', Warburg argues, 'that contemporary theatre placed those figures physically before the eyes of the artist, as elements of a truly animated life, then the process of artistic shaping seems obvious' (fig. 4).⁴⁷



Figure 4 Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, ca. 1482. Florence, Uffizi.

This is the point of view of the anthropologist who sees art as continuous with other forms of behaviour.

Warburg never speaks of the art of painting as if *it* might have been responsible for working the magical, unanticipated transformation of life. For him, art is redundant, because the heightened gesture, the supplement of hair or drapery, was already stylized as soon as it appeared in a poem or a play; indeed, it was already stylized when it occurred in life itself. What is a gesture if not a stylized movement? In this way Warburg suspended many difficult questions about representation. The gestures he describes never seem to 'roll over' into the realm of art. They never enter into the endless circuitry of intertextuality, signification, and difference.

As a consequence Warburg — as if he really were an anthropologist — did not 'see' paintings as units, as integrated, delicately calibrated formal machines where every part functions only in relation to the other parts. Take for example the

⁴⁷ Warburg, 'Sandro Botticellis "Geburt der Venus" und "Frühling"' (1893), in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 37; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 125.

Adoration of the Shepherds, the altarpiece painted by Ghirlandaio in 1485 for the Sassetti Chapel (fig. 5).



Figure 5 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1485.
Florence, S. Trinita, Cappella Sassetti.

Warburg understood the painting as an arena where the patron was able to bring two different visions of antiquity into harmony. The antique sarcophagus behind the head of the Child demonstrates the triumph of the Church over paganism. In the background, where an animated pagan procession passes under a triumphal arch—the arrival of the Three Magi—the emotional gestural language of antiquity is forced to celebrate the Christian victory. The procession suggests ‘symptomatically’ the ‘counterexpression of purely aesthetic Renaissance joy in animated form, a sort of “votive” offering, to the medieval and religious illustrational interest in art, summoning a reawakened antiquity as witness to its own pastness...’⁴⁸ The precise equilibrium and structure of the painted composition, its careful adaptation of its

⁴⁸ Warburg, ‘Francesco Strozzi’s letztwillige Verfügung’, in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 158; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 249.

pictorial models, just do not matter here. The required elements, the gestures, are all present and accounted for inside the picture—and that's enough.

By disregarding the frame and instead isolating the gesture, Warburg was seeking the deepest possible motivations behind art-making. Warburg goes so far back behind 'art' that he is no longer interested in the visual as such. In his art history he really does not differentiate the 'visual arts' and the other arts. For example, in his Botticelli articles he does not distinguish between poetry, pageantry, and painting. All the conventional conceptual tools of art history, 'form', 'style', 'format', 'composition', are functions of a synoptic 'visualized' conception of artefacts that is inextricable from a conception of the artwork. Warburg has no such synoptic conception of the work of visual art. He takes no interest in figure-ground relationships or framing devices that structure the art of painting: the human figure is the alpha and the omega of the artwork.

Warburg's pathos-formula was a strong symbol, a fusion of content with form. Warburg's unpublished notes suggest that one of the key conceptual sources for the pathos-formula was the *engram*, a term coined by the psychologist Richard Semon to denote the capacity of living organisms to carry the traces of events and stimuli, thus preserving those stimuli in social memory. The *engram* was the direct imprinting of stimuli on substance. Warburg uses similar language when he speaks, for example, of 'the experience of religious ritual as the primal mint for the expressive systems of tragic passions.'⁴⁹ Warburg transmuted this term into his own private term 'dynamogram.'⁵⁰ Warburg also drew on the thought of the Italian evolutionary theorist Tito Vignoli, who saw primitive man reacting to a dimly comprehended environment with the 'phobic reflex of cause projection', a defensive warding off of malevolent forces.⁵¹ The basic, often traumatic, experiences of archaic man were imprinted in symbols, often concretized gestures, and are preserved by civilization, conceived as a handing down of symbols. Warburg understood the image as an indexical record of the emotions and reactions of the past. No wonder the image within his art history could function as a sort of super-document, a supremely eloquent testimony of the past.

Such a strong symbol could not be assimilated by art history. Panofsky had to domesticate Warburg's pathos-formulae by explaining their force in the following way: they 'retain their validity for many centuries and appear "natural" to us', Panofsky wrote, 'precisely because they are 'idealized' as compared to reality—because a wealth of particular observations had been condensed and sublimated into one universal experience.'⁵² But Panofsky's description is a misrepresentation. This idealization is not at all what Warburg had in mind.

⁴⁹ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 244.

⁵⁰ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 248; also Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, 176.

⁵¹ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 217.

⁵² Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 268.

Matthew Rampley has explicated Warburg's symbol in terms of contemporary theories of 'empathy', or the imaginative projection of the self onto the other. Rampley argues that Warburg understood his pathos-formulas as concrete symbols of such projections. These symbols then became themselves screens for projection; and this is the basis for their peculiar magic and strength. 'The image', Rampley explains, 'itself becomes the empathized other. The symbolic representation loses its symbolic quality, the distinction between the image and its symbolized object is collapsed, and the image is subject to the same empathic identification as its represented object.'⁵³ The chain of empathic gestures is recursive. In Podro's words, the symbol is 'both an image of a situation which confronts us, and a gesture we make within that situation.'⁵⁴ The work of art that was built on an antique pathos-formula, such as a painting by Botticelli, itself immediately became a pathos-formula in its own right.

The chain of pathos-formulas, for Warburg, carries 'social memory.' Social memory for Warburg was not a hermeneutic process of remembering only what 'interests' us, of the sort identified with the nineteenth-century German historians Johann Gustav Droysen or Wilhelm Dilthey.⁵⁵ Nor was memory a systemic process, whereby forms are recycled or discarded according to a logic internal to a system, generating something like an effect of memory.⁵⁶ Memory for Warburg was also something too important to be left to the individual subject. Instead, in Warburg, memory is carried like a living charge, objectively, by the recursive sequence of pathos-formulas.

Warburg saw cultural history as a network of gestures that from time to time inhabit the spaces that are sometimes called 'works of art.' Art was not so much a place for him, as a mode of social behaviour. To express this vision, he needed to break out of conventional scholarly formats. He devised the *Bilderatlas*, the picture-atlas.⁵⁷ The picture-atlas was the strange project that occupied Warburg at the end of

⁵³ Matthew Rampley, 'Aby Warburg's Theory of Art', *Art Bulletin* 79, 1997, 48. The important study by Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, understands the convulsive, empathetic identification with objects as the core theme of Warburg's thought.

⁵⁴ Podro, *Critical Historians of Art*, 176.

⁵⁵ Warnke, "'Der Leidschatz der Menschheit wird humaner Besitz'", 113.

⁵⁶ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997, 170-71; *Art as a Social System*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 105.

⁵⁷ See Dorothee Bauerle, *Gespensergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene: Ein Kommentar zu Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Münster: Lit, 1988; *Begleitmaterial zur Ausstellung 'Mnemosyne'*, Marianne Koos, Wolfram Pichler, Werner Rappl, and Gudrun Swoboda, eds, Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1994; Martin Warnke, ed, *Der Bilderatlas MNEMOSYNE, Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 1, Berlin: Akademie, 2000; Kurt W. Forster and Katia Mazzucco, *Introduzione ad Aby Warburg e all' Atlante della Memoria*, Milan: Mondadori, 2002; Cornelia Zumbusch, *Wissenschaft in Bildern: Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk*, Berlin: Akademie, 2004; the exhibition catalogue by

his life and which he named *Mnemosyne*, ‘memory.’ The atlas was never published, but only previewed. In its last version it was a room-sized display system involving forty panels stretched with black cloth to which Warburg attached something like a thousand photographs of Renaissance paintings, ancient sculpted reliefs, illuminated manuscript pages, ex votos, maps, modern news photos, advertisements. A good example is panel 77, an irregular constellation embracing *Medea about to Kill Her Children* and *The Massacre at Chios* by Delacroix, modern photographs of golfers, two Greek coins, the cover of a fish cookbook, postage stamps from France and Barbados, an advertisement for a beauty cream, and a seal presenting Charles II of England as Neptune (fig. 6).



Figure 6 ‘Mnemosyne’, panel 77 (from: *Aby Warburg Mnemosyne: L’Atlante delle imagine*, Nino Aragno Editore 2002)

What does it all mean? ‘The catharsis of the “headhunter” having taken the form of a golfer’ —in Warburg’s enigmatic phrase.⁵⁸ By pinning them to panels, Warburg declined to submit the images to the hierarchies of grammar or argument, but rather allowed them to pulse in all directions at once, connecting laterally with one another. The panels of the picture-atlas were like the façade of a Romanesque

Didi-Huberman, *Atlas: ¿cómo llevar el mundo auestas?*, Madrid: MNCARS, 2010; *Atlas, ou le gai savoir inquiet*, Paris: Minuit, 2011; Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2012; Matthew Vollgraft, ‘The Archive and the Labyrinth: On the Contemporary *Bilderatlas*’, *October* 149, 2014, 143–58.

⁵⁸ Warburg, journal, July 31, 1929, cited by Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 301.

church, studded with monstrous, apotropaic symbols, forming incomprehensible motifs. The *Bilderatlas* treated images like accumulations of energy circulating through history, never settling into units of discrete meaning.

One need hardly point out how hard it is to sustain today such theories of the 'direct imprinting of stimuli', 'phobic reflexes', empathic projection, or memory as a living charge. They are too loosely connected to any real knowledge about the psychology of fear or ritual. Instead they rest on quasi-mystical conceptions of the survival of primordial energy. One can partially rescue the Warburgian symbol by associating it with a post-clinical, purely hermeneutic conception of the psychoanalytic symptom, as Didi-Huberman brilliantly does, but then it is no longer really Warburg's pathos-formula.⁵⁹ The pathos-formula, it would seem, is a concept of the image that drastically underrates the conventional and systemic aspects of representation, that is, it discounts the internal logics of substitution, replication, and transformation that representations are submitted to. In Warburg's schema there is no interference from signification.⁶⁰ The pathos-formula simply retains its charge throughout its historical run, unless it is corrupted by barbarism or concealed by decadent artifice.

Warburg's intuition was that the image escapes the binds of mere culture and so confronts us with the face of history itself. Giorgio Agamben, in his essay on Warburg, translated this idea out of the scientific vocabulary of the late nineteenth century and into the terms of a twentieth-century philosophy of being:

what might have appeared as an unconscious structure par excellence—the image—instead showed itself to be a decisively historical element, the very place of human cognitive activity in its vital confrontation with the past. What thus came to light...was neither a kind of diachrony nor a kind of synchrony but, rather, the point at which a human subject was produced in the rupture of this opposition.....The image is the place in which the subject strips itself of the mythical, psychosomatic character given to it, in the presence of an equally mythical object, by a theory of knowledge that is in truth simply disguised metaphysics. Only then does the subject rediscover its original and—in the etymological sense of the word—speculative purity.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, 284 and passim. Podro, *Critical Historians*, 176, thought that Warburg's concept of the symbol was closer to Freud's condensation than to the theory of empathy.

⁶⁰ Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, 182.

⁶¹ Agamben, 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', 102. Another expression of the same insight, I believe, is the subtle study by Giovanni Careri, 'Rituel, Pathosformel, et forme intermédiaire', *L'Homme* 165, 2003, 41-76, which understands the Pathosformel as a 'configuration', a place where image, text, and ritual 'se nouent', permitting a direct opening onto existence.

Agamben's ontological approach to the image not only rhymes with Warburg's collective psychology of the image, but also allows us to perceive a further rhyme. For here we are not so far, once we have allowed for the difference in terminology, from the picture of the history of Western art that Gombrich offered in his magnum opus *Art and Illusion* (1960). In this book Gombrich argued that artists make pictures by manipulating ready-made representational devices, inherited 'schemata' that designate reality by force of convention. But the driving impulse of art, and the source of the historical drama for Gombrich, was the struggle to escape convention and deliver reality itself. The hidden telos of art history for Gombrich is the 'true image' that escapes history. It is Gombrich who best grasped the incompatibility of Warburg's model with the traditional history of art—the art history of Wölfflin, Riegl, and Panofsky—which does not attribute to art the ability to recognize any reality beyond the reach of its representational conventions. He also perceived clearly Warburg's disengagement from aesthetics. Gombrich rightly saw that in order to escape the impasse of *Kunstwissenschaft* one had to abandon abruptly the concepts of the artwork and of visuality. Gombrich in his biography noted that Warburg moved from art history to the scientific study of man, attending courses in psychology in Berlin after handing in his art historical dissertation.⁶² It is the same move that Gombrich himself made in his career. Warburg was intensely engaged with the study of medicine, psychology, and evolutionary biology. Like Gombrich, and following the lead of the historian Karl Lamprecht, Warburg was interested in the psychological basis for optical perception and in children's drawings as a starting point for a psychological ethnology.⁶³ Gombrich, in his own *agon* with conventional *Kunstwissenschaft*, put his trust in experimental science. He tried to force the results of science onto the phenomenon of art, with limited success.

Warburg's science and Gombrich's science were two different ways of attempting to break with the same history of art. Our perception of this break is perspectively distorted because Gombrich's science is closer to us in time, and so looks more like 'normal' science with all its crass incapacity to deal with the mystery of art; whereas Warburg's science is a primitive, rough-edged, nineteenth-century science. But in a hundred years the difference between their scientisms will not appear so sharp, and they will both look like audacious attempts to break away from idealist philosophy and from humanism.

⁶² Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 84.

⁶³ Warburg described himself as a 'monist' ready to reduce aesthetic categories to psychology; see Georg Syamken, 'Aby Warburg—Ideen und Initiativen', *Die Menschenrechte des Auges*, 33. Cf. also Kathryn Brush, 'Aby Warburg and the Cultural Historian Karl Lamprecht', in Woodfield, ed, *Art History as Cultural History*. On children's drawings, see Barbara Wittmann, 'Indian Rituals and Children's Drawings: A Footnote on Aby Warburg's Psychogenesis of Culture', in *New Perspectives in Iconology: Visual Studies and Anthropology*, eds. Barbara Baert and Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Brussels: ASP, 2012.

Gombrich was not a pure humanist. He was not afraid of science; and he was not afraid to sketch the limits of human freedom. Science—and here it doesn't matter whether it is 'good' or 'bad' science—is disrespectful of free will. Both Gombrich and Warburg were ready to remove the human subject and its decision-making powers from their models of cultural history. For if the visualized object is absent from Warburg's art history, so too is the visualizing subject. The historical subject for Warburg is nothing more than the notional source of the emotion crystallized in the *Pathosformel*. The subject is erased in Warburg's schema; there is only the network of concretized gestures, hieroglyphs, afterimages of rituals, into which a subject can choose to insert itself. The *Pathosformel* do the suffering for you.

The threat to free will posed by science was understood already by Petrarch. The poet deplored both astrology and Greek science, preferring instead the ancient Roman focus on man. 'We are not Greeks, nor barbarians', he wrote, 'but Italians and Latins.'⁶⁴ Physics and astrology, for Petrarch, were both causal models that removed man from centre stage.

Today Petrarch's 'Latin' faith in man seems more remote than ever. No longer with dread, it seems, does anyone contemplate the anti-humanist or posthuman picture of a subjectless cultural cosmos. Such a cosmos is no longer the clockwork universe of materialistic science, perhaps, but a product of one might characterize as a new 'astrology' of culture. Culture, under this rubric, is understood as a system that grants the individual only a limited freedom of action; a system whose complex operations reveal themselves only in talismanic focal points that we may, if we like, call 'works of art.' These talismans work effects on minds and bodies that we cannot even begin to explain; effects that satisfy any possible definition of magic. Aby Warburg was already pointing towards this new astrology.

The weakness of Warburg's art history was precisely its unwillingness to approach the human subject except in its emotional states of self-loss or in performance. He avoided an expansive engagement with subjectivity just as he avoided interpreting works of art. Warburg may appear vulnerable to the same critique that was levelled against Ernst Cassirer by Martin Heidegger and others: namely, that his philosophy of culture was based on an excessively abstract model of symbol-formation and was insufficiently attentive to subjective experience and the engagement of the subject with factuality. But as Bernd Villhauer has argued, that critique may not fit Warburg.⁶⁵ First, as we have seen, Warburg's image, once it has been translated out of the language of science, promises to deliver, or even creates, the subject with an immediacy that scientific thought can only dream of. Second, Warburg understood symbol-making as a pragmatic activity embedded in ordinary experience. For Warburg the art of the Florentine Quattrocento was an

⁶⁴ Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance*, London: Routledge, 1983, 30.

⁶⁵ Bernd Villhauer, *Aby Warburgs Theorie der Kultur: Detail und Sinnhorizont*, Berlin: Akademie, 2002, 144-48. Cf. Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

‘occasional’ art, a practical art devised for this or that occasion, an art that moved in step with life. The artist for Warburg was ‘a master of technical tricks, born under the planet Mercury, who could do anything and supply anything; who painted and sculpted in his back workshop, but who had a front shop in which he sold all that anyone might need: belt buckles, painted marriage chests, church furnishings, votive waxes, engravings.’⁶⁶ The symbol is ‘won’ out of a daily struggle with the conditions of existence. In this process the question of subjectivity is deferred. Yet Warburg’s art history does not evade factuality. In this respect, too, there is an unexpected convergence with the London Warburgians: with the Baxandall of *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1972), for example, where ‘art’ is defined as the medium of a social relation among artists, patrons, and other beholders, sustained by a common repertoire of mental and affective habits, skills, and bodily disciplines. The work of art, for Baxandall just as for Warburg, was not so much a mirror of mind, as it is for more humanistically inclined scholars, but rather an ‘extrusion’ of daily, sensual experience.

The convergence between Warburg and the British Warburgians is, finally, limited. For Baxandall’s ‘social objects’ do not lead strange lives in time. Unlike Warburg’s symbols, they are anchored to their historical worlds. It is the temporal instability of the *Pathosformel*, finally, that makes it unassimilable by art history. Warburg’s symbol is so strong that it is almost a portent or epiphany. Didi-Huberman does not hesitate to associate it with Nietzsche’s conception of the eternal return.⁶⁷ For Didi-Huberman—and here he follows Walter Benjamin, one of Warburg’s most perspicacious readers—the Warburgian pathos-formula has a kind of ‘natural’ force, a real force. One wonders whether the current fascination with Warburg is not a way for contemporary scholarship to achieve a desired rapprochement with emblematic or epiphanic models of apprehension without appearing too mystical. Warburg today seems draped in a kind of rough glamour, the charisma of an archaic or ‘rusticated’ mode of history-writing. He writes an ‘enthusiastic’ history, like an ecstatic witness—he represents all the sincerity and eerie insight that scholarship believes it has lost.

Christopher S. Wood is Professor in the German Department, New York University. He is the author of *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (1993, reissued with new afterword, 2014); *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (2008) (awarded the Susanne M. Glasscock Humanities Book Prize for Interdisciplinary Scholarship); and *Anachronic Renaissance* (with Alexander Nagel) (2010). He is the editor of *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (2000).

christopher.wood@nyu.edu

⁶⁶ Warburg, ‘Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum’, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 113; *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 202.

⁶⁷ Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante*, 169-76.