



Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 83–90

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ABSTRACT: Interruptions and discontinuity are the very essence of Aby Warburg's conception of the temporality that affects art objects. Beneath the seemingly immobilized expressive gesture, the Hamburg scholar recognizes the vitality of the *Pathosformeln* that convey the intricacy of human multi-layered temporality, made of interruptions, resumptions, inversions, regressions, stops, accelerations, and survivals (*Nachleben*). In this sense, Warburg's idea of 'renewal', which he developed from his well-known investigation of the Italian Renaissance, does not quite overlap with the notion of rebirth: an expressive gesture can re-emerge and be renewed in a different time without dying and being born a second time with a different form.

Renewal

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The *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (*La rinascita del paganesimo antico*) is the title the art historian and librarian Gertrud Bing, together with Emma Cantimori, chose for the first collection of Aby Warburg's writings, released in 1966 in Florence by the publishing house La Nuova Italia.¹ The Italian volume was published more than a decade before the German original because Bing, who had been one of Warburg's closest collaborators, wanted to make up for Ernst Gombrich's failed attempt to sort out and select Warburg's texts. After the Warburgian library was relocated from Hamburg to London in order to preserve its material from the upcoming World War II,² its new director Gom-

1 Aby Warburg, *La rinascita del paganesimo antico. Contributi alla storia della cultura* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1996); in English as Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999).

2 See Dorothea McEwan, 'A Tale of One Institute and Two Cities: The Warburg Institute', *Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, 1 (1999): *German-Speaking Exiles in Great Britain*, ed. by Ian Wallace, pp. 25–42.

brich — who later would write the first biography of Warburg³ — was tasked with carrying on and concluding the publication of the Hamburg scholar's *Nachlass*. Each small historical and biographical detail is relevant to get a sense of the rich and assorted collection of images and words that Warburg put together in the intense period between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. For those who, like Gombrich, did not take part in the *Warburg circle's* collective research,⁴ it was surely harder to access both Warburg's fragmentary essayistic production, diaries, and notes, and the pictures from the legendary, albeit unfinished project *Atlas Mnemosyne*, whose tables had been collected, assembled, and displayed in various formats for several decades.⁵ The attempt to reconstruct the *Atlas* is, indeed, a never-ending 're-enactment',⁶ mainly because it had been conceived as a means to display the experimental efforts to shape a new kind of art history, and, furthermore, had been the result of 'team play'.⁷

3 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970).

4 See Emily J. Levine, *Hamburg, Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

5 Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Ulrich Pfisterer, Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, Uwe Fleckner, Michael Thimann, and Claudia Wedepohl (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998–), II.1: *Der Bilderatlas MNEMOSYNE*, ed. by Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (2000); in Italian as Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. L'Atlante delle immagini*, ed. by Maurizio Ghelardi (Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2002).

6 Cristina Baldacci and Clio Nicastro, 'Il Bilderatlas Mnemosyne rivisitato: una mostra e un convegno a Karlsruhe', *Engramma. La tradizione classica nella memoria occidentale*, 142 (2017) <http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3086> [accessed 18 December 2018].

7 Monica Centanni, 'Editoriale: Engramma da 0 a 100', *Engramma*, 100 (2012) <http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=1161> [accessed 18 December 2018].

The dictionary definition of 'renewal' identifies it as 'an instance of resuming something after an interruption' or 'the replacement or repair of something.' To renew, thus, is to give fresh life or strength to something. As part of the second meaning, 'recovery' is listed as one of the synonyms for renewal. This link between 'renewal' and 'recovery' erratically leads me to the core of Warburg's unique method, both by following the intertwined threads that bind the different fields of research he explored and combined, and by delving into a crucial event in his life. However, one should always keep in mind Edgard Wind's methodological suggestion in his biting review of Gombrich's Warburg biography. Here, Wind, criticizing Gombrich's statement about the possibility of understanding Warburg's work only if one gets lost in his maze, warns the scholar approaching the enormous number of Warburg's notes and drafts that these 'fragments' have to be considered as no more than preparatory scribbles.⁸ They constitute an essential part of Warburg's work, but they also need to be contextualized within a broader frame.

Warburg's fresh and crucial contribution to rethinking the implications of Renaissance symbolic forms was the result of his radical questioning concerning the migration of artistic forms in space and time. With this objective, he conferred a pivotal role to the materiality of mediatic supports and took into account all those secondary objects that at the beginning of the twentieth century were mostly overlooked by art historians, as, for instance, the tools of daily life, tapestry, or coins.

8 'He was like a man lost in a maze and the reader who attempts the next chapter should perhaps be warned that he, too, will have to enter the maze.' Edgar Wind, 'On a Recent Biography of Warburg', in *The Eloquence of Symbols. Studies in Humanistic Art*, ed. by Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 106–13.

The art objects, which for such an expansive conception cannot, thus, be reduced to their aesthetic qualities, are here conceived as vessels, as symptoms of the intricacy of human multi-layered temporality, made of interruptions, resumptions, inversions, regressions, stops, and accelerations. Warburg recognized in the artistic crystallization of expressive gestures and forms the physical embodiment of this ungraspable and discontinuous fluctuation of time. The renewal of different symbolic meanings emerges from apparently identical elements and styles, yet unpredictably awakes something that had not previously been there, that is, what Warburg called 'dynamogram', a term borrowed from biology, more precisely from Richard Semon's *The Mneme*.⁹ In this book from 1904, Semon uses the term 'engram' to name the traces of events on the living organism's nervous system and he provides an explanation of how these energies can be reactivated when the organism encounters new experiences at a later point.

By reframing Semon's notion within his theory of the image, Warburg conceives of 'dynamograms' as crystallizations of the images of ancient psychic energies surviving in the form of an inherited memory, which are renewed only through the contact with a new epoch, in the overturning or energetic inversion of the original meaning.¹⁰ Organic and inorganic time — what Andrea Pinotti poignantly calls memories of the neutral¹¹ — mingle in this immobilized time, the trace of events guarded by art objects that disclose the world of possibilities held in the past as a result of the collision between *Pathosformeln* (forms of pathos)

9 Richard Semon, *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Princip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1904).

10 Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, p. 248.

11 Andrea Pinotti, *Memorie del neutro. Morfologia dell'immagine in Aby Warburg* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001).

and *Nachleben* (survivals). Warburg's ultimate project was to rewrite (with words and images) the history of art as a history of the passions, avoiding the most obvious and partial conception of progress as a linear, teleological succession of ages.

Today, Warburg's idea of art history has perhaps begun to sound familiar, yet certainly no less timely, even current, as it exemplifies, for instance, a particularly radical approach to interdisciplinary research and resonates with the rise of interest in affect theory. In this respect, the unsolvable contradictions that feature both in Warburg's personality (what he fondly called his 'Janus face') and in his work, provide the probably most intriguing aspects to inquire into. 'Du lebst und thust mir nichts',¹² you live and do me no harm, is one of the best-known Warburgian mottos. He uses it to describe the safe space of experience that only art can create, as it is the unique human dimension where the polarity between the rational and the irrational finds a temporary reconciliation in what he calls *Denkraum der Besonnenheit*, the thinking-space of reflection ('sophrosyne').

In the draft for his essay from 1920, 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther',¹³ Warburg defines the *Denkraum* as a *Zeitspanne*, the time span between stimulus and response that characterizes human perception. As a devoted reader of Nietzsche and Burckhardt (not to mention his friend Ernst Cassirer),

12 Aby Warburg, *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde. Frammenti sull'espressione*, ed. by Susanne Müller (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2011). The fragments have since been re-edited in Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV: *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, ed. by Ulrich Pfisterer and Hans Christian Hönes (2015).

13 Aby Warburg, 'Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther', in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 597–697.

he aimed to overcome the opposition between Apollonian and Dionysian principles: Warburg remained sceptical with respect to excess and at the same time cultivated access to the passions through symbolic forms. The Warburgian *Denkraum*, hence, is conceived not as a utopian condition of balance and accord, but a force field of unpolarized, that is, reversible irrational and rational energies that can take shape only through contact with the 'other'.

Warburg's obsession with maintaining the right distance from reality in order to avoid the risk of incorporation, 'to recompose the fracture between man and the outside world'¹⁴ seems to be the leitmotif of his entire life. In 1921, after several failed attempts in other psychiatric institutions and right after his last violent crisis when he threatened his relatives with a revolver, Warburg was admitted to Bellevue, whose director at the time was Ludwig Binswanger, who subsequently became Warburg's psychiatrist. His diagnosis was schizophrenia, but it was later revised by Emil Kraepelin, who considered the case a 'mixed-state manic-depressive'. Against all expectation, during the three-year therapy at Bellevue, Warburg was able to slowly restore connections with family and colleagues, first of all Fritz Saxl, who provided crucial support in the preparation of his famous and controversial lecture *The Ritual of the Snake*.¹⁵ The story of Warburg's Kreuzlingen lecture is well-known and has become almost legendary; his presentation in front of the doctors and the patients of Bellevue is indeed

14 Filippo Trentin, 'Warburg's Ghost: On Literary Atlases and the 'Anatopic' Shift of a Cartographic Object', in *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Christoph F. E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), pp. 101–29 (p. 122).

15 Aby Warburg, 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2 (1938–39), pp. 222–92.

often described as a turning point in Warburg's healing journey. Recovery, though, is rarely a peak but rather a process, and what we actually find at stake in this lecture is precisely the peculiar temporality of symbolic renewal. By focussing on the material he had collected in 1896/1897, during the period he conducted field research in the villages of the American Hopi, Warburg's lecture sheds light on one of his primary interests, namely the psychic parallelism between the movement of an individual's life (for instance in mimicry) and the style of artistic movement. The journey in Arizona and in New Mexico had provided him with the opportunity to search in Hopi ritual practices for the stylistic forces shaping moving life into art that he had discerned in Renaissance symbolic forms. Behind and beyond their aesthetic-formal value, images embody the human biological need to shape and express the vital as well as historical development of the passions.

Hence Warburg's conception of an image-engram does not arrest or in any way pacify the constitutive instability, the pulsating movement it captures between the energetic poles of human conflict, namely the oscillation between primitive and chaotic energies and the rational faculty to organize the world. His personal experience, as well as his investigation of the Renaissance, tell us something about the necessary 'interruption' implied both in 'renewal' and 'recovery'. Renewal is not synonymous with 'rebirth', the latter being often associated with the Renaissance in contrast to the Middle Ages. Rebirth requires having been dead and being born a second time in a different body. In the case of renewal, however, the body is the same, and it carries the more or less conspicuous traces of the familiar symptoms. Interruptions are not always visible, they are

not always tragic and neat marks, they can be 'just' one of the shapes of time — as well as one way to deal with time.

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