

Aby Warburg's *Ergriffenheit/Ergriffen sein*: The Force of Emotions

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Aby Warburg's seminal concept of the *Pathosformel* arises within theoretical reflections centred on the phenomenon of 'being emotionally moved'. The encompassing spectrum of these affective states finds its synthesis in the notion of *Ergriffenheit/Ergriffen sein*, representing the energy exerted by artworks upon their beholders.

This study presents the concept of *Ergriffenheit/Ergriffen sein* as an energetic manifestation of the dynamic changes in the bodily state of individuals exposed to aesthetic encounters. Artworks are conceived as dynamic entities imbued with agency, actively participating in the intricate interplay between the energies they encapsulate and those they exert upon their image beholders. Through this inquiry, the paper aims to provide a thorough comprehension of the intricate interrelationship among emotions, bodily responses, and images. Moreover, this examination acknowledges art as inherently rooted in biological foundations and its evolution within historical and cultural contexts.

Il celebre concetto warburghiano di *Pathosformel* deriva da un complesso di riflessioni teoriche rispetto all'energia del 'being moved', espresso attraverso il termine *Ergriffenheit*. Alle diverse declinazioni della forza patemica Aby Warburg dedica la sua attenzione all'interno di una sua più ampia riflessione non sistematica sulle differenti manifestazioni dell'energia di *Pathos*, *Leidenschaft* ed *Ekstase*, la cui caratteristica comune è il radicamento nella corporeità. Questo studio si propone di indagare il concetto di *Ergriffenheit/Ergriffen sein* come espressione di mutamenti energetici dello stato corporeo di un individuo, a partire dagli studi sulla fisiologia del corpo umano e sul sistema nervoso condotti dallo stesso Warburg.

KEYWORDS: *Warburg, Energie, emotions, Ergriffenheit, embodiment*

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[...] der das Leben im unterirdischen
Wurzelwerk untersucht.

Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Einleitung*

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the concept of force has traditionally encompassed a range of meanings, including *energeia*/*dynamic*, *vis*, *vehement*, and *kinesis*, among others. According to Aristotle, *energeia* represents the force of transformation, the inherent power that drives unceasing development and growth, defying the notions of a fixed beginning or end¹.

Within traditional aesthetic discourse, the concept of *energeia* plays a pivotal role. Firstly, it signifies the manifestation of vitality within an artwork, its capacity to convey a sense of liveliness, energy, and dynamism. Secondly, *energeia* also affects the reader, listener, or image beholder; it is energy capable of stirring their emotions and eliciting an aesthetic response. *Energeia* acts as a catalyst, stimulating the viewer's sensory and affective experiences, thus establishing a dynamic interaction between the artwork and the perceiver. Leonardo da Vinci famously described the power of music to captivate its listeners to the extent that they are rendered 'half dead' with admiration. Da Vinci's characterisation exemplifies how aesthetic discourse has frequently portrayed the relationship between artwork and listener/viewer as one marked by emotions of overwhelming power, a phenomenon that Aby Warburg referred to as *Ergriffenheit/ergriffen sein*. In his thought, an artwork endowed with «Ausdrucksformen des maximalen inneren

1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics. A Philological Commentary*, ed. by Wolfgang Class, Verlag Senging, Saldenburg 2014-2018, A 6.8.

Ergriffenseins»² acts upon a perceiver by exerting a force similar to the physical forces observed in nature but also unique, as it encompasses both physiological, psychological and cultural dimensions.

This paper analyses Warburg's theories concerning the concept of *Ergriffenheit*, which is defined here as the utmost expression of the energetic paradigm that encompasses intricate interconnections between emotions, bodily expressions of motion, and action. In this study, artworks are not examined from a stylistic perspective but are regarded as living or agentic devices³. They are acknowledged for their affective potential, e.g., their capacity to shape the energies they encapture and significantly influence their reception. On the one hand, I associate the concept of affectivity with physiological and embodied responses that shape our subjective states and influence our interactions with the world. On the other hand, when discussing emotions as a concept, I refer to specific and discrete experiences that arise within the affective domain and involve physiological changes occurring in the body, cognitive appraisal, subjective feelings, and expressive behaviours. I take into account that cultural and social factors also influence these experiences. This perspective recognises artworks as dynamic entities that possess agency and contribute to the intricate interplay between the energies they embody and viewers' perception and interpretation.

The final aim of this paper is to shed light on Warburg's vision of the affective potency embedded within images and their subsequent impact on the body of the observer. Through this investigation, the paper endeavours to offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between emotions, bodily responses, and visual stimuli. Furthermore, this analysis recognises art as both biologically rooted and subject to historical evolution in cultural expressions within a monistic understanding of the complex interplay among biology, history, and artistic creation.

Among current researchers employing a bio-cultural framework for studying artworks, several novel approaches⁴ have emerged. These

2 Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Einleitung*, in Id., *Werke*, hrsg. v. Martin Treml – Sigrid Weigel – Perdita Ladwig, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010, pp. 629-638: 631.

3 For the concept of agency, see the well-documented study by Matthew Rampley, *Agency, Affect and Intention in Art History: Some Observations*, in «Journal of Art Historiography», 24 (2021), pp. 1-21. For a broader definition of agency, see also Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005; Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2015; Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2018.

4 Consider the neuroaesthetic shift influenced by Semir Zeki's groundbreaking

focus on the cognitive and neural processes of aesthetic response, and they primarily examine the physiological and affective responses evoked in the viewer when engaging with visual stimuli⁵. Considering the interplay between the brain, the body, and the experience of art, these inquiries offer fresh insights into how artworks elicit and influence physiological and emotional reactions in the image-beholder⁶. This framework has prompted a re-evaluation of the affective dimensions inherent in the aesthetic experience, resulting in significant implications for our understanding of the history of art. Recognising the importance of affective qualities in art⁷ challenges traditional perspectives and opens new avenues for understanding artistic practices throughout history. This shift in perspective invites a deeper exploration of art's

following studies: *A Vision of the Brain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1993; *Art and the Brain*, in «Dædalus», 127 (1998), 2, pp. 71-103; *Inner Vision: an Exploration of Art and the Brain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

5 Among others, see: Semir Zeki, *Notes Towards a (Neurobiological) Definition of Beauty*, in «Gestalt Theory», 41 (2019), 2, pp. 107-112; Anjan Chatterjee, *The Aesthetic Brain: How we Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014; Anjan Chatterjee – Oshin Vartanian, *Neuroaesthetics*, in «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», 18 (2014), 7, pp. 370-375.

6 See the pathbreaking study by David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1989. Regarding the anthropological relevance of the body as being doubled in images, see Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2001.

7 For the shift towards the recognition of emotions within cognitive cultural studies, influential works include mainly: Joseph E. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1996, and Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Penguin, New York-London 1994. Additionally, see: Gerald C. Cupchik, *Emotion in Aesthetics: Reactive and Reflective Models*, in «Poetics», 23 (1995), 1-2, pp. 177-188; Antonio Damasio *et al.*, *Subcortical and Cortical Brain Activity During the Feeling of Self-Generated Emotions*, in «Nature Neuroscience», 3 (2000), pp. 1049-1056; David Freedberg – Vittorio Gallese, *Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience*, in «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», 11 (2007), 5, pp. 197-202. Other notable studies are: Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2002, and Ernst van Alphen, *The Affective Operations of Art and Literature*, in *How To Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Ernst van Alphen – Tomá Jirsa, Brill, Leiden 2019. With regard to emotions in literature, consider the following studies: Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek, *Affektpoetik. Eine Kulturgeschichte literarischer Emotionen*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2005; Patrick C. Hogan, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2011; *Handbuch Literatur und Emotionen*, hrsg. v. Martin von Koppenfels – Cornelia Zumbusch, De Gruyter, Berlin 2016; Hannah C. Wojciechowski – Vittorio Gallese, *Embodiment, Embodied Simulation and Emotional Engagement with Fictional Characters*, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Emotion*, ed. by Patrick Colm Hogan – Bradley J. Irish – Lalita Pandit Hogan, Routledge, Abingdon 2022; Simone Winko, *Literature and Emotion*, in *Language and Emotion. An International Handbook*, ed. by Gesine Lenore Schiewer – Jeanette Altarriba – Chin Ng, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2023.

emotional and sensory aspects, ultimately enriching our understanding of artistic production, reception, and the evolving nature of aesthetic experiences across different periods.

Aby Warburg has played a pioneering role in fostering a paradigm shift towards appreciating and investigating artworks within what today may be defined as a bio-cultural perspective. This perspective recognises and acknowledges the physiological and emotional dynamics involved in both the creation and experience of artworks.

The investigation of emotional force was a fundamental aspect of Aby Warburg's 'energetic paradigm'; Warburg sought to describe how images and symbols in art and culture are infused with energy and then convey and provoke emotional and psychological responses. Warburg's intellectual pursuits led him to develop a keen cognitive interest in exploring images' affective and dynamic potential and their underlying operational mechanisms. He delved into the domain of empirical aesthetics. This interdisciplinary field emerged during the early 20th century, blending aesthetic theory with disciplines such as psychology, physiology, and other natural sciences. By engaging with empirical aesthetics, Warburg embarked on developing the 'energetic paradigm' that revolved around the power of emotions conveyed by motions (involuntary movements) and actions (voluntary movements). This paradigm led him to define the concept of «Engramme höchster Ergriffenheit», which encompassed the profound emotional imprints that shape human experiences. Notably, 'engram' was a term initially coined by Richard Semon and denoted the capacity of a living organism to retain emotional imprints of stimuli within a collective memory, as he argued in his work *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens* (published in 1906 and later revised in 1911)⁸. According to Semon, the 'engram' resurfaces into consciousness when a similar «energetic situation» revives it from its latent state⁹. Therefore, it was defined by Wood as «the direct imprinting of stimuli on substance»¹⁰.

By highlighting the interplay between artistic expressions, biological processes, and cultural influences, Warburg's approach emphasises the integral role of the body, the emotions, and their interactions

8 See the extensive study and the related bibliography in Kurt W. Forster, *Warburgs Mneme nach einer langen Pause des Vergessens*, in *Aby Warburg und die Natur. Epistemik, Ästhetik, Kulturtheorie*, hrsg. v. Frank Fehrenbach – Cornelia Zumbusch, De Gruyter, Berlin 2019, pp. 1-8.

9 Richard Semon, *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens*, Engelmann, Leipzig 1904, p. 98.

10 Christopher S. Wood, *Aby Warburg. Homo victor*, in «Journal of Art History», 11 (2014), pp. 1-28: 18.

in shaping artistic production. Warburg's undertaking was centred around a profound exploration of the intrinsic dynamic of artworks, and he aimed to reveal the psychological, anthropological, and natural principles that underlie their formation. His objective was to attain an understanding of the universal laws that govern the creation and reception of artworks, and he sought to do so by acknowledging their intricate interconnections with broader principles and forces in the natural world.

2. *ERGRIFFENHEIT* AND *ENERGIE*

The renowned opening passage of the *Einleitung* to the *Atlas Mnemosyne* establishes a unifying framework for the intellectual pursuit underlying the collected visual materials in the *Atlas*. This framework serves as a means for manifesting the emotional process of infusing representations of animated life with values of expression in order to create a distance between oneself and the external world. This emotional process is considered to be a fundamental act of human civilisation:

Bewußtes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Außenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen; wird dieser Zwischenraum das Substrat künstlicher Gestaltung, so sind die Vorbedingungen erfüllt, daß dieses Distanzbewusstsein zu einer sozialen Dauerfunktion werden kann, die durch den Rhythmus vom Einschwingen in die Materie und Ausschwingen zur Sophrosyne jenen Kreislauf zwischen bildhafter und zeichenmäßiger Kosmologik bedeutet, deren Zulänglichkeit oder Versagern als orientierendes geistiges Instrument eben das Schicksal der menschlichen Kultur bedeutet.

Dem zwischen religiöser und mathematischer Weltanschauung schwankenden künstlerischen Menschen kommt das Gedächtnis sowohl der Kollektivpersönlichkeit wie des Individuums in einer eigentümliche Weise zur Hilfe: nicht ohne weiters Denkraum schaffend, wohl aber an den Grenzpolen des psychischen Verhaltens die Tendenz zur ruhigen Schau oder orgiastischen Hingabe verstärkend¹¹.

Later on, Warburg introduces the concept of *ergriffen sein*. In his words:

Der Entdämonisierungsprozess der phobisch geprägten Eindruckserbmasse, der die ganze Skala des Ergriffenseins gebärdensprachlich umspannt, von der hilflosen Versunkenheit bis zum mörderischen Menschenfrass, verleiht der humanen Bewegungsdynamik auch in den Stadien, die zwischen den

¹¹ Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Einleitung*, cit., p. 629.

Grenzpole des Orgasmus liegen, dem Kämpfen, Gehen, Laufen, Tanzen, Greifen, jenen Prägerand unheimlichen Erlebens, das der in mittelalterlichen Kirchenzucht aufgewachsene Gebilde der Renaissance wie ein verbotenes Gebiet, wo sich nur die Gottlosen des freigelassenen Temperaments tummeln dürfen, ansah¹².

The concept of *Ergriffenheit* encompasses the spectrum along which one can be intensively emotionally moved. This phenomenon became central to Warburg's research as both a historian and a scientist. Warburg considers die «ganze Skala des Ergriffenseins»¹³ to be deeply embedded in our evolutionary history. In his own words, «[...] Ich suchte die Funktion des Gesetzes [des] kleinsten Kraftmaasses aus der memischen Dauer (die Geschichte) der Engramme höchster Ergriffenheit (die Antike ist ein solcher Conservator) darzustellen»¹⁴.

He interprets the state of *Ergriffenheit* as one that is determined by strong emotion and as one that, as in Darwin's¹⁵ perspective, contains traces of ancestral reactions that played a crucial role in the survival of humans in their natural environment. Following Darwin's viewpoint¹⁶, emotions originate from functional responses that occurred during struggles for survival and were subsequently imprinted and inherited as instinctive, uncontrollable motions (involuntary movements) and actions (voluntary movements). Therefore, Warburg posited that the repertoire of bodily gestures found in visual art functions as a set of visible indicators of emotions that are deeply rooted in the human body. In this context, emotions can be understood as adaptive mechanisms that aided early humans in navigating and surviving in a demanding

12 *Ivi*, p. 630.

13 *Ibidem*.

14 Aby Warburg, *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. v. Karen Michels – Charlotte Schoell-Glass, Bd. 3, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2001, p. 123.

15 Regarding the debate on the influence of Charles Darwin, it is essential to consider several key works. These include but are not limited to the following: Sabine Flach, *Communicating Vessels. On the Development of a Theory of Representation in Darwin and Warburg*, in *Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History*, ed. by Barbara Larson – Sabine Flach, Ashgate, Farnham 2013, pp. 109-124; Sigrid Weigel, «Von Darwin über Filippino zu Botticelli... und... wieder zur Nymphe». *Zum Vorhaben einer energetischen Symboltheorie und zur Spur der Darwin-Lektüre in Warburgs Kulturwissenschaft*, in *Warburgs Denkraum Formen, Motive, Materialien*, hrsg. v. Martin Tremml – Sabine Flach – Pablo Schneider, Wilhelm Fink, Leiden 2014, pp. 143-180; Matthew Vollgraff, *The Archaeology of Expression: Aby Warburg's Ausdruckskunde*, in *Aby Warburg und die Natur. Epistemik, Ästhetik, Kulturtheorie*, cit., pp. 121-148.

16 Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, John Murray, London 1872.

natural world. Warburg recognises the significance of these evolutionary processes and their impact on the human psyche, and he incorporated them into his exploration of the emotional dynamics within the realm of art and cultural expression. This understanding of bodily gestures as expressive manifestations of emotions would allow for developing a sense of empathy and an appreciation for the shared experiential aspects of human nature.

Within this intricate framework, the concept of «Energetische Ausdruckswertbildung»¹⁷ played a significant role. Warburg employed it not as a metaphor but as a representation of the vital force in nature. Indeed, Warburg draws upon a poetic notion of energy that was current in the 1800s during the Romantic era, conceptualised specifically by Novalis and E.T.A. Hoffmann, who derived their ideas from Johann Wilhelm Ritter¹⁸. They described energy as a dynamic force that could be reversed or transformed (*umschlagen* in German). Warburg's understanding of energy was also influenced by the scientific advancements of his time, particularly the theories put forth by Wilhelm Oswald. Oswald's notable work, *Der energetische Imperativ*¹⁹ (1912), positioned energy as the primary agent within chemical processes. Additionally, Warburg extensively studied the ideas about energetic processes put forth by Wilhelm Wundt²⁰. Wundt sought to measure sensory reactions (*Sinnesreaktionen*) to establish physiological foundations for understanding mental processes and their physiological underpinnings (*physiologische Grundlagen*).

Starting from these several premises, Warburg developed his concept of energy in strict relationships to motion. The exploration of motion in Warburg's work reveals its significance as a dynamic and expressive element that shapes both the creation of art and its perception.

Motion is also intrinsic to Warburg's definition of the *Pathosformeln*. This concept notably refers to dynamic images that embody condensed somatic gestures of emotional experiences, an idea to which I will return. Motion and action emerge from within the body as it interacts with the external world, giving rise to a complex system of subsequent

17 Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Aufzeichnungen*, in Id., *Werke*, cit., pp. 640-646: 643.

18 Grazia Pulvirenti, *Poetologia della conoscenza. Intorno ad alcuni esperimenti narrativi di Heinrich von Kleist*, in *Kunst und Wissenschaft. Miscellanea in onore di Aldo Venturini*, hrsg. v. Luca Renzi – Andrea Benedetti, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 349-367.

19 Wilhelm Oswald, *Der energetische Imperativ*, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, Leipzig 1912.

20 Wilhelm Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*, Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann, Leipzig 1874.

actions. The unity of the brain and body was a central aspect of Warburg's inquiry into memory, psychic energies, emotions, and the symbolic forms that conveyed and transmitted them. The introduction to *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* is widely recognised as a text where Warburg defines his central object of investigation: the comprehension of the «Darstellung des bewegten Lebens»²¹. He refers to a range of expressive representations that capture the essence of movement, including the ecstatic dance of maenads, Botticelli's rising Venus, the woman golf player, and the dynamic poses depicted in the *Laocoön group*. Elements utilised by artists to depict motion encompass various features such as facial expressions, specific body movements like running or dancing legs, oscillating arms, gestures, and additional components known as «bewegtes Beiwerk», including hair, veils, or garments affected by the wind. All of these elements fall under the category of «körperliche Ausdrucksbewegungen». In Warburg's thought, bodily expressions through gestures and motion are intricately intertwined with the expression of intentions and emotions. Philipp Ekardt refers to these expressions as «Affekt und Kinesis»²².

Even without contextual motivation, the energetic quality conveyed through motion is believed to arise within the image. This phenomenon of the image's expressive agency, expounded upon in Warburg's dissertation, is defined by his concept of «dynamisierende Zusatzformen» and is further explored through his examinations of the nymph and the figure of the striding maiden, both of which are characterised by flowing hair and fluttering garments:

Die Antike war für die Etrusker-Florentiner ein seltsam leidenschaftlich bewegtes, halb vergessenes Erinnerungsbild eigenen Lebens, das plötzlich lebensvoll und unheimlich farbig sich einstellte, wenn die Schwere des Tages die Sehnsucht nach jener Sphäre wachrief, wo die Ideen Platos, losgelöst von irdischer Körperlichkeit, im ewigen Reigen tanzen dürfen²³.

As early as in his doctoral dissertation, Aby Warburg undertook a meticulous examination of Botticelli's artistic *oeuvre*, wherein he discerned particular forms that he identified as distinct pictorial devices employed by Botticelli to convey a sense of vitality and motion within the depicted figures. Commenting on Alberti's observations regarding

21 Warburg, *Mnemosyne Einleitung*, cit., p. 630.

22 Philipp Ekardt, *Bewegungsimpressionen nach der Natur – Warburg mit Vignoli*, in *Aby Warburg und die Natur. Epistemik, Ästhetik, Kulturtheorie*, cit., pp. 83-90: 83.

23 Aby Warburg, *Florentinische Wirklichkeit und antikisierender Idealismus*, in *Id., Werke*, cit., pp. 211-233: 225.

the dynamic effects of wind on hair and garments, Warburg perceives this phenomenon as bestowing an essence of «organisches Leben» upon the other elements of the composition. In his own words, he asserted die «Behandlung des bewegten Beiwerkes» as «Kriterium des Einflusses der Antike»²⁴. He added to his dissertation, *Vier Thesen*, that he intended to be a theoretical guide to his argumentation. On the fourth he commented as follows: «Die Energie der poetischen Stimmung ist f[ür] uns deshalb so stark fühlbar, weil die Energie des realen Zusammenhanges (den wir historisch so ungern bemerken) eben in Energie der idealisierenden und rätselhaft verhüllenden Abkehrbewegung zu uns spricht»²⁵.

Art as a means to confront and counteract phobic emotions holds great significance in Warburg's theories and is a recurring theme throughout the corpus of fragments, diagrams and sketches collected under the title *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*²⁶, posthumously published in 2015. This corpus²⁷, spanning nearly two decades from 1888 to 1905 and consisting of 435 index cards arranged in chronological order, serves as an intellectual diary that documents Warburg's evolving thoughts and reflections on the fundamental concepts of his

24 Aby Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis «Geburt der Venus» und «Frühling» (1893)*. *Vier Thesen (1893-1896)*, in Id., *Werke*, cit., pp. 39-123: 58.

25 *Ivi*, pp. 108-109. For the above-mentioned added comment, see p. 123.

26 Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 4, hrsg. v. Ulrich Pfisterer – Hans Christian Hönes, in collaboration with the Warburg Institute, Akademie Verlag, Berlin-Boston 2015, pp. 1-271. I shall refer to this edition as FA with page number. An earlier edition of this corpus was published in Italy, complete with translations: Aby Warburg, *Frammenti sull'espressione*, a cura di Susanne Müller, Edizioni della Normale, Pisa 2011.

The scholarship on the *Ausdruckskunde* is still limited. See Matthew Vollgraff, *The Archaeology of Expression: Aby Warburg's Ausdruckskunde*, in *Aby Warburg und die Natur. Epistemik, Ästhetik, Kulturtheorie*, cit., pp. 121-148; Elena Tavani, *Aby Warburg: Simbolica mimetica e psicotecnica della distrazione*, in *Energia e rappresentazione. Warburg, Panofsky, Wind*, a cura di Alice Barale – Fabrizio Desideri – Silvia Ferretti, Mimesis, Milano 2016, pp. 85-104; Kerstin Thomas, *Momentane Mimik und potentielle Energetik. Aby Warburgs Ausdruckskunde zwischen Ästhetik und Naturwissenschaft*, in *Gefühl und Genauigkeit. Empirische Ästhetik um 1900*, hrsg. v. Jutta Müller-Tamm – Henning Schmidgen – Tobias Wilke, Brill, Munich 2014, pp. 137-167; Cornelia Zumbusch, *Wissenschaft in Bildern. Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2004; Andrea Pinotti, *Memorie del neutro. Morfologia dell'immagine in Aby Warburg*, Mimesis, Milano 2001.

27 The volume collects the following parts: *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*; *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde* (first titled *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie*); *Bemerkungen zu Heinrich Wölfflin, Renaissance und Barock, 1888*; *Vier Thesen*; *Symbolismus als Umfangsbestimmung (1896-1901)*.

theories. According to Matthew Vollgraff²⁸, the fragments represent a 'psychohistorical' theory of expression. The collection sheds light on Warburg's conception of expression as a crucial intermediary manifestation between the individual artist's body and the broader cultural body of societies. The fragments of the *Ausdruckskunde* reveal a determined endeavour to explore the significance and efficacy of dynamic expressions and their underlying mechanisms, specifically emotions as determined by motion and actions. By examining the role of dynamic expressions, Warburg aimed to illuminate their impact on the viewer or audience. He sought to understand how these expressions evoke emotional responses, convey meaning, and contribute to the overall aesthetic experience. Expressive, gestural, and kinetic motifs are crucial in Warburg's notion mentioned above of *Pathosformeln*. Claudia Wedepohl's comprehensive study (2012) provides valuable insights into the origins of this concept, tracing it back to Warburg's 1905 lecture titled *Dürer und die italienische Antike*. In this lecture, Warburg referred to archetypal and primal dynamic images characterised by their inherent sense of motion, which evokes an emotional contagion in the viewers. Wedepohl's analysis emphasises the understanding of *Pathosformeln* as a set of anthropological constants found in prototypical figures and motifs. In her words, *Pathosformeln* are «[...] primordial images [...] which have been formed by primordial experiences of man: an *a priori* that cannot be concretely imitated but is functioning as a kind of idea or transcendental paradigm [...] in the afterimage and makes this afterimage a variant of a non-existent primordial image»²⁹.

In other words, *Pathosformeln* can be seen as a range of prototypes into which the human mind condenses and compresses fundamental anthropological complexes of emotions. These prototypes are not predefined or fixed in a specific image; instead, they serve as an emotional matrix that inspires the creation of diverse images by different artists across different epochs. The dynamism of *Pathosformeln* lies in their inexhaustible power to generate a burgeoning amount of new and variegated images, mirroring the ever-evolving nature of human expression and experience.

Therefore, *Pathosformeln* can be regarded as a matrix of prototypical and primordial images that condense the profound emotional expe-

28 Vollgraff, *The Archaeology of Expression: Aby Warburg's Ausdruckskunde*, cit.

29 Claudia Wedepohl, *Von der Pathosformel zum Gebärdensprachatlas. Dürers Tod des Orpheus und Warburgs Arbeit an einer ausdrucks-theoretisch begründeten Kulturgeschichte*, in *Die Entfesselte Antike. Aby Warburg und die Geburt der Pathosformel*, hrsg. v. Marcus Andrew Hurtig – Thomas Ketelsen, Walter König, Köln 2012, pp. 33-50: 37.

periences of human beings, encompassing even the most intense traces of *Ergriffenheit*. In Warburg's view, they were shared by Renaissance paintings, works from the period of classical art, and in the serpent ritual of the Hopi, all of these being forms of expression that relied upon the depiction of human gestures to convey the memory of primitive and prehistoric experiences and emotions. From this perspective, *Pathosformeln* represent the organic material from which art, culture, and even civilisations emerge.

This dynamic energy is manifested when one acquires a sense of distance between the subject and the object. Indeed, as mentioned above, art is a means to contrast phobic emotions. In fragment 305 dated March 23, 1896, Warburg states, «Der 'künstlerische' Act ist ein auf das Object bezüglicher 'Entfernungsversuch' mit nachfolgender abtastender umschreibender Befühlung»³⁰. Here, Warburg emphasises that art-making involves an artist intentionally creating distance between himself or herself and the object. Subsequently, the artist engages in a sensory exploration, seeking to grasp the object's essence and communicate that essence through artistic expression. Another observation of Warburg's confirms the accuracy of this idea: «Das Kunstwerk ist ein Erzeugnis des wiederholten Versuches abseits des Subjectes, [das] zwischen sich und das Objekt eine Entfernung zu legen versucht»³¹.

In Warburg's view, specifically posited in his notes for his lecture at Kreuzlingen, a piece of writing that constitutes a sort of working draft or outline for his *Einleitung* to the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, visual artful images arise from the phobic reaction of a primitive human to natural threatening events. We could say, if using a Bayesian view of the brain³², that a terrifying sensation of something which is still unknown is transformed into a perception of something new through the inference of inherited concepts, thus helping the human to stabilise perceptions and giving rise to a mental image; this image binds the frightening unknown with the known. In this way, the human achieves a sort of defense: In Warburg's words: «Durch das ersetzende Bild wird der eindruckende Reiz objektiviert und als Objekt der Abwehr geschaffen»³³.

30 FA 150.

31 Aby Warburg, *Symbolismus als Umfangsbestimmung* (1896-1901), in Id., *Werke*, cit., pp. 616-628: 616.

32 Semir Zeki – Oliver Y. Chen, *The Bayesian-Laplacian Brain*, in «European Journal of Neuroscience», 51 (2020), 6, pp. 1141-1462.

33 Notiz 1, quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography. With a Memoir on the History of the Library by Fritz Saxl*, Phaidon, Oxford 1986, pp. 577-578.

3. MOTION, EMBODIED SIMULATION, AND AGENCY

From what precedes, we can deduce that *Pathosformeln* possess the power to move and stir the emotions of the perceiver. The intrinsic energy embedded within *Pathosformeln* solicits related emotions, evoking varying degrees of *Ergriffenheit*. This process occurs due to the *Pathosformeln*'s profound impact on the embodied experience of the image-beholder, wherein the energetic qualities of motions and actions inscribed within the *Pathosformeln* resonate and reverberate within the viewer's own bodily engagement.

Bodily motion, encompassing both involuntary movement and voluntary action, plays a significant role in the interaction between perception, emotion, experience, and cognition. These processes are shaped by the intricate dynamics between the embodied mind and the surrounding environment. Perception, emotion, experience, and cognition are actively generated through the neural adaptations that take place within the nervous system during experiences³⁴. By starting with the experience of the body in its environment, the human brain constructs a cognitive map of reality based on the body's physical capacity to act and navigate through space. This process gives rise to a neural repertoire of actions that shapes and articulates our relationship with the surrounding world. In other words, we interpret and make sense of the world according to our physiological potentialities and abilities to interact with it, and we tend to form hierarchical representations of actions and motor goals. Our shared motor system, which is organised according to goal-directed motor acts, allows us to organise these hierarchies³⁵.

A key aspect of this phenomenon (defined by Vittorio Gallese as 'motor cognition') involves 'motor simulation', whereby specific cognitive processes, such as understanding the motor intentions of others and predicting their actions, are made possible through the functional organisation of the motor system. This system is structured around motor actions that serve specific purposes. David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese have explained it in the following way:

34 Cf. Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2007; Alva Noë, *Vision without Representation*, in *Perception, Action, and Consciousness: Sensorimotor Dynamics and Two Visual Systems*, ed. by Nivedita Gangopadhyay – Michael Madary – Finn Spicer, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2010, pp. 245-256.

35 Vittorio Gallese et al., *Motor Cognition and Its Role in the Phylogeny and Ontogeny of Action Understanding*, in «Developmental Psychology», 45 (2009), 1, pp. 103-113; Vittorio Gallese – Valentina Cuccio, *The Paradigmatic Body. Embodied Simulation, Intersubjectivity and the Bodily Self*, in *Open MIND*, ed. by Thomas Metzinger – Jennifer Windt, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 1-23.

Our capacity to pre-rationally make sense of the actions, emotions and sensations of others depends on embodied simulation, a functional mechanism through which the actions, emotions or sensations we see activate our own internal representation of the body states that are associated with these social stimuli, as if we were engaged in a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation. Activation of the same brain region during first- and third-person experience of actions, emotions, and sensations suggests that, as well as explicit cognitive evaluation or social stimuli, there is probably a phylogenetically older mechanism that enables direct experiential understanding of objects and the inner world of others³⁶.

This physical ability implies that engaging in, observing, or even reading a linguistic depiction of an action portrayed within an artwork triggers a motor simulation process that activates similar regions within the cortical motor system. In fact, there exists a strong anatomical and functional connection between action and semantics, involving the integration of sensorimotor processes associated with the subject's actions towards an object and the meaning it conveys. In Gallese's words: «To observe objects is therefore equivalent to automatically evoking the most suitable motor program required to interact with them. Looking at objects means to unconsciously 'simulate' a potential action»³⁷.

According to Gallese, this process of 'embodied simulation' is the core mechanism that activates empathy and, in general, affective responses. Within the most recent studies about affects³⁸, these last are not considered purely psychological, but physiological processes, as explained in scientific terms by Antonio Damasio. He has developed the well-established hypothesis of 'somatic markers', i.e. that there is a link between changes at the bodily level (such as the heartbeat, temperature, and muscle tone, which reach the brain via the somato-sensory system), and emotions (which are information transferred by such somatic markers³⁹).

The capacity of a work of art to evoke emotional responses in the viewer, regardless of the historical context, constitutes what may be defined as its 'agency'. In other words, artworks manifest their inherent dynamics in order to elicit affective responses, thereby exerting

36 Freedberg – Gallese, *Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience*, cit., p. 198.

37 Vittorio Gallese, *The Inner Sense of Action: Agency and Motor Representations*, in «Journal of Consciousness Studies», 7 (2000), pp. 23-40: 31.

38 Cf. van Alphen, *The Affective Operations of Art and Literature*, cit.

39 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Penguin, New York-London 1994; Id., *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*, Pantheon Books, New York-Toronto 2010.

their agency. Agency is what enables artworks to transcend temporal constraints in a cyclical and anachronistic vision of the recurrence of biological rhythms: «Anachronic [...] time, [...] refers to the power inherent in objects to exceed the parameters of their chronological circumstances [...] It is the time of 'enchantment', most often partnered with the aesthetic reception of works of art – their capacity to entrance viewers beyond their own temporal horizon»⁴⁰.

Images activate affect through the transmission of energetic intensity within the domain of human sensations. The study of Warburg's theories concerning the active and affective potential of artworks due to their link with a biologically inherited language of gesture and emotion does not deny the active role played by the image-beholder in both creatively and imaginatively responding to the image and in cognitively making sense out of it, as Mathew Rampley⁴¹ has pointed out. Emotions play a significant role in the cognitive processes that take place during the viewer's aesthetic response. The aesthetic response is *per se* an active engaging cognitive process, and one that shows adaptive processes of self-regulation: «Cognition, in its most general form, is sense-making – the adaptive regulation of states and interactions by an agent with respect to the consequences for the agent's own viability»⁴². Image-beholders are dynamic and participatory entities because they embody both biological and cultural agency. They continuously interact actively with their ecological surroundings, including other humans, nonhuman animals, societies, cultural artefacts, and discourses. Through these interactions, image-beholders construct meanings based on their embodied experiences as living individuals. Their unique subjective perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories influence their engagement with the world and their capacity to interpret and attribute significance to visual stimuli. As active agents, image-beholders contribute to the ongoing meaning-making process by shaping their understanding and responses to the images they encounter.

At the same time, cultural artefacts are shaped by our embodied minds and, in turn, have a profound impact on our bodies, cognition, emotions, and imagination. Artefacts give rise to aesthetic ways of

40 Keith Moxey, *What Time Is It in the History of Art?*, in *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, ed. by Dan Karlholm – Keith Moxey, Routledge, London 2018, pp. 26-42: 27.

41 Rampley, *Agency, Affect and Intention in Art History: Some Observations*, cit., pp. 16-17.

42 Ezequiel Di Paolo – Evan Thompson, *The Enactive Approach*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Embodied Cognition*, ed. by Lawrence Shapiro – Shannon Spaulding, Taylor & Francis Group, New York 2014, pp. 68-78: 76.

creating meaning and ethical values. They provide experiential models for how the self perceives and interprets memories and emotions and the various dynamics involved in constructing and transmitting meaning, all of which are also influenced by historical, cultural, and geographical factors.

4. CONCLUSION

By concluding this paper and summarising the findings, it becomes evident that in Warburg's unitary and 'monistic' vision, artistic expressions are integral components within a unified system characterised by a dynamic and ever-changing metabolism. In this system, physical, cognitive, and cultural processes intertwine and mutually influence one another, forming a complex network that shapes the creation and transmission of artistic images. Reflecting on the dynamic interplay between the physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of human experience enabled Warburg to interpret the inner dynamics of artistic expression and its reception against a broader cultural landscape. By considering the intricate connections between the body, mind, and emotions, Warburg gained deep insights into the complex interplay between artists, their creations, and the individuals who engage with the art. His discoveries enrich our understanding of the multifaceted nature of artistic expression and its impact on cultural evolution. In the *Einleitung* to the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, he outlined the foundation for the intricate interplay he envisioned:

In der Region der orgiastischen Massenergriffenheit ist das Prägwerk zu suchen, das dem Gedächtnis die Ausdrucksformen des maximalen inneren Ergriffenseins, soweit es sich gebärdensprachlich ausdrücken läßt, in solcher Intensität einhämmert, daß diese Engramme leidenschaftlicher Erfahrung als gedächtnisbewahrtes Erbgut überleben und vorbildlich den Umriß bestimmen, den die Künstlerhand schafft, sobald Höchstwerte der Gebärdensprache durch Künstlerhand im Tageslicht der Gestaltung hervortreten wollen⁴³.

The human capacity for being intensively moved, *ergriffen*, is a fundamental human aesthetic experience that gives rise to the emergence and transmission of art as a biological expression of human bodies and societies' cultural endeavours.

⁴³ Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Einleitung*, cit., p. 631.