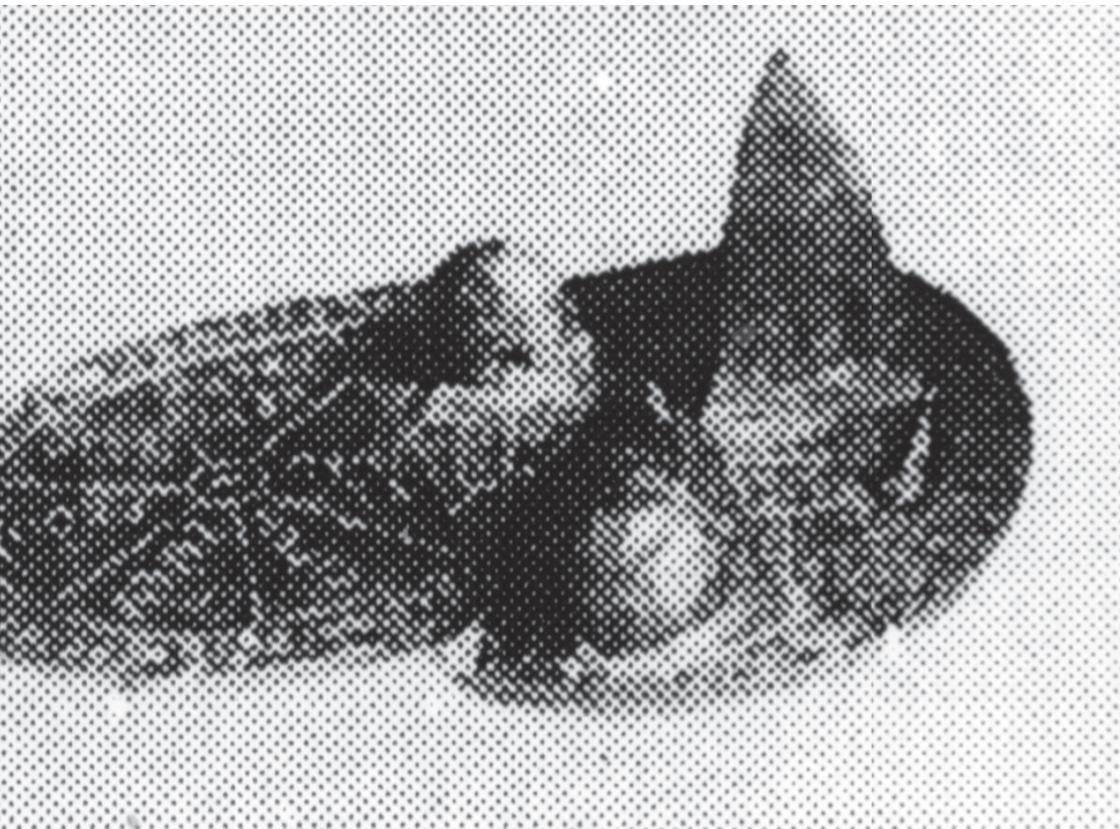


**Ekphrasis and a Dynamic Mysticism in Art:
Reflections on Henri Bergson's Philosophy
and Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas***

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This essay has previously been published in:

Ascott/Bast/Fiel/Jahrmann/Schnell (eds.) (2009) *New Realities: Being Syncretic*. Wien & New York: Springer, pp. 42-45.

Transtechnology Research • Reader 2011

Plymouth University

Portland Square, Drake Circus

Plymouth PL4 8AA

United Kingdom

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ISBN 978-0-9538332-2-1

Ekphrasis and a Dynamic Mysticism in Art: Reflections on Henri Bergson's Philosophy and Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*

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Consistent with his anthropological inquiries, the art-historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) suggested that art should be understood as an impulse and activity rather than a collection of icons, by which he criticised the categorisation, periodisation and focus on style in the contemporary art-historical practice. In his view, an artwork constituted not a closed totality but a juxtaposition of elements in tension — an intellectual, cultural and philosophical *dispositif*. Through his syncretic approach at the fringes of art-history, cultural anthropology, sciences of religion, and psycho-historical sciences he revitalised the art history discourse in his proposed recovery of “spirit”, which he defined as an enduring momentum throughout the various cultural expressions and styles of the particular periods. In this sense Warburg saw himself as a “... seismograph of the soul, to be placed along the dividing lines between different cultural atmospheres and systems” (Warburg, 1927). With his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Warburg created an image gallery between 1924 and his death in 1929, an archive of his personal image-memory, a syncretic mental montage, which in its notional ekphrasis formed an instrumental part of his dynamic library in the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* in Hamburg. Warburg conceived these image panels as an “iconology of intervals” (*Ikonologie des Zwischenraumes*), as he expressed it in his 1929 journal, which rather than involving any objects considered the contrasts, analogies, tensions, and anachronisms among them. He favoured displacements and ruptures over the transmission of forms in his uncovering of the underlying Dionysian principle and dynamism in art, which he sought in the intermediary states in between the displacements of the figures in the dynamics between the still images beyond the visible appearance of form and content.

The *Mnemosyne Atlas* requires a certain detachment through the spaces in between the symbolic order and their material forms and involves an active intervention in the processes of conceiving, understanding and interpreting — a dimension that Warburg called “*Denkraum der Besonnenheit*” or “*Andachtsraum*”² (Warburg, 1992, p. 267). He addressed the experience of art specifically in his notes on “Spectator and Movement” (revised into “Movement and Spectator”) in 1890:

To attribute motion to a figure that is not moving, it is necessary to reawaken in oneself a series of experienced images following one from the other – not a single image: a loss of calm contemplation (Michaud, 2004, p. 83).

As Philippe-Alain Michaud (2004) emphasises, Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* recalls a cinematic arrangement that requires the processes of projection, recognition and recollection of memory-images in the viewer's mind, demanding a ‘mental montage’ that stimulates associative trajectories of meaning. The very experience of the *Mnemosyne*'s method and heuristic in an interrelation and resemblance with recursive mental operations such as associations, memories, repetitions, and

focalisations, is reminiscent of Henri Bergson's contemporary treatment of the cognitive processes of recollection during the activity of perception. Consistent with Bergson's understanding of movement as the transference of an experienced state rather than a moving object (1991, p. 202), Warburg transferred movement to an inner principle and saw it no longer merely as an external force. His method can in this sense be understood as constituting a transition from a representation of movement, from an embodiment of life in motion to the psychology of the interior — a meta-psychology for a historical study of the human psyche.

Warburg conceived the *Mnemosyne* as being directed less to a knowledge of the past than towards its reproduction in a retrieval of affective dynamograms through the archaic symbolism in images, which he called *Pathosformeln* (pathos formula) (Böhme, 1997, p. 30). His inclination to consider the function of memory, through an adaptation and reinterpretation of Semon's and Hering's theories, as being "charged with preserving and transmitting energy temporally", can be illuminated through a Bergsonian understanding of memory as an extension from the past into the present, considered as a forward moving momentum. Bergson treated recollection as an actualisation of memory-images that can be triggered or amplified by the artwork, and most importantly evoked through a tension of consciousness towards the requirements of the present moment of perception (and the desires and imagination of the beholder)³. Although Bergson defined the *image* as something in between the object and its representation, always fuller than the perceptual and conscious capacities of cognition, Warburg's mnemonic method is in that sense close to Bergson's philosophy, in how far it acknowledges the accessibility of memories beyond a direct indexical relationship with the present perception. In this sense Warburg's reference to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a "ghoststory for adults" (*Geistergeschichte für ganz Erwachsene*) can less metaphorically also be read through Bergson's conception of the "virtual", in that its heuristic constitutes a revival of past memories in the present perception of the beholder. It stimulates the release of an original energy that not only endures but in a Bergsonian sense continuously pushes evolution forward in multiple pathways in its creative actualisations — hence it leaves traces in cultural forms, in Warburg's view most explicitly in art and religion. Rather than a passive surfacing of the past, this survival of the past in the present, according to Pinotti, has to be understood in Nietzsche's sense of a "becoming"⁴, since these formulas can only be conceived within the very processes of transformation in the perception of the viewer (2006, pp. 10-11). By taking the perspective of forces embedded in experience, in resonance with Bergson's own conception of "becoming", the following discussion shifts a contemplation of the *Mnemosyne* from a textual analysis — or as Matthew Rampley called it, "an exercise in art historiographical archaeology" (1997, p. 14) — to a focus on the cognitive processes of the beholder.

Like Warburg, Bergson suggested that the very processes of creative activity — which constitute the ordinary processes of our consciousness — were expressed most tangibly through the aesthetic faculty as a constituent part of intuition in the production (and in the perception) of the artwork. Intuition for Bergson was conceived as a conscious effort in order to establish a profound interconnection between the subject and the object, or in other words between spirit and matter; he suggested:

That an effort of this kind is not impossible, is proved by the existence in man of an aesthetic faculty along with normal perception. Our eye perceives the features of the living being, merely as assembled, not as mutually organized. The intention of life, the simple movement that runs through the lines, that binds them together and gives them significance, escapes it. This intention is just what the artist tries to regain, in placing himself back within the object by a kind of sympathy, in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts up between him and his model (1998, pp. 176-177).

Bergson maintained in his reflections on the experience of aesthetic pleasure that the conscious subjective processes bear a tendency of "... a possible movement towards ourselves, of a virtual and even nascent sympathy" (2001, p. 13). Similarly, for Warburg the production and perception of art was constituted by a creative (e)motion, guided by empathy in its grasping of the qualitative intensity of life or spirit, the affective quality of the *Pathosformeln*. His work was influenced by Robert Vischer's (1873) treatment of empathetic symbolism and imagination and by his suggestion that "... through the artistic imagination the mimetic assimilation of the subject to the object occurs in its most intense form" (Rampley, 1997). Warburg addressed the subject-object relationship in view of a development from a magical-associative to a logical-dissociative rhythmic progression in arts practice and commented in a sketchy note from his field-trip to the Hopi and Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona in 1895-1896:

The subject is lost in the object in an intermediary state between manipulating and carrying, loss and affirmation. The human being is there kinetically but is completely subsumed by an inorganic extension of his ego. The most perfect form of the loss of the subject in the object is manifest in sacrifice, which incorporates some parts into the object. Mimetic and imitative transformation: example; the mask dance cult. The scientific worldview presupposes that an actual transformation of a human into a plant, animal, or mineral is, by the laws of nature, impossible. The magical worldview, however, is based on the belief in the fluid borders between human, animal, plant, and mineral, such that man can influence becoming by means of a voluntary connection with the organically foreign being (Michaud, 2004, p. 325).

Warburg's dynamic symbolism was constituted by his notion of the dynamogram, which he defined as a morphology or an aesthetic of forces, which, as Didi-Huberman (2002, pp. 176ff) emphasises, became particularly evident in his later meta-psychological approach that led him to inscribe an understanding of the image within an oscillating polarity between an interiorised and exteriorised vibration. Warburg's comment to some extent is reminiscent of Bergson's understanding of perception that takes place in the object to be perceived by way of an extended conscious process of a "reciprocal interpenetration" (1998, p. 178). What in the citation above may seem reminiscent with Sir James Frazer's (1998 [1890]) notion of "contact-magic" or "sympathetic magic", can through a Bergsonian filter be translated into a grounded understanding of cognitive processes in constant negotiation between perception and recollection. Bergson suggested that reality can only be grasped through an oscillation between the virtual (past, memory) and the actual (present, action) constituting a vibrating object of inquiry on an experiential level of virtual contact, which in the perceptual processes of the *Mnemosyne* can be interpreted as the conscious entanglement with the survival of the past in the present.

Bergson (1998 [1907]) conceived of the constant bifurcating oscillation between internal and external, spirit and matter, subject and object, past and present, as constituting tendencies of a creative evolutionary process. More dramatically, Warburg seems to open an abyss between the unsettling, even potentially dangerous, power of the affective pulse from the past and the symbolic detachment of its cultural expression as intermediary spaces for reflection. However, he conceived of the mnemonic techniques as a threshold that did not indicate a linear development from the Dionysian to the Apollonian principle, but rather a rhythmic pulsation back and forth in a continuous retrieval of the archaic affective powers (Böhme, 1997, pp. 31-32). Warburg regarded the inference of these affect-energies in their ecstatic ruptures in the present as pathological — a schizophrenia of an intrinsic human condition, as he called it, expressed in the pathos formulas, which Giorgio Agamben located in the cultural divide between the sciences and the arts, between poetry and philosophy, between “the word that sings” and “the word that remembers” (1999, p. 100). Bergson instead distinguished two tendencies of the mind, intellect and intuition (formerly instinct), which in their schematic opposition in his philosophy appear less dramatically since in his view they constructively constitute and complement each other throughout the evolutionary process. He proposed a solution for the commonly assumed dichotomy through his conception of intuition, which supplements and ultimately contains the intellect in that it enables us to grasp what intelligence fails to give us but which it stimulates us to seek in the first place (1998, p. 177ff, 200). In a reading of Warburg’s approach from a Bergsonian perspective it could be said that the *Mnemosyne* opens up the formalism in art in order to get in touch with the underlying vital principles and creative energies, which are accessible through the timeless pathos formulas that carry the dynamism of its principle.

In one of his last publications Bergson (1935) spoke of the creative effort of life, when it makes itself manifest in its very duration (*durée*), as a revelation of mysticism. This mysticism has nothing to do with mystery or mystification or any form of static religion. It rather addresses a form of a heightened mental, seismographic activity that passes through the precarious stage of ecstasy (sometimes involving clairvoyant abilities and other psychic phenomena), to finally manifest in action whereby intuition unifies the creative force with activity. Bergson defined mysticism by its relation to the vital impetus on a purely experiential level and maintained that pure mysticism was a very rare phenomenon not least through the sheer difficulty of communicating this intimate union. He proposed:

In our eyes, the ultimate end of mysticism is the establishment of a contact, consequently of a partial coincidence, with the creative effort which life itself manifests (1935, p. 220).

The great spiritual movements in the cultural history in the sense of intellectual innovation and intervention, which Bergson sketched from the ancient Greeks onwards, ruptured the crust of material stability where the creative force unavoidably came to its halt; a sedimentation that in his terms manifests in “invisible seismic forces” (1935, p. 219). In this context Bergson addressed the fact that we live “in a condition of unstable equilibrium” which renders it difficult to define the normal state of health of mind and body (1935, p. 228).⁵ He suggested:

When the darkest depths of the soul are stirred, what rises to the surface and attains consciousness takes on there, if it be intense enough, the form of an image or an emotion. The image is often pure hallucination, just as the emotion may be meaningless agitation. But they both may express the fact that the disturbance is a systematic readjustment with a view to equilibrium on a higher level: the image then becomes symbolic of what is about to happen, and the emotion is a concentration of the soul awaiting transformation. The latter is the case of mysticism, but it may partake in the other; what is only abnormal may be accompanied by what is distinctly morbid; we cannot upset the regular relation of the conscious to the unconscious without running a risk. So we must not be surprised if nervous disturbances and mysticism sometimes go together... (Bergson, 1935, pp. 229-230).

It could tentatively be suggested that Warburg's attempts point toward a mystic experience in a Bergsonian sense, at least in their potential of an ecstatic encounter with a spiritual current, in search for contact with the manifestation of a vital dynamism beyond the material form of the image.⁶ With the *Mnemosyne Atlas* Warburg left an archaeological trace of an extraordinary mind that straddled spirit and matter in a profound investigation into the history of the human psyche as it is expressed in art. The crucial intervention of Warburg was to create a platform for accessing these invisible, persistent forces through the affective power that lies in the perceptual tensions within the beholder's mind, which can be understood as an epistemology of aesthetics. An investigation into a dimension beyond or rather between the images, in a dialogue with Bergson's philosophy, might furthermore provide a conceptual framework for applied strategies to liberate contemporary media arts practice from certain materialist constraints and tendencies. In this way it may stimulate a fuller grasp what could be called a "spiritual dimension", or in more current terms: to establish a contact between the creator and the beholder in an oscillating exchange between the virtual and the actual, by keeping the very creative force in a continuous vibration.

Notes

¹ This paper first given at the Universität für Angewandte Kunst is dedicated to my grandmother Prof. Lotte Hahn (1906-2002) who studied there ("*am Stubenring*" as she would still say) in Josef Hoffmann's Masterclass for Architecture as an interior designer between 1927 and 1931, around the same time as Aby Warburg presented his *Mnemosyne Atlas* and Henri Bergson completed his last major works.

² This can be translated into an intermediary (mental/virtual) space for reflection.

³ I have discussed the subject of memory in relation to the *Mnemosyne* and Bergson's philosophy more fully in *Time, Memory, Consciousness and the Cinema Experience: Revisiting Ideas on Matter and Spirit*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2009.

⁴ Pinotti (2006) emphasises the influence of Nietzsche in Warburg's thinking.

⁵ From hindsight in a wider historical perspective, Warburg has recently been understood as a visionary with an extraordinary sensitivity toward contemporary developments, particular with regard to his phobias

in relation to the following atrocities during the Second World War.

⁶This experience is most profound in the perception of the *Mnemosyne* as life-size installation, as for example in Gerhard Fischer's reconstruction from 1993, held in the Studienabteilung of the Albertina in Vienna.

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