

*Der Artikel unternimmt – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der bislang unveröffentlichten Aufzeichnungen zur Ausdruckskunde – eine systematisierende Rekonstruktion von Warburgs fragmentarischer Theorie der Nachahmung. Warburg denkt Mimesis als psychologischen Vorgang, der Perzeptions- und Emotionsprozesse mit affektiven Feedbacks verknüpft, die durch Symbolisierungsleistungen erzeugt werden. Dabei erhält Warburg wesentliche Impulse aus der Einfühlungsästhetik und insbesondere aus Robert Vischers Schrift Das optische Formgefühl. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt den von Warburg beschriebenen Effekten mimetischer Vorgänge: dem Gefühl, das aus dem Ähnlichkeitsabgleich zwischen der Gestalt des wahrnehmenden und des wahrgenommenen Körpers entsteht; der anthropomorphisierend-projektiven Funktion der Ursachensetzung im Wahrgenommenen sowie ihrer psychisch-distanzierenden Funktion. Außerdem skizziert der Text die zeitlichen und strukturellen Variationen, die Warburgs Mimesis-Verständnis im Vergleich zur Nachahmungslehre der klassischen Ästhetik (Winckelmann) anbietet.*

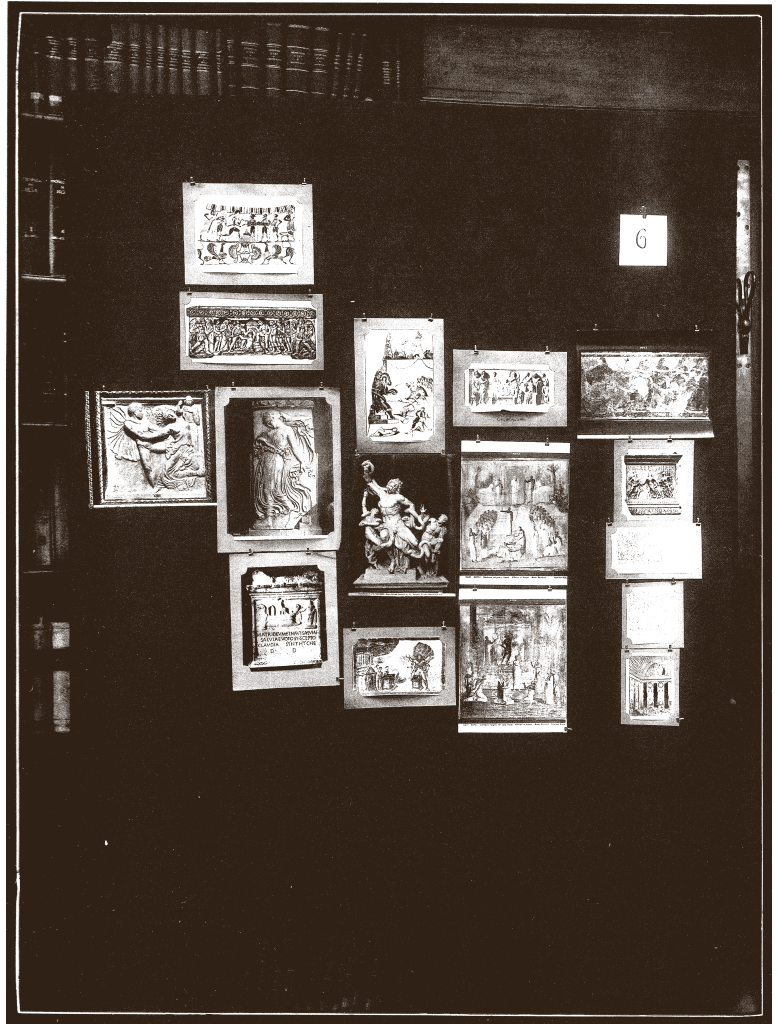
1 / The aim and scope of this article do not allow for an exhaustive treatment of the entirety of Warburg's writings, nor will it be possible to do full justice to Warburg-scholarship here. However, since the present text forms part of a more encompassing

*Philipp Ekardt, Sensing—Feeling—Imitating.  
Psycho-Mimeses in Aby Warburg*

The concept of mimesis (*Nachahmung*) recurs throughout almost the entire temporal and thematic span of Aby Warburg's work. This is not to say that Warburg ever developed a systematic account of mimesis as such, and not even of the role which mimesis specifically plays in the production, reception, and general cultural functioning of images—themes central to his *Kultur- und Bildwissenschaft*, as well as to his art historical studies. The absence of such a systematic analysis, or even a concise and reliable definition, is hardly surprising, since Warburg was anything but a builder of systematically organized theoretical or scientific edifices. Yet, the insistence with which the topic returns in his writings demonstrates at least a systematic interest on Warburg's part and allows his readers to formulate a few organizing observations.<sup>1</sup> The present contribution offers a cross-section of a number of Warburg's works, reaching from his early *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde* and a few of his art historical studies, to comparatively late texts such as the lecture on the snake ritual of the Hopi tribes and the introduction to the *Mnemosyne-Atlas*, a thematically organized inventory of transhistorically recurring figural patterns—bodies caught in movement and gesticulation—in the visual arts from Greek antiquity to Warburg's present.<sup>1</sup> Throughout all of these texts, a fragmentary, but not entirely inconsistent notion of mimesis emerges which covers subject-to-object-imitations as well as object-to-object-imitations. In the first case mimesis functions as the link that binds the perceiving subject to the object of perception or—more specifically—as a perceptual function which posits anthropomorphizing similarity between subject and object. In the second case mimesis creates a link of resemblance between a human figure,

investigation into the relation of affectivity, the function of art and images, and formal instability in Warburg's thought, the author hopes to give a more complete account in the not too distant future. Thanks to Claudia Wedepohl for directions through Warburg's notes at the archive of the Warburg Institute; to Christopher Wood, whose seminars at Yale University provided a first forum for some of these ideas; and to Jess Atwood Gibson for her editorial support.

1 Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, panel 6, London, Warburg Institute



<sup>2</sup> Hopi schoolboy, *Lightning with serpent head*, 1896, drawing, London, Warburg Institute



a wave of hair, textile drapery and their respective pictorial representations, but also between the snake and a strike of lightning, as depicted in symbolic Hopi drawings.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these two aspects, Warburg also theorizes more complex mimetic processes that feed back from object-imitations into the subject-object-relation and alter, or differentiate it. He holds that the artistic return of later periods to the figural patterns of Greek antiquity, but also the imitation of animal figures in ritual practices, to quote but two examples, exert an influence on how the mimetically triggered processes in the perceiving subject take shape at the level of emotions.

To promise the reader of the present text a coherent and all-encompassing presentation of Warburg's ideas on imitation would amount to an act of deception. However, two reliable aspects can be identified in advance. First, as briefly laid out above, Warburg's concept of mimesis spans more than a

2 / All translations are by the author; the ideal was not to achieve stylistic elegance, but rather to find a rendering that approximates the original as closely as possible.

3 / Aby Warburg: *Mnemosyne*. Einleitung. Letzte Fassung. 1927. WIA 111.103.1, A5. Abbreviations follow the call number system and pagination employed by the Warburg Institute Archive (WIA) in London.

single level, and he operates at least implicitly with the notion of a modulation between various types of mimetic processes. Therefore it seems more appropriate to speak of Warburg's mimeses, rather than assuming a unified, coherent, single Warburgian (notion of) mimesis. Second, these Warburgian mimeses seem to relate throughout to questions of the sensorium, feelings, and emotions. Warburg's theory of imitation develops from the discourse of *Einfühlungsästhetik* and it receives, more specifically, key impulses from Robert Vischer's treatise *Das optische Formgefühl*. The fact that Warburg was familiar with this text is well established, but the extent to which Vischer's theory of empathy corresponds with Warburg's conceptualization of mimetic processes is still surprising. One of the present article's intentions therefore consists in tracing and highlighting these correspondences between Vischer's and Warburg's works. On a more general level, the article argues that Warburg's theory of imitation not only models various psychological and sensorial processes as mimetic. It also argues that, reciprocally, Warburg conceives of mimesis in psychological terms. Hence the notion of "psycho-mimeses" which appears in the title of this article, and of which the following pages seek to give an account.

### 1 Perception as Imitation—*Einfühlung*

Mimesis, understood as *techné* that enables the production of images, appears most prominently in Warburg's writing with regard to the representation of movement. In one of his last texts, the introduction to the *Mnemosyne-Atlas*, Warburg writes of a "Darstellung des bewegten Lebens" (*representation of moving life*).<sup>2</sup> This formulation could serve as an accurate description of his main object of scholarly interest, namely the pictorially-mimetic rendering of movement in figures.<sup>3</sup> In

4 / Aby Warburg: Sandro Botticelli's 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling', in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I.1, eds. Horst Bredekamp and Michael Diers, Berlin 1998, p. 5.

5 / WIA III.103.1, C 3.

Warburg's work these figures appear, for example, in the form of antique depictions of raging maenads;<sup>3</sup> as 'a female servant in Ghirlandaio's painting who rushes into the scene of St. John the Baptist's birth' and as whom Warburg identified a young woman swiftly entering a chamber in Ghirlandaio's *Birth of St. John the Baptist*;<sup>4</sup> and even in the motif of the hurrying woman that Warburg discovered on the postal stamps of his own time. In nearly all cases the movement of these figures is evident, and is represented either through the rendering of motor agitation (running legs, swinging arms), through gestural activity, or through animated supplements, i. e. ornamental indicators (*bewegtes Beiwerk*), such as the drapery of a dress or the curls of a figure's hair caught and carried by the wind.<sup>4</sup> By using the term "körperliche Ausdrucksbewegungen" (*expressive movements of the body*) Warburg also implies that his concept of movement is not merely confined to a bodily level; rather, it encompasses both physical and psychological movement.<sup>5</sup> The agitated body *and* the agitated psyche are, thus, the doubly moved object of Warburgian mimesis.

A note from the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*—a collection of aphoristic theoretical speculations initially titled *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie* which Warburg began to formulate around the time of his dissertation—makes evident that Warburg's association of mimesis and movement is not limited to the realm of accurate and convincing pictorial representations of physically and psychically agitated figures. Rather, he complements his description of the pictorial rendering of movement with a psychological speculation about the perceptual processing of such artistic representations:

"Mit der Einführung sich vorwärtsbewegender Figuren wird der Zuschauer gezwungen: die vergleichende Betrachtung mit der anthropomorphistischen zu



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3 Maenad, Neo-Attic relief,  
Naples, Museo Nazionale



6 / Bruchstücke 7. xi. 190, as quoted in Philippe-Alain Michaud: *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement*, Paris 1998, pp. 79–80.

7 / A reference to Vischer's concept of "Einfühlung", as formulated in *Über das optische Formgefühl*, appears in the preface of Warburg's dissertation. Cf. Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I.1, p. 5. On Warburg's recourse to Robert Vischer cf. already Lorenz Dittmann: *Stil – Symbol – Struktur. Studien zu Kategorien der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich 1967, p. 97.

vertauschen. Es heißt nicht mehr: 'Was bedeutet dieser Ausdruck?' sondern 'Wo will das hin?' Das Auge vollführt den Figuren gegenüber Nachbewegungen, um die Illusion zu erhalten, als ob der Gegenstand sich bewegte." (*The introduction of forwardly moving figures forces the viewer: to exchange comparative viewing for anthropomorphic viewing. The question is no longer: 'What does this expression mean?'; but rather 'Where is this directed to?' The eye performs after-movements in relation to the figures, to maintain the illusion as if the object were moving.*)<sup>6</sup>

The key term here is *Nachbewegungen* —literally "after-movements", or, more elegantly put, "succeeding movements". If the prefix *Nach-* already suggests a general affinity to processes of *Nachahmung* (literally after- or post-mimicry), this suspected proximity is corroborated through a comparison with

one of the theoretical source-texts for Warburg's dissertation, namely Robert Vischer's 1872 treatise *Das optische Formgefühl*.

In the fragment quoted above Warburg assumes that the impression of movement is generated through a kinetic perceptual (re)performance which occurs while viewing the pictorial representation of a moving figure, and he also conceives of these inner-organic movements that occur in the perceiving subject as mimetic in relation to the perceived stimulus. This follows the doctrines of *Einfühlungsästhetik* which had one of its leading figures in Vischer.<sup>7</sup> In *Das optische Formgefühl* Vischer speaks of

4 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of St. John the Baptist* (detail), 1486–1490, fresco, Florence, S. Maria Novella, Tornabuoni Chapel



8 / Robert Vischer: “Über das optische Formgefühl. Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik” (1872), in: idem, *Drei Schriften zum ästhetischen Formproblem*, Halle a.d. Saale 1927, pp. 1–44, here p. 34.

9 / Ibid., p. 34. On the impression of movement as the result of an imaginary ‘moving along’ of forms cf. *ibid.*, p. 17.

10 / Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 9–10 for Vischer’s remarks on “Nerven- und Muskelempfindungen” (sensations of nerves and muscles). On “Vitalempfindungen” (feelings of vitality), p. 14.

11 / Ibid., p. 34.

12 / Ibid.

13 / Ibid., p. 9.

14 / Ibid., p. 11.

“Imitationen der Perzeption” (*imitations of perception*), thereby spelling out explicitly the axiom that perception is a mimetic activity.<sup>8</sup> The mediating mechanism that Vischer posits for such a mimetic interpretation of the perceptual process reveals a further proximity to Warburg’s prime object of investigation: “Die dem Reize entsprechenden Perzeptionsbewegungen sind im Grunde schon Imitationen, oder besser Vermittlungen zwischen Subjekt und Objekt.” (*The perceptual movements that correspond to the stimulus are basically already imitations, or, rather, mediations between subject and object.*)<sup>9</sup> It is, in other words, the sensation generated through the kinetic activity of perception, which Vischer assumes to originate in nerves and muscles, that replicates the shape and facture of the object of perception and provides for perceptual mediation.<sup>10</sup> Vischer could not be more explicit about the mimetic nature that he assigns to the process of perception: “Es ist hier wesentlich, daß die Formen des Objektes immer mit andern Formen und Mitteln des Subjekts wiederholt werden.” (*It is essential here that the forms of the object are always repeated through the different forms and means of the subject.*)<sup>11</sup> For this perceptual repetition Vischer uses the term “Nachahmung” (imitation).<sup>12</sup> If perceiving is imitating, the relation between the body of the perceiving subject and the body of the object of perception is, accordingly, defined as one of resemblance: “Als Maßstab für den Charakter der Empfindung glaube ich, kann man einfach den Begriff der Ähnlichkeit aufstellen.” (*I believe that one can simply posit the concept of resemblance / similarity as a measure for the character of a sensation.*)<sup>13</sup> More specifically: “Ähnlichkeit oder Unähnlichkeit des Objektes zunächst mit dem Bau des Auges, weiterhin aber mit dem Bau des ganzen Körpers” (*similarity or dissimilarity of the object first with the structure of the eye, but further with the structure of the entire body*).<sup>14</sup> On the basis of this axiom



15 / Ibid., p. 17. Mallgrave and Ikonomou trace this model of similarity back to Kant and Wundt. Cf. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou: "Introduction", in: idem (eds.), *Empathy, Form, and Space. Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, Santa Monica 1994, pp. 1–85, here pp. 22–23.

16 / Vischer, *Formgefühl*, p. 13.

17 / Ibid., p. 34. Cf. *ibid.* for the list of symbolic practices.

of (perceptually posited) similarity the respective character of every (perceptually provoked) sensation is defined as the result of matching of the structure or shape of the perceived object against the perceiving subject: "Die Art nun, wie sich die Erscheinung aufbaut, wird zu einer Analogie meines eigenen Aufbaus; ich hülle mich in die Grenzen derselben wie in ein Kleid." (*The manner in which the appearance/phenomenon is built/structured becomes an analogy with my own build/structure; I wrap myself in its limits like in a dress.*)<sup>15</sup> Perception and the feelings it engenders consist in pitting the outlines of the body against the outlines of the object: "Die Anschauung der äußeren Grenzen einer Form kann sich in dunkler Weise mit der Empfindung der eigenen Körpergrenzen kombinieren." (*The beholding of a form's outer limits can combine itself in an obscure manner with the sensation of the borders of one's own body.*)<sup>16</sup>

## II *The Nachleben of a Stimulus*

Vischer's text not only offers an analysis of the mimetic structure of perceptual activity, it also develops two perspectives on the psychological functioning of (artistic) forms. One of these perspectives connects indirectly to Warburgian theory, the other directly, but both ultimately return to questions of mimesis. Vischer defines the basic forms of art not as the imitation of independent third phenomena that exist prior to the perceptual link between subject and object; rather, he describes all sorts of symbolic practices such as music, language, facial miming, physiognomy and gesture as "imitations of forms of expression" (*Nachbilden von Eindrucksformen*).<sup>17</sup> If perceiving is imitating, the first object of imitation is, then, the imitative activity engendered in the perceiving subject. Art does not mime nature or culture as extra-perceptual entities. Rather, art mimes the effects of perception itself, understood as affects:

18 / Ibid., p. 35.

19 / Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman: *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris 2002, pp. 51–60.

“Die Tätigkeit des Auges hat einen Prozeß im ganzen Nervensystem und in der ganzen Seele, im ganzen Menschen erregt. Dieses Nachleben darzustellen ist der versteckte Selbstzweck jedes naiven Bildens und die Meinung, es handle sich um das Naturvorbild, täuscht sich selbst.” (*The activity of the eye has stirred some process in the entire nervous system, the entire soul, the entire human being. The secret reason for any type of naïve form-giving consists in representing this afterlife; the opinion that the object of this representation would be the original in nature is a self-deception.*)<sup>18</sup>

This passage is particularly interesting because it elucidates to what extent the aesthetics of empathy from which Warburg's thought took one of its major impulses shares basic assumptions with artistic practices of its period, such as Impressionist painting with its rendering of sensations and sensory values on canvases which were, in turn, conceived of as occasions for perceiving, rather than for recognizing the depicted object as an extra-perceptual entity. Moreover, the passage from Vischer is interesting because it adds *Über das optische Formgefühl* to the list of possible sources for the Warburgian concept of *Nachleben*. In Warburg, this term describes the specific temporal model of a persistence of figural patterns that originate in Greek antiquity, primarily the already mentioned agitated figures, but after their initial existence has ceased. It thus refers to a peculiar mode of being that begins with an image-entity's *de facto* disappearance, to continue in perpetual post-mortem returns, a mode of revenant after-life. As such it famously entered the formulation of a *Nachleben der Antike* which served as one of the mission-statements for the research program of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg. Georges Didi-Huberman has restored to the term *Nachleben* its philological and theoretical significance by pointing out that Warburg possibly derived the concept from Edward Tylor's evolutionary anthropology where it figures, for example, in Tylor's magnum opus *Primitive Culture*.<sup>19</sup> Didi-Huberman's key insight further consists

20 / Cf. Ibid., p. 16.

21 / Cf. Ibid., pp. 11, 17.

22 / Cf. ibid., p. 21.

23 / For an attempt at describing this 'bipolar' Winckelmannian constitution cf. Philipp Ekardt: "Maß und Umriss. Bilder als Regulative bei Winckelmann und Warburg", in: Ingeborg Reichle / Steffen Siegel (eds.), *Maßlose Bilder. Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression*, Munich 2009, pp. 247–261, here pp. 255–259.

24 / Didi-Huberman, *L'image vivante*, p. 53.

25 / Cf. ibid. Another way to describe the temporality of form and image in Warburg would consist in understanding their historical re-occurrences as the effect of a perpetual slipping from a state of latency into temporal and historical actuality and back again. Cf. Ekardt, *Maß und Umriss*, p. 250.

in recognizing in Warburg's concept of *Nachleben* a genuine contribution to theorizing the time/image-nexus. To profile Warburg's model of a temporality of art and image he contrasts it with the early idealist model of Winckelmann's aesthetics and Vasari's Renaissance-model.<sup>20</sup> In Didi-Huberman's reading of Vasari, the Renaissance-model posits a full return—literally a rebirth—of the lost forms of antiquity after the dark Middle-Ages, whereas the retrospective gaze of Winckelmann's idealist art history focuses on an essentially lost object.<sup>21</sup> Winckelmannian art history, one could add, implements the logics of structurally unfulfillable desire by constructing Greek classical form as an ideal that is as such unattainable, while nonetheless projecting the imperative to strive precisely for this unreachable goal.<sup>22</sup> Winckelmann thus situates the image in an ideal zone by assigning it to a quasi-mythical time while maintaining that this ideal at one point manifested itself in the actuality of historical time, thereby throwing the modern idealist aesthetician / historian into a characteristic bipolar crisis of alternating elation and depression.<sup>23</sup> Didi-Huberman holds that Warburg, by contrast, works with a model of a ghostly survival of antique forms, of a continued temporal existence of image-entities beyond their historical lifespan. In this manner, Warburgian *Nachleben* echoes Tylor's concept of temporal per-sistence in which surviving forms mark a „différentiel des deux statuts temporels contradictoires“, a differential between progress and regress.<sup>24</sup> Phenomena such as superstitions exist beyond their 'proper' historical point of time—they are 'standing over' (*superstitio*) from another period, and as such they form phantom-like entities which cause temporal 'impurities', insistent anachronisms.<sup>25</sup> As such they cannot possibly become the object of a retrieving motion like the one performed by Winckelmann because they persist already, albeit in a ghostly manner.

26 / Johann Joachim Winckelmann: Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst, 2., vermehrte Auflage 1756, in: idem, *Kunsttheoretische Schriften*, Vol. I, Baden-Baden / Straßburg 1962, pp. 1–44, here p. 3.

In the present context this juxtaposition of Winckelmann and Warburg attains renewed significance, because the temporality of form and image which Winckelmann develops—and which Warburg rejects—must be understood more specifically as a problem of *Nachahmung*, i.e. as a problem of mimesis. The imperative to reproduce the irreproducible Greek ideal is not just a question of mere repetition, but is, as attested by the title of one of Winckelmann's major works, an issue that arises in the context of *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*. Condensed into the dictum that “the only way for us to become great, or even, if possible inimitable, is the imitation of the art of the ancients” (*der einzige Weg für uns groß, ja, wenn es möglich ist unnachahmlich zu werden, ist die Nachahmung der Kunst der Alten*) Winckelmann's work paradoxically demands imitation in order to achieve inimitability.<sup>26</sup>

One unexpected significant aspect to emerge from tracing Warburg's work back to Vischer's *Das optische Formgefühl* thus consists in opening the possibility of thinking *Nachleben* not just as a specific temporal model, but as one element in a recalibrated theory of mimesis. If Vischer defined the processes initiated in the human organism and psyche by a sensory impact as the *Nachleben* of that stimulus, which in turn becomes the object of artistic mimesis, it is perhaps permitted to speculate whether, strangely, Warburg's construction of a *Nachleben der Antike* amounts to a concept of post-antique mimeses that seek to imitate and represent the quasi-somatic and psychological processes (impressions of movement) set off by the ongoing impact of antique forms which would now function no longer as originals or ideal forms, but as stimuli. When derived from Robert Vischer, mimesis is merely concerned with imitating the after-life, the survival of a stimulus, never the impacting phenomenon itself; never ancient art as such, only its repercussions. Such an

27 / The quotation is from Warburg's 1929 notebook on Grisaille and appears in Ernst H. Gombrich: *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, London 1970, p. 247. Cf. also Ulrich Port: "'Katharsis des Leidens'. Aby Warburgs 'Pathosformeln' und ihre konzeptionellen Hintergründe in Rhetorik, Poetik und Tragödien-theorie", in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 73 / Sonderheft (1999), pp. 5–42, here p. 34. Cf. also Warburg's definition of art—as well as rationalizing abstraction—in the *Bruchstücke* as reactions to "eingedrückte Bilder" (images as im-pres-sions / im-pressed images). As quoted in: Thomas Schindler: *Zwischen Empfinden und Denken. Aspekte zur Kulturpsychologie von Aby Warburg*, Münster 2000, p. 24. On the distancing function of grisaille cf. also *ibid.*, p. 177.

28 / Vischer, *Optisches Formgefühl*, pp. 20–21.

analogy may at first seem farfetched, but it perhaps appears slightly more plausible if one takes into account that on at least one occasion, namely in his notebooks on grisaille-technique, Warburg treated the cultural reception of antique forms exactly as a contingent impact that—as a quasi-stimulus—called for compensation through distancing imitation: "Die scheinplastische antike Vortragsweise (Grisaille als Stich bzw. Zeichnung) hält das Schattenreich der vorgeprägten Revenants in metaphorischer Distanz." (*The faux-plastic antique mode of presentation (grisaille as etching or drawing) keeps the shadow realm of pre-coined revenants at a metaphorical distance.*)<sup>27</sup>

### III Causation through Projection

The other trajectory that leads from Vischer's theory of mimetic empathy to Warburg's work is more obvious and easier to accommodate. There is a passage in *Das optische Formgefühl* in which Vischer moves beyond the discussion of the sensory-somatic and psychological processes of empathy and briefly opens a perspective onto possible cultural functions for this drive "to impose and to incorporate our own form into an objective form" (*unsere eigene Form einer objektiven Form zu unterscheiden [sic] und einzuverleiben*).<sup>28</sup> Vischer reverses the mimetic vector here. If in earlier cases he described a resemblance between the body of the object of perception and the body of the perceiving subject that engendered an imitative empathy in the latter, he now posits a reciprocal principle of projection whereby the human form functions as the perceptual pattern by which the object is promoted to a new level of interpretability, because it now appears as a quasi-spiritual being. "Diese [...] Einfühlung [...] werden wir [...] als die natürliche Mutter der religiösen Personifikation erkennen." (*We will recognize in this type of empathy the mother of*



29 / Ibid., p. 22.

30 / Ibid., p. 27.—Cf. also Warburg's comment on the switch from a comparative to an anthropomorphizing type of viewing. Cf. footnote 6.

31 / All quotations Vischer, *Optisches Formgefühl*, p. 29.

32 / Cf. Dorothea McEwan: "Zur Entstehung des Vortrages über das Schlangenritual. Motiv und Motivation / Heilung durch Erinnerung", in: Cora Bender / Thomas Hensel / Erhard Schüttelpelz (eds.), *Schlangenritual. Der Transfer der Wissensform vom Tsu'ti'kive der Hopi bis zu Aby Warburgs Kreuzlinger Vortrag*, Berlin 2007, pp. 267–282, here p. 268.

33 / Aby Warburg: *Schlangenritual. Ein Reisebericht*. Mit einem Nachwort von Ulrich Raulff, Berlin 1988, p. 24.

34 / Ibid., p. 54.

35 / Ibid., p. 37.

*religious personification*.)<sup>29</sup> In this manner, the basic perceptual mechanism of empathy becomes the ground of a "symbolizing activity" (*symbolisierende Tätigkeit*) by which natural phenomena acquire the status of quasi-personal, but still non-human entities, i.e. godlike or spiritual beings, because they are 'read' as similar to the form of the human body whose perception shapes them in his or her own image.<sup>30</sup> This formation of myth accounts for a type of causal thinking (*natürlich kausalen Denkens*) that Vischer assigns to prehistorical man who does not know the real, mechanical grounds (*real-mechanische Ursachen*).<sup>31</sup>

Any reader familiar with Warburg's work will by now have recognized the patent proximities to the model of mythical thought and magical action through which the art historian deciphered the ritual practices of the Hopi tribes which he had witnessed on his journey to New Mexico in 1895. He developed these ideas in a lecture that he gave in 1923 to an audience of fellow patients, medical staff—among them his doctor Ludwig Binswanger—and friends at the Sanatorium *Bellevue* in Kreuzlingen where Warburg was in treatment after suffering a breakdown. The lecture was later published as *Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika*, although its original title was *Über die Logik in der Magie des primitiven Menschen*.<sup>32</sup> In Warburg's rendering, the Hopi mask dances become "social food service through magic practices" (*soziale Lebensmittelfürsorge durch magische Praktiken*).<sup>33</sup> The precariously scarce rain in a desert land is secured, according to Warburg, by way of "danced causality" (*getanzte Kausalität*):<sup>34</sup> "Es handelt sich hier darum, die Verknüpfung zwischen Naturkraft und Mensch, d.h. das Symbolon, das Verbindende zu schaffen, etwa die magische Handlung, die real verknüpft." (*This concerns generating the link between natural force and man, i.e. the symbolon, the connector, for example the magic action that produces a real link.*)<sup>35</sup> The key con-

36 / Ibid., p. 27.

37 / Ibid. The third quote is from WIA III. 54 a, Tagebuch März 1923, 5887. As cited in Dorothea McEwan, Entstehung des Vortrags, pp. 273–274.

38 / Warburg's comparison omits the central role which difference and dissimilarity play in Darwin's thinking. The concept of the differentiation of the species relies precisely on the premise of a gradually dissolving resemblance, a growing rift of unlikeness between the species. For a reading of Darwin's works that emphasizes the aspect of difference with regard to race and sexual dimorphism, cf. Philipp Sarasin: *Darwin und Foucault. Genealogie und Geschichte im Zeitalter der Biologie*, Frankfurt a. M. 2009, pp. 280–296.

39 / Warburg, Schlangenritual, p. 18.

duit for this real symbolic handling, i.e. for the magical establishment of a causality that works from man towards the environment, is the Hopi's relation to the animal: "wo wir [i.e. Western man] das Gesetz hineinverlagern in den unbeeinflussbaren Entwicklungsvorgang durch die Natur selbst versuchen die Heiden diesen durch willkürliche Verknüpfung mit der Tierwelt zu erklären." (*where we [i.e. Western man] locate the law in the developmental process of nature itself which lies beyond our influence, the pagans seek to explain these processes through a deliberate connection with the animal realm.*)<sup>36</sup> This relationship between (hu)man and animal is situated on two levels, both of which are ultimately governed by similarity: at the primary level it occurs through a mimetic transformation of the ritual-dancers into the totem-animal from which the tribes descended in their mythical world-explanation. Warburg recognizes in this "will to animal-metamorphosis" (*Wille [...] zur Tier-Metamorphose*) some sort of "Darwinism by way of mythical elective affinity" (*Darwinismus durch mythische Wahlverwandschaft*), within which processes of "mimic transformation" (*mimische Verwandlung*) occupy a central role.<sup>37</sup> According to Warburg, the establishment of a resemblance between man and animal performs a function similar to the work of the evolutionist who refused to consider humans as a species categorically separated from the animal realm, instead positing their common descentance. Just like Darwin, the Hopi connect man and animal through establishing a link of similarity which runs from descendant—man—to (mythical) predecessor, the totem animal.<sup>38</sup> In addition to this more general empowerment through a mimetic return *ad fontes* stands a second magical relation with the animal, specifically with the snake which is magico-causally connected with the flash through its lightning-like shape.<sup>39</sup> The snake qualifies as "provoker of lightning or maker of water" (*Blitzerreger oder Wassererzeuger*)

40 / Ibid., p. 42. Matthew Rampley points out that Warburg could have derived this concept of magical mimesis from Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* or Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, both of which he was familiar with. Tylor held that 'primitive magic' was grounded in an "association of thought" which involved "a similar connexion in reality". Edward Tylor: *Primitive Culture*, Vol. 1, London 1871, p. 116. The quotation and Rampley's argument are from Matthew Rampley: "Mimesis and Allegory. On Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin", in: Richard Woodfield (ed.), *Art History as Cultural History. Warburg's Projects*, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 121–149, here p. 122. Rampley also points to the assumption of a "Law of Similarity" within which Frazer grounded magical thought and practice in *The Golden Bough*. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 123.

41 / Cf. Aby Warburg: "Flandrische Kunst und florentinische Frührenaissance", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I.1, eds. Horst Bredekamp and Michael Diers, Berlin 1998, p. 204.

through its resemblance with the phenomenon to be conjured, namely with lightning that comes with the thunderstorms which bring rain to the dry country.<sup>40</sup> Warburg did not consider these magical laws of similarity confined to non-European so called 'primitive' civilizations. At the sourcepoint of the European rebirth of classical antiquity, in early Renaissance Florence, Warburg discovers the pagan custom of commissioning wax votives for chapels. These image-replications of the donors were characterized by a strikingly individualized depictive style. That is, they were guided by the ideal of achieving a high degree of likeness which Warburg, in contrast to the usual understanding of the Renaissance as the moment of inception of the modern, supposedly enlightened subject, did not explain by positing an artistic will to representing a person in his or her incommensurable individuality. Instead, he saw the taste of the Florentine patrons which demanded evident resemblance as the outcome of a will to maximize the image's magical efficacy through "this mysteriously effectual identity between the donor and his image" (*jene geheimnisvoll wirkende Identität zwischen Stifter und Ebenbild*). According to Warburg, realism, understood as the most accurate rendering of appearances is, then, a mere effect of a very specified and optimized case of magic which in turn proves to be the point of comparison between Renaissance Florence and the Hopi country.<sup>41</sup>

Already in the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*, written shortly after his journey into the Hopi territories, Warburg had attempted to find a theoretical formulation for this magical or mythological link of similarity by which man displays "causal comportment" (*causales Verhalten*) towards the animal, and at that point he had already identified "Nachahmung" as the key practice, slightly later to be varied as "Nachahmung durch Einkehr in das

42 / WIA, III.43.2, pp.299, 306.—The date of the first entry is 27.1.1896; the second dates from 13.III.1896.

43 / WIA, III.43.2, p.299.—Already Lorenz Dittmann grouped Warburg's thinking with a number of art theories for which "der Leib als Gegenüber und der Leib als Medium" (the body as opposite and the body as medium) form a constitutive constellation. Cf. Lorenz Dittmann: "Kunstwissenschaft und Phänomenologie des Leibes", in: *Aachener Kunstblätter* 44 (1973), pp.287–316, here p.287. On the recurrence of concepts of incorporation and embodied projection (*Verleibung*) in Warburg's work cf. also Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, pp.390–405.

44 / WIA III.43.2, p.304.

Objekt" (*mimesis through communion with / entering into the object*).<sup>42</sup> Warburg employs the term "Verleibung" (*becoming-body*) to account for this process—a choice of words that highlights again the close connection between his concept of mimesis and empathy-aesthetics which must be regarded as an early example of embodiment theory, at least in Vischer's description of the mimetic constellation as an encounter between subject and object of perception as bodily entities.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV *Spatialising Mimesis: Distance and Emotion*

Two other closely related entries from the *Bruchstücke* finally point the way to a third conceptualization of mimesis in Warburg's work. This third concept complements the notions of imitation as an elementary component of the psycho-sensorial mechanism of empathy, and of imitation as the basis for magical practices of causation and influence. Both entries date from the same day, March 15, 1896, and Warburg seems to set up a basic dialectic of empathic mimesis here, or at least he appears to attempt an understanding of empathic mimesis as a bivalent dynamics. The first entry reads: "Künstlerische Nachahmung der Name für das Schwerkraftverhältnis in der Ebene zwischen S und O ohne reale Annäherung (Reduction der Entfernung auf Null). S gewinnt einen festen Standpunkt gegenüber O." (*Artistic imitation the name for the gravitational relation on the plane between S and O without real approximation (reduction of distance to zero). S gains a firm standpoint vis à vis O.*)<sup>44</sup> By parallel with the doctrines of empathy-aesthetics, Warburg's note can perhaps be deciphered as accounting for the relation between the perceiving subject (S) and the object of perception (O) as an imaginary, or psychological gravitational pull—which is plausible if one considers the involuntary nature of empathy as a psycho-perceptual

45 / On a related formulation in Warburg's notes on "Symbolismus als Umfangsbestimmung" which mentions the "Function der Schwerkraft im geistigen Haushalt" cf. Cornelia Zumbusch: *Wissenschaft in Bildern. Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk*, Berlin 2004, pp. 236–238.

46 / WIA III. 43.2, p. 305.

47 / Warburg, Schlangenritual, p. 59.

automatism that 'drives' the subject('s feeling) towards the object.<sup>45</sup> Although no real approximation occurs, the distance between subject and object gravitates toward zero. Against this tendency Warburg posits the establishment of a firm standpoint of the subject regarding the object; yet, the exact function of artistic imitation or mimesis in this process of cancelling distance on the one hand, and establishing a safe positional relation on the other is at first unclear. So far it merely lends its name to the interaction of these counter-directed forces. Some clarity can perhaps be gained if one moves on to the succeeding entry in the *Bruchstücke*: "Der 'künstlerische' Act ist ein auf das Object bezüglichlicher 'Entfernungsversuch'" (*The 'artistic' act is a 'distancing-attempt' in relation to the object*).<sup>46</sup> If one reads the reference to an 'artistic act' in the second fragment as a rephrasing, or a modification of 'artistic imitation' which figures in the first fragment, one can deduce that Warburg ascribed the aforementioned distancing-function to (artistic) mimesis. To the readers of Warburg's work this will not come as a surprise, although it might be considered astonishing that at such an early stage of his work Warburg was already operating with the concept of a *distancing* mimesis. Especially as this concept can be found in a nearly identical version in Warburg's lecture on the snake ritual (that is, almost two decades later) where it gained a much higher degree of prominence. The Kreuzlingen-manuscript describes the effect of mimetic ritual practices as the creation of "space as space of worship or thinking-space" (*Raum als Andachtsraum oder Denkraum*) through mythical or symbolic thought.<sup>47</sup> Warburg employs a related vocabulary in the introduction to his *Mnemosyne-Atlas*. In the depictions of bodies caught in movement and gesticulation, the so-called "Pathosformeln", Warburg recognized maximum values of expressive gesticulation (*Höchstwerte der Gebärdensprache*) which were to contain and regulate the passionately shattered



48 / WIA III.103.1, B4x; WIA III.103.1, C3.

49 / WIA III.103.1, A1. Cf. also the note in the *Bruchstücke*: “Der Erwerb des Distanzgefühls zwischen Subj. und Obj. [...] das Kriterium des Fortschritts des Menschengeschlechts.” (*The acquisition of the feeling of distance between subj. and obj. criterion for the progress of mankind.*), WIA III.43.2, p. 19.

50 / WIA III.103.1, A1.

51 / Warburg, Botticelli, p. 307. The original source is Wilhelm Dilthey: “Die drei Epochen der modernen Ästhetik und ihre heutige Aufgabe”, in: *Deutsche Rundschau* 72 (1892), p. 219. (Warburg also points to the reprint in Dilthey’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6, pp. 265–266). A version of this quote can also be found in Warburg’s file card box on aesthetics. Cf. Schindler, *Zwischen Empfinden und Denken*, p. 87.

52 / Spatialisation or distancing constitutes only a third of what might be termed a psycho-phenomenological formal triad through which Warburg describes the effect of affective regulation. Its other two constituents are “Umrissklarheit” (clarity of contour) and “Fassbarkeit” (graspability). For an initial account of “Umrissklarheit”, as well as its possible origins in Winckelmann’s aesthetics, cf. Ekardt,

personality.<sup>48</sup> Warburg termed the product of the artistic mimesis of figures moving and moved “Zwischenraum” (*intermediate space*) or “Distanzbewußtsein” (*consciousness of distance*), and he described it as “the substrate of artistic form-giving” (*das Substrat künstlerischer Gestaltung*).<sup>49</sup> In line with the general anthropological perspective of both the Mnemosyne-introduction and the Kreuzlingen lecture Warburg defines “the conscious creation of distance between oneself and the outer world” as the “foundational act of human civilization” (*Bewußtes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Außenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen*).<sup>50</sup>

The third function that Warburg assigns to mimesis is, then, best described through its spatialising character. Of all the Warburgian versions of artistic mimesis presented here, this probably comes closest to the maxim which Warburg once copied from Dilthey’s *Die drei Epochen der modernen Ästhetik und ihre heutige Aufgabe*, and which he considered a possible motto for his dissertation: “Dies Interesse ((an aller Kunstbetrachtung)) hängt nämlich an der Frage nach der Funktion der Kunst im geistigen Haushalt des Menschen(?)lebens.” (*This interest (in all contemplation of art) depends upon the question of art’s function in the mental economy of human life.*)<sup>51</sup> By consciousness of distance and thinking-space (Denkraum), rephrased more generally as spatialization, Warburg understands the effect of an affective regulation or containment that posits the perceiving or affected subject at a secure remove from the cause of its agitation, i.e. from the impacting impression.<sup>52</sup> If Warburg theorized mimesis according to the principles of *Einfühlungs-ästhetik* as a constitutive element of the empathic process and more specifically as the imitation of the afterlife of the sensory stimulus, and if he also followed Vischer in assuming mimesis as the basis for a projective anthropomorphization which enables a worldview of mythical

Maß und Umriß, pp. 259–261.

53 / Cf. W1A III.103.1, C3. Cf. also Horst Bredekamp's and Michael Diers' description of the pathos formulae as "Mittel der Angstbefreiung" (means for liberation from fear). Horst Bredekamp / Michael Diers: "Vorwort zur Studienausgabe", in: Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol I.1, p. 5\*.

54 / Konrad Hoffmann sketches a preliminary genealogy of Warburg's notion of the "Bild [...] als angstbewältigende Distanzierung" (image as a distancing that masters fear). He traces the principle of causation through Usener's studies to Vignoli and Vico, while reserving its transfer to the realm of images for Warburg's work. Konrad Hoffmann: "Angst und Methode nach Warburg. Erinnerung als Veränderung", in: Horst Bredekamp / Michael Diers / Charlotte Schoell-Glass (eds.), *Aby Warburg. Akten des internationalen Symposions Hamburg 1990*, Weinheim 1991, pp. 261–267, here pp. 264–265.

causation and magical influence, the postulation of a spatialising mimesis marks an additional level in Warburg's approach to *Nachahmung*. At stake here are emotions proper, and specifically their high arousal variants ('passions'), as well as the question of how to contain or bind them. The pictorial imitation of the agitatedly expressive, gesturing, and moving body feeds back into the perceiving subject and stabilizes his or her affectivity. More exactly: the image of the moving body counters *phobia* which Warburg singles out on a number of occasions as a specific affective tone to qualify the diagnosis of a general affective arousal.<sup>53</sup> Fear may very well occupy the position of a primary emotional response to affective impacts, against which the anthropological function of the pathos formulae in turn responds.<sup>54</sup> Only if one considers this primacy of fear does one arrive at a full account of Warburg's notion of a spatialising mimesis. Fear and its absence, finally, mark the emotional end of the psycho-mimetic spectrum on which Warburg's theory of imitation unfolds. At its other end lie the sensory movements and constellations of perception by which the subject mimes the object. Situated in-between are anthropomorphizing projection, causational and magically influential miming, the pictorial rendering of moving figures, the imitations of the afterlife of stimuli, but also the artistic return to ancient forms, all of which serve as modulating mimeses in the realm of sensing and feeling.