Pathographies of Modernity with Aby Warburg and Beyond

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An Astral Map of Warburgian Constellations

Edited by

Daniela Padularosa

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Warburg's work has been the subject of renewed scientific and academic interest, even in disciplinary fields other than art history. Although in this discipline Warburg has now become an important and undisputed name and has contributed significantly to the definition of a new method of study that does not only pertain to the strictly historical-artistic sphere, there still seems to be a lack of studies that consider Warburg's work as the nerve point and gravitational centre of an absolutely modern constellation of ideas and that might serve for a deep, multifaceted, dynamic and lively analysis of the most intrinsic aspects of European culture.

Warburg's work starts from an innovative approach to art history, not an "aestheticising" method as was typical of his time, but an iconological one: that is, he opposes formalism and the purely formal consideration of the work of art while underlining the relevance of the "power" of images, their "energy" and their capacity to move and constantly change over time. Hence, starting from the first decades of the 20th century, thanks to Warburg, the traditional *Kunstgeschichte* bearing a Winckelmannian imprint becomes a Nietzschean *Kulturwissenschaft*, to wit, a science of culture which is open and alert to the mnemonic traces of time deposited on the artwork. Already in the Sixties of the 20th century Carlo Ginzburg emphasised the double purpose of Warburg's research: to consider works of art on the one hand as a source for historical reconstruction, on the other hand as a product and symptom of history.[1]

The present volume aims therefore to emphasise the possibility of extending the issues posed by Warburg to other humanities, such as the history of literature—with particular reference to German literature and culture—and the history of the arts (theatre, cinema, photography, dance), preferring a critical analysis which is not chronological, but rather dynamic, transversal and interdisciplinary.

In the wake of the first work that Ernst H. Gombrich dedicated to Warburg,[2] Georges Didi-Huberman stressed the importance of "movement"

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[1] Carlo Ginzburg. "From Aby Warburg to E.H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method." In Id., *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore-London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 17-69.

[2] Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

in Warburg's writings, understood both as the "object" of his studies (the "Nymph"), and as a "method" of study: on the one hand Warburg's theories hark back to Goethe's morphology of the eternal metamorphosis of forms, according to which the "original" form changes constantly, nothing dies, but everything is transformed, on the other hand we can conceive "movement" as the very motion of the history of culture and the methodology of study.

Through the reading and contextualisation of Warburg's work the essays presented in this volume intend to underline the importance of the concept of the "dynamic energy" of images and apply it to the study of literature and other humanities in order to investigate the ability of an artwork to "move" and constantly change over time.[3] In an artwork—whether it is a literary or visual one—it is in fact possible to find latent iconological motifs, fragments or *Pathosformeln*, to wit, discordant and pathological elements, phantoms that "survive" in time and space revealing in their invisible traces the cultural memory sedimented in the work. Such a method, which is focused on a spatial and temporal dynamism, namely on interdisciplinary research as well as on the survival over time of iconological motifs, cannot neglect the element of otherness in one's own field of inquiry.

In other words, to go beyond one's field of research by temporally and spatially distancing oneself from it, turning to the alien and the distant, stressing the eccentric and finally returning to one's own culture, should enrich and transform that culture as well as one's own research field. It follows that the object of research is also transformed: in a historical period like the present one, characterised by the emergence of new populisms and new nationalisms, an attention to the "alien," the "outsider," or the "other," may appear as an "eccentric," but fundamental path to overcome clichés and fossilised art. As Didi-Huberman wrote, referring to the Bibliothek Warburg: "Everywhere that there existed *frontiers* between disciplines, the library sought to establish *links*."[4] Since Warburg entrusted the image with the function of "organ of social memory" and "'engram' of a culture's spiritual tensions,"[5] the present volume aims to identify all those images that can serve to reconstruct some aspects of our culture and draw a "pathography of modernity."

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[3] See "Energie und Pathos für die Kulturwissenschaften." *links. Zeitschrift für deutsche Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft*, No. XX (2020).

[4] Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms. Aby Warburg's History of Art*. Trans. Harvey L. Mendelsohn (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 21.

[5] Giorgio Agamben. "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science." In Id., *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 89-103: 95.

Although Aby Warburg's writings do not constitute a unitary and organic *corpus*, but rather appear fragmentary, sometimes as the result of *impromptu* occasions, in them can be found fundamental guidelines to his thought; Warburg's thinking faces a difficult dialectic between a tendency to systematicity and complexity and fragmentariness, and reflects the fragile personality of the author, the insidious cultural spirit of the time and the methodology of study, linked—as can be seen by his latest great project, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*—to a search for "details," which emerge in images as (hidden) bearers of a cultural memory that still has to be deciphered.

Precisely the detail, the fragment, reveals the most important and enduring aspect of the work of art; this means that in the distortion, in the almost invisible, sedimented and latent presence of pathological symptoms, i.e. in the elements of friction and the *Pathosformeln*, we can discover a truth of the image that gives meaning to an entire cultural era. These symptoms, phantasmal residues and memory traces, are meaningful both in relation to the historical time and the different cultures in which they are perpetuated. Scrap and anachronism are therefore the "negative" of reality and historical time conceived as a continuous flow; the history of culture is rather conceived as a "tensive dialectic" between forms that never disappear completely and that return, revealing the "unconscious of time," the "psychology of culture."

From this perspective, art appears as a *Zwischenraum*, an intermediate sphere between historical consciousness and cultural unconscious, in which the ancient forms that periodically reappear should not be understood simply as recurring motifs, but rather as "surviving" or latent motifs, which are not negative or positive in themselves, because they are "polarised" in their encounter with the new epoch, taking on new meanings from time to time.

In the *Zwischenraum* of art, the infinite movement and development of forms come to expression: art, understood as the centre of gravity of opposing tendencies, gives balance, protects from the abyss of non-form, and thus appears, in Warburgian thought, as an act of exorcism against the restless force that yearns to give form and expression to inner temperaments and feelings. The image, essentially polar and dialectical, thus expresses the creative energy, the restlessness, the *pathos* and *Unruhe* of what is to be formed, and at the same time the achieved serenity, the calmness, the balance of form, the reconciliation between feeling and expression.

While in his best-known studies on Renaissance painting and culture Warburg spoke of the *Nachleben der Antike,*[6] it is significant that he later turned to the culture of the so-called "primitive" populations to find there the original traces of those elements that survive over time and history. The survivals mentioned by Warburg seem to manifest themselves as phantoms, elements that are not static, permanent, clear and constant, but "intermittent," such as the movements of time, ephemeral and fleeting *flashes* that can reveal in the moment a glimpse of something eternal and recurring. This morphology of forms, based on the dialectic of transformation and survival, seems to follow the same principle of polarity of stillness and movement, plastic form and dynamism of flux, or systole and diastole, that we find in Goethe's writings. Warburg speaks in particular of the polarity of *pathos* and *ethos* within the work of art, namely of a dynamic, pathetic and sentimental element that encounters a stable and universal element. The concept of *Pathosformel* refers to the interweaving of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula. European culture itself appears to be the result of conflicting tendencies affected by "a kind of tragic schizophrenia."[7] In art, the crisis, the disease, the *pathos* of a culture show themselves as movement and change, as a need to overcome and transform a critical and uncomfortable condition. Art turns out to be a dynamic movement within its own life, an inner *dynamis,* which does not exhaust itself, but lasts in time and space.

This volume aims therefore to establish a double objective. The first one is to study Warburg from the perspective of German (and German-speaking) culture. His thought is indeed deeply connected to the culture of the early 20th century, which was dominated by the experiments of expressionism and the historical avant-gardes, by new artistic languages, such as photography and cinema, by the philosophical reflection on the performativity of the fragment and on the psychological and anthropological origins of the expressive gesture. As fascinating, original, and at times indecipherable as Warburg's figure may appear, he fits into a cultural context in which precisely alterity, originality, and thinking in fragments contribute to defining the plurality of European culture through the valorisation of eccentric and marginal thought, which develops precisely in shadowy areas and cultural interstices.

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[6] Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, introd. Kurt W. Forster. Trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999 [[1]1932]).

[7] Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," 97.

Aby Warburg's thought cannot disregard this historical context, let alone the Classic-Romantic and idealist tradition of German culture: Winckelmann and Lessing are inescapable readings for the Hamburg art historian; from the Romantics he then borrows and reworks the appreciation of the Renaissance and the contamination between the Italian Renaissance, with its Catholic imprint, and the German, Gothic-demonic one. Warburg will find a similar "demonic" element in Greco-Roman antiquity, described as a "double herm of Apollo-Dionysus;"[8] and "demonic" is a term, which immediately refers to Goethe, to whom Warburg also owes his reflections on the polarity of forms, but also on the dynamic energy underlying their constant oscillation between vitalism and nihilism, absence and infinitude. Taking up and broadening the perspective of Lessing's study on *Laocoon*, the German poet had sought to trace points of escape, opening gaps between artistic genres (word and image, poetic and visual art), connecting the different modes of expression, in order to pinpoint in a single space-time dimension the continuous and unceasing movement of forms: the work of art, ceasing to be a mere static object, already assumed with Goethe the character of a "device," a scenic-performative display, a principle that we will then find in the conception of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

The second objective of the volume is to extrapolate from Warburg's writings—mostly of a historical-artistic nature—a "method" that can be applied in different disciplines. On this subject the critics are not unanimous, precisely because of the non-organicity and non-programmaticity of his work. Warburg has in fact operated in an extremely meticulous, almost obsessive way, in collecting, cataloguing, comparing, analysing a vast repertoire of images and studies (just think of his Library and the *Mnemosyne Atlas*), but he has left very few organic and compact writings that can help us interpret his thought in a unitary and definitive concept. Precisely in this apparent non-organicity can be found, however, a new key of study and interpretation of modernity, by making use of its own means and by subsequently concentrating on the investigation of details, fragments, symptoms, *Pathosformeln*.

The fragment is not only an expression of modern thought; it also expresses the very technique of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which appears as a "cinematic" device, in which image-concepts from different eras and backgrounds come into contact with each other, giving rise to ever new "Constellations:" clusters of images, details that intertwine each other, catching the eye and showing the very expressive foundation of a culture.

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[8] Aby Warburg. "The Emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting." In Id., *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, 271-274: 273.

Considering that Agamben, resorting to an expression by Robert Klein, called Warburg's discipline a "nameless science," i.e. a science that still has to be found, it is important to ask ourselves about the infinite potentialities contained in his work and the future possibility of founding a new discipline that considers the different scientific branches in a cross-cultural and intertemporal way, for a definition of culture as an open, supra- and trans-national, dynamic and centrifugal knowledge field.

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When Didi-Huberman points out the "excessive" aspect of Warburg's method, he seems to suggest a working methodology that goes beyond a specific discipline and the knowledge acquired in one's own field and epoch. Taking inspiration from Didi-Huberman's suggestion, the present volume aims to follow the many intersections, and interferences, between art history and other disciplines, which can be found in Warburg's writings. In particular, the volume is designed as an "astral map," whereby each chapter represents a "Constellation" of polar keywords, such as *Pathosformel*, Ancient/Modern, Memory, Performativity, that hark back to a Warburgian linguistic and conceptual tradition. The "word," just as the "image," polarises within itself two meanings, or rather two opposed expressive modalities. As "binary" terms, the four keywords chosen for this volume express simultaneously the vehicle of movement and the movement itself.

The first Constellation focuses on Warburg's concept of "*Pathosformel*," its origin and its applicability in philosophy, literature and other media.

Georges Didi-Huberman's essay *Gestures, Formeln and Intensity Blocks*, opens the volume by investigating specific philosophical elements in the history of *Pathosformel* through the notions of *intentio* and *intensio* and the rich spectrum of meaning of the verb *tendere* and how they led to the modern history of aesthetic intensity, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Aby Warburg.

Claudia Cieri Via (Grisaille. *Aby Warburg's Thoughts on Leonardo da Vinci*) focuses particularly on two unpublished works by Aby Warburg kept in the WIA, such as the *Grisaille* Notebook and the *Three Lectures on Leonardo da Vinci* given by Aby Warburg in Hamburg in September 1899, which constitute Aby Warburg's only study of the artist and introduce some of the theoretical positions that give life to his formal language. In particular, Warburg's lexicon finds in Leonardo's artistic experimentation on *chiaroscuro*—through hatching, shadows, light and *sfumato*—a verification

of his expressive language, as it emerges from the sheet, spatially organised, dedicated to the Atlas of the Language of Gestures—*Gebärdensprachatlas*.

Karine Winkelvoss (*Alterations:* Pathosformeln *and Literature*) analyses the concept of alteration as the essential idea in the notion of *Pathosformel*, since only the introduction of a foreign element can lead to "Superlative der *Gebärdensprache*" (Warburg/Osthoff). Starting from the idea that Pathos itself as an event is an alteration, and that the concept of alteration is not as neutral as it might seem, the paper asks the question of how the idea of alteration works in literature, from endured to deliberate alteration, or, in other terms, from the alienation to the emancipation of the subject. Then, as she writes, the "predetermined expressive value itself which, springing from a more or less unconscious cultural memory, appears at the same time as an incongruity, as a (patho-logical) symptom, which, so to speak, *alters the general condition* […] of the work. But this alteration is not a degradation, as the most common use of the term suggests, but a gradation, an intensification."

Starting from the analysis of Warburg's posthumously published *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde* Grazia Pulvirenti's essay *Interpreting Warburg's* Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde *within a Bio-Cultural Perspective: Bodies in Motion, Emotions, and Perceptions* aims to highlight Warburg's importance also within modern scientific research. Drawing upon recent neuroscientific theories, Pulvirenti illustrates their deep relation with Warburg's energetic paradigm, especially with his reflections on the intertwined dynamics between mind and body, corporeality and motion, embodied cognitive and emotional processes. As the author writes, "Warburg's 'Ausdruckskunde' emphasises the dynamic interplay between the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of human experience, highlighting their essential role in the process of artistic expression and broader cultural development at large. Within this transdisciplinary endeavour […] Warburg seeks to construct a multifaceted framework that could allow him to shed new light on the profound secrets of human artistic creation."

The Constellation ends with Daniela Padularosa's paper *Pathosformel between Classic and Romantic: Goethe and Kleist*, which investigates Warburg's idea of *Pathosformel* as the "symptom" of a cultural disease in relation to German classic-romantic literature. Taking up Warburg's notes for the seminar *Burckhardt und Nietzsche,* Padularosa analyses the existential and intellectual "polarity" between Goethe and Kleist, in particular by comparing the many "nymph" figures we find in Goethe (Mignon, Lady Hamilton, Nausicaa) and the Bacchic figure of Kleist's Penthesilea. These figures disclose symptomatic elements expressing on the

one hand the author's malaise and indicating on the other hand an epochal change, the transition from Classicism to Romanticism, which generates a deep cultural crisis.

The second Constellation, dedicated to the binomial "Ancient/Modern," is opened by Monica Centanni (*"[…] to bury Warburg, not to praise him." The Role of Ernst Gombrich in the Tradition of the Warburgian Methodology and Thought*), who focuses on the reconstruction of Ernst Gombrich's relationship with Warburg's thought. Centanni's philological method aims to reconstruct what Gombrich makes of Warburg's materials and writings, starting from Gombrich's contribution to the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, up to his analysis of Warburg's "method" at the Lecture for the 70th anniversary of his death. Finally, special attention is given to the long overshadowed figure of Gertrud Bing, merely presented as Warburg's "assistant" by Gombrich.

Barbara Picht (*Aby Warburg and Ernst Robert Curtius*) proposes a cross-reading of Warburg's questions concerning the *Nachleben der Antike* with Ernst Robert Curtius' work *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), which is dedicated to Aby Warburg. Despite the many differences between Warburg's view of European cultural history and that of Curtius, Barbara Picht finds similarities in the research of latent pictorial motifs in Warburg, and of literary forms coined in antiquity in Curtius, since both scholars are concerned with Europe's way of communicating about itself in image and word, and both research programs, not less importantly, pursue political goals.

Signatures of the Classics. For an Abyssal Science of Origin between Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin is the title of Gabriele Guerra's paper, which, starting from the concept of signatures outlined by Giorgio Agamben, according to which all things bear a sign that reveals their invisible qualities, aims to retrace the concept of antiquity in Warburg and to compare it with Benjamin's notion of "origin" (*Ursprung*), as outlined in his book on the *Trauerspiel*. Guerra writes: "We can therefore say that in both Warburg and Benjamin there is a thought of origin in which there is an attempt to make opposing polarities and directions coexist—mania and melancholy, Dionysian and Apollonian, disconnection and connection, dispersion and collection, sovereign and martyr, power and sacrifice –, without resolving them in historically given logical-causal connections, but rather indicating their confluence in a precise place, which is simultaneously a place of thought and thought of place: a topology of origin as archaeology, in the form of a science of signatures."

The third Constellation revolves around the concept of "Memory," focusing on the one hand on the relationship between Warburg's thought

and Benjamin's political philosophy and showing on the other hand the potentiality of memory as a dialectical process between oblivion and recollection, trauma and belief.

Sigrid Weigel (*The Absence of Walter Benjamin in the K.B.W. The Constellation of a Latent but Failed Elective Affinity*) examines the reasons and consequences of Benjamin's absence in the whole network of the Kultur Bibliothek Warburg, despite the clear affinity between his interests and those of Warburg and his persistent efforts to connect with the Warburg circle. In particular, Sigrid Weigel connects "Benjamin's reflection on the origins of allegory in the history of religion, namely the 'emblematic coping' of the ancient heritage and the fear of demons with the help of allegory" with Warburg's idea of the afterlife of the pagan gods in astrology, and underlines that this failed encounter created an intellectual void.

The subsequent contribution by Massimo Palma (*Images and the Politics of Memory in Aby Warburg*) intends to investigate the connection between *Pathosformeln* and the *Nachleben* of the past as a hermeneutic tool, by which the image—and its posthumous life—is considered as a field of polar tensions, and as such a symptom of a "dialectic of the monster." "The *Pathosformel*'s process of catachretic *reconduction* is then 'to forget,' as well as 'not to forget':" considering memory as the repertoire of a struggling conflictuality, the paper finally investigates the presence of a political philosophy of the image in Warburg's theory of art history.

By analysing some important Italian films from Rossellini to Martone, Giulia Fanara (*On Bodies, Goats, Stars, and other Accessories: Italian Cinema between* Nachleben *and Belief*), argues that the Warburgian *Nachleben der Antike* shows itself not only in the return of nymphs, gestures, stars or accessories, but also in the unfolding of energetic dynamics released by the traumas of the Second World War. Fanara highlights how Warburg's concept of *Nachleben* applied to Italian cinema can be seen as the expression of a belief.

"Performativity," the volume's last Constellation, investigates properly how Warburg's thought can be applied in other humanities, with particular reference to cinema, architecture, performance studies, theatre, and gender studies.

In his paper *Mnemosyne, or Cinematography without a Camera*, Philippe-Alain Michaud starts from the idea that Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* was conceived as a cinematographic machine without a technical apparatus. Michaud's paper investigates how the art historian employs the means of reproducibility to dynamise the images and how, by doing so, he crosses the paths of Walter Benjamin and Sergej Eisenstein. As Michaud asserts, "Eisenstein's concept of montage-collision, combined with Benjamin's

dialectical image, sheds light on Warburg's tabular, non-linear approach to the inscribing plan in *Mnemosyne*, an approach that transgresses the boundaries between the order of words and that of images, and opens itself up, through the effect of polarisation, to the reactivation of the past." Warburg's history of art, which proceeds from the images without resorting to texts, is therefore conceived as a "history of ghosts," since *representation*, "understood not as *Darstellung* but as *Vorstellung*, brings the experience of the stage back into the space of knowledge."

Davide Stimilli's paper (*Aby Warburg and Louis Sullivan, Architects: On Platonism and Architecture*) offers a cross-reading of Warburg's thought in relation to the architectural work of Louis Sullivan. The author finds in Sullivan the same *anima naturaliter platonica* that we find in Warburg. This idealistic and Platonic matrix is crucial, according to Stimilli, for understanding the closeness between the two intellectuals: Warburg, who had become acquainted with Sullivan's work during his stay in Chicago, would develop an architectural principle for the design of the Warburg Library that indeed seems to follow a principle very similar to that of the American architect. Despite the "Platonic" affinities between the two, Stimilli traces a fundamental contrast that is explained in their different approach to the Idea; to Warburg's "monotheistic" tendency, Sullivan's indefinite "polytheism" is opposed: "if we rightly and Platonically understand Idea as a proper name and not a common noun, we may also understand the atlas *Mnemosyne* itself as the autobiography of the Idea, who is striving, with the help of the goddess Mnemosyne and not of mortal *anamnesis*, to recall its own name."

Aleksandra Jovićević (*Aby Warburg's Performed Imageries in the* Mnemosyne Atlas*: The Unusual Birth of Performance Studies*) investigates the similarities between Warburg's theory and *performance studies*, which integrate different methodologies (anthropology, aesthetics, art history, performance theory, *visual*, *dance*, *feminist* and *queer studies*). In particular, the paper analyses the affinities between Richard Schechner's notions of "restoration of behaviour" and "strips of behaviour" and Warburg's ideas of movement and of the dynamic energy of images. From this point of view, Jovićević understands *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a "visual proof of Warburg's thoughts," and his lectures as "lecture-performances because they too represented a vision of his thoughts, leaving them open to different interpretations without achieving a conclusion."

Starting from Warburg's concept of *Pathosformeln*, Daniela Sacco (*Performativity in Aby Warburg's Thought. Memory and* Pathosformeln *between Movement and Stillness*) reflects on the relationship between gesture, movement and stillness. The performativity of memory, which in

Warburg's reflections is expressed particularly in the idea of *Nachleben*, concerns the human being considered in his kinetic nature and invests the question of expressive and/or representative gestures. Taking Medea's figure immortalised just before infanticide (Panel 5 in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*) as a representative case study, Daniela Sacco investigates the dialectic between impulse, action and suspension/interruption as a matrix of the structuring of form. Medea's pose represents the idea of the "pregnant moment," namely "the most fruitful moment because it is capable of unleashing in the beholder a free-ranging imagination, in anticipation of what is predicted to happen, or not to happen."

The last paper, by Giulia Iannucci (*"Mutatis mutandis." Sirens as* Pathosformel *of the Trans-Performative Act*), explores a new kind of *Pathosformel* which is deeply connected with Warburg's idea of a recurrence of certain images which implies a trans-performative action. Whether zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or phytomorphic, the trans-formation of such amphibious creatures always takes place in the presence of water, an instrument of metamorphism, and implies a performative charge that tends to overcome fixed patterns of gender, class and ethnicity, where the mutation always seems suspended and never-ending.

Most of these papers were presented at the International Conference *Patografie del moderno. Per una mappa astrale delle Costellazioni warburghiane* that took place from 9th to 11th November 2022 at Sapienza University of Rome and at the Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici, whose staff I thank for their support, as the final elaboration of a Sapienza University Research Project.

Special thanks go to Maurizio Brancaleoni for his valuable help in giving this book its final form.

Rome, 5 December 2023
Daniela Padularosa

CONSTELLATION 1:

PATHOSFORMEL

CHAPTER 1

GESTURES, *FORMELN*, AND INTENSITY BLOCKS

GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN*

In the specific *tension* and *intensity* of the *Laocoon* (fig. 1.1), there is something of a clearly represented *intention*: the priest of Apollo is putting all his strength—painful and desperate, to be sure—into freeing himself from the snakes that are attacking him. He has every intention of saving himself and helping his children. But legend has it that the snakes will soon suffocate him and even dismember him and his two sons. Admirably chiselled in Hellenistic marble, Laocoon now protests in perpetuity against his bonds with an extraordinarily vivid, intense, immediate *gesture of affection,* one might say. Spectacular, in any case. The power of his torso and the muscularity of his arms can do nothing: power without power. The power of *pathos*: the power of being affected. This could be an exemplary figure for what Paul Ricœur so aptly called the "disproportion of feeling,"[1] that knot of tension between a *link* and a *conflict* that innervates the sculpture as well as all emotional expression.

As we know, Paul Ricoeur spoke of affectivity on the basis of the Husserlian theory of intentionality. What can we deduce from this theory about the relationship between intention and intensity? At first glance, it would seem that Husserl, who thought a great deal about intention, said very little about intensity. Natalie Depraz, however, has identified a very clear link between the two notions in her manuscripts on temporality, dating from 1929 to 1935: the *temporality of affection* is said to be constituted entirely

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* The following essay was first published in French under the title "Gestes, formules et blocs d'intensité" as a chapter of Georges Didi-Huberman's book *Brouillards de peines et de désirs. Faits d'affects 1* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2023). Courtesy of the publisher.

[1] Paul Ricœur. "Le sentiment" [1959]. In Id., *À l'école de la phénoménologie* (Paris: Vrin, 1986), 330-331: "disproportion du sentiment."

as *intentional* according to a qualitative, i.e. *intensive*, modality. Husserl wrote:

> The object [of affection] has a greater or lesser penetration [*Eindringlichkeit*], it also detaches itself to a greater or lesser extent, it has a greater or lesser intuitive fullness and intensity [*Intensität*]; it has a stronger or weaker sensitive intonation [*Gefühlsbetonung*], 'associative horizons' [*'assoziative Horizonte'*] which can more or less have an effect, etc. It strikes [*es klopft*] with a greater or lesser intensity [*Intensität*]. As a result, it knocks [*es klopft*] harder at the door of consciousness or at the ego, or weaker.[2]

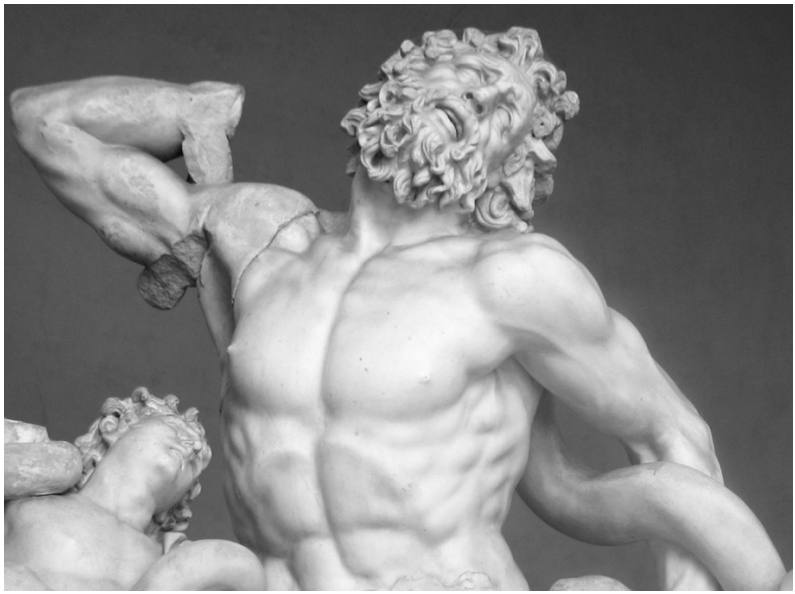

Fig. 1.1 Anonymous Author, *Laocoön and his sons*. Marble, copy after an Hellenistic original from ca. 200 BC. Musei Vaticani, Rome. Photo G. D.-H (detail)

[2] Natalie Depraz. "Temporalité et affection dans les manuscrits tardifs sur la temporalité [1929-1935] de Husserl." In *Alter. Revue de phénoménologie*, No. 2 (1994), 78-79: "L'objet [de l'affection] a une pénétration [*Eindringlichkeit*] plus grande ou moindre, il se détache également plus ou moins, il a une plénitude et une intensité [*Intensität*] intuitives plus ou moins grandes; il a une intonation sensible [*Gefühlsbetonung*] plus ou moins forte, des 'horizons associatifs' [*'assoziative Horizonte'*] plus ou moins capables d'avoir un effet, etc. Il frappe [*es klopft*] en conséquence plus fort à la porte de la conscience ou chez le moi, ou plus faiblement." Unless otherwise indicated, the translation is my own.

Here, then, where common sense would see little connection between *intentions* and *intensities,* this one passage from Husserl—his vocabulary so astonishingly "lively" and concrete—shows us how much the phenomenological approach to affective facts was developed from the outset through the link established between temporalisation and intensification, as when Husserl, in the same set of manuscripts (also cited and translated by Natalie Depraz) wrote:

> I do not only enjoy immediately, but I also enjoy by going ahead into the future, I enjoy insofar as future persistence [*künftige Verharren*] affects me in pleasure [*mich in Lust affiziert*] with the same intensity [*in gleicher Intensität*] and one enjoys it at the same time.[3]

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But a question of method arises here, as it often does: should we, faced with the contiguity of these two words—which are even closer in Latin: *intentio* and *intensio*—discriminate or articulate? Should we be looking for distinctions or discovering passages? In a long-term context where philosophical primacy was given to intentionality rather than intensity, as shown by Richard Sorabji's[4] or Dominik Perler's[5] historical overviews of intentionality in the Middle Ages, we have often opted, through a sort of scholastic tropism of divisions, for the first of these two methods. Isn't conceptual work designed to eliminate ambiguities? In a very comprehensive article on the notion of *intentio* in Thomas Aquinas, Father Henri Simonin, in 1930—and before André Hayen's wider study on *L'Intentionnel selon saint Thomas*[6]—called for us to avoid the trap of equivocal words, i.e. words with porous boundaries:

> The single Latin verb *intendere* commands two closely related notions that must be distinguished: *intentio*, tendency, direction towards a goal, and *intensio*, intensity, tension [...]. [...] It is therefore necessary to define the

[3] Ibid.
[4] Richard Sorabji. "From Aristotle to Brentano: The Development of the Concept of Intentionality." In *Aristotle and the Later Tradition*, ed. Henry Blumenthal - Howard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 227-259.
[5] Dominik Perler, *Theorien der Intentionalität im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2002).
[6] André Hayen, *L'Intentionnel selon saint Thomas* (Bruges-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954).

> notion clearly and always know to which of the two meanings we are referring [to avoid], in the words of Saint Thomas, [falling] into equivocation.[7]

We seem to be spontaneous in our distrust of equivocation, as when we speak of an "equivocal person" in the sense that he or she inspires no confidence, capable as he or she is of lying to you about everything and, above all, of wishing you harm on the sly. Equivocation is a kind of "evil eye" for thought. But this mistrust is also a denial of otherness, a denial of equality, in the sense that in every equivocation there is an "equal" value [*aequa*] of two different "voices" [*voces*], albeit close to each other. None of them will be definitively in a position of mastery: being equivocations, they must therefore dialogue with each other, if not form together a veritable dialectic. Equivocation—a word first used in medieval French in treatises on versification—will perhaps gain in poetic fruitfulness or *openness*, and therefore in theoretical richness, what it will have lost in *discrimination* or in definitional or taxonomic precision. Once we accept that Husserlian intention loses something by being divided into its two meanings, gnoseological and affective, we can try to understand what is gained philosophically by experimenting with the reciprocal *passages* between the terms of the equivocation that pair *intentio* with *intensio.*

Long before the obsessive age of scholastic distinctions, Saint Augustine—undoubtedly the most "phenomenological" of the great theologians—had not failed to reflect on the dynamic, both bodily and psychic, inscribed in the word *intentio*: a word he often uses as the equivalent of *voluntas,* itself understood, very broadly, as the "impulse of the spirit," its faculty of desiring or seeking beyond itself. In *De Genesi ad litteram*, for example, Augustine did not hesitate to question the power of this desire when erotic images in the imagination prove so strong for the spirit that "the flesh is of its nature moved by them [*caro... moveatur*], and emits [*emittat*] through the genital channels what by nature it has stored up."[8] Jean-Luc Solère, in an illuminating study of the relationship between

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[7] Henri D. Simonin. "La notion d'*intentio* dans l'œuvre de saint Thomas d'Aquin." In *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, XIX, No. 3 (1930), 447 and 461: "Le seul verbe latin *intendere* commande deux notions voisines qu'il faut distinguer: *intentio*, tendance, direction vers un but, et *intensio*, intensité, tension. […] Il est alors nécessaire de bien définir la notion et de savoir toujours à laquelle des deux acceptions on entend se référer [pour éviter], suivant l'affirmation de saint Thomas, [de] tomber dans l'équivoque."

[8] Saint Augustine. "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees. Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis. The Literal Meaning of Genesis." In *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle. Trans. Edmund Hill, Vol. 13 (New York: New City Press, 2002), Book XII (15, 31), 480.

intentio and *intensio*, commented: "The object [and] its image imprinted in the eye are thus, by virtue of the conjunction effected by *intentio*, superimposed in a strong unity, so that to see the one is to see the other: '*in tantum coeunt unitatem*'—a unity in which they nevertheless remain distinct without merging."[9]

In Augustine's *De Trinitate*, for example, the relationship between "vision" [*visio*] and the "thing" seen [*ipsa res*] was mediated by the term *intentio*, which can refer to both spiritual "attention" and a "desire" driven by the imagination. Then, extremely significantly, *intentio* came to be integrated as an essential element of Augustine's theory of temporality.[10] In the eleventh book of the *Confessions*, in particular, Augustine placed *intentio* at the level of an "insistence" or durability of the forces of the spirit, comparable from then on to a sound, or a tone, which "sounds, and does sound, and sounds on again" by creating something like a specific "space of time:"

> Courage, my mind [*insiste, anime meus*], and press on mightily [*et adtende fortiter*]. […] Press on where truth begins to dawn. Suppose, now, the voice of a body begins to sound, and does sound, and sounds on [*incipit sonare et sonat et adhuc sonat*], and list it ceases; it is silence now, and that voice is past, and is no more a voice. […] For while passing, it was being extended [*tendebatur*] into some space of time [*in aliquod spatium temporis*].[11]

This is how *intentio* was conceived by Augustine as *tensio*, *extensio* and even *distensio*, all at once psychic, visual and temporal: so many "motions" proper to the power of the soul when it "reaches out" towards its sensory, noetic, imaginative or affective objects. Jean-Luc Solère has clearly shown that this confluence of intention and tension—of tensivity or intensity—far from needing to be dissociated, must be seen in its movement of constant "disproportion" (to use the term put forward by Paul Ricœur). In Plato, for example, the *thymos* of affection was said to be alternately "tense" or "distended." The Stoics, for their part, had an intensive theory of *tonos* as a *tonality* (or sound) produced by a greater or lesser *tension*, like the string you stretch on your lyre. With this in mind, it would seem pointless to distinguish between emotion as an "intention," precisely directed towards

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[9] Jean-Luc Solère. "Tension et intention. Esquisse de l'histoire d'une notion." In *Questions sur l'intentionnalité*, ed. Lambros Couloubaritsis - Antonino Mazzù (Bruxelles: Ousia, 2007), 82.

[10] Saint Augustine. "The Trinity." In *The Works of Saint Augustine*, Vol. 5 (1991).

[11] *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip M. Parker, Webster's Thesaurus Edition (San Diego: Icon, 2005), Book XI, 215-216.

an object, and *Stimmung* as a vague "affective tonality" without an object: the only difference between the two would be one of tension. Even the Scholastics had spoken of an outward *tensio* proper to the soul, and definable, in the final analysis, as *intentio.* Quite simply, writes Solère, "these different terms and meanings (*intentio*: cognitive intention, voluntary intention; *intensio*: intensification) originally belonged, in antiquity, to the same conceptual field, which is that of *tension.*"[12]

The Latin verb *tendere* means both the act of *stretching something* (the hand, the eye, the skin, a bow, a tent, a net, a trap, etc.) and the act of *stretching towards something* (a desire, an effort where, incidentally, the hand and the eye can be of some use). The plural *tenta* was used to refer to the male sex being "stretched," i.e. erect. We used to say *attendere* to signify tension or attention of the mind, and *intendere* in a sense that was often more physical and moral. But it all went together, of course. In the 16th century, Ambroise Paré used the word *intention*—later called *intension*—to refer to the surgical action of stretching the two lips of a wound to bring them together. In the 17th century, Pascal invoked the "direction of intention" in his polemic with the Jesuits: a "method" described in the seventh letter of the *Provinciales* as a "marvellous principle,"[13] as powerful as a theological doctrine in the field of morality.

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But this "marvellous principle" is also a tragedy. For each of our intentions, in varying degrees of strength and duration, does nothing but *stretch us.* And, as a result, *we become distanced from ourselves.* Are we not, in our "affects," essentially "tense?" Are we not, in a way, like poor Laocoon wrestling with his snakes? Since tension is both a dynamic and morphological concept—morphodynamic, we should say—it's not surprising that, even before the development of a phenomenology of the sensible, the field of aesthetics was an exemplary battleground for any thought of intensity. In 1766, in his famous *Laocoon,* Lessing behaved rather like a scholastic theologian: he had to reduce ambiguities, put everything in its place and deduce firm ontological hierarchies. The affection of the "extremes"[14] of

[12] Solère, "Tension et intention," 60.
[13] Blaise Pascal, *Provincial Letters* [1656-1657], ed. Emmett F. Fields (Louisville: Bank of Wisdom, 2001), Letter Seventh, 133.
[14] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* [1766]. Trans. Ellen Frothingham (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 13.

pathos should not be "addressed to the sense of sight,"[15] but only suggested—something that only poetry was said to be capable of doing—so as not to "bind the wings of Fancy"[16] in the spectator.

This is why affect that is too visible, whether painted or sculpted, found itself rejected from the system of aesthetic values advocated by Lessing: "The opening of the mouth, apart from the violent and repulsive contortions it causes in the other parts of the face, is a blot on a painting and a cavity in a statue productive of the worst possible effect."[17] The visual arts suffer from the fundamental flaw that we almost always see too much or too little, whereas "In poetry a robe in no robe. It conceals nothing. Our imagination sees through it in every part […] Or, we may say, the poet alone possesses the art of so combining negative with positive traits as to unite two appearances in one."[18] Finally, only the poet would be able to represent time, and therefore intentions—and therefore affections: "The rule is this, that succession in time is the province of the poet, co-existence in space that of the artist."[19]

But this kind of distinction is not appropriate for processes—affectivity, imagination, images themselves—whose effectiveness consists precisely in crossing the boundaries and "definitions" of kinds of being. Two philosophical styles clash on this terrain (and their debate has not ceased to this day). On the one hand, there is a quest for *legitimacy* that seeks to define the respective places of this or that aesthetic phenomenon, all of which is based on—or founded on—an *ontology.* This is the attitude adopted by Lessing, who was nicknamed, by Wilhelm Dilthey in particular, "the great legislator of art:" the result is an aesthetics of *criteria*, of what "is" and what "is not" art, beauty and so on. On the other hand, there is a quest for *intensity*, which questions the power of a particular art form on the basis of a much more concrete and less judicious *experience.* This other attitude, which deploys its more intuitive, even affective style, has nothing to do with the criteria, hierarchies or definitive organisation charts of artistic ontology: above all, it puts itself to *the test*. All it expects from artworks is to be touched by them, open as it is to their "power to affect."[20]

This was, of course, Nietzsche's position. *The Birth of Tragedy* not only took a philological stance on the past, it also made a philosophical demand

[15] Ibid., 20.
[16] Ibid., 17.
[17] Ibid., 14.
[18] Ibid., 40 and 60.
[19] Ibid. 109.
[20] Wilhelm Dilthey. "Lessings 'Laokoon'" [1877]. In Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. XVII (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 103-104.

on the present and even the future of art and thought. A demand for intensity, both in relation to works of art and within one's own "power to be affected." Indeed, it would be somewhat naive to understand the polarity of Apollo and Dionysus in Nietzsche's essay in terms of a simple opposition between the law-giving god of art (master of the Muses) and the intense god of celebration (guide of the Bacchae). Apollo, too, *worked on intensity*, whether on the strings of his lyre or on the single, cruel string of his bent bow. But "Apollo," wrote Nietzsche, "could not live without Dionysus"[21]! It was indeed their "eternal contradiction,"[22] that is to say their perpetual *work in tension*, that generated the fertile—and emotional—tragic disproportion: "*Excess* [*Übermaß*] revealed itself as the truth; contradiction [*Widerspruch*], bliss born of pain, spoke of itself from out of the heart of nature."[23]

That's when intensity really comes into its own. Intensity is not a simple "increase" in energy, but the "tension" of forces struggling with each other. Intensity, then, stretched by a series of contradictory polarities whose aesthetic—and not logical—concept Nietzsche found in what he called "dissonance" [*Dissonanz*]:

> Yet this difficult, primal phenomenon of Dionysiac art [*Urphänomen der dionysischen Kunst*] can be grasped in a uniquely intelligible and direct way in the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance* [*in der wunderbaren Bedeutung der musikalischen Dissonanz*]; as indeed music generally is the only thing which, when set alongside the world, can illustrate what is meant by the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. The pleasure engendered by the tragic comes from the same homeland as our pleasurable sensation [*wie die lustvolle Empfindung*] of dissonance in music.[24]

Dissonance would be to form what a *symptom* is to normal physiological function, or what an *emotion* is to the habitual regime of our psychic contentment. In other words, Nietzsche's aesthetics of intensities cannot be understood as anything other than a *theory of affections*, as can be seen from numerous posthumous fragments from the 1870s. In essence, we read that dissonance would be the *form of what affects us*, from an experience that Nietzsche simply calls "pain," and which has the effect of deconstructing representations, or at least of conferring on representation in general a derivative status, secondary because it is screened by idealisation: "Think

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[21] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.
[22] Ibid., 26.
[23] Ibid., 27.
[24] Ibid., 113-114.

of the reality of dissonance as opposed to the ideality of indifference. What is productive, then, is the pain [...]. But is the reality perhaps only pain, and the *representation* born of that?"[25] All this leads to a dazzling opening-up of the point of view: a bursting of the boundaries where "consciousness" thought itself protected. If the reality of pain upsets us, affects us and demands its form, then we have to admit that an "unconscious" force is indeed at play: "The *unconscious force that creates forms* [*die unbewußte formenbildende Kraft*] manifests itself,"[26] writes Nietzsche, at the very moment when something is created, or even procreated, in the very dynamics of dissonance or *pathos.*

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This was, in any case, the fundamental lesson that Aby Warburg was one of the first in the field of historical and artistic scholarship to retain philosophically, to support philologically and to extend to new objects of study in the long history of Western art. Understandably, it was necessary for him from the outset—in 1889, as part of Carl Justi's seminar at the University of Bonn, where he was a student—to sketch out a "Draft for a Critique of the 'Laocoon' based on Florentine art of the Quattrocento,"[27] an attempt whose intellectual context Michel Espagne has usefully restored.[28] The aim was not only to reformulate in a fresh way the dividing lines established by Lessing between poetry and painting (for Warburg had clearly seen that, in Botticelli's paintings too, "a robe is no robe"), but also to substitute a *phenomenology of intensities* for any ontology or criteriology of art. The notion of "*pathos* formula"—in which what might be called "lines of fracture" and "movements of intensity" play together—will have been the great theoretical fruit of this critical reading of the *Laocoon.*

Right up to the end of his work, in the years 1927-1929, when he was feverishly working on his atlas of images, *Mnemosyne*, Aby Warburg never ceased to question these innumerable phenomena of pathetic intensification when they are visually represented. For example, plate 6 of the atlas integrates the *Laocoon* itself into a labyrinth of relationships—formal,

[25] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, ed. Raymond Geuss - Alexander Nehamas. Trans. Ladislaus Löb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 34.
[26] Ibid., 92.
[27] Aby M. Warburg, *Entwurf zu einer Kritik des "Laokoons" an Hand der Kunst des Quattrocento in Florenz* [1889], Londres, Warburg Institute Archive, III, 33.2.4.
[28] Michel Espagne. "Le *Laocoon* de Lessing entre Carl Justi et Aby Warburg." *Revue germanique internationale*, No. 19 (2003), 221-236.

cultic, historical—where the themes of erotic abduction (Proserpine), sacrifice (Polyxena) and the "sacrificing Maenad" [*opfernde Mänade*] collide: The latter is depicted in the cruel yet graceful guise of a nymph dancing with a large cutlass brandished in one hand and an animal corpse clutched in the other. *Laocoon* was thus in dialogue with the figures of desire as well as those of death, since we also see a number of figures dancing on tombs or sacrificial altars (fig. 1.2).[29]

In Warburg's eyes, the purpose of all these connections—these montages—was to highlight certain iconographic or chronological discontinuities, "fractures" that were nonetheless traversed, in a way that was both tectonic and fluid (like a lava flow that was both subterranean and explosive), by a great dynamic of "intensification" [*Intensifikation*]. Shortly before his death, between 27 May and 4 July 1929, the historian attempted to write a general introduction to his *Mnemosyne* project. It began by examining the *tensions* that animate the subject in its relationship to the outside world, which Warburg summed up as a fundamental dialectic between contact and distance. All of this, he asserted, had to pass through certain "expressive values [*Ausdruckswerte*] preserved in the memory"[30] and constantly *strained* by the desire to give them a sensible form (fig. 1.3).

But how does such an *intention to intensify* manifest itself? This was the big question that Warburg wanted to answer with a *structural* analogy based on a linguistic principle called the "suppletive function," which was developed in 1899 by the linguist Hermann Osthoff: "As early as 1905," Warburg wrote:

> the author was helped in such efforts by Osthoff's writing on the nature of the superlative in the Indo-Germanic language: in brief he demonstrated that a change in the word root [*Wortstammwechsel*] can occur in the comparison of adjectives and conjugation of verbs. Not only does the conception of the energetic identity of the intended attribute or action not suffer, even though the formal identity of the basic lexical expression has fallen away; rather, the arrival of an alien root achieves an intensification of the original meaning [*Intensifikation der ursprünglichen Bedeutung*].[31]

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[29] See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002), 115-270.

[30] Aby M. Warburg. "Mnemosyne Atlas. Introduction." *La Rivista di Engramma*, No. 142 (2017), ed. Monica Centanni. Trans. Matthew Rampley, accessed 24 July 2023, https://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3082

[31] Ibid.

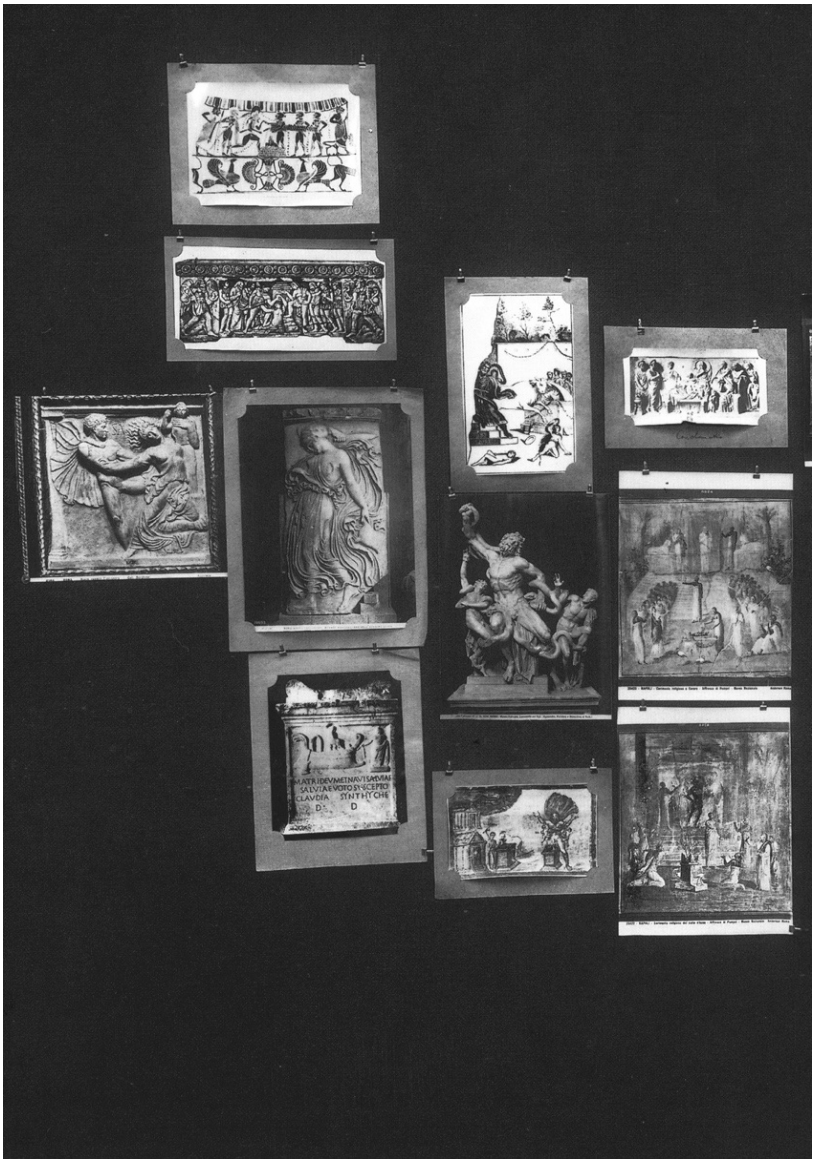

Fig. 1.2 Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1927-1929 (pl. 6, detail). The Warburg Institute Archive, London