

DANIELA SACCO*

The Performativity of the Classical According to Warburg: *Pathosformeln* and Memory in Renaissance Festivals

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the performative aspect implicitly embedded in Warburg's thinking about Renaissance festivals, starting with the formulation of the term *Pathosformel* introduced in the text *Dürer and Italian Antiquity* (1905). Here Warburg identifies Poliziano's *Fabula di Orfeo* as "the first Italian tragedy" and complements and extends the insights from the essay *Costumi teatrali per gli intermezzi del 1589* (1895). The lessons of Burkhardt and Nietzsche played a crucial role in shaping Warburg's understanding of *intermedi* as a form of transition between art and reality, as opposed to theatre, which is based on words and text. These *intermedi* are characterised by their high expressive mimicry qualities, and they are embryonic forms of the new art to come, which is accompanied by an implicit tragic element. Warburg shifts from mimetic models associated with iconology to a study of art history where he focuses on the creative principle as the tragic matrix of the artistic act. This allows him to integrate performative themes more effectively within the cultural understanding of art.

KEYWORDS: Aby Warburg; Renaissance festivals; Pathosformel; intermedi; performance

Aby Warburg's reflections on Italian Renaissance art are significantly influenced by his attention to festivals, and within this interest, the origin of the performative bearing that characterises his thought becomes apparent. Indeed, the theme of performativity is central to the domain of Warburgian studies, given that, from Warburg's perspective, the subject of artistic creation and reception is the human being understood in its kinetic essence and the artwork conceived as a living organism (Sacco 2024). This contribution intends to investigate the meaning of performativity as it emerges from Warburg's early studies on mimicry and theatrical phenomena as observed in the context of Renaissance festivals, starting with the coining of the term *Pathosformel*, and in relation to the conception of cultural memory, which will find a particular declination in the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.

Any examination of the performative dimension within theatre – which privileges transient, intangible events associated with cultural practices

* Università Iuav di Venezia - danielasacco@iuav.it

and various forms of celebrations, whether private, public, political, or civic – cannot fail to account for the perspective from which we observe it. Particularly noteworthy are the insights derived from the twentieth-century performative turn, which led to a view of theatre not so much as a static work but a living form, shifting the focus to the physical and kinetic dimensions of the performer, reenactment, the active role of the spectator, and the participatory, civic, and political dimensions. It is therefore of interest within the realm of Renaissance theatre studies to turn to current reflections on performance, employing categories and concepts that can be retroactively applied to an earlier historical context.¹

Warburg's interest in Renaissance festivals and theatre, rather than being considered a red thread running through his research and biography – one only has to think of the re-enactments of costume festivals on the Renaissance model in which Warburg and his family engaged (Contarini 1992, 88) –, should instead be seen as foundational to his reflections on the posthumous legacy of the classical – the *Nachleben der Antike*. The germinal nucleus of the conception of *Nachleben der Antike* is situated precisely in the context of the study of Renaissance festivities as living art, and it is from this study that Warburg outlines the key concept of *Pathosformel*, a concept that we could qualify as “performative”, and to which a specific notion of memory is linked, of particular significance for theatrical studies.

Reconstructing the genesis of his thought, it is evident that Warburg acknowledges the paramount role of theatre in the reinvention of ancient formulas by visual artists from his earliest studies. This is notably exemplified in his dissertation on Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus and Spring* presented at the end of 1891 (Warburg 1999c, 89-156). With reference to various theatrical texts, including Niccolò da Correggio's *Fabula di Cahepalo*, an anonymous drama on Daphne, an intermezzo from the *Rappresentazione di S. Uliva* and Poliziano's *Orfeo*, Warburg recognises “the theatrical type of the nymph” by its dynamic quality and vitality, characterised by its forms and accessories in motion (*bewegtes Beiwerk*) – flowing robes and windswept hair. The nymph will be recognised in later reflections as an emblematic example of *Pathosformel*. In this text, Warburg also states the importance of artists seeing “the revered figures of antiquity standing before them in flesh and blood”, that is, seeing them in presence, in their theatrical reenactment. Warburg observes that the direct imitation of theatrical scenes is a recurring practice in the figurative arts, recognizing a connection between figurative representations of ancient gestures and the moving presence of real bodies on stage.

¹ For an investigation employing this perspective in Italy, see Bortoletti and Sacchi 2018.

The kinetic force of the body's movement on stage, embodying vitality, serves as the defining element characterizing the revival of classical antiquity. In his analysis, Warburg adopts Jacob Burckhardt's definition of Italian festive pageantry from *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) as a "true transition from life into art" (Warburg 1999c, 125). It is precisely the consideration of this passage that forms the basis of Warburg's original reflection, leading to the development of the concept of *Nachleben*.

Two years later, in 1895, Warburg reiterated in *The Theatrical Costumes for the Intermedi of 1589* the arguments already presented in his dissertation on Botticelli. This time the subject is the costumes designed by Bernardo Buontalenti for festivities in honour of Christina of Lorraine, the future wife of the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici. Alongside Warburg's formulation of the thesis that *intermezzos* – in this case, Girolamo Bargagli's *La pellegrina*, performed in the Uffizi Theatre by the Siena Accademia degli Intronati – were an embryonic form of the new dramatic genre of opera, he makes a reflection on accessories.

Accessories, costumes and gestures play a pivotal function in the *intermezzos*, which were fundamentally characterized by mimicry. According to Warburg, these performances, devoid of verbal expression, do not qualify as dramatic art. This observation underscores his perspective that the *dramatische Kunst*, or dramatic art, in Germany during his era predominantly relied on verbal elements. They were mythological pageant and, as such, benefited from accessories more comprehensible to the audience. Once again, a "carne e ossa" (flesh and blood-) vision of the "le figure famose dei tempi antichi" (revered figures of antiquity) is essential for the effective rendering of the artistic creation and reception. In this essay first published in Italian, Warburg coined the expression "*forme intermedie*" (transitional forms) "between real life and dramatic art" (Warburg 1999b, 369). This concept appears to align with Burckhardt's formulation regarding festivals as a transition from life to art.

But such a judgment is too closely tied to the standpoint of modern theatrical practice. It fails to take account of the true origins of the Intermedio, which did not lie in the spoken drama so much as in the mythological pageant; and this, being an essentially mute and gestural art, naturally relies on accessories and adornments. All those now extinct transitional forms between real life and dramatic art, which the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries produced in such abundance – as, for example, in the carnival masquerade, for the *sbarre*, the *giostre*, and the *bufole* – afforded a unique opportunity for members of the public to see the revered figures of antiquity standing before them in flesh and blood. And in them the aid of decor and costume was all the more necessary, because the figures moved past the spectator in large

numbers and in rapid succession, leaving him only a short time in which to divine their often highly involved significance. (Warburg 1999b, 369)²

Warburg's interest in festivals illustrates his departure from the prevailing positivist tradition that dominated his time. This tradition bringing the study of spectacular phenomena back to that of theatrical literature, focused on the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century drama of sacred subjects, and coined the myth of the "origins of theatre" or the Renaissance "invention" of theatre (Ventrone 1990, 35-53). The text on *Intermedi* has become a point of reference not only for musical studies but also theatrical studies. Its significance as a foundational manifesto of theatrical iconography has been duly acknowledged, particularly within the context of Italian studies, as it anticipates fundamental themes of current historiographical studies by identifying essential methodological issues (Zorzi 1979, 419-63; 1988;

² See also Warburg, 1895, 24: "Ma un tale giudizio troppo moderno ci impedirebbe di apprezzare nel suo giusto valore psicologico il processo artistico, a cui questo simbolismo dei vestimenti deve la sua origine e la sua ragion d'essere. Si trascura di considerare che l'intermezzo, secondo il suo carattere, non apparteneva essenzialmente all'arte drammatica, che si manifesta con la parola, ma all'arte del corteggio mitologico, e che questo, di sua natura perlopiù muto, richiedeva, come è facile spiegare, l'aiuto dei cenni, degli accessori e degli ornamenti. Tutte quelle forme intermedie ora estinte, e che si collocano fra la vita reale e l'arte drammatica ove compare la processione mitologica o allegorica così frequente nei pubblici festeggiamenti dei secoli XV, XVI e XVII (come, ad esempio, nelle mascherate di carnevale, per le sbarre, le giostre, le bufole ecc.), davano appunto alla società di quel tempo l'occasione principale di vedere in carne e ossa le figure famose dei tempi antichi. È vero che talvolta i canti composti per le mascherate aiutavano il pubblico a indovinarne il significato, ma non si poteva fare a meno dell'ornamento esteriore quando tali maschere passavano l'una dopo l'altra davanti agli occhi degli spettatori che in tempo brevissimo ne dovevano indovinare il complesso significato" (But such a too-modern judgment would prevent us from appreciating in its proper psychological value the artistic process, to which this symbolism of costumes owes its origin and *raison d'être*. One neglects to consider that the *intermezzo*, according to its character, did not belong essentially to the dramatic art, which is manifested by speech, but to the art of mythological pageantry, and that this, by its nature mostly silent, required, as is easy to explain, the help of gestures, accessories, and ornaments. All those intermediate forms now extinct, and which lie between real life and dramatic art where the mythological or allegorical procession so frequent in the public festivities of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries appears (as, for example, in carnival masquerades, for bars, jousts, *bufole*, etc.), gave precisely to the society of that time the main opportunity to see in the flesh the famous figures of ancient times. It is true that sometimes the songs composed for the masquerades helped the public to guess their meaning, but one could not do without the external ornamentation when such masks passed one after another before the eyes of the spectators who, in a very short time, had to guess their complex meaning). Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are mine.

Molinari 1996, 37-8; Guardenti 1996, 36-7).

Although the study of Warburg's contribution to theatrical iconography is by no means exhaustive, we can observe that iconography does not give sufficient credit to the richness of the contribution that Warburg's studies make to theatre. Warburg transcended the role of a mere iconologist, despite being unanimously considered the founder of this discipline, and having many heirs who were scholars in iconology and iconography (Fritz Saxl, Erwin Panofsky, to name the best known). He was also and especially an anthropologist and a cultural historian. His analysis of images was situated within a more intricately delineated framework of meaning from a cultural-historical standpoint. It is through these scholarly interests that we discern the significance of theatre in his intellectual pursuits, particularly in relation to its performative dimension.

Another text that should attract equal if not greater interest in theatre studies is Warburg's 1905 lecture on Dürer and Italian antiquity, where he returns to Poliziano's *Orfeo* (Warburg 1999a, 553-8). He coined one of the key concepts of his reflection – the *Pathosformel* – precisely in reference to this specific case, the first profane drama in the vernacular, better defined as a *fiesta* by Poliziano himself, or the “first Italian tragedy” in Warburg's own words (Warburg 1999c, 121).³ The *Pathosformel* – the emotive formula – that is taken from antiquity and applied to the Renaissance is not simply an atelier theme, common in the aestheticising vision of the work from which Warburg immediately distances himself, but an experience passionately relived in the scene of Poliziano's drama. In this text, Warburg identifies the models from which Dürer drew inspiration for his depiction of the death of Orpheus, dismembered by the Maenads, whose primary reference in ancient art is the tragic dismemberment of Pentheus. Warburg had already noticed how the Maenads – ready to enact the *sparagmòs* on Orpheus, who was bent to the ground in the moment before receiving the fatal blows – had the distinctive features of nymphs, characterised by their striding step and their ancient robes moving in the wind. Warburg links this scene to depictions by Italian artists of the fifteenth century, in illustrations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, beginning with the inaugural vernacular edition of 1497, and in drawings from the school of Mantegna, Giulio Romano and Antonio Pollaiuolo; however, the primary emphasis is directed towards the concluding scene of Poliziano's *Fabula di Orfeo*, original in the literature of the time for its inclusion of the *sparagmòs* proper to the ancient tradition. The emphasis lies on the tangible, observable, and perceptible reference points that artists of the time sought to employ. Their intention was to encapsulate the potency of pathetic eloquence and articulate gestures charged with *pathos*.

³ On the importance of the *Pathosformel* concept in this text, see also Wedepohl 2012.

This text signifies a departure for Warburg from his preceding studies, as explicitly stated by the author himself in a note dating back to 1905, the year in which the text was drafted. This note accompanies the essay on theatrical costumes for the *Intermedi* of 1589: “Only now (8 September 1905) do I find that Nietzsche, in his *Birth of Tragedy*, deals at length with the origins of the opera. But how fundamentally wrong in relation to the historical process!!” (Warburg 1999b, 544).

Another note by Warburg is dated the same year: “Sul sorgere dello stile rappresentativo si veda il mio lavoro sui costumi teatrali: allora a Firenze non avevo tra le mani Nietzsche e la questione del dionisiaco era ancora molto lontana” (On the emergence of the representational style, see my work on theatrical costumes: at that time in Florence I did not have Nietzsche to hand and the question of the Dionysian was still a long way off; Ghelardi 2021, LI). The affirmation of this discard should be of interest to the field of theatre studies, which has focused more on the consideration of the text on *Florentini Intermedi*.

From 1905 onwards, Warburg’s comprehension of festivals, to which he significantly devoted a series of fragments – over two hundred pages grouped together in a dossier entitled “Festwesen” all yet to be studied (Warburg Institute Archive [WIA] 3.58.10 formerly 3.62.1.) – intended to serve as the cornerstone for an expansive research undertaking, underwent a reinvigoration facilitated by the lessons of Nietzsche and the consequential importance attributed to the Dionysian element in the context of Renaissance art.

It could be contended that, whereas previous studies focused on the influence of theatre in the figurative arts according to a mainly mimetic model – the artist’s vision of the theatrical scene, selected for its pathetic eloquence, and its figurative reproduction, thereby engaging with primarily iconological concerns – from 1905, Warburg enters more deeply into a reflection on the creative principle as the tragic matrix of the artistic act (Sacco 2015, 8-22). The question now shifts to the origin of the artistic and cultural principle, thus touching on themes that we can define more correctly as performative. In this context, the mediation of Nietzsche becomes pivotal. Within this variation we understand the meaning of the new concepts of *Pathosformel* and *Nachleben* and, here, anthropological interest comes into play, complementing and correcting the perspective of the art historian.

The study of Renaissance festivals must be considered in parallel with studies that absorbed Warburg’s attention during this period, when he developed an awareness of the biological necessity of images, perceived to be midway between religion and artistic practice. This realization was further informed by his firsthand experiences during a journey to New Mexico and Arizona in 1895–96, undertaken for the purpose of observing Native American cultures. Fritz Saxl, his historical collaborator, notes a distinct

shift in Warburg's perspective on the "paganizing festivals" of the Florentine Renaissance upon his return from America (Saxl 2003, 183-90).

The theme of festivals as expressions of the interconnectedness between life, art, belief, and ritual reoccurs, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde* (*Gesammelte Schriften* IV). These fragments, penned between 1888 and 1903, coincide with the period in which Warburg completed his dissertation on Botticelli, the essay on *Intermedi*, and developed the reflective musings from his journey to New Mexico. Consequently, it is imperative to regard these foundational fragments as the crucible shaping Warburg's intellectual framework, wherein various concepts, including the idea of the inherent kinetic nature of human beings emerged.

Let us initially concentrate on elucidating the significance of *Pathosformel*, coined in the essay on Dürer. One of the most compelling interpretations is provided by Salvatore Settis, who identifies it as an "explosive word", encapsulating both the rigidity of a *formula* and the energetic impetus of *pathos* (Settis 2012, 269-89). The double valence of this term arises from the inherent tension between two elements: *Pathos* and *Formel* exist as dialectically distinct. *Pathos* implies emotion, encompassing notions of instability, movement, and instantaneousness, whereas *Formel* conveys form, embodying ideas of stability, fixity, crystallization, and typicality. Likewise, Andrea Pinotti discerns in *Pathosformel* the dual signification of the concept of form as *morfé* – a sensible form, hence pliable and indefinite, and as *eidos* – an intelligible form, eidetic structure, and thus definitive scheme (Pinotti 2001). Consequently, the *Formel* encapsulates and conveys *pathos* and, as an expressive convention, is destined to perpetuate itself over time, passing from generation to generation and undergoing transformation. This is the reason why Warburg regards and employs the *Pathosformel* as a repertoire of forms in the transmission of the classical tradition, serving to express movement and passions as cultivated by ancient artists, subsequently transmitted, lost, and rediscovered during the Renaissance. In its new usage, the *Formel* undergoes a transformation, signifying a crystallization, a rigidification, and a detachment from *pathos*, or life itself. Consequently, it experiences a diminished ability to make sense of the existing reality, ultimately culminating in a phase of mannerism and the erosion of formal innovation, until a new view of life, a new impetus sprinkled with *pathos* renews it.

The process unfolding here is vividly depicted by Settis as "a highly dramatic alternation of loss of meaning, corresponding to the hardening into *formulas*, and regaining meaning, from *formulas* that had seemed, for centuries, inert and dead" (Settis 2012, 273). A novel aspect that Warburg explicitly elucidates in his essay on Dürer, distinct from his earlier studies, is the "twofold" dimension of the *Pathosformel*, recognized in the two facets

of ancient plasticity – the “emotive force of gesture” (“pathetisch gesteigerte Mimik”) and the “tranquil, classic ideal” (“klassisch idealisierende Ruhe”; Warburg 1999a, 553).

The Nietzschean coinage in this “twofold” dimension is evident, as Warburg explains later in his 1914 lecture *The Emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting*, in which he refers to the image of “a double herm of Apollo-Dionysus”, meaning an “Apollonian *ethos* together with Dionysian *pathos* grow like a double branch from one trunk, as it were, rooted in the mysterious depths of the Greek maternal earth” (Warburg 2001, 28). The assimilation of Nietzschean terminology enables Warburg to effect a decisive departure from the Winckelmannian conception of ancient art.

Nietzsche became an essential point of reference for Warburg, whose reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1889 profoundly influenced his thinking. The binary perspective of Apollo and Dionysus, fundamental to the cultural process, metamorphosis, and the origin and dissolution of forms, which Warburg absorbed from the German philosopher Nietzsche, underwent further refinement and correction in Warburg’s interpretation through his engagement with the writings of Burckhardt. This is clearly seen in the 1927 essay *Burckhardt und Nietzsche, Schlußübung*, dedicated to the two thinkers considered by Warburg to be “seismographs” capable of capturing the mnemonic wave (or engram) from the past. They represent, in Warburg’s eyes, the two poles of *ethos* and *pathos*, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. For Warburg, in whose worldview life and thought are intricately interwoven, both Nietzsche and Burckhardt serve as indispensable touchstones. They not only convey theoretical frameworks but also embody vital examples that profoundly shape his life. We are aware that Nietzsche, in invoking the Dionysian, eventually succumbed to its overpowering influence. Warburg, in contrast, defended himself against this eventuality by drawing lessons from Burckhardt. Through the virtue of *sophrosyne*, Burckhardt withstood the overwhelming impact of the mnemonic wave by shaping it and containing it within defined forms (Warburg, 1991).

Warburg reiterated in 1929, in his introduction to the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, the imperative, following and extending beyond Nietzsche, to perceive the Apollo-Dionysus duality as a manifestation of the polar function within the organic unity of “*sophrosyne* and *ecstasy*”. In essence, Warburg viewed Apollo and Dionysus “as a single, organic functional polarity that marks the limit values of the human will to expression” (Warburg 2017, 11-19).

The *Pathosformel* concept allows for this balancing act: in the Warburgian perspective, which regards human life as a kinetic process and a flux of energies, art emerges as an organic and harmonious creation stemming from the polarity between *ethos* and *pathos*. The *Pathosformel* serves as an expression of this inherent balance. Hence, an interpretation that views the

Pathosformel solely as an eruption of *pathos* is one-sided. Such an approach overly emphasizes the destructive and regressive facets while overlooking the constructive and formative aspects. In his essay on Dürer, Warburg models the concept of *Pathosformel* on the image of Orpheus, the central figure in Poliziano's *Fabula*, a character to whom Warburg would repeatedly return, discerning its inherently tragic nature. Indeed, the figure of Orpheus, as perspicaciously observed by Giorgio Colli, encapsulates the connection between Apollo and Dionysus, whereas Nietzsche, while unveiling their polarity, did not fully recognize their essential unity (Colli 1977).

The *sparagmós*, the dismemberment of Orpheus by the Maenads, devotees of the orgiastic cult of Dionysus, notably reintroduced in Poliziano's version, can be traced back through Ovid to Euripides' *Bacchae*. In its primary source, inferred from various fragmentary ancient accounts, the *sparagmós* is attributed to Aeschylus, who, in the lost tragedy *Bassarides*, narrates the dismemberment of Orpheus by the vengeful god Dionysus for Orpheus's preference of Apollo over him. The tragic myth of Orpheus precisely delineates the unity between Apollo and Dionysus within the character, illustrating a profound contradiction and paradox inherent in the polarity and unity between these two divinities.

Colli observes the foundational relationship between Dionysus and Eleusis as presuppositions of Orpheus. While Orpheus tells the narrative of the god and imparts the highest knowledge through initiation, he also engages in playing the lyre and singing. In Orpheus it is possible to recognise Apollo who manifests himself, revealing his benevolent aspect as "the one who grants Dionysus" (*Dionysodote*), after his dismemberment (Colli 1977, 37). The poetry of Orpheus, according to Colli, primarily embodies the song of Apollo in its expression, appearance, music, and speech. However, its content is infused with the passion of Dionysus. Hence, Warburg designates Orpheus as a *Pathosformel*, just as he did for the nymph. Still referring to the importance of reading Nietzsche to gain an understanding of the festivals, Warburg writes, in another note in the *Tagebuch* dating from 9 December 1905:

Mir wird klar . . . dass eine stilgeschichtliche Ikonographie des Todes des Orpheus eigentlich das Nietzschesche Problem vom Ursprung der Tragödie trifft; in ganz auffälligem Zusammentreffen, nur musste es heißen: 'Der Ursprung der Tragödie aus dem apollinischen Stile des dionysischen Tanzspiels'. Ich sah auch erst vorgestern, dass Nietzsche über die Entwicklung des *Stile rappresentativo* zum Schluss schreibt. Wenn Nietzsche doch nur mit den Tatsachen der Volkerkunde und Volkskunde besser vertraut gewesen wäre! Sie hätten selbst für ihn durch ihr spezifisches Gewicht regulierende Kraft für seinen Traumvogelflug besessen. (WIA, 3.10.3; Gombrich 1970, 185)

[I now realize that a stylistic iconography of the Death of Orpheus really touches on Nietzsche's problem of the Birth of Tragedy; a very remarkable coincidence except that it should read 'The Birth of Tragedy from the Apollonian style of the Dionysiac dance-ritual'. The day before yesterday I also saw that Nietzsche writes in his conclusion about the development of the *stile rappresentativo*. If Nietzsche had only been familiar with the data of anthropology and folklore! Even in his case their specific gravity would have served as a regulating force for his dream-bird flight.]

Warburg discerns the dual aspects of the figure of Orpheus, as reflected in the meaning of *Pathosformel*. This understanding allows him to grasp the function of Renaissance festivals as intermediate forms between art and life, as moments of transition and metamorphosis, coinciding with the emergence of new forms of expression, such as opera. The interest in these transitional forms, in which *ethos* and *pathos* achieve a harmonious balance, is consistent with all Warburg's research. In these forms, he perceives the artwork not solely as content or representation, which implies the iconological category of mimesis, but rather in terms of the energetic tensions that facilitate its expression. This perspective aligns more closely with the performative category of metamorphosis rather than that of mimesis.

In the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, as mentioned, this very aspect is captured through frequent references to festivals. In the fragment 410 of 1901 Warburg recognises how

Festwesen unterscheidet sich dadurch von den andern dramatischen Künsten daß die Verbindung der künstlerischen Leistung mit dem praktischen Anlaß (der mimische soziale Reiz) nötig ist. Der Aufzug, die Procession, der Trionfo der zum Endpunkt (Ziel) das Opfergeschenk hat. (Warburg 2011, 144, translation mine)

[Festivals differ from other dramatic arts because they require the connection of an artistic performance and a concrete occasion (the social mimicry stimulus). The pageant, procession, and triumph that have as their end point (purpose) the sacrificial offering.]

In notes penned much later, in 1924, within the margins of a lecture delivered by Karl Reinhardt at the Warburg Haus in Hamburg on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus and the festivals are described by Warburg as "Darwin's missing link for artistic creation" (Warburg 2021, 513). This echoes the fragment 420 from 1901 where Darwin heads the list of Filippino Lippi, Botticelli, Carlyle, Vischer, festivals, the Hopi, the Tornabuoni, Ghirlandaio, and back to the nymph, via Lorenzo Il Magnifico⁴ (Warburg 2011, 147).

⁴ See Warburg 2011, 147, fr. 420: "Automatische Reizausgleichung durch unorgani-

The reference to Darwin in Warburg's notes suggests an association with the study of mimicry and gestures as the foundational elements for understanding the genesis of cultural processes that culminate in the most refined forms of art. Warburg suggests that the genesis of art can be traced from the immediate mimicry prompted by the *pathos* of experience to artistic manifestations, for example, those that he, in the 414 fragment of 1901, recognises as: "ornamental figures that are the physiognomic precipitate of the mimicry of royal feasts. Degeneration (decay) through the deterioration (real or through animated recollection) of the immediate mimic stimulus" ("Ornamentale Figuren der physiognomische Niederschlag der realen festlichen Mimik. Entartung (Verfall) durch Absterben des unmittelbaren mimischen Reizes"; Warburg 2011, 145, Fr. 414 - 31.7.901).

During his university years, Warburg engaged with Darwin's seminal work, "The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals" (1872), wherein the discernible influence on the *Pathosformel* concept becomes apparent. In Warburg's view, gestures serve as subtle remnants of intentional and dynamic actions executed in the past, a perspective inspired by Darwin's exploration of expressions and emotions in human and animal behaviour. A performative conception, wherein gesture is considered a cultural expression, entails a memorial stratification connected to its repetitive nature and subsequent reactivation.

If experience leads to the formation of ritualistic and artistic expressions, these formations are prone to undergo mechanical repetition over time, devoid of their original vitality. However, a renewed contact with life has the potential to metamorphose these expressions into novel forms. The genesis of artistic creation has its origin in this dialectic, where the tension between established forms and the vitality of lived experience sparks the evolution and innovation of artistic expression. The engagement with life, characterized by *pathos*, not only revitalizes forms but also shapes the connection with memory. It goes beyond mere survival of a memory that can be mimetically reconstructed; instead, it involves the potential to re-live an experience. This concept is encapsulated in terms such as reenactment, embodied and relived memory, and, consequently, *Nachleben* (survival or afterlife) – interpreted as *Nach-erleben* (reliving or re-experiencing) – signifying the ability to undergo a renewed experience (Bonneau 2022, 21-6).

sche / Umfangserfüllung / die Nymphe als Umfangsbestimmung endlich zusammen. Von Darwin über Filippino zu Botticelli durch Carlyle und Vischer zum Festwesen zu den Indianern und durch die Tornabuoni mit Ghirlandajo wieder zur Nymphe . . . " (Automatic balancing of impulse through inorganic fulfillment of scope, the nymph has determination of scope finally together. From Darwin to Filippino to Botticelli through Carlyle and Vischer to festival culture to the Hopi and through the Tornabuoni with Ghirlandaio and back to the nymph . . .).

Psychology assumes a pivotal role in Warburgian theory, drawing substantiation from Darwinian evolutionary theory. However, its emphasis lies more in elucidating an inchoative process than in providing an explanation for the anachronistic return of a memory object. Secular festivals appear to Warburg as “faded forms” of cultic practice:

Die Perioden des Schwankens zwischen den Polen. Der Atarachie / Contemplatio und der Ekstase / Knisis - als Kreislaufgesetze erkennbar wenn wir die kultliche Praxis, deren abgeschwächte Formen wir als Welt. Festwesen festzustellen haben, als Zwischenleiter zwischen Religion und Begriff als katalytische Funktion in der Prägung der Ausdruckswerte begreifen, da sie das Summum der Eindrücke gestaltend sammeln und doch noch leidende Bewegung ist. (WIA, 1.9.18.4.2.3.1, fol. 15, translation mine)

[The periods of fluctuation between the poles. Ataraxia / *contemplatio* and ecstasy / *kinesis* are recognizable as laws of circular motion if we conceive cultic praxis, whose faded forms we have fixed as profane festivals, as an intermediate scale between religion and concept as a catalytic function in the coinage of expressive values, since cultic praxis collects by forming them the sum of impressions, yet is still a suffering movement.]

Festivals emerge within a historical phase characterized by oscillation between these dialectical poles, heralding the formalisation of *pathos*, of lived experience, alongside the coinage of new forms. The mythical ritual complex embodied by Orpheus is invoked to disrupt crystallised forms within mannerism and give rise to the emergence of novel forms, particularly within the framework of festivals acknowledged as precursors to innovative theatrical genres.

In his 1927 autobiographical text *Vom Arsenal zum Laboratorium*, Warburg states how Poliziano, mediating the Ovidian passage via Orpheus, has been “the mediator of antique movements in dramatic representation”. For this reason, his work is to be regarded: “the main thread that allowed me to penetrate the labyrinth of intellectual interrelations, which revealed to me also, as its ripest fruit and as a problem to be solved, the northern drama of the soul (Shakespeare!)” (Warburg 2012a, 115).

In the given context, the characterization by Warburg of Poliziano’s text as the “first Italian tragedy” holds notable significance. Defying clear categorization, this piece, has been subject to diverse interpretations, being alternatively identified as a sacred representation of a pagan theme, a representative eclogue, a mythological fable, a fable, a pastoral drama, or a mixed form of drama. It can be inferred that, according to Warburg, the nascent theatrical form that emerged at the dawn of the Renaissance was inherently tragic, precisely because it was nascent. It was the new stylistic form emerged from the polaric process of its formation, from the interweaving

of *pathos* and *ethos*, the Apollonian and Dionysian, embodied in the symbolic figure of Orpheus. Warburg seems to contend that the fundamental tension of tragedy underlies the birth of all theatrical forms, including the works of Shakespeare. At the core of authentic artistic creation of new forms lies a tragic matrix, a concept akin to the one Warburg identifies at the roots of civilisation.

In the *Introduction* to the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, artistic creation is included among the foundational acts of civilisation and described as a mechanism through which humanity navigates and orients itself within the world. The significance of artistic creation resides in the intricate interplay between the self, as the subjective entity, and the external world, perceived as the objective realm. Warburg designates the creation of a conscious distance between the self and the external world as the foundational act of human civilisation; this intermediate space serves as the substrate for artistic creation (Warburg 2017, 11-29).

In this text, Apollo and Dionysus – emblematic of *sophrosyne* and *ecstasy* respectively – emerge as two indissoluble poles that give rise to the *Denkraum*. This term was coined by Warburg in *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther* (1920) to denote space for thought and is composed together with *sophrosyne* (*Denkraum der Besonnenheit*). This mental space acquired through artistic expression lies in the fragile ground between the two limiting poles of psychic behaviour, namely “tranquil contemplation” on the one hand and “orgiastic devotion” on the other. In comprehending the artistic act, characterized by Warburg as a civilizational act, one must be willing to:

descend into the deep human spiritual compulsion to become enmeshed in the timeless strata of the material. Only then does one reach the mint that coins the expressive values of pagan emotion stemming from primal orgiastic experience: thiasotic tragedy. (Warburg 2017, 18-19)

As observed, the concept of *Pathosformel* encapsulates the fusion of *pathos* and *stasis*, incorporating the dynamism of movement alongside the enduring nature of form (*Formel*) (Settis 2012, 269-89). Hence, it is justifiable to regard the *Pathosformel* as “an expression aligning with the mental space of reflection”, akin to the *Denkraum*, as articulated by Ulrich Port (Port 2004, 42). The radical and tragic polarity between *ethos* and *pathos*, as previously delineated in the two-faced herm of Apollo-Dionysus, is therefore conceived both in expressive forms of emotion precariously crystallised in *formulae*, recognizable in a rhetoric of gesture (the *Pathosformeln*), and in the dialectical interplay that nurtures the space for thought (the *Denkraum*), from which the artistic act emanates. *Denkraum* can be defined as the space for thought that emerges between impulse and action; it represents a suspended moment,

which Warburg recognizes as inherently dramatic.

This concept is exemplified in Warburg's analysis of the image of Medea, immortalized in the instant just preceding the act of infanticide. The image in question is taken from a fresco located in Pompeii, specifically within the House of the Dioscuri. In this depiction, Medea is portrayed holding a dagger, as she contemplates killing her children who are playing not far from her, and Warburg dwells on it often both in his written works and by including the image in some of the plates of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. In Medea's gesture, Warburg discerns the poignancy and drama of the transitory moment in the symbolic interval of suspension. Within this symbolic suspension, Warburg identifies the potential for a demonic experience that can propel individuals towards unrestrained expression. He attributes this insight to the teachings of "Religionshistoriker, Philologen und Psychologen" (critics of religion, philologists, and psychologists), as mentioned in a passage from his lecture *Italienische Antike im Zeitalter Rembrandts* (1926), specifically referencing the Pompeian image (Warburg 2012b, 100).

Furthermore, it is not challenging to perceive a correlation between the suspended gestures of Medea and the persona of another theatrical character, Hamlet. Both are characterized by a similar hesitation and delay in carrying out an act of revenge. Warburg identifies "the Hamlet problems of the agony of conscience between reflex movement and reflective behaviour" ("Hamletproblemen der Gewissensqual zwischen Reflexbewegung und Reflexionsverhalten"), a concept he acknowledges and occasionally references, particularly in his study of Rembrandt's *Claudius Civilis* (Warburg 2012b, 99, translation mine). In this moment of suspension, characterized as "the eternally fleeting pause between impulse and action" ("Die ewig flüchtige Pause zwischen Antrieb und Handlung"), where the dynamics of stimulus and response unfold, the full creative, formative (and at the same time potentially destructive) power of gesture as the first artistic form par excellence is revealed. "Es steht bei uns", Warburg writes, "wie lange wir mit Hilfe der Mnemosyne die Atempause dehnen können" (it is a pause of breathing, which it is up to us to decide how far to dilate, with the help of *Mnemosyne*; 2012b, 101).

The intermediate dimension of festivals, where Aby Warburg identifies the potential for dismantling antiquated forms and introducing new ones, resonates with the mid-Enlightenment reflections of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on festivals as opposed to theatre. Rousseau's perspectives on this matter are evident, for instance, in his *Lettre à d'Alambert* (1758) and *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* (1771-1772); and specifically, this alignment resonates with the "generative model" attributed to Rousseau's conception of festivals, as highlighted by Marco De Marinis (2004, 35). This model revolves around the interplay of two contrasting elements: the festival as an

entirely spontaneous and disinterested occurrence that facilitates the release of unbridled energy, and the festival as an organized institution and tool of public pedagogy, directed towards representation. These two contrasting poles attributable to ‘revolution’ (understood as the emergence of a novel form) and order (understood as the repetition of the same form) encapsulate the dual elements inherent in the Warburgian concept of the *Pathosformel*: the bivalent significance of *pathos* and *ethos*, embodied in the mythical figure of Orpheus and in his revitalized ritual and civic function during the early Renaissance.

In this regard, to return to the reflection on contemporary and performance studies, one could note the resonance between the revival of the Orpheus myth at the dawn of the Italian Renaissance – evidenced by a surge in visual representations such as images, drawings, sculptures, and engravings, along with its incorporation into theatrical performances (Bortoletti 2020) – and the role shaping by the resurgence of the Dionysus myth since the late 1960s. This resurgence is manifested through the remarkable proliferation of Euripides’ *Bacchae* in theatrical productions (Fischer-Lichte 2014; Hall, Macintosh, Wrigley, 2004).

This global phenomenon has been specifically examined by Erika Fischer-Lichte, who discerned in it a pivotal historical transition fostering the emergence of revitalized forms of expression, concurrent with the ascendancy of the performative dimension over the representative one. Dionysus, the deity associated with inebriation, the negation of the *principium individuationis*, and the rejection of any unequivocal definition of identity, has resurged as a central figure in twentieth-century culture. The dysfunctional and conflicting mythical realm depicted in Greek tragedy provides an aesthetic and cultural prism through which to interpret the comparably disordered and conflicting aspects of contemporary reality. Richard Schechner’s *Dionysus in 69* serves as a seminal work in this resurgence, representing one of the pivotal moments in the performative turn, marked by its significant ritual bearing.

Fischer-Lichte observes how the performative turn in the late 19th and early 20th centuries went hand in hand with a shift in the theatre, overturning the hierarchy between text and performance, and at the same time redefining the relationship between ritual and myth. While, in the 19th century, myth was seen as primary and ritual only as its illustration, scholars such as William Robertson Smith, James George Frazer, Jane Ellen Harrison and Emile Durkheim reversed this hierarchy, and recognised that the ritual, as “not simply a thing done but a thing re-done or pre-done”, came first (Fischer-Lichte 2001, 277-91). The same could be said about the “transitional forms” Warburg recognises in Renaissance festivals as embryonic manifestations of the emerging art, which have no connection with dramatic art built on

words and text (myth), but exhibit highly expressive, mimetic, and gestural qualities (ritual).

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