

# Aby Warburg and the Communicative Dimension of the Image: Critical Essays and Three Unpublished Works

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## Abstract

The book *A fórmula da paixão* (*The Formula of Passion*), edited by Leão Serva and Norval Baitello Junior, presents the Brazilian public with three unpublished sources by Aby Warburg, along with six critical studies. Covering topics such as the “pathos formula”, the communicative dimension of the image, and its political-ideological use, the work makes an important contribution to the Warburg debate in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Aby Warburg; Pathosformel; Atlas Mnemosyne; image theory.

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The name of the art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) has become increasingly relevant in Brazilian academic circles, whether through the translation of his texts<sup>1</sup>, the dissemination of the works of renowned interpreters<sup>2</sup> or the emergence of a flourishing national bibliography<sup>3</sup>. This reception of Warburg has just received a new boost with the collection *The Formula of Passion*, a series of articles and documents compiled by Leão Serva and Norval Baitello Junior that make a significant contribution to the debates on the author.

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<sup>1</sup> This endeavor began with the collection edited by Contraponto (Warburg, 2013) and continued with the works organized by Leopoldo Waizbort (Warburg, 2015b) and Cássio Fernandes (Warburg, 2018). Also worth mentioning is the collection of texts published in Portugal (Warburg, 2015a).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the book by Didi-Huberman (2013), which was published at the same time as the book by Philippe-Alain Michaud (2013).

<sup>3</sup> The dossiers published in *Figura* (Fernandes, 2017), *Modos* (Casazza & Pugliese, 2020) and *Art Research Journal* (Casazza et al., 2022) are worth mentioning here.

In the introduction, one can already recognize the tone that the organizers set for the work: a humanized Warburg who possessed a great sensitivity for images; a bibliophile who bequeathed to posterity not only an extensive library in which the “books speak to each other” (p. 6), but also an innovative project, an atlas that was to bring together a “collection of panels with ‘families of images’” (p. 10).

The “three unpublished fragments” appear directly after the introduction. Despite their brevity, these primary sources (which are rarely explored even in the international literature) richly convey certain nuances of Warburg’s academic activities between 1914 and 1918 that dealt with the problem of the image and its use in political propaganda. The first document is a letter from Warburg in which he discusses his project for a magazine entitled *La Guerra del 1914*. Here, he presents his initiatives to spread the German perspective through images. The second document is a letter from 1917 in which Warburg describes his collection of more than 50,000 index cards on the history of the Great War. The third document is a text published in *Die literarische Gesellschaft* (1918), which deals with the ideological use of art and the role of the press in contemporary reporting.

The first article in the collection, *From the formula of pathos to the atlas of gesture language*, written by Claudia Wedepohl, deals with the construction of the well-known concept of the “pathos formula” (*Pathosformel*). According to Wedepohl, this concept finds an explicit reference in Warburg’s essay on Dürer (p. 37) and an indirect appearance in the thesis on Botticelli, namely in the conception of the “pathos formula as externalization of an affect” (p. 26). Central to Wedepohl’s argument is the interpretation of the essay on Dürer as a fundamental moment in Warburg’s work, outlining the four basic concepts (exchange, migration, afterlife, memory) that were to characterize the great project of his last years (p. 43), the Mnemosyne Atlas. What is striking in the analytical structure of the article is the careful handling of archival sources and the meticulous analysis of Warburg’s conceptual thinking. This reflects the recent interest of scholars in primary sources, which have long played a peripheral role in bibliography<sup>4</sup>.

*References of a nameless science* by Marie-Anne Lescourret continues the collection by taking up the problem of Warburg’s methodological novelty, a theme related to the expression originally formulated by Robert Klein (1998, p. 207) and later reinterpreted by Giorgio Agamben (1984). The article revisits the problem of overcoming the Winckelmannian legacy and the formulation of a new approach to art history that is closely linked to the anthropological dimension of the image and Warburg’s emphasis on the “relationship of man to his environment” (p. 53). According to Lescourret, in order to determine the theoretical roots of

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<sup>4</sup> In 2003, Papapetros made the following diagnosis: “It is certainly a curious phenomenon that the entire literary industry about Warburg has been generated in the absence of Warburg’s own work, which in large proportion remains unpublished today” (Papapetros, 2003, 174).

Warburg's method, one must understand its inner dynamics, as a process of overcoming aestheticism, but not as a purely positivist approach that would mean the “privileging of reason over passion” (p. 54). On the contrary, Warburg chooses a comprehensive approach to the human sciences based on the work of the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. He also opens the field of art history to images of little esthetic value (p. 60) and introduces the concept of “science of culture” (*Kulturwissenschaft*) as an “instrument for observing the depth of the image and the continuity between the visible and the invisible” (p. 62).

*Idea vincit! Some images tangential to Aby Warburg's ellipse*, signed by Norval Baitello Junior, deals with the last decade of Warburg's career, and bring an interesting project to the center of the discussion, that consisted of creating a stamp with the phrase “idea vincit!” (the idea wins!)<sup>5</sup>. Baitello Junior uses this object to show how Warburg's interests as an image scholar were linked to his civic and political commitment. The basis of the argument is the idea of “directive images”, a concept formulated by the psychiatrist Karl Heinrich Fierz, that implies the existence of images with remarkable symbolic content that act as references for maintaining the strength and cohesion of societies (p. 64). This concept, ingeniously introduced into the debate, allows us to understand the importance of images for Warburg and the meaning that a stamp bearing the names of foreign ministers – Briand, Stresemann, Chamberlain – could have for an intellectual convinced of the need for victory “through ideas, not weapons” (p. 67). At the same time, the essay offers a rich philological analysis of the concept of “pathos formula” (p. 68) and “after-life” (*Nachleben*), which in the latter case differs from Didi-Huberman's proposed translation of the term as “survival” (p. 70).

While the discussions in the first three essays focused more on theoretical and methodological issues, Peter Schwartz's article *Aby Warburg's archive of the Great War* introduces a series of analyzes that concentrate on visual sources. Schwartz focuses on the so-called “index cards of the war” (*Kriegskartothek*), material that has largely been lost (only three of the 72 original boxes are still extant) (p. 78). Indeed, it consists of a collection of notecards containing mainly extracts or paragraphs from newspaper and magazine articles. In addition to the notes, which show how Warburg was concerned with the “mobilization of human irrationality in a moment of political crisis” (p. 80), the boxes contain collections of images depicting figures such as Bismarck or issues such as Jewish involvement in the First World War (p. 95). More generally, Schwartz's text offers an interesting description of the “index cards of the war” and the accompanying images, and points to possible connections with projects such as the magazine *La Guerra del 1914* and Warburg's essay on Luther (p. 106).

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<sup>5</sup> An important reference for the study of the postage stamp is the text by McEwan (2005).

The debate initiated by Schwartz is continued by Leão Serva in *The photographic collection of Word War First in the Warburg archive*, an essay that analyzes the details of the collection of images Warburg assembled during the First World War. In contrast to Schwartz, who sees no direct connection between the *Kriegskartheek* and the photographic archive (p. 96), Serva asserts a direct link between these two projects and even suggests, in agreement with Didi-Huberman, the harmony between the photo collection and the Mnemosyne Atlas (p. 118). In addition, the essay looks at the impact of contemporary events on Warburg and shows that the photographic archive does not reflect an attenuated view of the conflict (as Schwartz claims). Serva provides some interesting examples that show the apocalyptic side of the First World War: the theme of pain and death in the photograph of a Jewish funeral (p. 124) and in the image of amputated soldiers (p. 125); the theme of life after death in the image of a knight with lance and gas mask (p. 126); the theme of destruction in the photographs of destroyed monuments (p. 127-128).

Based on Warburg's findings, *Questions of distance – Pathosformel as image of thought* by Pablo Schneider discusses the subject of "images" and attempts to establish some links between Warburg's work and later photographic production. The essay is based on two basic assumptions: the idea, which refers to Leonardo da Vinci's treatise on painting, of the representation of movement as a "means of communication for states of mind" (p. 136); the idea of journalistic photographs as possible forms of expression of a visual language that can express pathos (p. 139). Based on these perceptions, the author draws some parallels, for example, between an ancient fresco depicting the Dance of the Maenads and an Indian woman at a student protest (p. 139), between an image from plate 79 of the Mnemosyne Atlas and a scene from the 1959 television series *Bonanza* (p. 150). In fact, these connections are based more on the esthetic and compositional sense of the images than on direct links. However, they are quite intuitive suggestions that can be seen as an important reference for the study of contemporary images from a "Warburgian" perspective<sup>6</sup>.

The collection ends with an epilog by Leão Serva and Baitello Junior entitled *Mnemosyne Atlas, Warburg's Algorithm*. The project of compiling a series of texts that emphasize the contemporary relevance and communicative dimension of Warburg's great legacy could not have found a better conclusion. In the end, the organizers leave us with more provocations than solutions, emulating a style of reflection characteristic of Warburg: Can we imagine the genealogy of images constructed by Atlas Mnemosyne as an intersection of images, similar to that of Google? What do the early 20th century image scholar and the 21st century search engine have in common? "Would the process that Warburg performs with his trained eyes on

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<sup>6</sup> A contemporary example of the study of images, strongly inspired by Warburg, is the "political iconography", a project based on a method of working with images similar to the Mnemosyne Atlas (Fleckner *et al.*, 2011, p.11).

the panels of the atlas have been included in the computer programs that became Google Images?” (p. 157).

*The Formula of Passion*<sup>7</sup> is an ingenious and provocative collection that will undoubtedly establish itself as an important chapter in the history of Warburg’s reception in our country.

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<sup>7</sup> So, what is the “formula of passion”? The collection contains no reference to this original and audacious translation of the term *Pathosformel*. However, in a recent article, the organizers define it: “The ‘formula of passion’ is nothing more than a strong trigger that elicits affective responses in those who interact with the images” (Baitello Jr. & Serva, 2022, p. 9).