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On Form: Wind and Warburg Examined¹

Guido Boffi

Kunst ist Magie, befreit von der Lüge, Wahrheit zu sein.
Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

Abstract

These days, forms of artistic products mostly belong to the universe of the generalized visual regime. Can we mean the same thing when we apply the expression ‘form of the artwork’ to the products of our time as well as to the works described by Wind and especially by Warburg? In other words: what is *the issue* of the artwork’s form? I maintain that the compelling nature of the question of form may well emerge in the light of the writings of Wind and Warburg. For both, the artwork reveals itself as the connection *along time* between the deep background (mythical-energetic), and its phenomenality, in which it materializes but can never be exhausted. In this sense, the form is the differential between *being* and a *configuring*, expressive force. Warburg’s research moves from a primitive (prelinguistic) background to its redefinition in panels and linkages of meaning (the *Bilderatlas*); Wind goes the opposite way: from Panofsky-like schematism to empirics and historicity.

Keywords

Artwork; Form; Historicity; Myth; Time

1.

I remember seeing many years ago an elegant exhibition of primitive masks and other ritual objects at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, where they were relished for their sheer formal beauty by a group of intelligent connoisseurs; and I must say that in that tasteful

¹ The text has been translated by Emma Mandley.

setting they looked as harmless and wholesome as a basket of fresh eggs. There was not a drop of poison left in them. They had all become pure art.²

Wind wrote these words for ‘Aesthetic Participation’, the second in a series of six Reith lectures broadcast by the BBC in 1960, published the same year in *The Listener*, and edited, revised and expanded three years later in the collection *Art and Anarchy*. With a philologist’s precision, a philosopher’s argumentative clarity, and the elegant appeal of a conversation that demands to be followed, the entire series of lectures was unsparing in its criticism of art that had become inessential and fatuous. What kind of art did he mean? Art that is comforting; art that is too easily assimilated; art that slips smoothly into the art system: regardless of style, art such as this is stripped of its own authority.

Wind radically rejects any tendency to fetishize art’s autonomy. This has inevitable repercussions for the study of aesthetics, whether it be the aesthetic of ‘art for art’s sake’ or pure form, of the avant-garde or immediacy. In his judgement, these aesthetological positions all stem from a one-sided grasp of certain themes that emerged in early German Romanticism, notably in Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis: the aesthetic of the interesting, of the fragment or sketch, of unreflecting spontaneity. Closer to home than those lofty progenitors, we encounter aesthetics informed by embarrassing triviality, whose aim is to hand out prescriptions offering immediate relief to the impatient, the shallow lovers of perfection.

There is a deception lurking in formalistic art theory and aesthetic purism, cloaked in scientific pretensions. An *abstract* deception. ‘The treatment of art *as if it were pure* has proved a useful and economical fiction, not unlike the construction of models in science’.³ Thinking ‘in morphological classes’ is thus in itself helpful, not least in terms of establishing models for purposes of stylistic classification. However, it is fatal if the model ends up being ‘confused with the thing’, when there is no way back from the abstraction. The theory of pure art suppresses the reality, the thing and the artwork that actually exist, and so: ‘Intent on establishing an artistic experience that is clear, tidy, and direct, it overcleans the work of art and transforms it into an aesthetic dummy’.⁴ Art, if it surrenders to this, if it becomes art for art’s sake, is reduced to a recreation like any other. Pure entertainment, a *divertissement*.

² Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 3rd edn, with an introduction by John Bayley and addenda incorporated in the notes (London and Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 28. On this work, see the recent publication by Ben Thomas, *Edgar Wind and Modern Art: In Defence of Marginal Anarchy* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020). The critical bibliography relating to Wind has grown, after decades of neglect, while there is now a vast number of publications relating to Warburg: in the present essay I must confine myself, for reasons of space, to indicating just a few of the recent studies on both. There are many relevant articles and perceptive reviews in *La Rivista di Engramma* (www.egramma.it), edited by Monica Centanni.

³ Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, p. 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

In these lectures, Wind is still referring to the debate that arose between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth concerning the form of the artwork and formalist theories: from Riegl to Wölfflin, from Croce to Berenson. Why should this be of any interest to us? Has this debate not been entirely settled?

Until it was discussed in the second half of the last century, autonomous art incorporated at least one heteronomous claim, that of presenting itself as an alternative to the world of economics. These days, forms of artistic products mostly belong to the universe of the generalized visual regime. This is a plural universe, certainly, yet almost entirely absorbed into the only *format* still available, institutional spectacularization, ready to draw in artists, operators, displays, promotions, the market and consumers no less than artworks.

With a momentum that has become increasingly urgent in the new millennium, the mimetic, expressive and visual explosion of artistic practices, together with the acceleration in media and technology, have led to a crisis, or at least a greater fluidification of consolidated approaches to art: not only in history but in criticism, philosophy and aesthetics. This being the case, how can we possibly claim that the historical, cultural, epistemic, linguistic and conceptual leap that lies behind us is reversible? Can we mean the same thing when we apply the expression ‘form of the artwork’ to the products of our time as well as to the works described by Wind and especially by Warburg? In other words: what is *the issue* of the artwork’s form?

2.

I think I can answer that the issue of form, if we grasp what is at stake when we interrogate it – and in this regard Wind and Warburg provide us with a valuable vantage point – continues to be a matter of interest, not only in terms of a historiographic debate about the history of theories, methodologies or aesthetics, depending on areas of concern and points of view. No, the central focus remains theoretical. Hence, even while taking into account the technological leap and the new constituent features of artistic events and products, the question of form is by no means exhausted. It was not exhausted by the debate about formalism in art that took place about a century ago; it is not exhausted today by the advent of a generalized visual universe that fills our lives with screens, images, devices of every size and purpose, which are no more aesthetic-artistic than practical-financial. It has not been condemned to ultimate insignificance or irrelevance by this whirling, polyfocal, externalized artistic activity, which in itself does not feel in any way obliged to *conform* to particular linguistic criteria.

However, I do not intend to turn this into an anapodictic assertion. In fact, I maintain that the compelling nature of the question of form may well emerge in the light

of the writings of Wind and Warburg. We must therefore return to Wind: once again, for the moment, to the second lecture in *Art and Anarchy*.

This contains a passage worth reading, because it *radically* illustrates the artistic sphere:

Art is an exercise of the imagination, engaging and detaching us at the same time: it makes us participate in what it presents, and yet presents it as an aesthetic fiction. From that twofold Root – participation and fiction – art draws its power to enlarge our vision by carrying us beyond the actual, and to deepen our experience by compassion; but it brings with it a pertinent oscillation between actual and vicarious experience. Art lives in this realm of ambiguity and suspense, and it is art only as long as the ambiguity is sustained.⁵

Wind is talking about art per se, with a barely concealed universalist impulse. His words ought to hold true for the prehistoric pantheon of figural and wall painting as much as for Picasso, for the earliest aboriginal art as much as for that of today, for Goya and Mondrian and Constable. In short, they ought to hold true for everything that we are accustomed to describe – a little conventionally and pragmatically – as ‘art’, without knowing exactly what lies behind that term, despite decades of analytical efforts that have sought to settle it for once and for all, deploying different argumentative strategies and using different conceptual tools. Could it be that art is in fact a functional, rather than material, designation for a somewhat varied morphological class of aesthetic phenomena related to doing? For the moment we can leave the question open. The clearest definition I am able to give is probably the one I took from aphorism 143 of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* to introduce this essay: ‘Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth’.⁶ This definition does not suppress magic in the name of rational truth but attributes a dimension that Adorno calls ‘enigmatic’ to the artistic sphere, very closely related to the dimension described by Warburg and Wind.⁷

Be that as it may, Wind’s point is this: the artistic sphere is innately ambiguous, based on both presence and detachment, on participation and fiction. Art is ambiguity oscillating between compassion in the actual experience and adventure in the vicarious experience.

No one could fail to see the perfect consistency between Wind’s words in the 1960 lecture and the important article he wrote in 1950, *The Eloquence of Symbols*:

⁵ Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, p. 24.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by Edmund F.N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 222.

⁷ On the magic dimension in Warburg, see the most recent study by Maurizio Ghelardi: ‘Magia bianca. Aby Warburg e l’astrologia: un “impulso selvaggio della scienza”’, in A. Warburg, *Astrologica. Saggi e appunti 1908-1929*, ed. by M. Ghelardi (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), pp. 7-70. Among Ghelardi’s edited works and essays on Warburg, all with a philological and philosophical focus, I will single out one publication: *Aby Warburg. La lotta per lo stile* (Turin: Aragno, 2012).

In the centre of any good symbol there is an opaque core which will not yield to rational analysis, although around this core translucent images may be grouped which draw from it their strength and denseness. [...] An eloquent symbol has a way of flattering our desire for depth without offending our sense of coherence. With a high degree of lucidity it manages to remain enigmatic. Its poetical force derives from a union of the transparent and the opaque.⁸

Wind is quite clearly engaged in a single, coherent and consistent discourse.

3.

Ambiguity is one of the terms (another, as we have seen, is *symbol*) that demonstrates that Wind has absorbed the Warburgian view of polarity and duality. It is the ambiguity in which *the transparent and the opaque* combine, yet prevent a rational unscrambling of the enigma that resides in their *formal unification*. Contemporary art is also drawn back to this, urged towards those mimetic-ritual well-springs of the *humanum* which consumed Warburg's research.

'From that twofold Root – participation and fiction': these were the words Wind used in his second BBC lecture. The expression immediately reminds me of the conclusion to a lecture Warburg gave in Florence in April 1914, *Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance*, written at a time when he was on the edge of a mental breakdown and the *zeitgeist* itself was collapsing towards the imminent First World War:

Die Renaissance hätte sich die Leidensgruppe des Laokoon – eben um ihrer erschütternden pathetischen Beredsamkeit willen – erfunden, wenn sie sie nicht entdeckt hätte. Wir entschlossen uns jetzt allmählich, diese klassische Unruhe als eine wesentliche Eigenschaft der antiken Kunst und Kultur anzusehn [...]. Das apollinische Ethos wächst mit dem dionysischen Pathos gleichsam als Doppelzweig aus einem Stamme hervor, der in den mysteriösen Tiefen des griechischen Mutterbodens wurzelt.⁹

I do not think enough has been made of the fact that by using the expression 'eloquence of symbols' Wind is explicitly referring to the 'overwhelming emotive eloquence' that Warburg saw in the *Laocoön*, while taking it to a broader affirmative plane. Warburg uses the term *Beredsamkeit*, which also appears in the title of the German version of Wind's work: *Die Beredsamkeit der Symbole*. A considered coincidence. Symbols, and therefore all enigmatically ambiguous artistic *forms*, have an eloquence expressed precisely in their evident reluctance to speak out, to draw aside the veil completely. If anything, they re-veil

⁸ Edgar Wind, 'The Eloquence of Symbols', *The Burlington Magazine*, 573 (1950), 438-486 (349), reissued unrevised in 1985 at the beginning of the second revised edition of the book of the same name.

⁹ Aby Warburg, 'Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance', in *Werke in einem Band*, ed. by M. Treml, S. Weigel and P. Ladwig, in co-operation with S. Hetzer, H. Kopp-Oberstebrink and C. Oberstebrink (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), pp. 281-310 (307-308).

as they reveal. Herein lies their greatest potentiality: in the ability to speak with overwhelming *emotive* eloquence, without ever exhausting what there is to be said. The surface of what is expressed, what is said, is rippled by an unexpressed depth, its mysterious presence felt in the form, as it were, on the skin of the image. It is true that this is made apparent to the viewer, yet only through ambiguous signs, insoluble droplets, in quick, fleeting movements such as those of the famous *nympha* in Ghirlandaio's Florentine fresco – a nymph whose very figure is ambiguous, twofold: she is certainly a bringer of gifts, as Ghirlandaio intended, but she is also a maenad or wild bacchante, who reappears in the guise of the grieving Magdalene ('und zwar unter der ausdrücklichen Verantwortlichkeit der heidnischen Kunst der Vorfahren')¹⁰ at the foot of the Cross in Bertoldo di Giovanni's bronze relief.

An Apollonian *ethos* and a Dionysian *pathos* sprout together from a single 'trunk rooted in the mysterious depths of the Greek motherland' – from a living, returning past. Warburg's research was obsessed with this, and he himself was overwhelmed by it. Perhaps it was inevitable, given that it concerned the form of his identity, in the way that it manifested itself at the time of his most significant health crisis, when he found himself exposed in every way to that 'other' which early on had flashed into his mind through the *biological necessity* of images: a necessity that he himself suffered as the 'highly sensitive seismograph' that he was, as were Burckhardt and Nietzsche. This necessity drove him towards a head-on collision with the history of European art, which was still shrouded in the aura of classicism and dominated by aestheticizing and formalistic criteria.

For Warburg, the question of form was directly focused on the *form of life* (in a biological and anthropological sense) and articulated as such; and through this, on *artistic form*: a repository, in its own 'style', of the codes of figurative expression.

4.

Perhaps, in order to understand what is meant by *form of life* when applying this expression to Aby Warburg's unique nature, it is first worth considering how he chose to define himself. No one has done it more clearly than he did when he described himself as 'Jewish by blood, Hamburger at heart, Florentine in spirit', as the art historian Gertrud Bing recalled in 1958, in the conclusion to her commemorative speech marking the unveiling of a bust of Warburg in Hamburg.¹¹ 'A rare *Verschmelzung* of those three elements', added

¹⁰ Warburg, *Der Eintritt*, p. 301.

¹¹ Gertrud Bing, *Aby M. Warburg. Vortrag anlässlich der feierlichen Aufstellung von Aby Warburgs Büste in der Hamburger Kunsthalle am 31. Oktober 1958* (Hamburg: [n. pub.], 1958), p. 32: 'Und nun lassen Sie mich mit einem kleinen autobiographischen Satz schließen, den Warburg einmal auf italienisch niedergeschrieben hat: "Ebreo di sangue, Amburghese di cuore, d'anima Fiorentino". "Jude von Geburt, Hamburger im Herzen, im Geiste ein Florentiner". Er hat selbst vielleicht gar nicht so genau gewußt, was für eine seltene Verschmelzung diese drei Elemente in ihm eingegangen waren'. For Gertrud Bing, see Laura Tack, *The Fortune of Gertrud Bing (1892-1964): A Fragmented Memoir of a Phantomlike Muse* (Leuven: Peters, 2020).

Bing, his closest collaborator. A ‘mixture’ or ‘fusion’ is the term she uses. Interestingly, Warburg paints a rather different picture of himself in a brief 1927 memoir:

when I look back on my life’s journey, it seems that my function has been to serve as a seismograph of the soul, to be placed along the dividing lines between different cultural atmospheres and systems. Placed by birth in the middle, between Orient and Occident, and driven by elective affinity into Italy.¹²

In the metaphor of the seismograph, which Warburg applied to Burckhardt and Nietzsche in the same year,¹³ the specific description of being placed along the *dividing* lines between different cultures suggests a need to keep them apart, rather than merging into them, so as to absorb the seismic force, the shock wave, and to precisely pinpoint the fault line’s fracture. Warburg saw himself as being on the boundary between opposing elements: between East and West, between pagan antiquity and the Christian Renaissance, between instinctive energy and structured intelligence – between cultures neither merged nor reconciled, nor separate, but always oscillating in his soul, seeking a balance that was not always achieved. It was never possible to pin them down for once and for all on a single map. In this sense even his complex identity could perhaps be seen as reflected in, or projected onto, Panel A of the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, the introductory panel dedicated to *orientation* as a *system of relationships*: a cosmological, geographical and genealogical orientation.¹⁴

At the beginning of his posthumous essay dedicated to Burckhardt and Nietzsche, we come across the expression ‘mnemonic wave’ (*mnemische Welle*). By this, Warburg means the ebb and flow of impacts that a civilization feels when it is steadily pounded by the survival of its own past. This dynamic appears and reappears as much in collective as in individual memory, by whose waves he was himself buffeted.

¹² WIA III.93.8: this consists of five typewritten pages regarding the second voyage to America that Warburg had planned, but which Binswanger dissuaded him from undertaking.

¹³ See Warburg, ‘Schlußsitzung der Burckhardt Uebung’, in *Werke*, pp. 695-699, especially p. 695.

¹⁴ The caption reads: ‘Different systems of relationships in which mankind is involved: cosmic, earthly, genealogical. The equation of all these relationships in magical thinking, since separating ancestry, place of birth and cosmic circumstances already presupposes an intellectual feat. 1) Orientation. 2) Exchange. 3) Social classification’; Warburg, *Bilderatlas ‘Mnemosyne’: The Original*, ed. by R. Ohrt and A. Heil, in cooperation with Haus der Kulturen der Welt/The Warburg Institute (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020), p. 24. All three of the images displayed on the panel suggest variations on an idea: the classical, the founding tradition of European culture, cannot be found as such in any supposed identity of enduring values presumed to apply outside those interactions, mutations, transmigrations, peregrinations and hybridizations from which it is actually formed (in a vertical sense, in space and time: from earth to sky and from sky to earth, from past to present and from present to past; and in a horizontal sense: respectively from north to south and south to north, from east to west and west to east, from land to land and from ocean to ocean).

In Warburg's view, it is Nietzsche who expresses the power of active forgetting with regard to rhetoric that idealizes Greek genius.¹⁵ Yet at the same time he is a typical example of Dionysian surrender to the mnemonic wave, in which, as it were, he finds oblivion, dissolving to the point where he himself becomes the wave. Conversely, Burckhardt keeps his distance from the Apollonian spirit, perceiving the danger of being permanently swept away by it. The polarity that these two figures represent is, very significantly, one of inseparable opposites. Because if it is necessary, on the one hand, to move away from the idea of a superior, universalized and original classicism, absolved of its actual history, on the other hand it is also necessary not to be seduced or overwhelmed by the equally totalitarian power that wants it forgotten. This power, while writing off classicism's presumed purity and permanence, ends in eliminating both the syncretism and the singularity that constitute its actual features. In this sense, both Nietzsche and Burckhardt seem to Warburg, as they still do to us, to be 'grafted onto the same trunk', representing memory, to which they fundamentally belong. Their very opposition is therefore also fundamental – and thus insoluble.

The first step, and perhaps still the most important, is to recognize the polarity and the rhythm, the beat of memory and the lifting of oblivion. For Warburg, it is this that nourishes the human imagination, creator of simulacra, forms and connections. In fact, it is always the subject of a battle between the two poles: the lively Dionysian nymph (the mania represented by the Bacchic maenad's exuberant, orgiastic vitality) and the static, melancholic Apollonian god (the depression present in contemplative stillness). One of his last notes, written in April 1929, spells this out lucidly, projecting the same form onto his life experience:

Manchmal kommt es mir vor, als ob ich als Psychohistoriker die Schizophrenie des Abendlandes aus dem Bildhaften in selbstbiografischen Reflex abzuleiten versuche: Die extatische Nymphe (Manisch) einerseits und der trauernde Flussgott (depressiv) andererseits als Pole zwischen denen der Eindrucksempfindliche seinen tätigen Stil zu finden versucht. Das alte Kontrastorspiel: Vita aktiva und vita kontemplativa.¹⁶

¹⁵ Nietzsche waged a bitter and violent battle against the persistent, gilded but deceptive image of Hellas, at least as early as in his private notes of 1875, as well as in his lectures on *The Divine Service of the Greeks* (1875-78), given when he was teaching classical philology in Basel, and later, after his public breakthrough, in *Human, All Too Human* (1878-80). He was the anatomist of the 'impure thought' of the Greeks and the genealogist of the exchange effected by tradition between the 'human element (*das Menschliche*)' revealed by antiquity and 'the humanist element (*mit dem Humanen*)'. Today, we are more aware that the classical is not a monolith that the Greeks supposedly created out of nothing and then handed down to the Romans. In this context see Monica Centanni, 'L'originale assente', in *L'originale assente. Introduzione allo studio della tradizione classica*, ed. by Monica Centanni (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2005), pp. 3-41; Salvatore Settis, *The future of the 'Classical'*, trans. by Allan Cameron (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Warburg, 'Aufzeichnungen, 1927-29', in *Werke*, pp. 640-646 (645).

5.

All Warburg's work is a study of the surface movement of the mnemonic wave and the play of currents that carry it along. He follows their flows and interruptions. He invented a device to capture them: the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, an atlas of images of Western cultural memory, which absorbed him for thirty years before his death put an end to its further development. This atlas of simulacra, which were intended almost to speak for themselves by virtue of their emotive eloquence – like the quotations Benjamin gathered for what would have been his book on Paris *passages*, that other immense unfinished work of the first half of the twentieth century – is without doubt Warburg's most ambitious venture.¹⁷ Warburg wanted it to be an experiment in 'eine Wissenschaft der bildlichen Orientierung', a science of *orientation* in the form of images.¹⁸ The production of this atlas required him to grapple with mnestic simulacra, digging into the constituent depths of *logos* and *pathos*, of human expression and experience. Warburg brought into play a series of conceptual oppositions that characterize European cultural memory: Christian/pagan, classical/Gothic, Western/Eastern, Olympian/demonic, Apollonian/Dionysian, ethos/pathos, logic/magic, form/delirium, action/impulse, ascent/descent and many others. In these pairs he never sought to express a dualism, just as he did not diminish their polarities through identification and superimposition, but allowed the imagination's creative potential for connections to flow through them, at the service of what he chose to call 'Ikonologie des Zwischenraums'.¹⁹

The *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* is a kind of Apollonian-Dionysian cognitive machine conceived as a didactic device: a series of printed reproductions of figurative works (paintings, drawings, marble reliefs, sarcophagi and photographs) but also newspaper cuttings, postcards and postage stamps, mounted in groups on panels covered in black hessian. His last version of the Atlas consisted of seventy-nine panels.²⁰ This risky project cannot be understood only in iconographic and rational terms. Rather, it requires an openness to the impact of the energies concentrated in the simulacra, which reverberate so eloquently from those panels. This is knowledge through possession, and therefore an Apollonian-Dionysian machine, destined as such to invalidate any provisionally fixed order in the arrangement of images. The *Atlas* does not establish either the meanings of the

¹⁷ I began to take note of the affinity of themes and problems uniting the research of Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg in an article I wrote many years ago: Guido Boffi, 'Immagini della memoria. Warburg e Benjamin', in *Rivista di Filosofia neo-scolastica*, 3 (1986), 432-448.

¹⁸ As described by Warburg in his report of December 1927 'Vom Arsenal zum Laboratorium', in *Werke*, pp. 683-694 (691).

¹⁹ Warburg, *Aufzeichnungen, 1927-29*, p. 643.

²⁰ Tools that are helpful for a study of the *Bilderatlas* include: Kurt W. Forster and Katia Mazzucco, *Introduzione ad Aby Warburg e all'Atlante della Memoria*, ed. by Monica Centanni (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002); *Zwischen Kosmos und Pathos. Berliner Werke aus Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas 'Mnemosyne' / Between Cosmos and Pathos: Berlin Works from Aby Warburg's 'Mnemosyne' Atlas*, ed. by Neville Rowley and Jörg Völlnagel (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2020).

reproductions of artworks or the connections that it weaves between them. Instead it unsettles, unravels, churns and creates circular movements.

Conceived as a complement to an oral presentation, the *Bilderatlas* is absolutely not an artwork. Yet among its objectives it certainly aims to convey the connection between the creation of figurative art and the dynamics of real life.²¹ And one of its surface effects is to capture Warburg's specific concept of the *form of the work* as being resistant to formalistic and aestheticizing temptations: that is to say, as a symbolic form that can *create space* for thought insofar as it is imbued with an overwhelming *emotive* eloquence. As densely and speedily as possible, the form of the artwork must combine the measured orderliness of the Apollonian example, which articulates and discriminates, with the unrestrained oblivion of the Dionysian example, which raves and confuses, without one wholly prevailing over the other, because together they express a single being.

This is why, even today, form is always related to the *being of the artwork*, because being and form indicate connective modes. 'Being' is still only a lexical-grammatical simplification pursued by philosophers with the same enthusiasm as Eros pursuing the flight of beauty. Interrogating form implies interrogating the meaning of something that exists ambiguously: visible and invisible, memorable and unmemorable. However, the meaning cannot be seized by those – be they philosophers or art theorists – who interrogate the artwork in rational terms. It suddenly appears, as an image, as a result of its own symbolic incursion into that which is present: in a dangerous flash of beauty.

6.

Warburg's *Bilderatlas* might well be viewed as a last attempt to establish a 'system of relations' among those dense connections, endured for so long. It was the *biological* necessity of the symbolic composition that made it urgent for Warburg, the need to assume an inevitably precarious and uncompromising form, to find a distance and a rhythm somewhere between the primitive (i.e. pre-linguistic) feral impulses that are the matrices of human figurativeness, and the opposing logical-rational forces that are increasingly dominant in the age of technology.²² The form of the artwork is not separate from the form of life, it does not become autonomous; indeed in some ways the former derives from the latter and must remain connected to it precisely because it must not be reduced to aestheticizing formalism.

²¹ In this context, the most stimulating research into the connections between Warburg's *Atlas* and contemporary art can probably be found in the recent publication by Salvatore Settis, *Incurzioni. Arte contemporanea e tradizione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2020).

²² Wind came across primitive feral impulses in Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), a work that had a considerable influence on the initial direction of his research.

Wind's journey seems to have been the opposite. His starting point had been a table relating to form and he turned to an empirical life in order to immerse himself in it. The beginning, I believe, was his 1925 work *Zur Systematik der künstlerischen Probleme*, published in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, edited by Max Dessoir²³ and extracted from his Inaugural-Dissertation.²⁴ Warburg, who Wind would meet two years later, was still in his future.²⁵ The writers with whom he compared himself were instead Wölfflin, although he immediately saw the limits of his comparisons and morphological descriptions in the theoretical-artistic environment; Riegl, in particular 'the dualism between ideal content and active forces' (*Dualismus von 'idealen Inhalten' und 'wirkenden Kräften'*); and above all Panofsky, his thesis supervisor at Hamburg University, who in the same year and in the same journal had earlier published the essay *Ueber das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie*.

In this contribution, Panofsky attempted to set out a table of fundamental concepts, with a view to considering and defining visual-intuitive values, while maintaining a focus on the pure domain of style. Through these values Panofsky was convinced that he would be able to frame artistic questions in a systematic way. He was also convinced that it was necessary (and sufficient) for the basis of the system for articulating problems to be contained within in a single major problem, with an antithetical nature.

Alle diese künstlerischen Probleme [...] sind implizite beschlossen oder enthalten in einem einzigen großen Urproblem, das seinerseits die Form einer Antithese besitzt und [...] a priori gesetzt ist: in dem Problem, das sich vielleicht am besten mit den Worten 'Fülle' und 'Form' umschreiben läßt.²⁶

For Panofsky, in this essay, an artistic problem only truly exists if the opposition between form and fullness (of content) is presumed a priori. The presumption is overtly ontological but can be articulated in methodological (transcendental) terms as an opposition between time and space. Time represents a principle of fluidity and connection, while space represents a principle of objectivization, separation and differentiation. Thus, the rigid antithetical structuring of the problem's reality, which is the basis of every configuration of concrete visual intuition, is not met by an equally rigid opposition but by the space-time interaction conceived to construct the concrete-intuitive world of the artwork. This leads to a definition of the artwork: 'Das Kunstwerk, ontologisch betrachtet, ist eine Auseinandersetzung zwischen "Form" und "Fülle" – das Kunstwerk methodologisch

²³ See *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 4 (1925), 438-486.

²⁴ A note to the title explains: 'Der Aufsatz ist einer größeren Arbeit ("Ästhetischer und kunstwissenschaftlicher Gegenstand") entnommen, die im Juli 1922 abgeschlossen wurde, aber aus äußeren Gründen noch nicht erscheinen kann', *ibid.*, p. 438.

²⁵ For Wind's biography, see Ben Thomas, 'Edgar Wind. A Short Biography', in *Stan Rzeczy*, 8 (2015), 117-137; Bernardino Branca, *Edgar Wind filosofo delle immagini. La biografia intellettuale di un discepolo di Aby Warburg* (Milan and Udine: Mimesis, 2019).

²⁶ Erwin Panofsky, 'Ueber das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie. Ein Beitrag zu der Erörterung über die Möglichkeit "kunstwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe"', in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 2 (1925), 129-161 (130-131).

betrachtet, ist eine Auseinandersetzung zwischen “Zeit” und “Raum”.²⁷ Panofsky believes that this opposition is replicated, on the qualitative level of the visual sphere specific to the artistic phenomenon, in three other respective oppositions: (a) elementary values (haptic/optic); (b) figurative values (surface/depth); and (c) compositional values (division/fusion).²⁸

7.

‘Die apriorische Deduktion genügt [...] nicht. Wir brauchen neben der kategorialen Antithese noch ein *regionales Schema*, welches im Konkret-Anschaulichen die *Stellen* zeigt, an denen die Kategorie sich bewähren soll’.²⁹ For Wind, a table of stylistic oppositions is not enough. It is necessary to ‘regionalize’ Panofsky’s scheme, so that the categories can prove themselves in concrete-visual places. Wind therefore considers it necessary that other pairs of relations which categorize the sphere of the artistic problem should also be reduced to the level of transcendental normativity. In its intent, this an approach aimed at a more precise articulation of the formal-transcendental plane, at a more articulate categorization and a greater systematic completeness; in the results, however, the reality plane of the artwork becomes apparent. Panofsky’s scheme becomes triplicated. The sphere of the ‘thing that appears’ (*erscheinendes Ding*) and the sphere of ‘life that is expressed’ (*sich äußerndes Leben*) must be added to the sphere of the ‘qualitative phenomenon’ (*qualitative Erscheinung*).³⁰ On the level of the ‘thing that appears’, haptic and optic values correspond to the framework and the singular quality; on the level of ‘life that is expressed’, they correspond to fixity and animation. Ideality and reality correspond on the one hand to surface and depth, on the other to object and subject. Division and fusion correspond to separation and connection in the sphere of the thing and to rigid isolation and the vital flow in the sphere of life. However, it is precisely the appearance of the *thing* and the expression of *life* that cannot be prevented from venturing into ‘places’ that are extraterritorial in relation to the pure region of the visible in its own right, outside the eidetic of style to which Panofsky’s bare qualitative phenomenon belongs. The gateway to empirics is open, and it is expressly to be found in transcendental theory. If this is the case, as I believe, then the original problem itself, implied in any problematization, is not at all absolute in relation to the space-time dimension.

It would certainly underestimate Wind’s fine intelligence to imagine that he did not notice the stumbling block. Everything works, so long as we confine ourselves to the a priori network of problems through which Panofsky reinterpreted the categorial invention of Alois Reigl’s ‘artistic volition’ (*Kunstwollen*). However, with regionalization focusing on

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 131-132.

²⁸ Panofsky, *Ueber das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie*, table p. 132.

²⁹ Wind, *Zur Systematik der künstlerischen Probleme*, pp. 461-462.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 464-467 and 467-472.

the thing that exists and represents its own subject, as well as on the life that expresses its own interior, Wind has clearly gone further. Yet he has still not passed through the gateway to empirics and historicity. He does not abandon Panofsky's tenacious neo-Kantianism. He takes a step back but once again accepts manifestation and expression as being 'within the scope of the original categorial antithesis of fullness and form'.

Die Sphäre der 'sinnlichen Erscheinung' war mit der des 'erscheinenden Dings' durch die *Darstellungsbeziehung* verbunden, die Sphäre des 'erscheinenden Dings' mit der des sich 'sich äußernden Lebens' durch die *Ausdrucksbeziehung* verknüpft. Nun geht sowohl die Erfassung der Dinggestalt als auch die des Ausdrucksgehaltes auf ein einseitig bestimmtes *Ziel* aus. Infolgedessen verlaufen beide, die Darstellungs- und die Ausdrucksbeziehung, in einseitiger *Richtung*. *Jene* tendiert von den singulären Qualitäten zum allgemeinen *Schema*; denn indem sie 'darstellt', ist es ihr um den 'Bestand' des Dinges zu tun, das in singulärer Weise 'erscheint'. *Diese* wiederum tendiert von dem formelhaften Status zum lebendigen *Gefühl*; denn indem sie 'ausdrückt', will sie das eigentümliche 'Leben' vermitteln, das sich in der 'Äußerung' bekundet. Betrachtet man nun beide Richtungen sub specie der kategorialen Urantithese von Fülle und Form, so erkennt man, daß das *Ziel* der *Darstellungsbeziehung* (das allgemeine Schema) auf seiten der 'Form', – das der *Ausdrucksbeziehung* aber (das lebendige Gefühl) auf seiten der 'Fülle' liegt.³¹

In this remodelling of his first mentor's dictate, Wind is not acting unconsciously when he turns implicitly towards the apriorism of problems with respect to concrete, actual and historical responses or to the ideal normativity of the 'classical'. It was only *a matter of time* before the tension injected into the schematism of the categorial would poison the purity of stylistic visibility: not only form but also the 'classical' would no longer seem the same.

8.

'There was not a drop of poison left in them': as we have heard, a drop of poison played no part in the formal contemplation of the ritual objects described in the BBC lecture. The poison of life. It is still missing in the 1925 text as well. Yet everything is already in place. Wind will soon pass through the gateway into empirics that he himself had already opened in the smooth wall of the categorial: artworks are also the fruit of the precise historical semantics deposited in them like sediment. The time of their genesis, as well as the time of the connections inherent in them and in which they take shape without ever becoming depleted, is the time of form itself.

The point is that for Wind, even before meeting Warburg – and still more so afterwards, since they share the same opinion on this subject – historical sediment cannot be separated from the form of the artwork, as formalists and historicists would like, unilaterally but based on opposing claims. What is, then, the problem of form? As long as

³¹ Wind, *Zur Systematik der künstlerischen Probleme*, p. 473.

we are anchored in the metaphysical rigidity of classical antitheses, in this case notably form/content and surface/depth, it is impossible to isolate. But there have been, and there still are, different kinds of metaphysics. The great Scholasticism even traced out pathways along which immanence and transcendence, far from separating from each other in an abstract way, form a circle and compose a rhythm that weaves together the beat of form/content and surface/depth. We who easily flee from any homogeneous metaphysical system have surely no need to remind a great historian of philosophy (as well as of art and culture) such as Edgar Wind of this.

Counter to fatuous formalism without depth – and the repugnant aestheticizing history of art that Warburg railed against – Wind does not throw the baby out with the bathwater: he does however insist on form inhabiting a sphere that spurns merely ornamental definitions or those that seek nothing more than the representation of the object itself. Hence form must be completely and resolutely autonomous. This means, in fact, an insistence on the absolute formal autonomy of the artwork. Note, however, that this would still not be understood in Wind's focalization, without it being identified *together with* the pre-representational (and symbolic-energetic, Warburg would have added) depth of the work itself. Formal autonomy *and* background depth do not coincide, it is true, but neither are they mutually exclusive: they comprise an indistinguishable and irreducible complexity.

What do the panel structures of Warburg's *Bilderatlas* demonstrate if not the discontinuity of form, the internal tensions and dynamics that no formalistic-aestheticizing manifesto could ever accept? This is what I described above as the figurative schematism laid out by Warburg on consecutive panels, except that every artwork, even those furthest from any representational intent, retains its own formal autonomy – inasmuch as this is qualified by the sparkling connections that are its very being, the winding waters of myth that give it its nervous energy. It is clearly a matter of *conceiving* form, in the simultaneous meaning (ambiguity) of thinking and creating. Form appears because it originates in time and as a time of ambiguity and equilibrium. That is to say, because the artwork reveals itself as the connection between the deep background (mythical-energetic), and its phenomenality, in which it materializes but can never be exhausted. In this sense, form is the differential between being and a configuring, expressive force.

I imagine that Wind thought something of this kind when reviewing Plato's philosophy of art, which contains a lesson that should be taught today in all university courses on aesthetics. He wrote: 'For Plato art is a kind of magic. It permeates man and can transform him'.³²

³² Edgar Wind, 'Θεῖος Φόβος (Laws, II, 671D): On Plato's Philosophy of Art', in *The Eloquence of Symbols: Studies in Humanist Art*, ed. by J. Anderson, with a biographical memoir by H. Lloyd-Jones (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 6.

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