

Warburg and Poliakoff, Movement and Style

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTEMPORARY
STUDY OF IMAGES AND PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

It is necessary, for those who dedicate themselves to the activity of painting, to possess a wider view that can gather a certain number of references which tend, collectively, to an idea of a group: a group within which the characteristics of its own references are collected, possible but solid ones, that can function as a support for a construction based on the secular exercise of painting. This foundation of painting in its sources (or, as we say in the artistic field, in its 'influences') is not just an excuse on the part of the painter with the intention of an immediate justification and integration of his creation in the cultural context of Painting in his own time, something which would make him start from the ends to justify the means (the ends being the consumption of his pictorial production by the public). Nor does it serve a facilitated autonomous creation of value, with the concern of pre-establishing a secular program that would make painting more authentic but devalues the real process of pictorial creation that accompanies, step by step, any painterly production, from the beginning to the end and that can and should, from the beginning to the end, include that very process. The foundation of painting on its sources or 'influences' serves, rather, to achieve its integration in a group of reference from which painting, any true painting that aims at the present, can and

should take part. This work aims at an updating of the analysis of these influences from the means which serve as references to the pictorial analysis and creation: the images (reproductions) and the paintings themselves.

Keywords: *Movement; Style; Images; Paintings;*

1 | INTRODUCTION

That group where painting aims to be included in is, in spite of its incursion in the contemporary, the group of art history, of *all* art history. And it is undeniable that one of the tasks that art history proposes in its program is the production of references. But any painting that wants to be contemporary, cannot deny that art history, although it can partially establish and justify the present (and presence) of painting, does not do so completely. Art history does not offer, beforehand, the relation that painting establishes with the contemporary: a thing that only art and the artist, in the fullness of the process and in the activity of painting, can discover. From which it results that it would be wrong to want to integrate *painting in art history*. We would only be copying models instead of producing them. We should, rather, integrate *art history in painting* (the one that wants to belong to the present times), giving it mobility, *movement*.

In this way, from the integration of art history in painting, results: 1 - a foundation on the references that give solidity and stimulus to the work (a stimulus which results very much from the dual relation that is established between similarity and difference in relation to its sources); 2 - a legitimate appropriation of a set of composition rules and secular techniques which can legitimize painting and present it in its contemporary time (assuming, in practice, this tradition of rules and techniques or assimilating it first in order to be free from it and constructing something new afterwards); 3 - a net of references (where some submit to the others) which integrates, directly, the course of art history in painting and canonizes it in a present time which emerges from tradition.

From this results the observation of the importance of art history to contemporary painting: the analysis of art history, of all art history (a totality which can never be truly reached but to which, ideally, it is aimed at), of its movements, of its styles, of its values and of its social implications, serves its constant location and relocation in the modernity of the present times. These operations of placement of art history in current times are absolutely necessary so that these times can (still) maintain something profoundly vital and organic (in painting and outside of it).

Therefore, in an attempt to answer the issues stated above, we will try to describe an up-to-date vision (not in debt of idealistic or refraining visions which are frequently associated with values from the past as an attempt to copy those values and not recovering or regenerating them) of art history which is distributed over two different approaches: the first, the approach of an art historian of his motive of study, the second, the vision of a modern painter of art history and its result in pictorial production.

However, by designating modernity here, we are, basically, bringing the discussion of a moment of art history towards the present. We are doing exactly what the painter should do with the present times: to integrate them in his own painting. In this way, just as both of them, the historian and the artist, tried to transpose to their own visions the characteristics of the time in which they lived (giving back to it the revitalization of its past), so we also envision here the contribution of some ideas to the updating of artistic studies. And given the fact that most of the times this study of references is made in relation to images and, in the case of painting, stems from the direct observation of paintings, and that both images and paintings have in common their presentation on a two-dimensional plane, we

will here establish a simple parallel between images and paintings. In this way, when speaking of images we could just as well be speaking about the real presence of paintings and vice-versa.

All of this happens for a reason. No one will deny that today images of all kinds proliferate without limit showing us, at the same time, the best and the worst of our times. And not being able to avoid the intrusion of that quantity of images coming inwardly through the eyes, not being able to simply eliminate them, we conclude that it is important to know how to deal with them. Fundamentally, to learn how to deal with chaos. And not being idealists, both the art historian as well as the painter, which are here introduced, dealt with that chaos in a different way: rather than imposing on it an ideology, they integrated it in a new summoning vision, comprehensive and embracing. In the case of Aby Warburg (1866-1929), it is a vision of *movement*. In the case of Poliakov (1906-1969), it is one of *style*. But movement and style are not apart, but rather they mix themselves, inseparably. We can find style in the former as well as movement in the latter. It is this association that we intend to discuss here [1].

2 | MOVEMENT: ABY WARBURG

This time of ours is, after all, a receptacle time in which lives the totality of all times transmitted by the profusion of images representative of those times and also a time in which we live our own lives. And it carries with it a higher reason or a demand which, basically, and starting from a perspective of a *dynamic contradiction* (which eliminates the main idea of a dialectics because, after all, both the traditional opposite terms on which dialectics is based are now in a state of fusion), starting from the main exercise of the observation of life and, therefore, from living itself: a demand to destroy all linear sense of causality. Because, maybe, our time does not believe in the notion of finality of its future. The idea that anything that emerges, from wherever it comes, is a cause of something, namely the event which will follow it (an idea that comprehends the present as a cause of the future); this idea does not seem to be a part of our present times anymore. It seems that not even the temporal limits that determine the contemporary are definitely established (by any system of moral values or any scientific practice) nor is the future still something which is presented to us beforehand as something that we are certain our present time predicts, solves, and sustains. What happens is that, presently, the continuous line

between past, present and future has fragmented, which results in an absolute randomness of moments: past and future pass without discretion through the present inhabiting it in a floating and unordered way. From this process (or anti-process), Fredric Jameson has already given us a lucid vision by comparing it to the mental process of schizophrenia: 'When the relations of the signifying chain break, then we have schizophrenia in the way of a babbling of distinct and unrelated significance. (...) If we are incapable of unifying the past, the present and the future of the phrase, then we are, similarly, incapable of unifying the past, the present and the future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the break of the chain of significance, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material significance or, in other words, *to a series of pure and unrelated presences in time*' (Jameson, 2008, p.26).

To Aby Warburg, who suffered from a schizophrenia which led to several internments, this idea of several presences was contained in his vision of art history and the recovery from his sickness had to do with the possible articulation between those several presences comprehending an idea of movement. However, these presences in which the images transmitted were interpreted from a general context of significance or from a psychology 'of the pendular movement between *the position of causes as images and its position as signs*' (Gombrich as cited in Agamben, 2006, p. 116). Warburg projected, at the final phase of his disease, to build a platform where he could, most justly, study this 'pendulous movement of images' and, by recovering, in some way, a lost chain of significance by the aid of images, he could heal himself of his disease. This platform (*called Mnemosyne*) consisted of numerous panels where reproductions of art objects were permanently fixed, removed, grouped or changed amongst themselves by means of 'laws of good neighbourhood' [2] (Figure 1) and intended to 'tell an art history without words' as well as 'set art history in motion' (Didi-Huberman as cited in Michaud, 2004, p. 10). He arrived, therefore, at the definition of the concept of *Pathosformel* applied to art history [3]. Warburg was well aware of the danger of fragmentation of the chain of significance by which men guide themselves.

Therefore, we can read in a text of his that 'the whole humanity is schizophrenic'. This sentence is not, however, a definitive one. Integrated in the process of the *Pathosformel*, it would be possible to rehabilitate art history and to revive it through its images and, in this pathological process, to

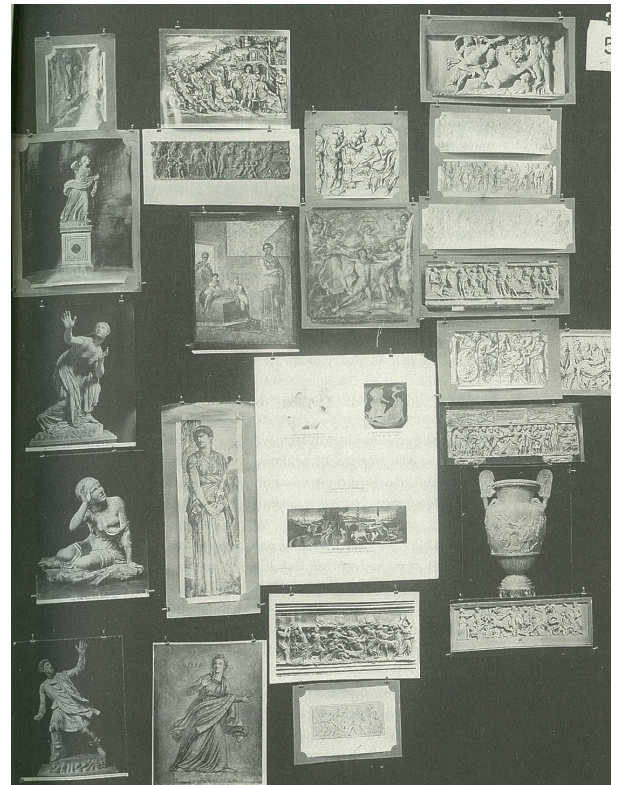


FIGURE 1 | Mnemosyne, 1923-29.

rehabilitate humanity in the figures of the artist or the art historian, in the sense of a healing (through the observation of images, not only at their surface (form) but also in their depth (content)). Therefore, he continues in the same statement: '(...) from an ontogenetic point of view, it is possible, maybe, to describe a type of reaction to images of the memory as primitive and former, even if continuing to live on the margin. In a later stage memory does not provoke an immediate and practical reflection any longer (...), but the *images of the memory* are, then, consciously organized in *images and signs*. *Between these two states* a type of reaction to the impressions comes to take place which we can define as the symbolic force of thought' (Warburg as cited in Agamben, 20006, p.116). This symbolic force, or what Agamben calls a 'pure historical matter', presents itself through the eyes of Warburg as a regenerative force that crosses life and the images (mnemonic or not) that compose it: the 'life as energy' (Ferreti, 1989, p.27) which exhales from images (or which crosses through them) is, therefore, a *composing energy*, a force which composes the sight and which (in)forms it (composing, after all, the art objects or the images we obtain from them).

In this way, Agamben tells us that 'the attitude of artists facing images inherited from tradition was

not thinkable, to Warburg, in terms of aesthetical choice nor of neutral reception: it was more of a mortal or vital confrontation, according to the case, with the terrible energies those images contained in themselves and which had in themselves the possibility of making man return to sterile submissiveness or guide him on the path to regeneration and knowledge. This was true not only to artists (...), but also to the historian and to the wise'. These should, then, absorb the undulatory movement of 'transmission and survival' (*transmission et survie*) [4].



FIGURE 2 | 'Content and Form': 1 - Form; 2 - Content; 3 - Mnemonic wave.

However, the idea of vital force does not adjust to the method of the purely aesthetical art history which observes form in detriment of content or of styles in detriment of culture. Warburg thinks a new art history, alive and comprehended as a single movement towards the whole [5]. This single movement should feed, at the same time, life (as an energetic entity) and art history, in a mutual measure which could make art history overflow towards life or life pour into art history: '(...) all his life he will retain a frank repulsion for an "aestheticizing art history" and for a purely formal consideration about the image (...) and a concept such as the Pathos-formel (sic) one, which makes it impossible to part form from content (Figure 2) because it indicates an indissoluble intrinsic nature of an emotive load and an iconographic formula, shows that his thought cannot be interpreted in moulds of recognizable oppositions such as form/content or history of styles/history of culture. That which is most proper to him in his scientific attitude is more than a new way to make art history; it is a tension towards overcoming the limits of art history itself (...)' (Agamben, 2006, p.114)

Following an 'art history told exclusively from its images' (Warburg), we can verify that, if to the image we do not usually subscribe its commentary it is because the image has something which substi-

tutes it. Instead of appending to form (in photography, painting, etc.) a comment, Warburg opted to let the proper power of images speak for itself. Which means that images have, in themselves, a power of significance and of reference that individualizes them as much as it makes them relate between themselves which resulted, to Warburg, on a constant readjustment of each image in relation to its neighbouring images: the image was truly in *movement*.

The symbolic power of the image survives, then, in the unity between form and content and each image, by possessing its own symbolic power, has also the ability of attraction or proposes a constant reflux back to itself: because an image, by existing in a state of tension in which content arises through form is, most exactly, an image in movement and an image with depth (from where content arises). In the article we have been quoting, Giorgio Agamben calls our attention to a book by Richard Semon called *Mneme* (1908) of which Warburg owned a copy, where the author treats memory as energy: 'memory is not a property of consciousness, but the quality which distinguishes life from organic matter. It is the capacity to react to a certain event during a certain time; which means the form of conservation and transmission of *energy*, unknown to the physical world'. Therefore, Agamben tells us that 'the symbol and the image have the same function as in Semon (...): in them are crystallized an energetic load and an emotional experience that has an inheritance transmitted by social memory (...). That is why Warburg speaks frequently of *dynamograms*, transmitted to artists in a state of maximal tension (...)' (Agamben, 2006, p.111). It is this tension which makes problematic the placement of an image inside a group or, simply, near another image. It is, likewise, what makes an art history as history of styles or of forms problematic. And it is what makes especially problematic an idea of causality applied as a linear art history. Because what is captured from the image is not its place in a chain of causes and effects, but the *extreme tension* which attracts us and makes the image relate, first of all, with itself and then with its neighbouring image.

Warburg was well aware of this: 'the inadequate categories borrowed from an evolutionary theory have impeded art history from having those materials available to the "historical psychology of human expression" which, after all, is still to be written' (Warburg as cited in Michaud, 2004, p. 31). Furthermore, the references to the idea of cause devoid of any linear union are recurrent in Warburg: 'the artistic activity, when it represents the human figure is, first of all, the causality reproducing once more

the surface of things themselves' [6] (Figure 3). This means that causality is something undulatory which is on the inside of things and then arises on its surfaces in a permanent circular movement (Agamben, 2006, p.116). The 'Science without name', researched by Warburg is, as he says in a note of 1929, an 'iconology of the interval' (Agamben, 2004, p.116). The interval is the detail where everything happens and 'God hides in details' (Warburg).

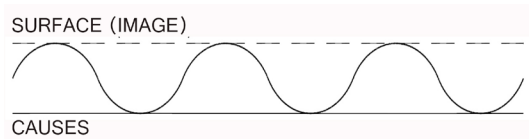


FIGURE 3 | The mnemonic wave.

3 | STYLE: POLIAKOFF

We should follow, then, the idea of the 'iconology of the interval' and compare it to the pictorial production in a clear intention of enquiring if the constant of the interval is verified. This constant, if existent, could give place, then, to a legitimate practice: the practice and use in painting of images of reference which can be a base for it and influence it. We have already drawn the movement which relates the images between themselves (undulatory) as well as the movement that inhabits each particular image (circular). The problem here proposed leads us, now, to question the relation between two distinct objects: images and paintings. In the case of Poliakov, who also built a *Mnemosyne* (Figure 4), this relation is given in a pure mobility which is set between images and paintings. Strongly influenced by ancient and modern painting, it is from the direct observation of paintings, ancient

and modern, but also from the reproductions (images) of paintings that Poliakov takes his reference: it is in that permanent comparison that he puts his pictorial memory in practice and it is from that comparison that he integrates *art history in painting*. If in Warburg the 'iconology of the interval' generates movement *between* images, in Poliakov, it generates a *style*, which definition we can find in Meyer Schapiro: 'For the one who makes a synthetic history of culture, or for the philosopher of history, style is a manifestation of culture as a whole; it is the visible sign of its unity' (Schapiro, Meyer, 1999, p.36).

This notion is adequate for the pictorial thought of Poliakov which reflected the whole of his own pictorial memory, a whole he searched for in his art: 'we can find in art a richness that will be without boundaries' or 'the abstract is a chain of thoughts: the isolated thought ceases to be abstract' (Marchiori, 1976, p. 18). We can see then, in these observations, something of the 'mnemonic wave' which Warburg spoke about. With the difference that in Poliakov, the thought, in its relational form (in the 'iconology of the interval' that allows it to relate images), holds with its practical capacity, with the use of the composition, as a practical result from those relations, in a style (abstract) of its own.

What Meyer Schapiro presents as 'style' ('the manifestation of culture as a whole'), is observable in the works of Poliakov where is posited the total memory of culture as well as the contemporary view on culture. In his *Mnemosyne*, Poliakov placed images of such different times which went from prehistory to Matisse's collages and saw in abstract art, justly, an effective means of abridging art history and to integrate it in his painting, updating it in this way: '(...) properly recognizing his debts towards his sources,



FIGURE 4 | The Mnemosyne on the wall of Poliakov's apartment.



FIGURE 5 | 'Joachim's dream' (detail) by Giotto, 1305-6.



FIGURE 6 | 'Composition 1969' by Poliakoff.

towards the past, Poliakoff was formed in an era fertile in teachings to a man which aimed at broadening his culture, but which continued, without dispersion, researches started by Kandinsky and the Delaunays' (Marchiori, 1976, p.18). Poliakoff recognized the event of modern art as a privileged vehicle of expression of his own time. And in it he saw the possibility of integrating art history. The 'iconology of the interval' was, for Poliakoff, the direct observation of a *temporal interval* between two different images: one, the ancient 'influence', the other, its new abstract interpretation.

This takes us directly to an analysis of one of Poliakoff's paintings and of what it can contain of this interval. The painter was very influenced by Giotto's frescoes which he saw again in 1969 at Padua and of which he had already included an image, 'Joachim's dream', in his *Mnemosyne*. Juxtaposing the image of Giotto's fresco and a painting by Poliakoff of the same year, we can develop a comparative analysis between the image and the painting and better understand their common composition (Figures 5 and 6).

The lines traced in white over Giotto's image are the same traced in black over Poliakoff's painting (the same drawing is repeated in each figure) and aims at capturing the general lines of composition which are, after all, common to the image and to the painting.

By comparing the two figures, we will observe that there are areas that are repeated in both compositions: the internal curve of the rocks in Giotto's fresco is repeated in the painting by means of an extreme simplification (an abstraction) in the purple shape of Poliakoff's painting, for instance. And also the composition's tendency towards verticality is common to both of them, which reveals a repetition of areas and shapes of reference for the composition in both figures. It is the composition of the interval, a pure relation between the image and the painting.

4 | CONCLUSION

We hope to have contributed in this introductory way to the updating of the intrinsic value of images and paintings. Painting can and must contain, in itself, art history (which is learned from images and paintings), which legitimizes it. However, the observation of images, even from an historical perspective, can lead to several interpretations. Just as Martin Kemp states, 'if an individual image is seen inside several classificatory categories, it can really look different in higher or lesser degree' (Kemp, 1997,

p.11). With this in mind we must conclude that in the interpretation of the image, we should rely on a relativity that is appropriate to it and which results from the diversity of interpretations that time yields on it. But also, in this relativity, we find the opposite of a dogmatic attitude: we find an opening, which contributes more to its constant process of integration in the present times. And we find that through the movement of interpretation and the style of execution it is possible to renew pictorial production in a renewal as indispensable as effective.

ENDNOTES

[1] It is convenient to refer to what we here propose to discuss, beginning, also, with the idea that movement and style belong, as a characteristic which portrays it, to the modern times, embracing all the Modern Age from the Renaissance to the current days. As it can most clearly be observed in art, it is movement and style which preside over the creative action and which base art in an activity that recreates the time in which art places itself. Imposed or chosen, the union of movement and style seems to be the characteristic that bonds our time, something in which things are now immersed (not only images or paintings but also the objects themselves), and something from which results a new vision, a new perception and a new placement in the world.

[2] Warburg did with images what he was used to do with the books of his large library: 'The law that guided him was the one of "good neighbourhood" according to which the solution of his problem was contained not in the book he was searching for, but rather in the one next to it. This way he made from his library a sort of labyrinthic image of himself, from which the power of fascination was enormous', (Agamben, 2006, p. 110)

[3] The concept of Pathos is connected with the idea of excess as well as of mobility. *Pathosformel* is best translated as 'Formula of pathos'. For a relation between the ideas of *Pathos* and of *Pathology*, cf. Didi-Huberman's introduction in Michaud, (2004).

[4] 'We should learn to see Burckhardt and Nietzsche as capturers of mnemonic waves. (...) Both of them are very sensitive seismographs, from which the foundations tremble when they must receive or transmit the waves', Warburg in Agamben, (2006, p.115). Thus we can see how much Warburg associates the idea of knowledge with the idea of incarnation of a vital energy or symbolic force associated to the image of undulation

[5] For the concept of *whole or unity* in Warburg's thought, cf. the chapter 'The Aesthetics of Empathy' in Ferreti, (1989).

[6] About the centrifugal direction of the image, cf. Didi-Huberman (int.) in Michaud, 2004, p.13. About the circulatory movement in Warburg, cf. Agamben, 2004, pp.118-20.

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