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# ARTISTIC SURVIVAL

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## Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time

*Georges Didi-Huberman*

*Translated by Vivian Rehberg and Boris Belay*

“Survival” is the central concept, the *Hauptproblem*, of Aby Warburg and the Warburgian school of art history. In Warburg’s work, the term *Nachleben* refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs—as opposed to their renaissance after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations in image and motif. Almost every section of Warburg’s *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* opens with a collection of documents related to artistic survivals, the concept was so fundamental to the structure of his thinking. Formed within the context of Renaissance studies—a field associated by definition with revival and innovation—Warburg’s concept of survival assumed a temporal model for art history radically different from any employed at the time. He thereby introduced the problem of memory into the *longue durée* of the history of motifs and images: a problem that (as Warburg himself observed) transcends turning points in historiography and boundaries between cultures.

Warburg’s idea of afterlife or survival differed widely even from that of Anton Springer. Warburg’s model presupposed a way—a decidedly anthropological way—of envisaging the historicity of culture. At this level, Warburg was

extending Jacob Burckhardt's analyses and renewing the value of Burckhardtian dialectical notions like "history and type," "form and force," "latencies and crises." On the other hand, Warburg's model suggested a new way—a decidedly archaeological way—of representing the anthropological field of images. And at this level, Warburg was extending Edward B. Tylor's analyses, finding value in donors' testaments, genealogical trees, astrological themes, the borrowings of High Art from artisanal techniques—features of culture entirely neglected by any history of art founded on aesthetics. Warburg's revolution was aimed at art history of the kinds represented by Vasari and Wincklemann. Time conceived as a succession of direct relationships ("influences") or conceived in the positivist way as a succession of facts had no appeal for Warburg. Instead he pursued, as a counterpoint or counterrhythm to influence and fact and chronology, a *ghostly and symptomatic* time. Ghirlandaio's portraits belong, of course, to the chronological time of quattrocento art—they fall within the rubric of modern art in the Vasarian sense—but for Warburg, those paintings are incomprehensible until the *anachronistic* time of the survivals they embody or incorporate is elucidated. Warburg found Etruscan and even (via the votive effigies of the Santissima Annunziata) medieval survivals in the Sassetti Chapel frescoes: their "revivalist" contemporaneity—their participation in the Renaissance—was haunted and belied by these spectral memories. Such was, briefly summarized, the first lesson of Warburg's *Nachleben*.

Was the lesson understood? Conclusively understood, I would say, by some; but by the mainstream, definitively not. And in the most crucial instances, procedures more intricate, problematic, and covertly hostile than understanding or misunderstanding have pertained.

*History of the Wax Portrait*, published in 1911 by Julius von Schlosser, borrowed its vocabulary from Schlosser's friend Aby Warburg (though also directly from Edward Tylor)<sup>1</sup> and demonstrated that "afterlife" offered the only route to understanding the most peculiar aspect of wax sculpture: its long duration, its resistance to the history of styles, its capacity to survive without exhibiting significant evolution.<sup>2</sup> The history of images, in Schlosser's sense, is in no way a "natural history" but instead an elaboration and a methodological construction; that his history escapes the laws of conventional evolutionism tends to justify his trenchant critique, at the close of the book, of Vasarian teleological pretensions.<sup>3</sup>

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are done by Viviane Rehberg. See Julius von Schlosser, "Commentario della mia vita," trans. Giovanna Federici Ajroldi, in *La storia dell'arte nelle esperienze e nei ricordi di uno suo cultore* (1924; Italian trans., Bari: G. Laterza, 1936), 36. See also E. H. Gombrich and Didier Eribon, *Ce que l'image nous dit: Entretiens sur l'art et la science* (Paris: Biro, 1991), 29. The English translation appears as *A Lifelong Interest: Conver-*

*sations on Art and Science* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

2. See Georges Didi-Huberman, "Viscosités et survivances: L'histoire de l'art à l'épreuve du matériau," *Critique* 54.611 (1998): 138–62.

3. Von Schlosser, *Histoire du portrait en cire*, trans. Édouard Pommier (1911; French trans., Paris: Macula, 1997), 7–9, 171–72.

Presumably Schlosser, through modesty rather than ignorance, left undeveloped a few theoretical problems inherent to survival as a model.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, an idea of considerable significance began to take shape in his book: *Whereas art has a history, images have survivals*—survivals that discredit them, banish them from the sphere of accredited high art. In return, the history of artistic styles (the history credited by high culture) holds their survival in contempt.<sup>5</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Schlosser's *History of the Wax Portrait* has long been read by anthropologists rather than art historians.

Edgar Wind probably never risked a theoretical choice as exploratory and radical as those of Warburg and Schlosser. Still, Wind clearly understood that *Nachleben* had to be used as more than a mundanely biological metaphor. “When we refer to the survival of Antiquity,” he wrote in 1934, “we mean that the symbols created by the Ancients have continued to exert their power on successive generations; but what do we mean by ‘continue?’”<sup>6</sup> Wind went on to show that survival entails a complex set of operations in which forgetting, the transformation of sense, involuntary memory, and unexpected rediscovery work in unison—complexities meant to remind us that the temporality at play is cultural rather than natural. Here, Wind's critique was not only of Heinrich Wölfflin's “immanent history,” but of historical continuity in general. The presumption of continuity ignores, Wind held, what every survival entails: a play of “pauses” and “crises,” of “leaps” and “periodic reversions,” that together form, not a narrative account of the history in question, but a web of memory—not a succession of artistic facts, but a theory of symbolic complexity.<sup>7</sup>

The critique of historicism implied by Warburg's hypothesis could not be stated more clearly than in Wind's rendering. Gertrud Bing has taken note of Warburg's paradoxical position in the epistemology of the historical sciences (it might be added that Michel Foucault's positioning is paradoxical in a similar way). On the one hand, Warburg could be occasionally incomplete in his analyses, biased, or even wrong about various historical facts and phenomena. On the other hand, his hypothesis about memory—the specific kind of memory supposed by *Nachleben*—must profoundly alter, if taken seriously, our understanding of what a historical phenomenon or fact is. Bing insisted on the way in which

4. See von Schlosser, *Histoire du portrait en cire*, 31–32, for a discussion about whether the survival of a formal motif has a single or multiple origin.

5. Von Schlosser, *Histoire du portrait en cire*, 8. Schlosser had long been interested in the forms of the “survival of paganism” in Christian art. As he wrote in 1894: “The past is everywhere so lively and strong that the traces it has left in newer forms of culture must be quite deep” (von Schlosser, “Heidnische Elemente in der christlichen Kunst des Altertums,” in *Präludien, Vorträge und Aufsätze* [Berlin: J. Bard, 1927], 9–43).

6. Edgar Wind, intro. to *A Bibliography on the Survival of the Classics*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell, 1934–39), 1:viii.

7. Wind, intro., 1:vii. On the relationship between this approach of Wind's and Warburg's approach to artistic survivals, see Bernhard Buschendorf, “War ein sehr tüchtiges gegenseitiges Fördern: Edgar Wind und Aby Warburg,” *Idea* 4 (1985): 165–209.

the concept of *Nachleben* should transform our idea of tradition. No longer imaginable as an unbroken river, where accruals are carried from up- to downstream, tradition should, after Warburg, be conceived as a tense dialectic, a drama that unfolds between the river's flow and its whirling eddies.<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin thought of historicity in something like this way.<sup>9</sup> But it must be emphasized that few historians have taken Warburg's lesson on board. Historians in general prefer not to risk being wrong, so they embrace the idea of facts and condescend to speculation. We might call their attitude scientific modesty or cowardice or philosophical laziness; it may result from a positivist abhorrence of theory.

E. H. Gombrich, historian of culture par excellence (and at the time director of the Warburg Institute in London), intended his 1970 biography to put Aby Warburg's achievement in perspective; but if the book does so, it is from the standpoint of an Oedipus regarding his Laius. Evident throughout is Gombrich's desire that the ghost—the *revenant*, as Warburg was defining himself by 1924—not return.<sup>10</sup> Gombrich's intent was to ensure that the outmoded hypothesis of survival not survive (or eternally return) in the back of art historians' minds. To achieve this end, two sorts of operation were required. First, Gombrich had to invalidate the dialectical structure of survival; that is, he had to deny that a double rhythm, comprising both survivals and renaissances, organizes and renders hybrid or impure the temporality of images and motifs. Gombrich went so far as to claim that Warburg's survivals amount to nothing but revivals.<sup>11</sup> The second gambit on Gombrich's agenda—to invalidate the anachronistic structure of *Nachleben*—demanded no more than a return to Anton Springer, to Springer's reperiodization of the distinction between survival and renaissance. In other words, Gombrich sought to reduce a theoretical distinction to one more simply chronological (between Middle Ages and Renaissance). He then finished the job by distinguishing the obscure “tenacity” of medieval survivals from the inventive “flexibility” of imitations *all'antica*, which only a renaissance worthy of the name—the Renaissance of the fifteenth century—could produce.<sup>12</sup>

8. Gertrud Bing, “A. M. Warburg,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28 (1965): 301–302, 310.

9. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (1963; English trans., London: Verso, 1998), 27–56.

10. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg, An Intellectual Biography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970; 2d ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 307–24.

11. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 16: “The special problem of *Kulturwissenschaft* that Warburg had singled out as his principal concern was that of ‘*das Nachleben der Antike*,’ literally ‘the afterlife of classical antiquity.’ But this use of ‘afterlife’ is not current in English, and the nearest equivalent, ‘survival,’ was preempted by Burnett Tylor, who devoted chapters 3 and 4 of his book to ‘Survivals in Culture’—by which

he meant superstitions, children's games, and other residues of past phases in any given civilization. Warburg certainly wished *Nachleben* to comprise these survivals, but he was more concerned with what would now be described as ‘revivals,’ the reappearance in the Italian Renaissance of artistic forms and psychological states derived from the ancient world.” See also Gombrich, “Aby Warburg and A.-F. Rio,” in *Studi in onore di Giulio Carlo Argan* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1994), 48, in which the Warburgian question *Was bedeutet das Nachleben der Antike?* is translated as “How are we to interpret the continued revivals of elements of ancient culture in Western civilization?”

12. Gombrich, “The Style *all'antica*: Imitation and Assimilation,” in *Norm and Form, Studies in the Art of the Renaissance 1* (1961; English trans., London: Phaidon, 1966), 122–28.

But Gombrich was not the high exorcising priest of our poltergeist; that honor belongs to Erwin Panofsky. However reluctantly, Gombrich himself acknowledged that Panofsky invalidated the concept of *Nachleben* for generations of art historians to come.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1921, Panofsky published an article titled “Dürer and Classical Antiquity” to rival and rectify Warburg’s paper “Dürer and Italian Antiquity” (published fifteen years before).<sup>14</sup> Despite tributes paid to Warburg, the problematic of survivals yields in Panofsky’s paper to one of influences—and the question of pathos, tied in Warburg’s thinking to the Nietzschean Dionysiac, yields to a problematic of types and the *beau idéal* (supported by references to Kant and to classic rhetoricians).<sup>15</sup> In Panofsky’s 1929 obituary for Warburg, the latter’s key expression *Nachleben der Antike* goes unmentioned and all that is left of survival is *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and “heritage” (*Erbteil des Altertums*).<sup>16</sup>

In 1933, Panofsky joined Fritz Saxl in his attempt to historicize Warburg’s conceptual schemas—an entirely legitimate endeavor.<sup>17</sup> Panofsky’s first important publication in English (his entry visa to a new intellectual and institutional context that would transform his exile into an empire) was a long article, coauthored with Saxl, entitled “Classical Mythology in Medieval Art.”<sup>18</sup> It is possible and relevant, up to a point, to read their article as an extension of Warburg’s work on the survival of the antique gods. To all appearances, Panofsky and Saxl limit themselves to applying the notion of *Nachleben* to a chronological sphere in which Warburg had not worked directly. Panofsky and Saxl clear a theoretical space for survival and show how it invalidates the Vasarian view of history—they do so with an immediate caveat, almost a retraction:

The earliest Italian writers about the history of art, such as for instance Ghiberti, Alberti, and especially Giorgio Vasari, thought that classical art was overthrown at the beginning of the Christian era and that it did not revive until, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy, it served as the foundation for what is usually called the Renaissance. . . . In thinking as they did the early writers were both right and wrong. They were wrong insofar as the Renaissance was connected with the

13. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 316–17.

14. Erwin Panofsky, “Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1921–22; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 277–329.

15. See Panofsky, “Albrecht Dürer,” 277–79, 311–12 (in which the Nietzschean Dionysiac is explicitly tempered by rest and balanced by the principle of moderation).

16. Panofsky, “Professor A. Warburg,” *Das Johanneum* 3.9 (1929): 250.

17. See Fritz Saxl, “Das Nachleben der Antike. Zur Einführung in die Bibliothek Warburg,” *Hamburger Universitäts-Zeitung* 2.9 (1920): 1–4; Saxl, “Rinascimento

dell’antichità. Studien zu den Arbeiten A. Warburgs,” *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 18 (1922): 220–72; and Saxl, “Frühes Christentum und spätes Heidentum in ihren künstlerischen Ausdrucksformen,” *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 2 (1923): 63–121. A shift is noticeable between the articles of 1920 and 1922 from *Nachleben* to *rinascimento*. Saxl continued the project with his new collaborator, in Panofsky and Saxl, “A Late Antique Religious Symbol in Works by Holbein and Titian,” *Burlington Magazine*, 1926, 177–81. See also Panofsky, “Two ‘Lost’ Drawings by (and after) Sebastiano del Piombo,” *Old Master Drawings* 2 (1928): 31–34.

18. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology in Medieval Art,” *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 4.2 (1933): 228–80.

Middle Ages by innumerable links. . . . Classical conceptions survived throughout the Middle Ages—literary, philosophical, scientific, and artistic—and they were especially strong after the time of Charlemagne, under whose reign there had been a deliberate classical revival in almost every cultural field. The early writers were right insofar as the artistic forms under which the classical conception persisted were utterly different from our present ideas of Antiquity, which did not come into existence until the “Renaissance” in its true sense of the “rebirth” of antiquity as a well-defined historical phenomenon.<sup>19</sup>

These introductory remarks imply, not just an extension, but a dissociation or perhaps inversion, of what Warburg intended, despite Panofsky and Saxl’s claim to be his disciples.<sup>20</sup> What they extend of Warburg’s theory is his overall notion that survival and Renaissance are, as ideas, at antipodes. What Panofsky and Saxl invert or even abandon is the structural or synchronic content of the theory: all that is nonchronological or anachronistic in the polarization, the double rhythm, of classical survival and classical resurrection. Beginning with that resurrection (the Renaissance), matters divide more neatly as to value and time, axiology and periodization. Survival becomes a “low” category of historical analysis—and its usefulness in understanding the Middle Ages renders that epoch a time of artistic conventionality, a degeneration (however gradual) of classical norms, and an unfortunate disjunction of form and content: “*The medieval mind is incapable of realizing the unity of classical form and classical subject matter.*”<sup>21</sup>

Panofsky and Saxl restore the Renaissance to its status as an artistic summit, a period of stylistic purity and archaeological authenticity. But they go further, defining the quattrocento and cinquecento as virtually the only time in which humanity, freed from the burdens of the conventional and the symbolic, has been true to itself: “The reintegration of classical mythological subjects achieved during the Renaissance was an incentive as well as a symptom of the general evolution which led to the rediscovery of man as a natural being stripped of his protective cover of symbolism and conventionality.”<sup>22</sup> Not every anxiety or tension is displaced from this account (Panofsky and Saxl do invoke the Counter-Reformation: the *end* of the Renaissance). But only the “classical harmony” of the Renaissance “in its true sense” is said to transcend the artistic and cultural crises that survivals from the past revealed negatively or by default.<sup>23</sup> There remained only one conceptual difficulty to resolve: the Renaissance—the resurrection of

19. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology,” 228.

20. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology,” 229.

21. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology,” 240, 263–68. (This assertion goes against explicit statements by Warburg: see, for instance, “Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara,” trans. David Britt, in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contribu-*

*tions to the Cultural History of the Renaissance* [1912; Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999], 581: “In matters of substance, at least, the so-called medieval mind was quite capable of pursuing archaeological accuracy.”)

22. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology,” 268.

23. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology,” 276–78.

a past time—contradicts the assumption of *Nachleben* on two levels not easily reconciled. The coincidence of the axiological and the chronological is not inevitable. Panofsky found an effective solution to the problem by distinguishing between two different orders or categories: the synchronic order that he calls “renovation” and the “well-defined historical phenomenon” of the Renaissance. What is sometimes termed the Carolingian Renaissance is, for Panofsky, not a Renaissance but a renovation. The only Renaissance “in its true sense” is that of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> As for survival, the concept was now tucked away in the haze of its relative imprecision.

From 1944 onward, Panofsky replaced the term “renascence” with “renovation.”<sup>25</sup> This system would be locked into place with the 1960 publication of *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*, a book based on papers given in 1952 (but in development during the preceding eight years).<sup>26</sup> Panofsky forcefully reiterates that the Carolingian “renovation,” and in general all of the Middle Ages’ “protohumanist” moments, were in no way Renaissances in the strict sense of the term but only partial returns to antiquity, only resuscitations.<sup>27</sup> In order to resolve his initial problematic—the relationship between historical continuity and historical change<sup>28</sup>—Panofsky built a framework for understanding that, due to its three-part structure, resembles the famous semiological distinction that he makes among “primary subject matter,” “secondary or conventional subject matter,” and “intrinsic meaning or content” in the introduction to *Studies in Iconology*.<sup>29</sup> According to Panofsky, a tripartite hierarchy (ancient, medieval, modern) must structure the “theory of historical time,” and at the top of it we find the Renaissance, whose capital R signals its chronological importance and timeless dignity—a dignity that Panofsky qualifies with Hegelian expressions like “self-realization,” “becoming aware,” “becoming real,” and “total phenomenon.”<sup>30</sup> For Panofsky, Vasari (who, after all, said the same thing) was right. Art awakened to its own consciousness, its own history, realization, and ideal signification, in and through the Renaissance.

24. Panofsky and Saxl, “Classical Mythology,” 1235.

25. Panofsky, “Renaissance and Resuscitations,” *Kenyon Review* 6 (1944): 201–36.

26. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiskells), 1960.

27. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*, 42–113.

28. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*, 1: “On the one hand, there are those who hold that ‘human nature tends to remain much the same in all times’ [Lynn Thorndike], so that a search for essential and definable differences between succeeding generations or groups of generations would be futile on principle. On the other,

there are those who hold that human nature changes so unremittingly and, at the same time, so individually, that no attempt can and should be made to reduce such differences to a common denominator.”

29. Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1939; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 26–54. I have tried to analyze this distinction in *Devant l’Image: Question Posée aux Fins d’une Histoire de l’Art* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 105–68.

30. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*, 8–9, 31.



In anticipation of the event, over the *longue durée* of the Middle Ages, partial renovations took place, renaissances that, as moments of reawakening to classicism, shook up the history of forms.<sup>31</sup> Eventually the dormant substance from which these moments stand out in relief appears. Panofsky hesitates to name the substance or to legitimize it theoretically, preferring instead to speak, in a roundabout way, of an incubation period—but clearly what he is referring to is *das Nachleben der Antike* in Warburg’s sense.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, the last sentences of Panofsky’s *Renaissance and Renaissances* bring the errant ghost of survival into direct opposition with the ideal, intangible, pure, immortal, omnipresent, resurrected soul of classicism *all’antica*:

The Middle Ages had left antiquity unburied and alternately galvanized and exorcised its corpse. The Renaissance stood weeping at its grave and tried to resurrect its soul. And in one fatally auspicious moment it succeeded. This is why the medieval concept of the Antique was so concrete and at the same time so incomplete and distorted; whereas the modern one, gradually developed during the last three or four hundred years, is comprehensive and consistent but, if I may say so, abstract. And this is why medieval renaissances were transitory; whereas the Renaissance was permanent. Resurrected souls are intangible but have the advantage of immortality and omnipresence.<sup>33</sup>

We recognize echoes, in this passage, of Vasari’s and Winckelmann’s eulogies on—their corresponding idealizations of—the classical revivals of their respective eras. It is legitimate, of course, to have and express preferences for resurrected souls over wandering ghosts (or vice versa). But Panofsky expressed his aesthetic and metaphorical preferences, here and elsewhere, in a discourse claiming that art history should be founded on scientific objectivity. Such objectivity apparently consists in the study of “well-defined historical phenomena” rather than vague survivals: the study of ideas (which are immortal like gods), not of images and motifs (which are undead like ghosts). Objective art history, moreover, recognizes that there is one historical moment, a canonical time, without impurity—the Renaissance—when the homogenous reintegration of form and content became perfectly legible.<sup>34</sup>

31. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art*, 104–8.

32. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art*, 53.

33. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art*, 113.

34. On the eventual fate of Panofskian distinctions and choices, see Otto Demus, “A Renaissance of Early Christian Art in the Thirteenth Century in Venice,” in *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Matthias Friend, Jr.*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 348–61; Ingvar Bergström, *Revival of*

*Antique Illusionistic Wall-Painting in Renaissance Art* (Göteborg: ACTA University of Gothenburg: 1957); Eugenio Battisti, Paolino Mingazzini, Guglielmo Matthiae, and Heinz Ladendorf, “Antique Revival,” in *Encyclopaedia of World Art*, vol. 1 (1959; rev. ed., New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 478–502; Cornelius Clarkson Vermeule, *European Art and the Classical Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 5–13; Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969); Michael Greenhalgh, *The Classical Tradition in Art* (London: Duckworth, 1978), 19–34.

Objective art history, in other words, rejects all of Warburg's fundamental intuitions.

*Veritas filia temporis*, as the antique adage goes.<sup>35</sup> But for the historian, a question remains: truth is the daughter of precisely *which* time—or of which *times*? As Warburg's disciple, Panofsky began by recognizing how attention to the history of images and motifs discloses the full complexity and anachronism of time. In a German text whose title translates as “The Problem of Historical Time,” Panofsky purposely relied on a medieval example to introduce the dilemma inherent in any evolutionary model of art history:

Indeed, where but in Reims could a group of sculptures offer so sumptuous a sight? It appears, in an endlessly shimmering fabric, that the most varied threads sometimes intertwine, sometimes create a rigorous network, sometimes move away from one another, never to be joined again. Just in itself, the differences in quality, which are at times considerable, prevent us from believing there has been a single evolutionary line. But, even beyond this example, distinct stylistic trends have not always developed in the same direction; they have moreover not always just interpenetrated—they have continued to exist side by side, in spite of all of the to-ing and fro-ing. . . . it seems that this infinite variety of “systems of reference,” which, at a basic level, faces the art historian and constitutes a world, amounts to a monstrous chaos, to which it is all but impossible to lend form. . . . do we not find ourselves, then, facing a world that lacks homogeneity, a world in which frozen “systems of reference” cohabit (to use Simmel's terms) in self-sufficient isolation and irrational singularity?<sup>36</sup>

Panofsky thus commenced by recognizing the impurity of time. Yet he ended up trying to eradicate the impurity, to resolve it, subsume it into an ordered schema that reestablishes the yearning of art history for aesthetic golden ages (the Renaissance was one) and reintroduces the enforcement by art history of coherent periods and “systems of reference.” In this text of 1931, Panofsky concludes by hoping that a chronology of the Reims sculptures might one day clarify the multiplicity of stylistic systems of reference there and establish a hierarchy among them.<sup>37</sup> An idealist or positivist historian would express Panofsky's hope as the intent to achieve purity by analytic means. Approached logically, systematically, survivals disappear from history, just as residue disappears from good wine. And

35. See Saxl, “Veritas Filia Temporis,” in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 197–222.

36. Panofsky, “Le problème du temps historique,” in *La Perspective comme forme symbolique et autres essais*, trans. Guy

Ballangé (1931; French trans., Paris: Minuit, 1975), 223, 227.

37. Panofsky, “Le problème du temps historique,” 228–33.

yet . . . without residue, there are only ideal wines—tasteless wines—wines lacking the impurities that, in a sense, give them their style, their *life*.

In pursuit of meaning in the visual arts, Panofsky hoped to get beyond the too Nietzschean or too Burckhardtian intuitions that had led to Warburg's obsession with the life and afterlife of images, their *Leben* and *Nachleben*. But now, in turn, Panofskian (or rather, post-Panofskian) iconology has become obsessed with symbols, ignorant of symptoms, too devoted to chronology, too ignorant of anachronisms. Our next requisite correction may depend on our understanding Warburgian "survival" in the context of its dynamic—its morphological and metapsychological—consequence and implications.

The recoil from "survival" as a category of art historical attention is attributable to its basic impurity; *Nachleben* is impure in much the way *Leben* itself is. Both are messy, cluttered, muddled, various, haphazard, retentive, protean, liquid, oceanic in scope and complexity, impervious to analytical organization. There is no doubt that Panofsky sought to understand the meaning of motifs and images, but Warburg wanted much more: to understand their "life," their "force" or impersonal "power"—these are the terms (*Leben, Kraft, Macht*) that Warburg used but studiously refrained from defining.<sup>38</sup> This vocabulary derives mostly from Burckhardt, as Warburg was pleased to observe—and especially from Burckhardt's interest in the conduits between art and daily living (his research into the role of passing spectacles in Renaissance visual culture is a case in point).<sup>39</sup> For Warburg, as for Burckhardt, art was not a simple matter of taste, but a "vital question."<sup>40</sup> Nor was historiography for either of them a straightforward matter of chronology, but rather an upheaval, a life struggle in the *longue durée* of a culture.

Thus the history of images was for Burckhardt and Warburg a question of life and death, and thus of survivals. The biomorphism of their vocabulary, however, has nothing to do with that of Vasari or Winckelmann. For the life in question is unnatural and impure (cultural and historical). This enigmatic form of life can be understood as simultaneously as a play of functions (requiring an anthropological approach), a play of forms (requiring a morphological approach), and a play of forces (requiring a dynamic approach). Life is, in this context, a play of functions in that the life meant is that lived by a culture—an inference that Burckhardt's first readers did not fail to draw. "It is to the Italian soul," Emile Gebhardt wrote of Burckhardt in 1887, "that he attributed the secret of the Renaissance; and by the word *culture* he meant the intimate state of the con-

38. See Bing, "A. M. Warburg," 305.

39. See Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 63.

40. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Réflexions sur l'Histoire de l'Art*, (1941; French trans., Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 204: "For Burckhardt, beauty, *bis* beauty, was a vital question rather than a question of taste."

sciousness of a people. For him, all the great facts of this history—politics, erudition, art, morals, pleasure, religion, superstition—demonstrate the activity of a few vital forces.”<sup>41</sup> Thankfully, various ambiguities in Burckhardt’s *Kulturgeschichte* have been edited out by the social historians who have invoked it, just as vagaries in Warburg’s *Kulturwissenschaft* have been edited out by the iconologists and social historians of art who have made use of it.<sup>42</sup> Still, along with those ambiguities and vagaries, many of the most crucial suggestions that Burckhardt and Warburg offered have also been made to disappear. What follow are a few that Warburg offered more or less explicitly.

First, to the extent that life is a play of functions, it is neither a play of facts nor one of systems. We must speak tangibly—of a culture’s *life*—as a rejoinder to positivist historiography (which tends to be reductively chronological, factual, and discursive) and as a rejoinder to idealist, especially Hegelian historiography (which tends to be reductively abstract, systematic, and fixated on truth). In both the idealist and positivist approaches, the historian disincarnates time by attempting to simplify (or rather, deny) its complexity. “Life as culture” might be a formula, given its dramatic difference from established ways of seeing, that is destined to break with the schematic (and thus trivial) choice we are generally offered between nature and history or between idea and history:

History is not the same as nature, and it creates, brings to birth and abandons to decay in different way. . . . By a primordial instinct, nature creates in consistently organic fashion with an infinite variety of species and a great similarity of individuals. In history, the variety (within the one species *homo*, of course) is far from being so great. There are no clear lines of demarcation, but individuals feel the incentive inequality—inciting to development. While nature works on a few primeval models (vertebrates and invertebrates, phanerogams and cryptogams), in the people, the body social is not so much a type as a gradual product. . . . We shall, further, make no attempt at system, nor lay any claim to “historical principles.” On the contrary, we shall confine ourselves to observation, taking transverse sections of history in as many directions

41. Émile Gebhart, *Études méridionales: La Renaissance italienne et la philosophie de l'histoire* (Paris, 1887), 4. For later opinions on Burckhardt’s *Kulturgeschichte*, see Karl Joachim Weintraub, *Visions of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 115–60; Olga Rubitschon, *Elemente einer philosophischen Anthropologie bei Jacob Burckhardt* (Basel: Druckerei Birkhäuser, 1981); Felix Gilbert, “Jacob Burckhardt’s Student Years: The Road to Cultural History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47.2 (1986): 249–74; and Friedrich Jaeger, *Bürgerliche Modernisierungskrise und historische Sinnbildung. Kulturgeschichte bei Droysen, Burckhardt und Max Weber* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1994), 86–102.

42. See Peter Burke, “Cultural History: Past, Present and Future,” *Theoretische Geschichte* 13.2 (1986): 187–96; S. K. Cohn, “Burckhardt Revisited from Social History,” in *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*, ed. Alison Brown (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995): 217–34; Gottfried Boehm, “La critique de l’historicisme par Jacob Burckhardt: Genèse et validité,” French trans. M. Charrière, *Revue germanique internationale*, no. 2 (1994): 73–81, in which he clearly outlines how Burckhardt’s work does not lend itself to sociological readings.

as possible. Above all, we have nothing to do with the philosophy of history. . . . Hegel speaks also of the “purpose of eternal wisdom,” and calls his study a theodicy by virtue of its recognition of the affirmative in which the negative (in popular parlance, evil) vanishes, subjected and overcome. . . . We are not, however, privy to the purposes of eternal wisdom: they are beyond our ken. This bold assumption of a world plan leads to fallacies because it starts out from false premises.<sup>43</sup>

Having made this double refusal, Burckhardt commenced to write a third sort of history.<sup>44</sup> Warburg would come to elucidate the fundamental commitments of any historian who chooses to write in this vein: to be a philologist beyond facts (since facts are valuable mainly for the basic issues that they raise) and a philosopher beyond systems (since basic issues are valuable mainly for their singular realization in history). This “third way” for historiography refuses teleologies as utter pessimisms, and it recognizes the historical being (*Dasein, Leben*)—the utter complexity—of each and every culture. Burckhardt would go so far as to say that authentic history is deformed, not just by ideas that issue from preconceived theories, but even or especially by ideas that issue from chronology itself. History should be, he argued, an effort that dislodges us from our fundamental incapacity to “understand that which is varied and accidental” (*unsere Unfähigkeit des Verständnisses für das Bunte, Zufällige*).<sup>45</sup>

This conception of temporality is unusual in that it has no need for the concepts “good” and “evil,” and no need for either beginnings (sources from which all else must derive) or ends (historical meanings on which all else must converge). Good and evil, beginnings and ends, are not essential to accounting for the complexity, the impurity, of historical life. Temporality on this model is a dialectic of rhizomes, repetitions, symptoms. Localized history—patriotic or

43. Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: An Interpretation of History*, trans. J. H. Nichols (1868–71; English trans., New York, 1943), 72–73, 91–92. See also Werner Kaegi, *Jacob Burckhardt: Eine Biographie*, vol. 6 (Basel: Schwabe, 1956), 117–43.

44. See Karl Joël, *Jacob Burckhardt als Geschichtsphilosoph* (Basel: Halbing and Lichtenhahn, 1918); Löwith, “Burckhardts Stellung zu Hegels Geschichtsphilosophie,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 7 (1928; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), 9–38; Löwith, *Jacob Burckhardt: Der Mensch inmitten der Geschichte* (1936), in vol. 7 of *Sämtliche Schriften*, 39–361; A. Janner, “Il pensiero storico di Jacopo Burckhardt,” *Quaderni italo-svizzeri*, no. 9 (1948): 3–58; Hinrich Knittermeyer, *Jacob Burckhardt: Deutung und Berufung des abendländischen Menschen* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 1949), 151–76; J. Ernst, “Geschichtsbegriff und Geschichtskritik bei Jacob Burckhardt. Die Grundlagen der ‘Weltgeschichtlichen Betrachtungen,’” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 6 (1954): 323–41; R. M. Kingdon, “The Con-

tinuing Utility of Burckhardt’s Thought on Renaissance Politics,” in *Jacob Burckhardt and the Renaissance, 100 Years After* (Lawrence: Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1960): 7–13; Eckhard Heftrich, *Hegel und Jacob Burckhardt. Zur Krisis des geschichtlichen Bewusstseins* (Frankfurt: A. M. Klostermann, 1967); Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); Hurst Fuhrmann, “Jacob Burckhardt und die Zunft der Historiker,” in *Das andere Wahrnehmen. Beiträge zur europäischen Geschichte*, ed. Martin Kintzinger, Wolfgang Stürner, and Johannes Zahltan (Köln: Böhlau, 1991), 23–38; and Irmgard Siebert, *Jacob Burckhardt. Studien zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichtsschreibung* (Basel: Schwabe, 1991).

45. Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, ed. Rudolf Marx (1868–71; Leipzig: A. Kröner, 1929), 5, 66.

racial history—is completely foreign to it, because contextualist historiography, like contextualist philosophy and anthropology, has been incapable of theorizing relationships of difference with any cogency and conviction. But neither is universal history the objective of Burckhardt’s “third way.” He refused, from the commencement of his career, to seek a formula, however intricate, that would bring the rhizomes, repetitions, and symptoms into a general system:

The philosophers, encumbered with speculations on origins, ought by rights to speak of the future. We can dispense with theories of origins, and no one can expect from us a theory of the end. . . . Questions such as the influence of soil and climate are introductory questions . . . for the philosophers of history, but not for us, and hence quite outside our scope. The same holds good for all cosmologies, theories of race, the geography of the three ancient continents, and so on. . . . The study of any other branch of knowledge may begin with origins, but not that of history. After all, our historical pictures are, for the most part, pure constructions, as we shall see more particularly when we come to speak of the State. . . . There is little value in conclusions drawn from people to people or from race to race. The origins we imagine we can demonstrate are in any case quite late stages.<sup>46</sup>

The preference for contextualist (localized) history results from an eagerness for convenience—for information that can be coped with, labeled, managed, packaged—but its accessibility depends on an optical illusion, and the eagerness may be accompanied by willful blindness. The capacity to tolerate and deal with an absence of differentiable periods and episteme (to live with an oceanic, unanalyzable unity, lacking beginning, end, and formulable meaning) is to say the least a rare power. Those who, like Burckhardt and especially Warburg, can see their way to tolerating historical impurity are often moved aside, with the subtlest gestures, by other scholars who do not share or understand that power. In the case of Panofsky and Gombrich’s treatment of Warburg, the adversarial feelings that arose out of intolerance, misunderstanding, and perhaps fear were presented as (more simply) condescension to imperfect scholarship. Some of the finest sensibilities have in this way been “corrected” off the map of our intellectual life. It is not so much, then, for the sake of justice as for our own peace of mind that we reverse the exorcism of such affronted and beneficial ghosts.

46. Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom*, 74–75.