FEAR, REVERENCE, TERROR

THE ITALIAN LIST
Carlo Ginzburg

Fear, Reverence, Terror

FIVE ESSAYS IN POLITICAL ICONOGRAPHY
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1. The essays, or experiments, collected here deal with themes that differ greatly among themselves, although they are connected to the political iconography mentioned in the subtitle. Less obvious is the analytical instrument they have in common—the notion of *Pathosformeln* (formulae of pathos) suggested by Aby Warburg more than a century ago. I shall say something about its significance and origins before alluding to the somewhat different use I have made of it here.

2. Warburg, in a lecture he gave at Hamburg in October 1905, juxtaposed a Dürer drawing representing the death of Orpheus with an engraving on the same subject from the circle of Mantegna. The drawing was inspired by the engraving but as Warburg observed, the latter—through intermediaries that
are no longer apparent—echoed, in the gesture of Orpheus being put to
death, a gesture that one still finds on Greek vases: ‘an archaeologically
authentic formula of pathos [Pathosformel’]. For Warburg this was not an
isolated case: the art of the early Renaissance had recovered from antiquity
‘the models of an intensified pathetic manner of gesturing’, ignored by the
classicist vision that identified the art of the ancients with ‘quiet grandeur’.
In this stylistic-iconographic interpretation of the death of Orpheus,
Warburg (as he noted some months later in his diary), hearkened back to
Nietzsche, so as to supplement (and correct) Winckelmann. Next to
Nietzsche, Burckhardt: the Renaissance (as Fritz Saxl observed with the
help of Warburg’s notes), had recovered, especially through sarcophagi,
the gestures of orgiastic paganism that the pious Middle Ages had tacitly
censored. It is precisely in a passage from Burckhardt’s The Civilization of
the Renaissance in Italy—‘Whenever Pathos emerged, it took an ancient
form’—that Gombrich recognized the germ of the idea of Warburg’s
Pathosformel. Perhaps, but that seed fell on ground made fertile by other
experiences.

3. In his published essays, Warburg made scant use of the notion of Pathos-
formeln. But he turned to it almost obsessively in the endless mass of notes
which he accumulated over the years. Taking inspiration from the research
of the linguist Hermann Osthoff on the primitive character of superlatives,
Warburg compared representations of specific gestures—which could be
cited as formulas—to verbal superlatives, in other words, to ‘primordial
words of impassioned gesticulation’ (Urworte leidenschaftlicher Gebärden-
sprache). Among the characteristics of these ‘primordial words’ was,
according to Osthoff, ambivalence—an element that Warburg extended to the *Pathosformeln*. Emotional gestures taken from the ancients entered Renaissance art but with an inverted meaning. An example of this ‘energetic inversion’ (Warburg’s term) is the Mary Magdalene represented as a maenad in the Crucifixion by Bertoldo di Giovanni, the Florentine sculptor who was a student of Donatello; an image that recurs twice, in its entirety and as a detail, in the atlas *Mnemosyne*, on which Warburg was working at the end of his life.

After the death of Warburg, Edgar Wind, who had been a member of his circle, returned to Bertoldo di Giovanni’s Mary Magdalene in a brief essay entitled ‘The Maenad under the Cross’. It began with a reference to Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art*. Commenting on a drawing by Baccio Bandinelli which he owned, Reynolds noted that the artist had taken his inspiration from a Bacchante ‘intended to express an enthusiastic frantick kind of joy’ in order to represent a Mary beneath the cross which ‘express[ed] frantick agony of grief’. And he concluded: ‘It is curious to observe, and it is certainly true, that the extremes of contrary passions are with very little variation expressed by the same action’. Wind noted that Warburg ‘without knowing of this passage in Reynolds’ *Discourses* . . . collected material which tended to show that similar gestures can assume opposite meanings.

On this last point Wind erred. Warburg came to know about the passage in Reynolds in a way that helps us to better understand the genesis of the notion of *Pathosformeln*. 
4. We should say straight away that the connection is absolutely obvious. In 1888, while he was preparing a seminar for August Schmarsow, the 22-year-old Warburg stumbled upon the famous book by Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in Florence’s National Library. In his diary Warburg noted: ‘At last a book which helps me.’ That this ‘utility’ concerned the notion of *Pathosformeln* has been frequently noted, but in vague terms: ‘it remains to be understood’, it has been said, ‘in what sense this influence should be interpreted’. Perhaps. But any interpretation will have to consider a fact that has strangely been ignored by students of Warburg: that Darwin, in the chapter dedicated to contiguity between extreme emotive states—such as spasmodic laughter and crying—had cited in a note the abovementioned passage from Reynolds (‘It is curious to observe . . . ’), and commented: ‘He [Reynolds] gives as an instance the frantic joy of a Bacchante and the grief of a Mary Magdalen.’

Those five lines from Darwin sparked in Warburg’s mind a reflection that lasted 40 years. It is tempting to see in them, *in nuce*, the notion of ‘formulæ of pathos’ (*Pathosformeln*) and what it implies: on the one hand, the relationship with antiquity; on the other, the ‘energetic inversion’ that transforms the ecstatic frenzy of the Bacchante into the sorrowful frenzy of Mary Magdalene. But this is a retrospective illusion—the seed does not explain the tree. Significantly, Warburg waited almost 20 years before publicly proposing the notion of *Pathosformeln*.

5. This hesitation might have stemmed from a difficulty that Warburg never succeeded in truly resolving. If the expressions of emotions—as
Darwin suggested in the very title of his book—can be explained through evolution, the search for specific cultural mediators becomes superfluous. But it was precisely these mediators, certain or presumed, which were instead at the heart of Warburg’s Hamburg lecture on ‘Dürer and Antiquity’ (1905). In the introduction to the atlas *Mnemosyne* written shortly before his death (1929), Warburg spoke instead of ‘engrams of an impassioned experience which survive as a hereditary patrimony inscribed in memory’. In the span of a quarter century, Warburg’s thinking had oscillated between two opposed directions. The richness of his work, published and unpublished, arises precisely here—from the unresolved tension between the historian and the morphologist, which can be summed up in the contrast between the diagram that condenses the sensational deciphering of the Schifanoia frescoes and the images juxtaposed, by way of contiguity and dissonance, in the panels of *Mnemosyne*.

6. The tension between morphology and history that criss-crosses Warburg’s work has objective roots. The transmission of the *Pathosformeln* depends on historical events; human reactions to those formulas depend on totally different contingencies, in which the more or less brief times of history are interwoven with the much lengthier ones of evolution. The manner of this interweaving leads us to an area of research that remains largely unexplored. The essays collected here will hopefully make a small contribution to this end.

In the first, the analysis of the gilded silver vase in the Schatzkammer (treasure chamber) of the Munich Residenz demonstrates the ambiguous
role played by the antiquity-inspired *Pathosformeln* in representing a new and overwhelming reality: the conquest of the New World. In the second essay, the identification of the term *awe*, which joins terror and veneration as a central element in the thought of Hobbes, clarifies a decisive chapter in a long history that hinges on the expression of extreme and ambivalent emotions. Terror and veneration are at the heart of the third essay, dedicated to Jacques-Louis David’s *Marat*—its recovery, in the service of revolutionary iconography, of gestures from an iconography that is first pagan and then Christian perfectly illustrates the ambiguities of secularization. The same theme is present, implicitly, in the fourth contribution—the premises, both distant and near, of Lord Kitchener’s gesture help us to understand its tremendous efficacy. And in the last essay, an analysis of Picasso’s violent juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary, broken sword and light bulb, casts unexpected light on *Guernica*. We have returned to terror and its gestures, a theme that is at the very heart of these essays devoted to political iconography.

7. The notion of *Pathosformeln* brings to light the ancient origins of modern images and the manner in which those origins have been reworked. But the analytical instrument that Warburg gave us can be extended to phenomena very different from those for which it had originally been developed. The title page of *Leviathan*—that illustrious example of political iconography—translates into a new image the words of Tacitus: *fingunt simul creduntque* (they believe what they have just made up). Here we find ourselves confronted not by an emotion but by an idea, a *Logosformel* which
has an emotion as its object—we are subjugated by falsehoods of our own creation. In its disarming, paradoxical simplicity, this idea can help us to develop a critique of the languages of politics, and of its images.

Translated by Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi
Notes


10 Gombrich, Aby Warburg, p. 72, where the title is cited incorrectly as The Expression of Emotion in Animals and Men.

11 Didi-Huberman, L’image survivante, p. 232. This question is followed by an attempt at a reply, rich in useful observations (pp. 224–40, 242–6). The decisive importance of Darwin for Warburg’s theory of expression had already been pointed out by Gombrich (Aby Warburg, p. 242).


13 Didi-Huberman, L’image survivante, p. 240. This tension does not appear in Didi-Huberman’s book, which pays scant attention to Warburg the historian. But the reconstruction of the ‘theoretical’ Warburg is impaired by the polemic against the ‘haine positiviste de toute “théorie”’ [positivist hatred of any ‘theory’] (p. 93). Warburg’s ideas obviously originate from positivism even if they go beyond it (just as in Freud’s case for that matter, but the comparison between the two, belaboured by Didi-Huberman, is not very illuminating).

A Note on the Texts

Compared to the French version of this book (Peur révérence terreur. Quatre essais d'iconographie politique [Paris: Les presses du réel, 2013]), the essays have now become five: a new one, the first, has been added, which had already been included in the Mexican edition (Miedo, reverencia, terror. Cinco ensayos de iconografía política [México: Editorial Contrahistorias, 2014]). For an expanded version of the preface, see ‘Le forbici di Warburg’ in Maria Luisa Catoni, Carlo Ginzburg, Luca Giuliani, Salvatore Settis, Tre figure. Achille, Meleagro, Cristo (Maria Luisa Catoni ed.) (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013), pp. 109–32.

I note below where and when the writings collected in this book (all more or less revised) first appeared:

I am deeply grateful to Francesca Savastano for her work on the Italian version of this book. Her sharp, demanding eye helped me to correct oversights and inaccuracies.

My friends Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi translated into English, with unfailing competence, the preface and third chapter, as well as some additions and corrections I prepared for this edition. For further corrections I am indebted to the learning and generosity of Alberto Toscano. Many thanks to them all.