

**Warburg and Jolles:
a cognitive approach to the art of viewing and the art of reading**

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My brief reflection is based on two assumptions that might be controversial. The first assumption is about *Pathosformel* [pathos formula] and *Sprachgebärde* [language gesture], the two fundamental terms in Warburg's art of viewing art, who first used the term in his 1906 writing on Dürer and the Italian antiquity (Warburg, "Dürer und die italiensche Antike"), and in André Jolles' art of reading literature, developed mainly in his book on *Einfache Formen* from 1930. My first thesis is that these two terms can be compared and that they – phenomenologically taken – refer to the same concept. In further research this reflection might even be extended to Panofsky's concept of "type" and to Ernst Robert Curtius' notion of "topos".¹ My second and main thesis is that this concept can be explained (and explored) by some of the recent theories developed in cognitive studies. In this sense I will simultaneously deal with Warburg and apply a Warburgian interest in joining insights from the so-called culture studies and the so-called cognitive sciences, one of the leading and promising research areas in present times.

The interesting point about *Pathosformel* and *Sprachgebärde* is that they seem to exist before concretization in the arts and even before their concrete meaning. Oscillating between a morphological preexistence and its meaningful appearance, their floating experience is a challenge both to history and eternity, to universalism and cultural relativism. Whenever one deals with Warburg's famous *Mnemosyne-Atlas-Project* one can observe this challenge in action: The fact that the project is only bequeathed in vague drafts and ambiguous representations only highlights the permanent entanglement of its observer between "I do not really understand what it means" and "There is something about it".

¹ From the perspective of a methodological challenge a comparison of *Pathosformel*, *Topos* and *Type* has been developed by Pfisterer. See also the fundamental findings in Wuttke, "Ernst Robert Curtius und Aby M. Warburg".

Intuitiveness as the anticipation of its meaning is what really delights our interest in Jolles and Warburg and their concepts of *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel*. I will try to offer now some theoretical approaches from cognitive studies that might help us understand both: the terms of *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel*, as well as our interest in them.

The first concept that must be mentioned is of course the concept of schemas and scripts, which Ernst H. Gombrich referred to in his *Art and Illusion* even before the cognitive turn that we are suggesting (Ettlinger, 510). Schemas allow us to establish a meaningful contextual knowledge in a given situation, which means recognizing a single occurrence in its contextual relatedness. Schemas exist before the given experience and help us organize our perception, understanding and behavior. But schemas are grounded on experience as well, and are thus permanently modeled and changed. We count on schemas to make sense of the world, but we do not simply depend on them as an everlasting predestination. There can be several types of "schema management" (as Peter Stockwell put it): schemas can be restructured or preserved, they can be reinforced or completed, disrupted or refreshed (Stockwell, 80-81). But without them we hardly could make sense of what we perceive and experience. Some schemas even develop into, scripts which define a sequence of expected behaviors for a certain situation. Entering a coffee shop we immediately know how to act (looking for a table, sitting down, asking for a coffee, paying and leaving again), though coffees and waiters and chairs and bills may be different from case to case. Those who have experienced the Lisbon Café *Brasileira*, a *Wiener Kaffeehaus* and an American *Starbucks* know that scripts have a very limited validity – so that we sometimes leave the coffee shop quite disappointed by the coffee, the waiter, the chair or the bill.

Art and literature widely build upon schemas and scripts – and so does our recognition of *Pathosformel* and *Sprachgebärde*. Recent findings concerning mirror neurons might even help explain how we develop our schemas and scripts by mirroring each other's mind. The so-called "theory of mind", i.e. understanding others as intentional beings, with a mental existence much akin to our own, depends highly on the assumption of scripts and schemas, which allow us to theorize in an outreaching complex manner, as in the following sentence: "Of course I care about how you imagined I thought you perceived I wanted you to feel." (Zunshine, 30).

Sprachgebärde and *Pathosformel* would be the impetus of scripts and schemas unfolding as a shared and contextual meaning. As such they would be simultaneously stable and dynamic, universal as a principle and historical in their unfolding. This first cognitive description could be a step forward in the analysis of their sophisticated and manifold experience in art.² There are still many doubts concerning theory of mind, mirror neurons and the perceptual and behavioral importance of schemas and scripts. But these doubts are no stronger than the effort to explain the mindful workings of the brain both as a common and an extraordinary experience.

A second theory from cognitive studies might suggest a further insight. Without contradiction to the former proposal, we might try to consider *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* as a way of conceptual integration, the so-called blending or "mental binding", first developed by Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier in their book *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. The theory has been widely applied to the analysis of metaphor, but – as the title of the book suggests – its scope is much broader. In our interpretation the *Pathosformel* would work like a "presentation space" which is blended with the (representation of the) referent in a way that generates meaning. Again we could count on a certain stability, continuity and recognition on the one hand, as we could experience on the other hand singularity and innovation. Following a later development of conceptual blending we could imagine a relevance space working in the process itself, once again like an orientation towards restructuring, preservation, reinforcement, refinement, disruption or refreshment. Observing the concrete case of Dürer's "Tod des Orpheus" we might understand how the antique tradition and the modern vision worked together in Dürer's art. By joining the two attributes given by Warburg himself to the *Pathosformel* ("lebenskräftig"; full of life) and to Dürer's own position in painting ("bodenständig"; down-to-earth) we acknowledge the process of conceptual integration as a concrete moment in history: *Pathosformel* and Dürer's own position merge in the reinforced blend that gives rise to what we call the *Renaissance*. The blend would be what Warburg himself called the *Einverseelung*, (Warburg, "Mnemosyne", 3), a mental assimilation (figure 1).

² *Neuroaesthetics* is the new discipline linking the long tradition of empathy in art theory to the observation of cognitive processes as in the case of mirror neurons. Such discussion must necessarily refer to Warburg's *Pathosformel*, as do David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese in "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience", 75.

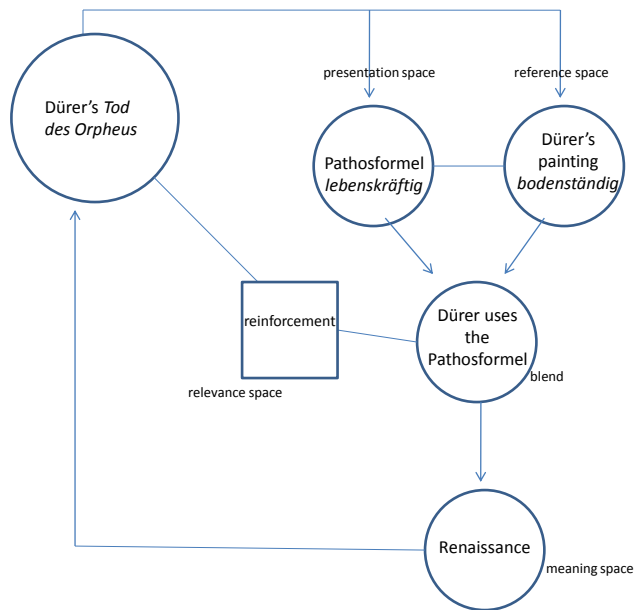


Figure 1

To understand the same procedure for the term *Sprachgebärde*, one can observe in figure 2 how the life and death of Mr. X is transformed through the presentation as a *Sprachgebärde* of virtue and wonder. The resulting blend gives rise to the meaning of the legend of a saint.

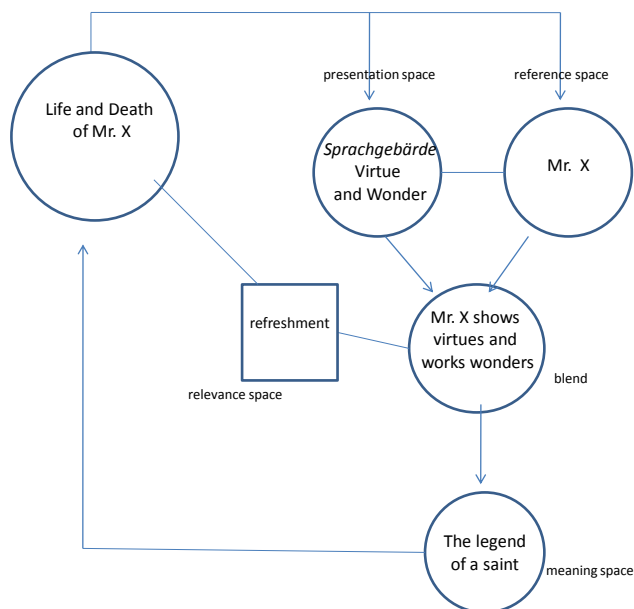


Figure 2

In both cases the conceptual integration of a given presentation space and a new reference space results in a concrete meaning. Just as there would be no legend without

Mr. X and no saint without the *Sprachgebärde* of virtue and wonder, there would be no *Renaissance* without Dürer's painting and the *Pathosformel* reinforced by it. The process that we described is the way it makes sense, both for the author or painter and for us, who just receive the message for understanding.

In both cases I suggested that *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* are prior to the case or to its concrete experience. The same must be true for schemas and scripts that we identified as a first cognitive concept relevant for those terms. This allows me to ask now where *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* may come from. If they are prior to the case and to the concrete experience, where might they come from, where might they be at home? Are they universals or archetypes (as often suggested) that exist as an a priori transcendent category? From the point of view of rhetoric, Joachim Knape has discussed the meaning of *Pathosformel* and rejected clearly any significance in the use of the term based on the idea of an universal set of signs or archetypes (Knape, 123, 129). For Warburg *Pathosformel* seems to be less a rhetoric sign (Knape, 131) than a vestige within what Knape calls the code of the European community of visual communication (der europäischen Bildkommunikationsgemeinschaft; Knape, 135). What does that mean? Might this help explain why certain *Pathosformel* could have been lost somehow in the Middle Ages – as Warburg suggests? Or how could they come to an end – as Jolles states for the legend of saints (though he recognizes that they found their "renaissance" in the sports pages of today's newspapers)?

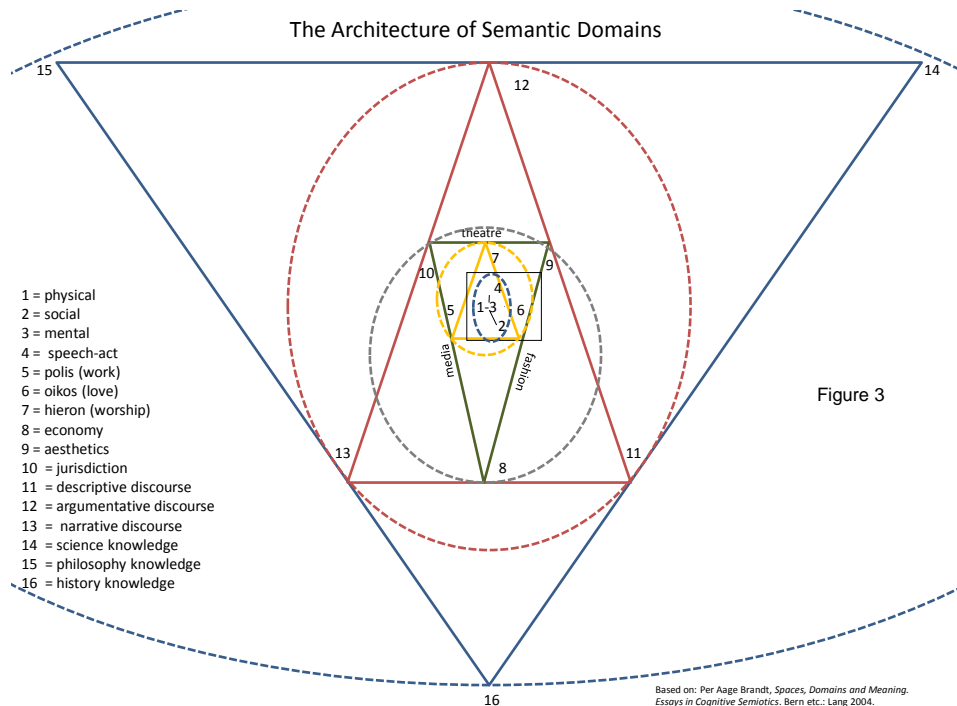
I would like to propose an answer in two steps. First I would like to refer to what Leonard Talmy called the "Cognitive Culture System" that evolved in the human species as "an innately determined brain system whose principal function is the acquisition, exercise, and imparting of culture" (Talmy II, 373). Talmy provides evidence for his thesis that "culture is a highly organized cognitive construction, and that little in cognition of such a complex and systematic character 'just happens' without specific neural provision for it". This cognitive culture system is acquired in infancy, then turns out to be quite stable through lifelong exercise and is continuously handed down to the following generation. As we attempt to establish congruency between our conception of the world and the world we live in, incongruities between the environment and the developed brain, incongruities introduced, for example, by significant changes in the environment, produce distress and dysfunction (Wexler, 1772). Through our cognitive culture system we stick to "certain kinds of regularities,

patterns, and norms" (Talmy 379) by which we experience the world and develop meaning.

Talmy refers to the famous list of 72 cultural universals proposed by George Peter Murdock in 1965 as the general framework through which culture emerges. Among the 72 universals we find cosmology and courtship as well as hair-styles and hospitality or sexual restrictions and soul concepts, just to give six examples in their original alphabetical context (Talmy 376). But we do not find *Sprachgebärde* or *Pathosformel*, because they are not universal in the sense of Murdock's list. But nevertheless they are part of the cognitive culture system developed along our history in its concrete "regularities, patterns, and norms". As such they are a cognitive entity, prior to the concrete experience, but dependent on its acquisition, exercise and imparting. This might explain how the *Pathosformel* could have gone lost and be rediscovered again, why *Sprachgebärden* can die and then rise again. Certain "means of transmission"³ guarantee their survival – though they might be "concealed" by other artefacts or cultural strata as Warburg explains in his introduction to the Mnemosyne-Atlas (Warburg, "Mnemosyne" 5). It mainly explains why we can share the notion of *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* and why they can work meaningfully as schemas and in conceptual integration, not as a genetic heritage but as a cultural experience renewable through continuous acquisition. The cognitive culture system is universal as a human condition, but it is necessarily historical in its actuality. Or in the famous words of simple truth: We are cultural by nature. That is why Dieter Wuttke's suggestion that culture studies (he speaks of *Geisteswissenschaft*) should be the science of the historical world is a necessary reorientation in an artificially divided culture (Wuttke, *Para uma visão holística*, 58). And thus cognitive studies as a reductive neuro- and brain science could never achieve an adequate insight about the historical process of mind and meaning.

I would like to invite you to consider a second cognitive model that might help us describe the challenge even more clearly. Figure 3 presents a simplified summary of the "Architecture of Semantic Domains", developed by Per Aage Brandt.

³ I borrow the term from Gertud Bing in Wuttke, "Ernst Robert Curtius und Aby M. Warburg", 684.



In the centre of the diagram you find the four basic semantic domains (the physical, social, mental and speech-act domains), surrounded by twelve satellite domains. In a first orbit we find the practical domains (work, love and worship). A second orbit based on exchange establishes economy (exchanging things), jurisdiction (exchanging acts) and aesthetics (exchanging signs). As a third orbit we find the discourses of description, argumentation and narration that establish finally three domains of knowledge in science, philosophy, and history.

I will not discuss this architecture now – and I even do not want do suggest it as the final word on the structure of our semantic domains. I would like to use this structure just for the purpose of clarifying where *Pathosformel* and *Sprachgebärde* are – metaphorically speaking – at home. Here we come to some interesting findings. First we recognize that *Pathosformel* and *Sprachgebärde* seem to be at home in the so-called domain of aesthetics since they are mainly determined by the exchange of signs. In the case of *Sprachgebärde* we recognize its deep foundation in the speech-act domain, while the *Pathosformel* seems to be outreaching to the narrative discourse.

Anyway, what is most striking about such observation is the fact that it does not fully satisfy a characterization of what *Pathosformel* and *Sprachgebärde* are about. And this second finding can help us understand why the cognitive description of their meaning is a complex endeavour: the interesting point in *Pathosformel* and *Sprachgebärde* is not where they are at home and what they mean in terms of semantic determination. On the

contrary, *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* are ways of connecting domains of meaning and thus ways by which meaning is performed. Instead of situating *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* in an "Architecture of Semantic Domains", we should try to describe ways and forms of interacting and performing semantic structures. Or expressing this finding even more radically: *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* do not mean anything; they are just ways of performing meaning. It is their performative character that Warburg emphasizes in the task of representing "menschlich bewegtes Leben", humanly moved life, as he explains in the introduction to the *Mnemosyne* project (Warburg, "Mnemosyne", 6). The representation of humanly moved life leads Warburg necessarily to merge the ontological, the biological, the psychological and the point of view of fine arts.⁴

I would like to draw two conclusions from this observation. The first is that we might need to develop a new kind of cognitive architecture not searching for meaning and semantic determination, but trying to describe cognitive forms of interacting and performing semantic domains. Instead of observing what one thinks, the question would be how one thinks. Not insisting on the content of meaning but on the ways and forms of its appearance. In the same way that Murdock's list cannot account for *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel*, an "Architecture of Semantic Domains" does not provide the essential elements to describe them. Again: we already know a lot about the content of an "Architecture of Semantic Domains" and about the content of a culture cognitive system as described by Talmy. Murdock's list would be a kind of general lexicon of the culture cognitive system, varied by each culture in concrete forms. But we know very little about a general grammar of this system that determines the way in which the lexicon is performed. Ways of thinking – instead of contents of meaning, that is what *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* are about.

Using the metaphors of lexicon and grammar reveals how much of what *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* adhere to depends on cultural variety. As the lexicon, grammar is culturally determined. Thus the second point to conclude from this observation is that *Sprachgebärde* and *Pathosformel* belong to what we started to describe in recent projects developed in our research centre as *tacit knowledge* (Hanenberg). Tacit knowledge is a term that we borrowed from Michael Polanyi and his

⁴ As Knape (Knape 124) pointed out, inviting to a critical evaluation of Warburg's attempt.

famous thesis that "we know more than we can tell". Even though our research on tacit knowledge has only started and therefore has given rise to more questions than to any answers and still less to any certainty, we might agree beforehand that there is some tacit dimension in the way we think and that this tacit dimension is culturally imparted and shared. A *Pathosformel* would be a tacit way of representing humanly moved life, as *Sprachgebärde* would be a tacit kind of expression both being culturally determined. In tacit knowledge cognitive principles meet history as their cultural concretization. We do not have any cognitive principles without their cultural concretization and no cultural processes that are not based on the cognitive principles. In tacit knowledge nature and nurture meet necessarily.

I imagine Warburg's library as the archive of tacit knowledge, and if it were able to speak, we would certainly know more about the way we think. If one could identify the coordinates in Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* we would get a veritable map to tacit knowledge that would not only identify semantic domains but mainly the way they are linked together. A cognitive science seeking for the conditions and the performance of tacit knowledge will find in Warburg's and Jolles' work an identical interest: to find out not what, but how we think, view and speak, describing ways of blending, identifying scripts and schemas, naming patterns, rules and norms and recognizing the dynamic relation in the way they perform across semantic domains by building up cognitive culture systems smaller than mankind but embracing more than the individual.

The project would actually be a science of culture. And even before we can start to explore it further, we recognize immediately that this tacit knowledge is as powerful⁵ as it is fragile. As tacit knowledge, *Pathosformeln* and *Sprachgebärden* must be acquired, must be practiced and imparted. That is what culture is about. That is why we care about the art of viewing and the art of reading. At risk always. Lost and refound. That is why *Mnemosyne* is as much the goddess of the past as the guide to the future.

⁵ Karl Sieriek has given a systematic approach to iconic energy that seems to cover quite well the function of *Pathosformal* as tacit knowledge, mainly in what he calls the "orientational functions of the image". See Sieriek's article in this volume.

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