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El estilo de los fragmentos: forma y construcción teórica en los *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* de Aby Warburg

The Style of the Fragments: Form and Theoretical Construction
in Aby Warburg's *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*

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Resumen

En 1888, Aby Warburg comenzó a escribir los *Grundlegend Bruchstücke* (fragmentos), tratando de sintetizar sus reflexiones teóricas y los contornos de sus estudios sobre el Renacimiento. Este trabajo duró hasta 1905, produciendo un compendio a modo de diario que contenía bocetos, definiciones conceptuales, aforismos y referencias bibliográficas que pretendía presentar como un libro sobre teoría de la imagen. Trayendo a la discusión esta importante fuente, aunque aún no ampliamente conocida, este artículo analiza el pensamiento teórico de Warburg en sus contornos y proceso de construcción. Pretendemos debatir el lugar de los fragmentos en su reflexión teórica centrándonos en tres temas generales: I) el proceso de trabajo de los fragmentos; II) sus elementos formales; III) su sistematicidad. Por último, argumentamos que, aunque falte a los fragmentos el estricto rigor y de la sistematicidad técnica, ellos no dejan de presentarse como una rica reflexión teórica, una obra con un notable vigor filosófico.

Palabras clave

Warburg; fragmentos; teoría de las artes.

Abstract

In 1888 Aby Warburg started to write the *Grundlegend Bruchstücke* (fragments), trying to synthesize his theoretical reflections and the contours of his Renaissance studies. This work lasted until 1905, producing a diary-like compendium containing sketches, conceptual definitions, aphorisms, and bibliographical references that he intended to present as a book on image theory. Bringing to the discussion this important, though not yet widely known, source, this article analyzes Warburg's theoretical thought in its contours and construction process. We aim to debate the place of the fragments in his theoretical reflection focusing on three general topics: I) the working process of the fragments; II) their formal elements; III) their systematicity. Lastly, we argue that, though Warburg's fragments lack strict rigor and technical systematicity, they do not fail to present themselves as a rich theoretical reflection, a work with remarkable philosophical vigor.

Keywords

Warburg; fragments; art theory.

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Written between 1888 and 1905, with minor changes dating from 1912, Warburg's fragments (*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*, henceforth *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*) can be seen as a broad and continuous intellectual endeavor that starts with the attempt to elaborate a kind of theoretical compendium for his investigations on the Renaissance and the theory of image. In this work, Warburg deepens his main theoretical questions and indicates fundamental complements to the themes of his historiographical production. In their entries, conceptual definitions, and aphorisms, the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* emphasize a set of themes and problems whose content reveals important nuances of his thought. Among their main issues, we find some themes as the problem of stylistic change, symbolism, and the constitutive mechanisms of expression.

In this article, we bring the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* to the center of the discussion.² Far from intending an exhaustive analysis, we aim to reconstruct their contours and construction process. To do so, we focus first on the working process of the fragments. Next, we analyze some of their particular elements, for example, the intensive use of aphorisms and neologisms. Finally, we investigate their systematicity. Based on some quotations, we interpret the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* as characteristic reflections of a working method that is more concerned with presenting problems and inquiries than proposing solutions. Though Warburg's text lacks strict rigor and technical systematicity, it does not fail to present itself as a rich theoretical reflection, a work with remarkable philosophical vigor.

The working process

The process of writing the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* comprises a long period of Warburg's academic life (1888–1905). Despite this chronological range, we observe that the work on the fragments is concentrated on some specific moments. Between 1891 and 1892, for example, Warburg devoted himself intensively to the manuscript. From a sum of 491 fragments,³ 173 were written between January 1891 and May 1892,⁴ echoing his concern with the theoretical-conceptual problems of his doctoral thesis and his psychophysiological studies in Berlin. From this period, we can highlight the series of fragments that deal with issues such as mannerism, dynamic forms, and unconscious projection (Warburg, *Fragmente* 132-133). These fragments show us some theoretical-conceptual implications of his *Four theses*.⁵

Another crucial moment in the elaboration of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* took place between 1895 and 1897, a period that coincides with Warburg's trip to the United States. We count exactly 81 fragments that document his reflections in moments immediately before his trip and the subsequent record of his experiences and observations among the Pueblo Indians, in short, precious insights for understanding the constitutive mechanisms of expression (Warburg, *Fragmente* 138-179). In this context, on January 27, 1896, partaking from his observations among the Pueblo Indians, Warburg conceived four stages of the manifestation of

² The “rediscovery” of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* is a relatively recent event. In addition to the translations into Italian (2011) and French (2015), from the 2010s onwards, this source emerges in critical literature as a necessary reference for the debate on Warburg's theoretical thinking (Ghelardi 41-52) (Müller and Targia) (Rampléy 303 et seq.) (Vollgraff 122 et seq.) (Wedepohl, *Pathos* 21 et seq.).

³ In our sum, we include the fragments published in the German edition of 2015.

⁴ We overlooked the fragments 277 to 278c, as they are not dated in the original manuscript. In any case, they were written sometime between 1892 and 1894.

⁵ Initially presented as the conclusion of his doctoral thesis (Warburg, *Renewal* 144). In 2010 this material was edited and published in an expanded version (Warburg, *Werke* 109-117). An alternative version of the text has been published by Hönes and Pfisterer (Warburg, *Fragmente* 285-292).

primitive religiosity, all linked to a process classified as “embodiment” [*Verleibung*]. More than the specific content of this categorization, we observed how this reflection records the development of his theoretical problems: “I believe I have finally found expression for my psychological law, something I have been looking for since 1888” (Warburg, *Fragmente* 145).⁶

In addition to these periods of intensive production, the history of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* is marked by prolonged interruptions. These are equally significant as they reveal crucial moments in Warburg’s biography and the evolution of his projects. The most characteristic example dates back to May 1892. After conceptually defining attention as the “practical eradication of our double physical structure” (Warburg, *Fragmente* 133), Warburg puts aside his text, returning to it only in January 1894.⁷ This interruption was related to the efforts to publish his doctoral thesis (Warburg, *Briefe* 104-105)⁸ and the fulfillment of his compulsory military service in Karlsruhe.⁹

After 1901 we identify another period of notable slowdown in the production of aphorisms and schemata. Between January 1901 and December 1902, we count 29 fragments (Warburg, *Fragment* 210-223), a considerable decrease compared to the productive period of the early 1890s. We can think of a double reason for this change. First, Warburg directed his attention to the writing of essays on the *Quattrocento* and his activity as a lecturer. Second, the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* already had a considerable amount of material. Therefore, nothing is more natural than the decrease in the production of new formulations and the directing of his energies towards the conclusion of the text. Although we can count some fragments written between 1903 and 1905, it is visible the intention of abandoning the production of new aphorisms to dedicate instead to the formatting of the manuscript, with the occasional insertion of corrections and updates. Furthermore, from 1905 onwards, with the concept of *Pathosformeln*, Warburg’s theoretical ambitions centered on another project, the notebook *Schematismus der Pathosformel*.¹⁰

The revision of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* was a slow and gradual process. The intensive use of aphorisms, constant reformulations, later additions, and the gaps in the body text contributed to making it even more challenging and complex. In fact, the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* are composed of several notes that served to document the advances of Warburg’s research and theoretical reflections. They were structured as a kind of diary (most entries indicating place and date).

In 1896 Warburg undertook an initial attempt to organize this material following a chronological order and arranging it in book format (Hönes and Pfisterer 326) (Müller, *Warburgs* 69). Until 1901, his endeavor continued at a slow pace, when he decided to hire the typist Hermine Streiber to carry out the transcription. In August 1901, Streiber concluded the work, transforming Warburg’s single cards into two volumes copybook.¹¹ Initially, Warburg did not edit the manuscript, except for the addition of two quotations from Hermann Usener

⁶ All translations throughout this article are my own, except when otherwise specified.

⁷ Disconsidering the fragments 277 to 278c, which were written between May 1892 and January 1894, but without defined data.

⁸ Letter from Aby Warburg to Charlotte Warburg, June 3, 1892.

⁹ On this context (Roeck 81 et seq.).

¹⁰ Notebook on which Warburg worked between 1905 and 1911 (Weigel 143).

¹¹ Streiber’s manuscript was the base for the version published in Italy (Warburg, *Frammenti*). Scholars have criticized this edition for presupposing Streiber’s manuscript as a “finished version” of the text, ignoring its multiplicity and later variations (Ghelardi 43) (Hönes and Pfisterer 324 et seq.).

and Carl Justi.¹² In 1905, however, he took it up again to add a sequence of cards produced between 1902 and 1905 (Hönes and Pfisterer 327).¹³ Though they represent a small fraction of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, these cards of 1905 are a remarkable example of constant improvement of the text, showing how Warburg conceived the fragments as the proper place to deepen and rethink his research topics. After that, Warburg would only change the manuscript again in 1912. On that occasion, he altered the title of his project from “Fundamental fragments for a monistic psychology of art” [*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie*] to “Fundamental fragments for a pragmatic theory of expression” [*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*] (Warburg, *Fragment* 145).

In a broader sense, Warburg’s work on the fragments reveals his intention to transform a material, at first sight, disconnected and inconsistent, into a robust and coherent presentation of his theory of the image. The insertion of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* as a volume of Fritz Saxl’s *Gesammelte Schriften* indicates how the fragments were conceived, not only by Warburg but by his collaborators, as an editorial unity.¹⁴

Form and challenges

Warburg, it turned out, never threw away a piece of paper. He wrote with great difficulty and he never stopped writing. A large proportion of his literary remains turned out to be draft, jottings, formulations, and fragments abandoned on the way to the finished work. Many of the notes were in headline form, indicating certain images or examples which Warburg wanted to adduce, and many of them recurred again in kaleidoscopic fashion (Gombrich 3).

The analysis of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* faces some difficulties. To a large extent, this is due to Warburg’s method of textual production, marked by the agglutination of various materials and theoretical sketches, many of which are inconclusive and difficult to understand.

The characteristic hesitation of his intellectual production and the impressive difficulty in finalizing his writings are the general biographical elements that mark his projects. Warburg used to work through the night until he could put down on paper the ideas that troubled him: “That’s why I could sleep peacefully!” (Warburg, *Fragment* 6).¹⁵ He was aware of the limitations of his textual production process: “I am not a master of writing” (Warburg, *Tagebuch* 147).¹⁶ In a passage from the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, we notice that sometimes he could misunderstand his own formulations: “I have no idea what I wrote” (Warburg, *Fragment* 34). Indeed, though Warburg had audacious projects, they were always delayed thanks to his slow pace of production: “I have monumental plans, and I produce only a little”

¹² The quotation of Usener’s *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* on the cover of the manuscript and the quotation of Justi’s *Winckelmann* as epigraph.

¹³ Hönes and Pfisterer published for the first time this material (Warburg, *Fragmente* 224-227).

¹⁴ Fritz Saxl’s conception emphasizes the anthropological dimension of Warburg’s text by bringing it together under the title *Fragments concerning “the theory of expression, anthropologically considered”* (Warburg, *Renewal* 80).

¹⁵ The *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* show other examples (Warburg, *Fragmente* 32 148).

¹⁶ Registered in the diary of *Bibliothek Warburg*, September 14, 1927.

(Warburg, *Briefe* 171).¹⁷ In this sense, the critical literature shows how hard it was for Warburg to produce consistently and put his ideas on paper (Schoell-Glass 284).

Warburg's manuscripts (especially the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*) are composed of tables, schemata, and aphorisms. In many of them, Warburg develops a consistent argument, while, in others, he limits himself to general statements or formulations in topic format. Beyond that, his manuscripts are full of addenda and marginal annotations. Naturally, Warburg was a collector of materials and ideas. He often crosses his initial formulations over without removing them, adding then the new ones. If, on the one hand, this writing process allows a more accurate perception of the interpretive possibilities present in the text, the author's creative abilities, and his theoretical horizon, on the other hand, it imposes an organization that is not very sympathetic to the reader.¹⁸

This procedure, typical of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, is not restricted to Warburg's juvenile production. It is interesting to observe how later works, such as the project on Giordano Bruno, reproduce the same form of articulating and presenting ideas. Comparing the two excerpts below, we notice the evident similarity:

June 10, 1895

The law of the greatest measure of force as a convenient formative factor of intellectual activities in the artistic actions and creations that circumscribe (Warburg, *Fragmente* 138).

May 09, 1929

Magic-monstrous concretion adapted to an intuitive-intellectual abstraction (Warburg, *Bruno* 49).

In both cases, we face statements that are not self-explanatory. These quotations should be understood as single ideas that integrated or would be integrated into Warburg's historical research, making sense only in the light of his production as a whole. Thus, we can conclude that the study of his manuscripts demands the reader the ability to fill in gaps, point out possible solutions, and connect the content with its surrounding conditions.

Other distinctive aspects of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* concern their linguistic structure, the emphasis on scientific terminology, and the recurrent use of neologisms.

The transposition of characteristic scientific terms, especially those from physiology and psychology, is visible throughout the fragments. The formulation of new terminologies applied to the image theory covers expressions such as ganglia, central organ, nerve fiber vibration, and nerve pulsation.¹⁹ These concepts emerge in some original and audacious reflections, demonstrating Warburg's attempt to establish a scientific basis for his study of the image. In this sense, Warburg describes the perception of the image through the nervous stimuli: "Peripheral stimulus replaced by a peripheral image / similarity / (dream) / no function of the central organs? ganglia" (Warburg, *Fragment* 113). Further on, he reflects on the physiological origin of the movement: "Abandonment of the observed static part of the object and subsumption through the vibration of the entire nerve fiber [no differentiation of ramifications]" (Warburg, *Fragment* 126).

In some cases, Warburg's terminology reveals his theoretical frame and philosophical interlocution. The concept of energy, for example, can be mentioned as a reference to a

¹⁷ Letter from Aby Warburg to Mary Hertz, December 15, 1896.

¹⁸ Despite the precision and philological richness of the work edited by Hönes and Pfisterer (Warburg, *Fragmente*), we notice how the idea of editing a book close to the original manuscript results in a hard-to-read text.

¹⁹ On scientific terminology in Warburg's manuscripts (Targia 19 et seq.).

theoretical framework typical of the natural sciences. Used with some frequency by Warburg, this concept emerges in different contexts and with subtly different connotations. Warburg speaks of “sensory energy” [*Sinnesenergie*] (Warburg, *Fragment* 137), “energy of memory” [*Energie der Erinnerung*] (140), “discharge of energy” [*Ausladung der Energie*] (160), and “energy of reflex activity” [*Energie der Reflexhätigkeit*] (208). This use indicates not only a kind of theoretical-conceptual experiment but also an important intellectual reference that is recorded by the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* (Warburg, *Fragmente* 54): Georg Hirth’s book *Energetische Epigenesis und epigenetische Energieformen*. When he conceives man as a physical-energetic system, Hirth presents a crucial idea for the theoretical horizon of the fragments. The thesis according to which human actions and reactions are a result of a flow of energy, in other words, an entropic conversion of “organic energy” (Warburg, *Fragment* 241), enables Warburg to apply a complex scientific explanation to his theoretical-methodological reflection on image. In a fragment dating from 1896, he exposes his thesis of the dynamic change of “nervous energy” as a fundamental factor for a new stimulus, a new form of artistic expression:

Through the attention to the momentary expression of the object, the renunciation of its real environment is produced – the similar nervous energy, generally used for a new differentiation, is applied to eliminate a memory stimulus, analogous and more intense. The (artistic) expression, acquired in this way, indicates a decrease in the measure of the distance between subject and object (Warburg, *Fragmente* 157).

Alongside the recurrent utilization of scientific terminology, the use of neologisms marks the style of the fragments. In addition to nouns that we cannot find in the lexicons or dictionaries, such as “substitutionalism” [*Substitutionalismus*] (Warburg, *Fragmente* 116),²⁰ Warburg makes intensive use of neologisms by prefixation, as we can see in his formulations based on the concept of “embodiment” [*Verleibung*]. With the construction by prefixation, Warburg intended to differentiate the subtleties of each process, overcoming a mere generalist presentation. This type of procedure makes any literal translation impossible. In addition, it often makes it difficult for us to understand its intended meaning.

II corporal introjection [*Hineinumverleibung*] (animal) “imitation”

III corporal annexation [*Anverleibung*] (symbolism of tools)

I incorporation [*Einverleibung*] (medical magic)

IV corporal addition [*Zu-verleibung*] (ornamented pottery) (Warburg, *Fragmente* 145)²¹

Einverleibung, *Hineinumverleibung*, *Anverleibung*, and *Zu-verleibung* are terms created by Warburg to express nuances of the magic-pagan ritual of the Pueblo Indians in the different stages of their relationship between “subject” and “object”, “self” and “external world”. Here we face a form of conceptualization very close to that undertaken by Robert Vischer in his doctoral thesis, *Über das optische Formgefühl*. Vischer derives from the concept of “empathy” [*Einfühlung*] six formulations that underpin his new interpretation of the aesthetic act: *Anföhlung*, *Ausföhlung*, *Ineinsföhlung*, *Nachföhlung*, *Zuföhlung*, *Zusammenföhlung* (Vischer 21 et seq.). Vischer’s approach corresponds to an attempt of specification whose aim is to explain the act of “empathy” [*Einfühlung*] in its details, beyond the mere interpretation of empathy as an act of projection of the observer onto the object. The limit of this strategy consists

²⁰ The term finds no correspondence in Grimm’s, nor modern dictionaries.

²¹ This translation is based on Gombrich (91).

in the fact that, when searching obstinately for linguistic innovations, Vischer ends up creating unnecessary complications, compromising the clarity and precision of the exposition (Ikonomou and Mallgrave 22). Sometimes the over-specification and unrestricted neologisms could obscure more than enlightening.

The systematic of the fragments

Many works that are praised for the beauty of their coherence have less unity than a motley heap of ideas simply animated by the ghost of a spirit and aiming at a single purpose (Schlegel 154).²²

A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine (Schlegel 189).²³

Alongside Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel is one of the most important representatives of the philosophical style of the fragments. Combining a provocative and polemical posture with a sober, poetic, and reflective way of expression, Schlegel consolidates this form of philosophical reflection in the late-eighteenth century. According to Márcio Suzuki, Schlegel established an approach that starts from the attempt to solve problems of philosophical nature, giving up the strictly technical presentation of philosophy, clinging, on the other hand, to the establishment of connections and the development of multiple particular forms around a unity of form (Suzuki 16-17).

Even starting from a fragmentary reflection, Schlegel does not abandon the idea of systematicity, introducing the fragment as a central element of a philosophical system conceived, no longer in a closed way, but as a system that is maintained in its articulation. Admitting multiple points of view in the construction of a unitary whole, the idea of fragmentation, in a somewhat paradoxical way, corresponds to the systematic form par excellence of philosophical reflection.

Appropriating the aesthetics of the fragment, Warburg aimed to build a theoretical-conceptual edifice capable of encompassing the more general process of the historical development of artistic expression and its constituent psychological mechanisms. His strategy is based on the Schlegelian idea of fragments as a legitimate form of philosophical reflection, conceiving, even in the fragmentation of content, the possibility of maintaining the vision of totality.²⁴ For Warburg, the idea of totality is not based on the systematic presentation of content but its articulative elements. Never abandoning a holistic perspective, the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* present not a systematic analysis but a kind of “open” construction, reflecting Warburg’s process of constant improvement and self-maturation.

Schlegel’s porcupine metaphor appropriates the image of an animal that, being one, points to all sides, conserving itself, at the same time, as particular and universal, or as a unity that points to the universal. This metaphor aptly illustrates the internal dynamics of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*. If we return to the first title of the manuscript, “Fundamental fragments for a psychological philosophy of art” [*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer psychologischen Kunstphilosophie*], we perceive the attempt to elaborate a reflection that, based on the critical-textual procedure of the fragments, could develop a unitary and philosophical understanding of art in its psychological dynamics. In her commentaries on the theoretical

²² *Lyceum*, fragment 103.

²³ *Athenäum*, fragment 206.

²⁴ The relationship of Warburg’s fragments to Schlegel’s work is mentioned by Zumbusch (231).

framework underlying this title, Susanne Müller speaks of Warburg's intention to go beyond a mere accumulation of theses. He aimed to present a philosophy of art based on a psychological model, aligning the psychology and experimental aesthetics of authors such as Robert Vischer, Heinrich von Stein, and Hermann Siebeck (Müller, *Wasserzeichen* 15).

Moving forward in our analysis, we can understand the use of the aesthetics of the fragment as a constant strategy in the construction of Warburg's theoretical edifice. However, this same methodological constancy does not apply to the emphases and objectives of his project. The recurrent title changes are very illustrative in this respect. In October 1901, for example, Warburg changed the title of the manuscript to "Fundamental fragments for a monistic psychology of art" [*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie*] (Warburg, *Fragment* 3), demonstrating the abandonment of his attempt to place his project in a philosophical bias (aesthetics), dedicating instead to the formulation of a new psychology of art. The turn towards psychology was related to his studies of this discipline and his interest in psychologically understanding Renaissance man. Keeping the aesthetics of the fragment as a possibility for a unitary theoretical approach, Warburg explains the monistic orientation of his project, which, starting from the rejection of a dualistic understanding of art, moves towards a holistic approach based on the idea of the unity of culture. The development of this conception began in 1890. In his diary, Warburg speaks of "the search for a psychological-monistic systematization. / The specific place of aesthetics in consciousness in relation to the psyche and nature" (Warburg, *Fragmente* 228).

The proposal of a monistic perspective for the psychology of art goes beyond the perception of the unity in the fragmentary. This approach is related to the artistic dynamics and its creative process. According to Wedepohl, Warburg's early experience in Florence had a significant influence on his theory of expression. It was from this practical experience that he found the impetus to build, between the duality of realism and idealism, his theoretical interpretation (Wedepohl, *Botticelli* 193). One of the goals of his project was to find a balance between the dualistic interpretation of art. Indeed, Warburg tries to overcome this apparent contradiction by sustaining a monistic understanding. In the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, he argues that realism and idealism are essentially two indistinct stages of artistic creation: "Idealism and realism designate only gradually, and not essentially, different stages of artistic work" (Warburg, *Fragment* 15). Idealism and realism can be seen as expressions of the same process, a unity of apparent opposites that corresponds to the essence of artistic activity. In this sense, art history is not defined by the idea of a linear process (decadence and overcoming) but by the figure of the pendulum, which represents for Warburg the image of eternal oscillation.²⁵ It is this image that we find in a fragment from January 1892, when Warburg defines how idealism and realism deal with representation and mimicry (Warburg, *Fragment* 109).

For Warburg, idealism and realism are ways of understanding and representing the movement. By representing the apprehension of mimicry and movement, idealism and realism correspond to two essentially identical phases that diverge only in their procedure. While idealism results in the preservation of the static element – "[in idealism, the artist] sees only the mimic 'preserved' in the image, however, he replaces the dissimilar *petites perceptions* by the general dynamic alteration of the static" –, realism starts from the attempt of reproducing simultaneously the mimicry and the static – "[in realism, the artist] seeks to reproduce by simultaneously circumscribing the mimicry and the static" (Warburg, *Fragmente* 115).

²⁵ On the pendulum as a figure of thought (Warburg, *Fragmente* 258).

In parallel, Warburg touches on another dualism of the aesthetic discussion of the time, the dichotomy between form and content.²⁶ In the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, Warburg links these conceptions with the idealist and realistic manifestation of art: “The substance = resistance, uniform weight = idealism = typological sign. / The form = detachment, difference, isolation = realism = characteristic sign” (Warburg, *Fragmente* 135). In its typological or characteristic sign, the dualism in art translates the apprehension of the object by the artist and its consequent transformation into representative content. When he analyzes this issue, Warburg indicates the artificial, or abstract, aspect of this conceptual repertoire: “Form and content are abstract concepts for the elucidation of dualism in the work of art: they should be called quality and living being, subject and predicate” (Warburg, *Fragment* 54). Warburg’s proposal comes in the sense of overcoming the dualistic approach of the work in favor of focusing on the symbolic aspect of the expression. In this sense, Warburg leaves aside the discussion about the individual value of the artistic work as an aesthetic product to emphasize its psychological element, understood here as the nucleus of a new theory of the image.

In 1912, as a result of a long process of intellectual maturation and influenced by his project “of the –still unwritten– ‘historical psychology of human expression’” (Warburg, *Renewal* 585), Warburg conceived a new title for the fragments: “Fundamental fragments for a pragmatic theory of expression” [*Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde*]. Here we perceive the progressive transition from problems restricted to aesthetics to the investigation of the symbol and the expressive dimension of art. The emphasis on the “psychological-monistic” dimension gives way to the problem of formulating a new “science” or “theory”²⁷ of expression, which would henceforth constitute the guiding axis of his thought.²⁸

The change from “monism” to “pragmatism” reveals an important stage of self-criticism of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*. Warburg abandons the emphasis on the unitary conceptual aspect and the attempt to overcome the epistemological and aesthetic dualism to focus on the “pragmatism” of his project. The claim for pragmatic art history is not based on the attempt to reintroduce positivism or on a dogmatic structure of thought since Warburg would never abandon the fragmentary aspect of his presentation. Indeed, he starts to focus on the organization and articulation of ideas as a fundamental process of his theoretical thinking. Commenting on this change of titles, Buschendorf emphasizes his orientation “towards a theoretical treatment of action in the subject of art and image” (Buschendorf 233). In this way, Warburg retakes the reference to the German concept of “science” [*Wissenschaft*] as the organization of all knowledge on a given subject (Grimm and Grimm), dialoguing with the current view of art history that was based on the pragmatism of reconstruction of the documents, after they have gone through a rigorous critique of authorship and authenticity (Wessely 261).

Starting with the circumscription of his scope to the philosophy of art, then implementing a gradual expansion of its scope, Warburg finally arrives at a more comprehensive conception, describing his fragments as a fundamental reflection on man in the general context of culture. Thus, in November 1929, Warburg speaks of his fragments as “the

²⁶ An illustrative case is the discussions on the concepts of “form” and “manifestation” [*Erscheinung*] (Hildebrand 5-17).

²⁷ In the original: *Kunde*. This term comes from Latin: *notitia, scientia* (Grimm and Grimm). We chose to translate it as theory. Our intention is to distinguish *Kunde* from Warburg’s references to “science” [*Wissenschaft*]. It is worth noting that both words have very close meanings, although the concept of “theory” does not carry any implication of strict conceptual systematicity. Maurizio Ghelardi in the Italian edition of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* also opts for the translation of *Kunde* as “theory” (Warburg, *Frammenti* 181).

²⁸ According to Martina Sauer, this change of titles reveals the transition from a “philosophy starting from above” (projection theory) to a “philosophy starting from below” (anthropology) (Sauer 269-270).

creation of the space for reflection as a function of culture: an essay on a psychology of human orientation based on universal historical-imagery foundations” (Warburg, *Tagebuch* 547).

In the light of these title changes and different attempts to articulate an epistemological unity between art and culture, the question arises: in the end, did Warburg manage to find a consistent solution to the problems proposed by the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*?

First of all, we should note that he abandoned the project in 1905. The practical result of this abandonment is the inexistence of what could be considered a definitive version of the text. This fact imposes some difficulties on our analysis of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, but it also reinforces our understanding of the fragments as a source that assumes an auxiliary function in the general context of Warburg’s production, namely, the presentation and formulation of ideas and questions for his research.

The critical literature has highlighted the inconclusive aspect of the fragments as one of their most relevant characteristics, considering their “abandonment” in 1905 as a sign of their imminent failure (Hönes 367). Warburg began to dedicate himself to studying specific cases as a safer and more promising way for his theoretical-conceptual formulations. According to Hönes, this change of perspective is very significant, as it shows us how in 1905, in his study of Dürer, Warburg discovered a “new, potentially more fruitful way of writing theory by grounding it in its ‘natural interwovenness’ with historical facts” (368).

Other scholars have commented on the fragmentary aspect of Warburg’s thought and its theoretical implications. Cornelia Zumbusch, for example, argues that the different forms of aphorisms, schemes, and fragments with which Warburg marks his theoretical notes vindicate the tradition of romantic thought. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to associate Warburg’s style with the “fragmentary” element present in the early Romantics. In Warburg, the fragmentary can be understood as something unfinished but never as something that lacks cohesion (Zumbusch 231). Calabrese characterizes Warburg’s thinking as oscillating, suggesting personal motivations for abandoning his projects.²⁹ This author speaks of a kind of “ideology of the fragment” that decisively marks Warburg’s production, expressing his inability “to face a systematic study and to focus only on specific arguments” (119).

On the one hand, the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* remains an unfinished work, bringing no definitive solution to the problem of a systematic approach to the artistic phenomenon. On the other, they do not fail to present valuable insights for the study of art, bringing to the center of the discussion the art as manifestation, as a form of expression. In this process, the work itself, the art in an abstract sense, or the artistic genius, is not at the center of discussion, nor is the presentation of answers. On the contrary, the fundamental task is to understand man’s relationship with the outside world, the mechanisms of perception, the configuration of style, and the socio-historical conditions surrounding artistic expression.

In 1907 Warburg talks about the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke* as follows:

It looks as if, up to my fortieth year, there had been a blockage in the association fibres between those carrying my general ideas and those concerned with the visual impressions that underlie these ideas, and as if this had prevented them from interweaving naturally and crossing the threshold of consciousness in this form. And yet, of these general ideas which I value so highly people may perhaps say or think one day: these erroneous

²⁹ Similarly, Gombrich maintains that the difficulties of Warburg’s theoretical work reflect his constant mental agonies. In a passage of his intellectual biography, we can read: “Even so, his ambition to show how such material should be ‘assimilated’ in a worthwhile interpretation resulted in agonies to which the diary and the many drafts bear witness” (140).

schematic ideas had at least one good result in so far as they excited him to churn up individual facts that had not been known before (Gombrich 140).

We can conclude that the fragments are a work to be continually reformulated. In their general contours, topological aspects, and objectives, they present themselves as a product of constant revision and maturation. Despite their unfinished status, they present intriguing ideas, or as Warburg once described, a set of “babbles” (Warburg, *Tagebuch* 547).³⁰ Certainly, the fragments accurately reproduce the dynamics of an intellectual stimulus characteristic of Warburg’s work, whose impulse is directed more to present problems and inquiries than to propose solutions. The question about the formulation of a coherent conclusion, the success or failure of the *Grundlegende Bruchstücke*, must always be answered from a perspective that understands them as a work of great philosophical vigor but without a language and a strictly technical systematization. Although Warburg did not present any conclusive solution, we cannot say that he failed. Through the fragments, he opened new research paths, developed experiments, and established a consistent (though fragmentary) organization for his art theory.

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³⁰ Registered in the diary of *Bibliothek Warburg*, October 11, 1929.

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