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Back and forth around critique. Some notes on Horst Bredekamp, between history and theory

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Abstract. This paper sets forth some hypotheses on Horst Bredekamp's research. Bredekamp's *Bildwissenschaft* has a peculiar thought dynamic that was initially developed in his art historiographical efforts. These show a relevant entanglement of present interest and past issues, research method and research object. I will show this with a focus on his research on the *Kunstkammer*. This dynamic developed later in Bredekamp's research on the image act in a theoretical way. It is transformed here in the attempt to develop a thought which is not overcome by, and does not destroy, the energy which lies at the core of the image act. The peculiar connections between these dimensions are discussed as the effects of the problematic urges that the different developments of his method and theory try to address always anew. It will be shown that a hidden, vital core of his work is a striving towards critique.

Keywords: Horst Bredekamp, *Bildwissenschaft*, image act, art theory, criticism.

Horst Bredekamp holds a prominent position among living art historians and theorists. His books are read worldwide and have been studied and discussed in various ways. The peculiar thought dynamic that permeates his work, however, remains largely overlooked, at least as far as a theoretical attention to it may go. This paper aims to discuss this aspect, with a particular focus on *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, which has been recently republished in English (Bredekamp [2021]).

Some theoretical aspects of his work are at once consequences and new instances of methodical facets of his previous research: In an interview given to Christian Joschke, it is Bredekamp himself who traces the fundamental concept of the image act – even though not yet present as such – to his first book, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte* (Bredekamp [1975]): «Les premières pages de ma these de doctorat [...] traitent de l'acte d'image sans le citer nommément» (Bredekamp, Joschke [2018]: 118). I will outline some observations about this (in hindsight) theoretical ghost.

It seems important to immediately emphasize this limitation to the dynamic of his thought. I will not delve directly into images or art historical analysis here. This choice is, first, a matter of sheer interest and space; but more than that, it can be shown that this brings us closer to Bredekamp's work than one might initially assume: his theory wants to be a theory *of* image acts, and not a theory *about* them. Thus, the fundamental paradox it grapples with is how to construct a linguistic (logical) theory concerning *image acts*¹.

The history of this problem – dealing historically, and linguistically, with images – would not be an easy one to write. A fundamental chapter of this history brings us close to a positing of this problem as a problem of method: Warburg's «legacy». Bredekamp (as many others) feels urged to evoke Warburg – or a certain reading of his work – as being essential to his theoretical strive as an art historian and, more broadly, as a «scientist of images».

One initial way to allude to Warburg is quite implicit. It represents a kind of response to an inherent latency in Warburg's writings. In a paper, Bredekamp discussed broadening the spectrum of art history's objects and problems, and, consequently, the possibility of giving it a new, old name: art history as *Bildwissenschaft* (Bredekamp [2003]). The neglected tradition to which he makes reference is, broadly speaking, German and Austrian; and its two essential points are that «first, art history [as *Bildwissenschaft*] embraced the whole field of images beyond the visual arts, and, secondly, it took all of these objects seriously» (Bredekamp [2003]: 418)². This way of doing art history is technically characterised by the usage of photography to reproduce and compare images – and therefore it includes Grimm, Lübcke, Springer, Burckhardt and Wölfflin first, and later on Panofsky – and obviously, Warburg is its most significant representative: «he repre-

sents the essence of art history as *Bildwissenschaft*, which claimed to invest an unhindered energy in even the seemingly marginal and worthless» (Bredekamp [2003]: 424)³. Through his *Bilderatlas «Mnemosyne»* he was the first to extensively utilize the possibilities offered by photographic reproductions to compare a wide array of images, both «high» and «low». He never baptised this science he sometime called «*Wissenschaft von den Bildern*» (Warburg [2011]: 44) or *kulturwissenschaftliche Bildgeschichte* (Warburg [1998]: 535, translated as «*iconological science of civilization*» in Warburg [1999]: 651)⁴, nor did he ever give a comprehensive explanation of its (his) methodology. Bredekamp's paper tries to hint precisely in this direction by first proposing a name which has historical depth, and which looks back at this definition sometimes used by Warburg. A latency – a missing name – gets covered through a baptism in the name of method.

However, Warburg never systematized this «new science» he had begun to practice, nor did he ever offer a definitive exposition of his theoretical approach toward it. Many have tried to look for this theoretical exposition in fragments, primarily within his research on the psychology of art. These notes are famously opened with the motto «Du lebst und thust mir nichts! [You live and do me no harm]» (Warburg [2011]: 26), which not by chance is very meaningful for Bredekamp, who interprets it as an «invocation» rather «than a certainty» (Bredekamp [2021]: 8). According to Bredekamp, this invocation hints at the immanent, ever-present *enargeia* of the animated image. Although Warburg was most aware of it, this *enargeia* seems – to Bredekamp – to be deformed in his writings. Bredekamp's crucial reference to Warburg's motto occurs in another inverted form, eliciting the construed background of the motto itself. Bredekamp's theoretical urge

¹ The title of the first German edition is more explicit in its reference to a theory: *Theorie des Bildaktes*.

² On the difficult relations between art history and *Bildwissenschaft*, keeping Bredekamp in sight see (von Falkenhausen [2007]).

³ On the relevance of the technical aspects of art history, or *Bildwissenschaft*, see (Haffner [2007]).

⁴ It remained a science «qui [...] existe, mais n'a pas de nom» (Klein [1970]: 224) – a definition later expounded and made famous by (Agamben [1984]).

emerges through a reflection on another latency in Warburg's scattered legacy.

Looking for a method and stumbling upon the *enargeia*; giving a name and trying to re-activate the attention towards the animation within images, to the extent of attributing a distinctive agency to them; both seem to be complex ways of creating and pursuing a path through that legacy. The passage from a reflected latency to an active, pursued urge, follows a recognisable development. This signifies a development in the methodological dimension of art history. There are two main aspects to this attempt.

In his book on Warburg, Georges Didi-Huberman makes a distinction between the two sides of the theoretical situation of art history. Reflecting on Winckelmann's model while aiming at explaining Warburg's, Didi-Huberman writes that «There is no history of art without a philosophy of history [...] just as there is no history of art without a philosophy of art» (Didi-Huberman [2017]: 4). Art history is rooted in this twofold ground: it has to develop models of historiography and of image theory, while keeping them together.

The reference to Warburg's legacy goes along with the question or, rather, the need of a model of historiography and a model of an image theory. It is important to underline that we are dealing here with a twofold tension. This tension is at the basis of his *Image Acts* as a direct research question. But it had actually accompanied Bredekamp from earlier writings.

Typical of Bredekamp's work is in fact a tight bond between method and the research object. This approach can be found in many works of his, but has a specific relevance in his book *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine* (Bredekamp [1995]). The subtitle of the German edition – «*Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte*» – makes a connection between the historical object and the theoretical attention directed towards it quite explicitly. It is by looking backwards, writing the history of the *Kunstkammer* and reflecting on this history, that Bredekamp tries to develop useful tools for the development of art history (or art historiography).

If we take a step forward, and begin to reflect on the fact that – in his account – it is exactly the action of the objects we are concerned with that prompts a reaction by the art historian, we might recognise that we have stumbled on the problem of (image) agency. The second reflection is by no means separate from the first one, just as the first one prompts the second: they are the two poles of the twofold tension we are dealing with.

Now Bredekamp's discussion of the history of the *Wunderkammer* begins with a sort of *après-coup*: it begins with the 18th Century idea of the possibility of a natural history. This idea is seen by Bredekamp as a possible consequence of 1) the intellectual effort to understand two objects – ancient sculpture and automata – as well as of 2) a way of exhibiting collections of artificial and natural objects: the *Wunderkammer* itself. As he writes, it is the thesis of the essay «that the historicization of nature was already underway within the scope of the *Kunstkammern* from the 16th to the 18th centuries» (Bredekamp [1995]: 9).

This initial step is already worthy of attention. The history of this object begins by alluding to the potential intellectual afterlife of that same object. This is an *afterlife*, given that the intellectual history of the 18th century, as characterized by Bredekamp, progressively rejects a fundamental aspect of any conceivable *Kunstkammer*: the continuity between artificial and natural which is systematically lost, for instance, in Winckelmann's works.

We need to focus on a reflective dynamic which is already at work in this first step. On one side, the historian regards his object with an explicit retrospective gaze, that of the object's afterlife. On the other side, the content of this afterlife is a way of thinking history as capable of writing a natural history as well. There is a double reflection then, concerning the form and the content of the afterlife of the *Kunstkammer*.

This reveals something about Bredekamp's attention to his research object. This 18th Century mirroring is a trace for what follows from Bredekamp's own point of view. Namely, an implicit reflection on his own historiographical

endeavour, developed while writing the history of the *Kunstkammer*. It is as if his research object were to attain yet another afterlife through a possible way of writing (art) history in the 20th and 21st centuries. This circularity is just as powerful as it is problematic.

The distinction between the history of the object and its writing is regarded by Bredekamp in a peculiar way. His approach implies a tight bond between the structure of the research object and that of history-writing. In this sense, the reference to what I called the afterlife of the *Wunderkammer* in the 18th century works somewhat like a laboratory for Bredekamp's approach on a wider scale.

Due to space constraints, providing a comprehensive account would be impossible of the historical content of Bredekamp's book; and it is not necessary if our attention is focused on method mainly. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss an essential polarity of the *Wunderkammer*, for the sake of the argument I am developing.

The central striving of the *Wunderkammer* is, according to Bredekamp, that of «*machinamenta*». It is a concept, and an action, which «reflected a desire to analyse and comprehend all the objects and forces that make up the world, without losing sight of antiquity in the process» (Bredekamp [1995]: 44). But this is not enough. The *Wunderkammer* encompasses a conception of the living being as well. According to Bredekamp, life's peculiarity must be thought of, in a traditional way, as the self-motion of the living being, in the first instance. An epoch which conceived life as a mechanism, and accordingly tried to reproduce life through artificially self-moving machines (*automata*), must produce a like, artificial organising structure in the *Wunderkammer*. Especially in bridging the gap between the «natural» and «artificial»: «[the concept of *machinamenta*] encompasses all objects collected with a particular purpose in mind – natural formations as well as sculpture, buildings, paintings, instruments and machines» (Bredekamp [1995]: 44).

The development that moves it towards its academic form reveals the other pole of its intrinsic tension. It is expressed by the same phrase used as

the title of the book: «the lure of antiquity and the cult of the machine» (Bredekamp [1995]: 57). It is meaningful that a conceptual polarity – which locates the research object in its epoch – entails reference to a historical span: the lure of antiquity which implies, one may say, a theoretical usage of the past. Not only past as such, then, but antiquity as the starting point for a reflection on it, which takes it as its object. A mode of reflection which assimilates it, translating it into a model (even in an utopia, possibly), and makes active use of it. The historical objects that are collected in the *Wunderkammer* become, by the logic of the collection and their activation within it, historical subjects. But just how much is Bredekamp's book itself a sort of *Kunstkammer*?

This trouble might explain why Bredekamp seems to give a lot of attention to such conceptions of the *Kunstkammer* that tend to use it, through the re-actualisation of a promethean praxis, «as an active laboratory» (Bredekamp [1995]: 51). Although different historical visions of the *Kunstkammer* may be, or may have been, possible, it is Bredekamp himself who makes active use of the tension between the lure of the antiquity and the cult of the machine. He makes his research into an active laboratory as well, as he activates the history of the object in accordance with what interests him in his historiography.

According to Bredekamp, after a long period of necessary oblivion of the *Wunderkammer*, due to the separation occurred between lure of the antiquity and cult of the machine, the contemporary landscape may allow to revitalise it as a conceptual model. Considering how the *Wunderkammer* can produce memory, akin to a *tabula rasa* awaiting content, Bredekamp recalls that Turing had used the metaphor of the programmer God, who fills the tape of the world with ever new records. And this implies for Bredekamp that the «deep» epistemology of the computer, and thus of the digital age, may be traced back to that of the *Wunderkammer*: «the 20th century has inherited the theoretical essence of the *Kunstkammer*» (Bredekamp [1995]: 111). We should urge ourselves to look at art and science without immedi-

ately opposing them, therefore, avoiding to oppose them right away, as it had become customary after the end of the epoch of the *Kunstkammer*.

This leads to a consequence regarding images in the contemporary age, in which the technical apparatus propels towards a «hegemony of images» (Bredekamp [1995]: 113), as opposed to the previous power of language. Remember his connection between the technical use of photographic reproduction and the *Bildwissenschaft*. It is this situation that creates the need for new instruments for art historians, but also highlights the role of this practice: «the world of digitalized images cannot begin to be understood without knowledge of art history» (Bredekamp [1995]: 113). An art history – Bredekamp’s – that has forged its instruments in the study of the *Wunderkammer* could, if the heritage of the latter is constitutive of the new age, be ready to understand it. We have gone full circle: it is our present time that needs to recreate the concept of the *Wunderkammer* to understand itself through a *Bildwissenschaft*.

The conclusion directly links this book with the Preface to *Image Acts*. It emphasizes the persistent necessity to comprehend images in an age of their immense proliferation – arguably even more pressing today than at the end of the last century. This need, initially addressed through historical research, is now being faced by developing a theoretical approach to images themselves.

The dynamic of Bredekamp’s thought may be exhibited through another example, this time from *Image Acts*: His reading of the graveyard scene in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (Bredekamp [2021]: 118-120). As Vercellone writes in his Introduction to the Italian edition of *Image Acts*, this reading allows for a conceptual clarification of the scopes of the entire book. Bredekamp suggests that Mozart, by incorporating the vitality of images into his enlightened worldview, alludes to the «image-active enlightenment» (Bredekamp [2021]: 279) which he proposes as a synthetical key to his image acts theory. Bredekamp, in other words, understands Mozart as doing something similar to what he is doing himself. This shows that

the dynamic of his thought is that of a «usteron proteron» (Vercellone [2015]: xv). An inversion which I will now discuss.

First, let us take a closer look at the connection between *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine* and *Image Acts*.

Now, the theoretical interest of the *Wunderkammer* is strictly bound to the continuity between nature and art which is characteristic of its way of displaying objects. It is not by chance that one of the features of *Image Acts* underlined by Vercellone is exactly that images are, in Bredekamp’s perspective, technically built objects which, in themselves, erase the difference between nature and culture (Vercellone [2015]: xix). The correlation between the two books does not lie merely in the enduring relevance and increasing proliferation of virtual images from the Nineties to today. It implies a theoretical bond between the intellectual structure of the *Wunderkammer*, as studied by Bredekamp by exercising his peculiar thought gesture, and the structure of the image as discussed in the later book. But there is a difference.

If, in the *Wunderkammer*, the works of visual art are taken as such and then linked to natural and other artificial objects, in the case of the image act the question is taken to another level right from the beginning. Attention is given to the image as such, and not only to images as pictures, or objects of visual art generally taken. A comparison between Bredekamp’s perspective and Mitchell’s can be used to clarify the issue: the latter’s distinction between image and picture (Mitchell [2005]) might be regarded as being abstract from the former’s point of view, in which images (*Bilder*) are taken as being in-and-above the pictures which they may make up. Images are created by a human activity of matter manipulation⁵.

The *activity* of images, whether embedded in a

⁵ According to Bredekamp, «in its fundamental, initial definition, the concept of the “image” encompasses every form of conscious shaping» (Bredekamp [2021]: 16); furthermore, «one may speak of “images” as soon as naturally occurring entities evince a trace of human intervention and elaboration» (Bredekamp [2021]: 18).

picture or any other visually interesting object, is considered an intrinsic feature of the image itself. It is not a kind of life which supervenes in the presence of the spectator. To return to the *Wunderkammer*, it is not merely recognized after being spatially linked to fossils or other natural objects that were once alive. There is no *après-coup* in this sense. Nonetheless, the methodological *après-coup* that permeated the theoretical structure of the *Wunderkammer* is also present in the theory of the image act, but on another, fundamental level.

It is relevant that Bredekamp, while drawing the line which connects his «image act» to Austin's «speech act» (Austin [1962]), emphasizes the difference between the two. However, he finds that applying this directly – in the form of a «pictorial speech act» (Kjørup [1978]) – to the realm of images is very problematic: it would reduce the intrinsic activity of the image to a human activity which happens through the use of images, in so far as a «speech act» can be understood as a linguistic means by which the speaker performs an action. Following Bredekamp's lead, if the image act were thought as a linear theoretical translation of the speech act, the speaker would thus speak through the image, while he tries to understand the image as able to «pictorially speak» for itself.

Therefore, the reference to the speech act is in fact present – but indirectly. In fact, if Hoglebe were right in writing that *Image Acts* «in der Tat einen bedeutenden Versuch darstellt, Bilder zu animieren» (Hoglebe [2007]: 136), then Bredekamp's attempt to develop an account of the active life of images may be reduced to a mirroring of an abstract theory on the surface of images, taken as mere objects. It would be as paradoxical as a study of the living being *as living* from the point of view of an entomologist's chart. As said, Bredekamp wants to discuss images not just as words that are spoken, but as speakers themselves. It is on this basis that one should look for «the founding of a true *image science* [*Bildwissenschaft*] that might then be derived from this» (Bredekamp [2021]: 33). The two sides – speaking and being spoken; activity and being activated from the

spectator's reaction to the image – are both present in the definition of the image act.

The following succinct definition of the *Bildakt* makes this clear. Bredekamp writes:

Der «Bildakt» bezeichnet die Wirkung auf das Empfinden, Denken und Handeln, die aus der Eigenkraft des Bildes und der Resonanz mit dem Gegenüber entsteht [...] Der Begriff «Bildakt» sucht die aus der gestalteten Umwelt kommenden Anstöße, welche die überkommenen Handlungs- und Reflexionsrahmen erweitern oder auch unterminieren, systematisch zu erfassen⁶. (Bredekamp [2017]: 25)

The first interesting point here is the exposition of the polarity, if it may be called so, between the two sides we have been studying. The effect of the image is an intrinsic force, but a force that also comes to resonate with the spectator. And it is both poles that make the image act what it is.

The other interesting aspect of such a definition, which touches upon the concept of the image act, is that the intention exposed by the «concept» itself is a systematic one. In this respect, it is important to expound Bredekamp's attempt to systematically structure his analysis. Yet, this systematic attempt originates once again from an interplay between history and theory.

The first chapter of *Image Acts* begins with the study of some ancient image-objects that were able to «make statements» in the first person singular, at least when their user or spectator would read the statements written on them. These are easily read in terms of the definition of the image which Bredekamp uses to lay the conceptual basis of the *image* side of his definition of the image act; the cases of «speaking» images activates the short circuit between image energy and resonance in the spectator which characterises the *act* of the

⁶ «The “image act” defines the effect on perception, thought and action, that is originated from the energy of the image and its resonance with the counterpart [...] The concept “image act” tries to capture in a systematic way the impulses coming from the shaped environment, which expand, or also undermine, the traditional frames of action and reflection».

image act in a broader sense. Thus, we encounter examples or manifestations of the theory. The peculiar thought dynamic typical of Bredekamp seems to be at work once more. The problem could be stated as follows: what or who is it, that speaks? Images or spectators, be it past spectators or us? – and then, is the image act but a reflection of the spectator's act? This bears, furthermore, on the relation between objects and theory.

Without indulging in speculations about the problematic dynamic of testimonies, one can note that the succinct history of the image act which is developed by Bredekamp in studying the various types of the image act is already written in a theoretical hindsight. This is clearly indicated by the title given to the third chapter of the book: «inherent theory» (Bredekamp [2021]: 37). A reading of some historical objects as bearers of an inherent theory – *this* theory – describes them early on from the point of view of the theory which must be shown as convincing through its reference to them. We get here to the level at which Bredekamp's thought dynamic, that which we had already seen active in *The Lure of Antiquity*, shows its relevance for the theory of the image act. This circular dynamic is made explicit by the way in which he had constructed the historical research on the *Wunderkammer* as a metamorphosis from the historical to the theoretical thinking of a like dynamic. *Image Acts* takes this dynamic to the extreme: to the definition of the very *nature* of the research object.

The same can be observed on the *systematic* side of his theoretical interest. Bredekamp categorizes the image act into three primary forms: the schematic image act, the substitutive image act, and the intrinsic image act. The third is the most important one, or one could say, the fundamental one. I will briefly recall their main features to show why it is so, and discuss their implications.

Schematic image acts occur when the life of images is directly at stake, mainly in the form of movement. Bredekamp's usage of the word «scheme» draws on Maria Luisa Catoni's study on the meaning of the word *schema* in ancient Greek culture (Catoni [2008]), and expounds it through

his own concept of the activity of the image. Bredekamp's interest lies in schemes that, driven by their energy, have the power to influence the spectator's perception and even prompt action. Their agency is connected to a perceptive resonance which can move the spectator to re-act.

The second shape of the image act is that of substitutive image acts. Interestingly, the connection between the first two forms of the image act is underlined by a focus on liveliness: «the empowerment of the image, imbued with a life of its own, which – be it in the form of the *tableau vivant*, the automaton or the animated object – establishes a basis for the schematic image act, is also to be encountered in the case of its substitutive equivalent» (Bredekamp [2021]: 137). This is the sphere of the image acts in which a basic violence is at work, because here «bodies are treated as images and images as bodies» (Bredekamp [2021]: 137). One can substitute the other, and thus even make for its destruction (or for its salvation), because the substitute bears the consequences of the actions in the place of its double. The historical contours of this shape range from the *Vera icon* of Christ to the contemporary images of war (or war images), in which the destruction of images, or images of destruction, are consciously used as a weapon. The main vector of efficacy of such image acts is overtly political, and in fact a central role is played by the analysis of Abraham Bosse's frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. This analysis is interesting not only for its role in the articulation of the substitutive image act, but it works on a more subtle level to show how images and words are in a productive connection, rather than in conflict (Bredekamp [2021]: 159; Bredekamp [2012]).

This interaction becomes even more effective in the case of the intrinsic image act. This third type has a peculiar nature. In Bredekamp's taxonomy it is – it should be – one of three possibilities, but at the same time it showcases fundamental features of the image act *as such*. This gives it a theoretically different weight in relation to the other two kinds of image acts.

Bredekamp initiates his analysis of this third form by referencing the myth of Medusa, and how

images can embody a beholder, not just being observed. But this brings right away to the core of the activity-resonance dynamic of the image act as such, which we have seen at work repeatedly. The point is that, in the case of the intrinsic image act, this dynamic becomes the explicit device through which images become effective. It is the form itself of those objects which may be read as cases of intrinsic image acts. A form that is designed on the basis of that relation: «It is in the formal qualities of works of art that appear to gaze out at the observer that their own true eyes are to be found» (Bredekamp [2021]: 209). Preserving the iconic autonomy, if we may term it thus, is a clear objective of Bredekamp's articulation of the intrinsic image act.

Tokens of this type «are able to see entirely on their own terms, without the adjunct of inscriptions or corporeal or mechanical apparatus. In doing so they are the custodians of the intrinsic image act» (Bredekamp [2021]: 209). They showcase an essential feature of the image act – and the core problems of its theory. First, because the *act* still appears to be functionally displaced in the agency of the spectator, even if the latter is «absorbed» by the object. Second, because the interplay between image and language, something that has haunted the theory since its initial definition, starting from the distinction from the speech act that still underlies it, becomes particularly problematic here.

As a core element of the analysis of the intrinsic image act, Warburg's name is evoked once more: «Warburg's concept of art [...] remains a paradigm in any consideration of the image act» (Bredekamp [2021]: 198). Bredekamp makes a precise reference to the concept of the *Pathosformel*, arguing that Warburg's lifelong strive was to overcome a dread (Bredekamp [2021]: 253): the dread of the iconic gaze. It is by going as deep as possible in this iconic dread that one is pushed back to language. Not just because of Warburg's practice as an art historian, but due to the very structure of the concept of *Pathosformel*, which dramatically entails a relation between image and language and with the action/re-action dynamic.

There may be, in fact, an implicit parallel between Bredekamp deriving his image act from the speech act, and Warburg's usage of Hermann Osthoff's linguistic theory to characterise the use of expressive means in art as analogous to linguistic superlatives (Warburg [1998]: 363; Gombrich [1970]: 178). The attention given to this use leads to the development of the *Pathosformeln* themselves. That is, a device that embodies the conflict itself and that is ever again re-activated in perilous circumstances: «As regards its two ostensibly contradictory components, Warburg opposed “pathos” (as the momentarily exaggerated corporeal reaction of a spirit in distress) to the ethos of a consistent element of character subordinate to the emotional control of a “formula”» (Bredekamp [2021]: 256).

The effect of the schematic image act, and the disruptive, violent energy of the substitutive one hinge on the implicit opposition between image and spectator; this dynamic now becomes, in the intrinsic image act, constitutive of the image-as-a-form. But if we look at the intrinsic image act through the lenses of this reference to Warburg, we see that its way of dealing with the energy of the image, and its bouncing back to the relation to language right at the bottom of the attempt at saving its iconic autonomy, have an almost transcendental meaning for the other two shapes of the image act, and for the image act as such⁷. The intrinsic image act is intrinsic to *any* form, and therefore it runs through the other two kinds of image acts as well. The word itself which names it – *intrinsic* – seems to display a sort of systematic reflection on the relation between theory and history. This reflection can be discerned through the lines of the characterization of historical objects as bearers of an «inherent theory».

Bredekamp's main concern in evoking Warburg in this context is therefore almost meta-theoretical. This reveals his intentions in the theoretic-

⁷ As Benyo writes, Bredekamp's proposal «se vincula con la idea de la imagine como quiasmo habitado por fuerzas ambivalentes que constituyen polaridades oscilantes» (Benyo [2021]: 341).

cal endeavor – specifically, his need for an «image-active enlightenment» in a context where the control over the power of images appears increasingly challenging. Not only because of their nature, as he intends to show, but due to the lack of a fitting – and distancing – theory as well. In this sense, his theory is a re-action itself. But does it re-act to the nature of the image act, or does it react to itself, to its own definition of the object of the theory?

It may now be relevant to stress once more that Bredekamp is no strict «warburgian». The way he uses Warburg's work – and especially its more theoretical side – is not just selective but notably attentive to the blind spots inherent in its «legacy». Not resorting to Warburg's later discussion of the *Pathosformeln* as an «engram», for instance, may signal one relevant distance. If, more generally, we may see Warburg's historical writings as theory-laden, Bredekamp's own approach to the issue of the image act seems more concerned with the development of a *historical* theory. The theoretical (and meta-historical) *use* of Warburg does not imply that effects of this usage can be found in Warburg's work: quite the contrary, one may argue. This may seem obvious on the side of the content of theory, but what is at issue is the «level» at which theory is discussed. The self-reflective dimension of the historical endeavour seems to mark off Bredekamp's approach from Warburg's (in whose approach the, so to say, meta-physical dimension is intertwined with the historical one) as in a more historicistic take not just on history but on theory as well. Bredekamp's *theory* emerges while reflecting on history and historiography, and theory is thought as an implicit – and now made explicit – part of their complexion. It is this approach – self-reflective, meta-historical and meta-theoretical – that seems to imply a theoretical distance from Warburg's *kulturwissenschaftliche Bildgeschichte*.

The way in which Bredekamp tries to connect his image theory with a philosophy of embodiment, broadly taken, could give a last clarifying hint in this direction. He does so by recalling the perspective not only of contemporaries

like Krois, but also that of Wind, Cassirer, and Warburg, as models to understand the body as in itself – in its movements, even the basic ones – capable of meaning (symbolical or metaphorical) (see Bredekamp [2021]: 265-266). But it is of the utmost importance to underline that what is at stake here is not a reduction of the conscious sphere to a manifestation of the bodily.

In Warburg's famous discussion of the relevance of Darwin's studies on animal expression, Bredekamp maintains that what concerned Warburg was the recognition of

the deliberation of human creativity, that surplus of the image shaped by human hands – not manifest in the mechanics of instinct, and not addressed by Darwin – which extended from corporeal gesture, by way of the entirety of corporeal choreography in the formalised celebration of festivals, to the «pathos formula» of the work of art. (Bredekamp [2021]: 256)

Human creativity as a surplus, the shaping of pathos, which extends and formalises the corporeal: this clarifies that what is at stake here is the possibility of the image to open up the space of consciousness.

However, this space is the linguistic one of a theoretical endeavour that outlines its object by implying its tenets in it. We meet here yet another metamorphosis of Bredekamp's method, because this characterisation of the energetic polarity of the image explains, and is explained by, the «image-active enlightenment» that he defends. It is true, in this perspective, that works of art or iconic artefacts are in themselves energetically charged⁸. Indeed, this compels us to comprehend images in a manner that prevents being overwhelmed by their power. And yet it seems that the polarity of the activity of the image almost mirrors, or can at least be matched with the reflective thought dynamic which, as we have seen, was a characteristic already of Bredekamp's historiography.

It seems that Bredekamp continuously addresses this point anew. This type of circular-

⁸ Bredekamp makes another relevant connection, here, to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (Bredekamp [2021]: 279).

ity, however, should not be valued negatively or with a refusal. In fact, it reveals a hidden core of Bredekamp's endeavour – and indeed something that should be present in any historical endeavour. The continuous back-and-forth between (historical) objects and theory implies the possibility of going full circle and reading the relation on which I have insisted in both directions: from history to theory, and from theory to history, without forgetting any of the two. One could characterize this undertaking as *critical*, primarily because it involves an ongoing exploration of the theoretical foundations inherent in historical practices, particularly in relation to the objects of study. A recent contribution highlights Bredekamp's need for *distance* (see Bredekamp [2021b]). It is one condition for the exercise of this type of critique, and a condition that is simultaneously reinforced by exercise.

In conclusion, we may say that a very relevant aspect of Bredekamp's work on the image act, both in his theory and in his historiography, lies not so much in the sheer theoretical level as in the implicit striving towards criticism that permeates it. If this holds, his broader project may be defined as the attempt at critically thinking both images and our thought about them. The openness and need for continual critical engagement in his research are outcomes of the thought dynamic it encapsulates – a dynamic that I have attempted to elucidate in this paper. With Bredekamp, but far beyond him, an urge for a critical assessment of images remains always to be dealt with, each time anew.

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