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What is an image? A meditation on the image as force

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In 1891 the art historian Aby Moritz Warburg (1866–1929) wrote the following on a file card, which would later be incorporated in the unfinished manuscript of *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde* (Fundamental Fragments for a Pragmatic Knowledge of Expression), regarding a peculiar aspect of looking at images: ‘Ways [*or Forms*] of losing oneself in an image. I – Tarrying with the feeling of being overwhelmed by the number of things [...]’¹ According to the jotted note on the file card in question, Warburg tried to catalogue different ways of losing oneself in an image. Why and for which purpose he pursued this enquiry is not known. Warburg’s fragmented inventory is incomplete, but we can speculate that he thought that dwelling in, or tarrying with, the sensation of surplus, which the image embodies in its aesthetical splendour and seductive materiality, is one of numerous ways to go astray within the visual. With this almost sublime awareness regarding human perception, the fragment ends in suspense. No further explanation is given, nor did Warburg elaborate the proposition at a later stage. The fragment is therefore more of an *espéron*, a snippet that spurs our imagination and excites our interpretation, rather than a scholarly proposal for a methodology.

Despite the enigmatic character of Warburg’s note, it can still serve as an inspirational motto, because it seems to propose a common-sense approach to images in general; the note seems to suggest that images are filled with information, things and meanings that are heterogeneous, poly-iconic and impossible to circumscribe without some kind of order and organisation. Beside this obvious interpretation, Warburg’s note does not seem to disregard the wandering mind of the onlooker or the power of curiosity. The image therefore appears to possess a heuristic and memory-evoking quality that can advance knowledge, teach us and sum up history, elaborate morals, but – if we interpret Warburg’s note as a warning – also seduce us into unfocused oblivion, or into the slow death of nostalgia. In these multiple dimensions lies the power of images, but also the magic and fault lines of memory itself.

¹ Warburg Institute Archive III, 43.1.2.1, TS of MS 43.1.1 *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde* (Monistischen Kunstpsychologie), 1888–1895, 1901, [§137].

In the following talk I will discuss the image as force rather than as a single object of aesthetical contemplation or something to be deciphered and understood by a subject. The talk will focus on the image as strange attractors that partake in the (re-)construction of events and atmosphere, interpretation and memory, but also lostness and possession. I will therefore engage, not only the corpus of Aby Warburg but also, a broad repertoire of theoretical anecdotes from Art History, Image-anthropology and Visual Culture Studies in order investigate the many dimensions of being forced and taken by images.