Botticelli Past and Present
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We come now to discuss Ninfa as a ‘theoretical figure’. This signifies above all that the *images of fluidity* found in the works of Ovid or Lucretius, Botticelli or Ghirlandaio, Michelet or Victor Hugo, tell us something very fundamental about the *fluidity of images*. The play on words between *Einfühlung* (empathy) and *Einfüllung* (pouring in), which I noted in connection with Botticelli, characterising the empathy aroused by images and a certain sense of imaginary or symbolic (certainly *imaginative*) ‘flow’, was to find its development in a crucial concept. This concept, persistently reiterated by the author of *Mnemosyne*, was that of ‘migrations’ (*Wanderungen*) – the temporal as well as spatial movements through which every image finds its consistency, which, rightly speaking, is not stability, but rather fluidity, the play of ‘sources’ and ‘influences’, ‘currents’ and ‘whirlpools’… At the end of his life, Warburg observed that ‘there is law of energy governing the rotation of meaning (*es gibt ein energetisches Sinn-Drehungsgesetz*)’, even as there is a law governing the change in direction of the wind (*wie es ein Winddrehungsgesetz gibt*).¹

The disappointment I felt 12 years ago on failing to identify a precise source for the French expression ‘*brise imaginaire*’ (imaginary breeze) – used by Warburg in the German text of his thesis on Botticelli² – has now been alleviated by the discovery of several French texts which do use this phrase. All are to be found in his library. The first passage appears in an art-historical study by Paul Mantz, published in 1873 in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. Describing a female portrait from the school of Rembrandt, he writes ‘the flesh is a little white, the clothes are opulent and the draperies swell, blown out by an imaginary breeze…’.³ One senses here a literary *topos* (without excluding other possible sources), particularly as other archaeological descriptions use the same formulation, somewhat in the manner of Wilhelm Jensen’s novel *Gradiva*.

Here, for example, Gustave Mendel describes in 1912 a Greek relief sculpture in the museum of Constantinople:

[...]the muse proceeds to the right, taking slow, deliberate steps. Her demeanour is noble and serene; the full weight of her body, which is vigorous without being heavy, is placed on her left foot, positioned flat on the floor. Her right leg is bent and trails slightly,
her foot barely touching the floor with the tips of her toes, which extend over the plinth. With her left arm, she holds the lyre against her body, touching the strings both with the fingers of her left hand and with the plectrum she holds in her right. She is dressed in a light tunic which covers, without obscuring, her generous breast. The tunic floats at her feet, pleated with small, irregular, sinuous folds, while her mantle falls from her left shoulder over her back, covering her legs and rising up again, exposing the right side of her bust, towards her left shoulder; from this falls a fold, floating freely behind her as if lifted by an imaginary breeze[...].

It is no surprise to find the expression ‘imaginary breeze’ invoked in the context of representations where references to antiquity predominate. However, it is much more surprising – and highly instructive theoretically – to find the same phrase in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s L’Ève future (Tomorrow’s Eve). Aby Warburg owned a copy of the 1891 edition of this work. In this great symbolist novel the Ninfa futura, an ‘electro-magnetical’ creature invented by the principal character Thomas Edison, is intended to embody the ‘most surprising way in which to seek the ideal’ in a woman. It is at the moment when this creature’s kingdom is discovered – a veritable ‘underground Eden’, like the lair of an octopus or Josiane’s palace in Victor Hugo’s L’homme qui rit – that the ‘caress of an imaginary breeze’ causes veils, screens and petals to billow within this enchanted environment, described like a sexual organ seen from within.

Such a possible reference by Aby Warburg to L’Ève future – after all, he quoted from another contemporary poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti – forewarns us, like many other indications, that it would be incorrect to see his interest in the ‘survival of Antiquity’ as pure nostalgia for the classical past. Mnemosyne speaks of desire as much as of memory; Nachleben is as much about modernity as it is about archaeology. Manet, for example, inspired Warburg to write an entire iconological study, while Arnold Böcklin, who made a painting entitled Le Printemps in 1862, also aroused his enthusiasm. Warburg admired Böcklin’s energetic manner of representing in his paintings the ‘vent rafraîchissant dans le vent et les vagues’, his naiads and nymphs sharing their watery frolics. If we accept that the history of art as a literary genre cannot be disassociated from a certain poetic history, it will come as no surprise that Warburg’s Ninfa brings together a whole universe of languages – not just of images – from Hölderlin’s nymphs through to symbolist poetry and the ‘erotic-fluidity’ and ‘tormented’ production of the French Romantics. Let us just revisit
the first sketch of Hölderlin’s *Hypérion*, when the nymph reappears, like Beatrice to Dante:

A rustling in one of the side-walks startled me.

Ah! Then, in this painful solitude with my heart all empty of joy, *she* appeared before me; woven as of light and fragrance, so gracious and delicate; above her smile, calm and full of unearthly calm, her great shining eyes were enthroned in god-like majesty, and the golden crests of hair glinted about her face as the spring-breeze tossed them like little clouds in the first light of dawn.[…]

Years passed; springs came and went; many a glorious picture, many a memorial of your beloved Italy, sprung from divine imagining, delighted me, but time has obliterated most of it: only *her* image remains to me and everything it entails. Still she stands before me as in the holy intoxicated moment I found her; I press her to my heart, the sweet phantom;[…] Everything hastened towards her. A part of her being seemed to communicate itself to everything[[…]].

From this perspective, it is as true of the nineteenth century as of the fifteenth to say: these are modern periods *par excellence*, periods in which everything is reinventing itself thanks to certain techniques, around a certain notion of the human subject. At the same time, these are periods in which a tremendous passion was felt for everything ancient. There was never a time when Greek and Roman drapery were the topic of such intense study as they were following the writings of Léon Heuzey over a period of 50 years, from 1872 to 1922. It is no coincidence that Maurice Emmanuel’s work on Greek dance – studies with which Warburg’s notion of *Ninfa* has specific associations – addressed the antiquity of dithyrambic or bacchanalian gestures using a method that was pre-eminently modern – the chronophotography developed by Etienne-Jules Marey, the ‘artist-scholar’ who was so passionate about the forms of physical and physiological fluidity. We thus begin to understand that with this ‘fin de siècle Maenadism’ the immemorial motifs that Warburg studied from the perspective of survival could be channelled through something resembling modern cinematography, as Philippe-Alain Michaud has seen.

Thus the ancient version of *Ninfa ariosa* found in Leon Battista Alberti or Antonio Cornazzano seems to reconfigure itself at the end of the nineteenth century, taking on the features of a *Ninfa auratica*. Loïe
Fuller would, of course, be the ultimate example of this. Celebrated by Mallarmé, she was already coming close to futurism, particularly in her ‘avant-garde’ use of light. It is no surprise that Aby Warburg’s interest in gestures and ‘pathos formulae’ eventually culminated in an encounter with a certain style of contemporary dance, in which a real ‘poetics of flow’ developed around artists such as Isadora Duncan, Rudolf von Laban or Mary Wigman. In the case of Isadora Duncan, we should remember that she wanted to dance Botticelli’s *Primavera* (in terms of iconography) because (in terms of morphology) it had been the motion of the waves that first inspired her desire to dance:

It was when I was contemplating the waves when I was very young that I first thought about dancing. I tried to follow the movements of the waves and to dance according to their rhythm. [...] When in Florence, we spent several weeks strolling ecstatically through museums, gardens and olive groves. It was at that point that Botticelli captured my youthful imagination. I would sit before *Primavera* for whole days; I loved it. A delightful ageing guard would give me a stool to sit on and observed my adoration with great emotion. I would stay there until I could actually see the flowers in the painting growing, the bare feet dancing, the bodies moving until a joyous angel came to visit me and then I thought: I will portray this image through dance[…]. Inspired by Botticelli’s painting, I created a dance which sought to reproduce the gentle, marvellous movements he evoked, the tender undulations of the earth which was blanketed with flowers, the dance of the nymphs in a ring and the flight of the zephyrs, unfolding around the central figure, part Aphrodite, part Madonna, whose single meaningful gesture indicates the birth of springtime.

In his footnotes to the ‘Preliminary remarks’ prefacing his work on Botticelli, published by Gertrud Bing, Aby Warburg included some additional references and quotations, as a kind of epigraph. The first comes from Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and suggests precisely these ideas of fluidity, of the backwash of the waves, of ebb and flow (‘many shall run to and from’). The second, taken from the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, evokes art as inherent in the ‘spiritual balance sheet of human life’ (‘*der Kunst im geistigen Haushalt des Menschenlebens*’). The third comes from an article entitled *Zur Genesis eines ästhetischen Begriffs* (‘On the genesis of an aesthetic concept’), which was published in 1894 by Theobald Ziegler and identified Novalis as the actual originator of empathy as an aesthetic concept.
This helps us to get a better understanding of the romantic grounding of this modern aesthetic, at the point where morphological considerations (the objective forms of images with which we are presented) encounter anthropological questions (the subjective power of images deep within us). Before making the obligatory reference to Goethe, Wilhelm Dilthey also returned to the waves of the sea and to Leibniz’s ‘minute or dull perceptions’; he added that the ‘difficult transformation of Leibniz’s metaphysical aesthetics into a psychological aesthetics’ was required. This was a task to which the romantic – followed by the modern – revival of humanist theories of the imagination attempted to respond, and ‘now for the first time a real explanation of the most important psychical phenomena became possible’.

There can be no doubt that Aby Warburg wanted to adopt and extend Dilthey’s proposition to understand ‘how in a work of art image, form, feeling, thought and spirit are all connected from within’. This demands a completely different idea of aesthetics from simple academic criteria of beauty, as is clearly – and almost violently – apparent in Schiller’s letter to Goethe of 7 July 1797, cited by Dilthey as the epigraph to his 1892 article: ‘Would that the demand for beauty finally be given up and once and for all replaced by the demand for truth!’

This was an agenda that Dilthey sought to follow, affirming that philosophical aesthetics should not be afraid of engaging with contemporary matters that are un-ideal and, so to speak, immanent, such as ‘psychological depth’, the materiality of the medium or even political questions, lying between ‘naturalism’ and ‘socialism’.

If indeed the notion of Einfühlung (empathy) seems so important in this regard, it is because, as Dilthey affirms,

The way in which we become conscious of the external world – namely, as resistance to our will – explains the basic sense in which we spontaneously and inevitably attribute something inner to what is given to sense as outer. The essence of aesthetic apprehension and creation, i.e., the relation of feeling and image, meaning and appearance, inner and outer, is based on this.

It is in this way that images are immanent to our existence within the world: they flow between our internal sensibilities and external forms. And this is how, in Dilthey’s words, ‘we learn to see through the eyes of the great painters. Through Shakespeare we learn to understand what happens on the stage of the world and through Goethe what comes to pass in the quiet depths of a human soul’. It is from this starting point that an
unwavering connection will be established, in which *survival* (the power of memory), *creation* (the power of desire) and the essential *fluidity* of images interact in motion.\(^{24}\) We find this the connection not only in Warburg’s writings, but also – with a remarkably similar vocabulary – throughout Bergson’s philosophical dynamic.

Whether sculpted in marble, fixed beneath a painter’s varnish or shown in motion through a cinema projector, images always *flow in and flow out again*. This living movement resembles the backwash of waves, bringing them both close to us (caressing, intimate) and distant (mysterious, retiring). This is their essential ‘anadyomenic’ quality, as found throughout *The Birth of Venus* (fig. 1.0).\(^{25}\) They whirl, they move, here and there, they pull away and return to us until the point at which they coil up into the ‘octopus lair’ of our unconscious psyches, out of our range of vision by being at our very core. That is what Aby Warburg chose to observe. That is why he found it essential to create an *historical anthropology of the imagination*, capable of penetrating the ‘micro-history’ of a single painting – even of a single detail. From this could be extracted a significant structural lesson, pertinent on the level of both the individual psyche and the whole sociohistorical fabric.

It will come as no surprise that his interest in the aesthetic and psychological notion of *empathy* caused Warburg, years later in 1893, to concern himself with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s anthropological concept of *participation*. This phenomenon was first (and not coincidentally) observed by the ethnologist in connection with the ‘survival of the dead’, as envisaged by the so-called ‘primitive mind’;\(^ {26}\) but anthropologists soon recognised it early on in the heart of the modern and pre-modern West. In the *Carnets*, written at the end of his life, Lévy-Bruhl wanted to examine this notion of ‘participation’ further, although he insisted at the outset on the ‘impossibility of clearly analysing participations’ because, he stated, they originate from a very obscure realm of the human psyche.\(^ {27}\) This process, all the more powerful for being impossible to analyse, represented for Lévy-Bruhl an ‘affective generalisation’ (rather than a ‘law’), what he would eventually call a fundamental ‘mode of existence’: ‘For the primitive mentality to be is to participate’.\(^ {28}\)

For our purposes, it is intriguing to note that from the *illogical* nature of participation – which is ‘resistant to contradiction’ and made up of ‘bi-presence’, ‘duality-unity’ and entities which fall under the ‘*pars pro toto* principle’\(^ {29}\) – we can easily infer its fantasmatic or unconscious characteristics. From this starting point, it will be ‘aesthetics which puts a first coherence in primitive man’s mind’, as summarised by Maurice Leenhardt in his preface to the *Carnets*.\(^ {30}\) And it is this
aesthetic character – the constant employment of image and imitation, as for example causing our enemies to suffer by stabbing their effigies\(^{31}\) – that gives these phenomena of participation their essentially fluid character.

Accordingly, to feel participations between things and phenomena is to find oneself in the attitude familiar to the human mind when it feels itself in contact with the mythical world fluid reality, forces at one and the same transcendent and immanent. [...] and there is seen to appear, in place of the determinism of phenomena which seems to us the very framework of the ambient world, characteristic fluidity of the mythical world which is unaware of it.\(^{32}\)

Even Claude Lévi-Strauss, in the section of his *Story of Lynx* entitled ‘On the side of the wind’, would remark on this essential character, which he in turn refers to as the ‘fluidity of mythical forms’.\(^{33}\)

One could find confirmation of such fluidity of images in Sandor Ferenczi’s speculations on the paradigm of the sea (*Thalassa*) as a fundamental ‘psychomorphism’ in which the backwash of waves is understood as a principle of sexual flux (the impulse of life) and of a reflux or regression to the ‘maternal womb’ (the impulse of death).\(^{34}\) It would also be fascinating to enter into Warburg’s beloved labyrinths of comparative mythology: somewhere between the Aphrodite anadyomene of Hesiod or Botticelli and the African ‘water gods’, at the point where imagined equivalences between water and semen set in.\(^{35}\) Equally intriguing would be Georges Dumézil’s research into water deities as construed in the Indo-European world from Iran to Ireland, by way of Roman religion – which, for example, set up a polar opposition between female sea goddesses: the dangerous, boiling, swirling *Salaria* and the reassuringly calm *Venilia*.\(^{36}\)

It would also be useful to return to Bachelard’s analyses of the ‘imaginary journey’ sparked by air and water, the two fluids par excellence (though remaining critical of some of his assertions). At the beginning of *L’Air et les Songes (Air and Dreams)*, Bachelard wrote that the imagination is essentially open and elusive. Within the human psyche, imagination is the very experience of openness.\(^{37}\) Such openness and mobility will be necessary to grasp symbolic ‘coherence’ as well as ‘unconscious dynamism’.\(^{38}\) Certainly Bachelard would have found Warburg’s ‘brise imaginaire’ and ‘accessories in motion’ additional evidence for his claim that ‘dynamic imagination’ is [to be understood as] a psychic amplifier and at the same time as a dialectical process balanced between the loss...
of shape and the regaining of shape. ‘Can the study of the fleeting images be a subject? Images of aerial imagination either evaporate or crystallize. We must seize them between the two poles of this constantly active ambivalence.’

This is how Bachelard came to the crucial notion of the material immanence of the imagination as he describes it throughout L’Eau et les rêves (Water and Dreams).

When I was meditating on the concept of the beauty of matter, I was immediately struck by the neglect of the material cause in aesthetic philosophy. In particular, it seemed to me that the individualizing power of matter had been underestimated. Why does everyone always associate the notion of the individual with form? Is there not an individuality in depth that makes matter a totality, even in its smallest divisions? Meditated upon from the perspective of its depth, matter is the very principle that can disassociate itself from forms. It is not the simple absence of formal activity. It remains itself despite all distortion and division. Moreover, matter may be given value in two ways: by deepening and by elevating. Deepening makes it seem unfathomable, like a mystery. Elevation makes it appear to be an inexhaustible force, like a miracle. In both cases, meditation on matter cultivates an open imagination.

So it is with the idea that ‘material imagination [is] an exhuberance of forms’ that Bachelard returned to romantic motifs of torment. Continuing in the same vein as Novalis and Michelet, he saw a whole ontology of adversity in the spectacle of the ocean, affirming that ‘insofar as he is a source of energy, a being is, an a priori anger.’ The incarnation of ‘aquatic melancholy’ is what he refers to as the ‘Ophelia complex’, the nymph in whom desire and death are united. For Bachelard this is an opportunity to re-examine a theme continuously reiterated and depicted in a vast poetic and iconographical tradition since antiquity – a perpetual backwash of imagery. In this nymphs and naiads appear as ‘a mass of desires and images’, where ‘at the edge of the waters edge, everything is tresses’ and ‘the being rising out of the water is a reflection that materializes little by little; it is an image before it is a being, a desire before it is an image’.

[...]

It was in relation to a dream described by Novalis in Henri d’Ofterdingen that Bachelard gave his fullest commentary on what he called ‘water’s
feminine substance’. At this point in the poet’s narrative there develops ‘a profoundly materialized imagination, where water, in its volume and mass, not simply in the fairy-world of its reflections, appears like dissolved maiden, like the liquid essence of maiden’.\(^45\) Such an imagination is haunted by the memory of Hesiod’s Aphrodite anadyomene, by all the Oceanides and the sculpted Auraï (breezes) that adorn the mausolea of ancient Greece.

So that is the Ninfa fluida: always fleeting, always present. She comes and returns. She survives. Is it not a fluid being that lasts best, lasts longest? In the long confrontation between sea and promontory, it is surely the promontory that will crumble first, however enormous, phallic and intimidating it may be. The sea will ‘endure’, precisely because it does not have a ‘durable’ form, because it does not impose itself *en bloc* and because it derives its strength from its ability to withdraw, in the incessant movement of the backwash, of ebb and flow. This is indeed Ninfa fluida, ancient and lost, but always present, enduring right up to the here and now. Our contemporary, then – but always, by her own desire, *in search of lost time*.

For we remember Odette, in Proust’s novel.

As she stood there beside him [Swann], brushing his cheek with the loosened tresses of her hair, bending one knee in what was almost a dancer’s pose, so that she could lean without tiring herself over the picture[...] Swann was struck by her resemblance to the figure of Zipporah, Jethro’s daughter, which is to be seen in one of the Sixtine frescoes.\(^46\)

It was when she adopted an air of ‘unrelieved sorrow’ that Odette, who was a contemporary figure *par excellence*, evoked more than ever the ‘faces of some of the women created by the painter of the Primavera’.\(^47\) Equally, Odette was the contemporary of the celebrated dead beauty known as the ‘Inconnue de la Seine’\(^48\) and of those modern Pythias – hysterical and psychic nymphs – who spat out their souls and conversed with ghosts.\(^49\)

This is the era of Max Klinger’s fascinating images in which we see excessive draperies, drowning lovers, antique centaurs along with modern-day girls, defecating in a meadow after a picnic, mermaids making love in the waves in a burlesque parody of ancient friezes, scenes representing the ravishing of women stranded on river banks, portraits of Nietzsche with fashionable nymphets dropping gloves while ice-skating.\(^50\) This is the period of a ‘return to antiquity’ for the Viennese
intellectual and artistic avant-garde. While Warburg was pondering the fluid motions in Botticelli’s paintings, Ferdinand de Saussure was discussing the two ‘floating kingdoms’ that constitute ‘ideas’ and ‘sounds’ – ‘plastic’ spaces, in the depths of which a linguistic act will operate its cuts and crossings. It would soon be Wittgenstein’s turn to adopt the same vocabulary in his concept of the ‘flow of life’ and the Heraclitan notion of Alles fließt (‘everything flows’).

This is also the period in which dreams and phantoms were being scrutinised for their psychological truth. Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, includes the unique ‘illustration’ of a typical dream, taken from the humorous Hungarian magazine *Fidibusz* and relayed to him by Sandor Ferenczi. Over the course of eight vignettes we are presented with a little boy and his young governess, first wearing city clothes, then semi-naked by his bed. Then comes the image of the child urinating; the flow of urine grows into a stream, then a river, then a canal, and then an expansive ocean – another manifestation of the ‘hypochondriac wave’ (fig.4.2). At the end of the 1920s, going beyond the classic oppositions of ‘outer content’ and ‘inner content’, Ludwig Binswanger proposed a phenomenological approach to the immanence of images, both in dreams and fantasies. For example in a dream about falling, it is ‘our whole existence (Dasein) [which] moves within the meaning matrix (Bedeutungsrichtung) of stumbling, sinking and falling’.

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**Fig.4.1** Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), *Les ‘royaumes flottants’*, 1906–11, in *Cours de linguistique générale* (1906–1911), ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (1915), revised by Tullio de Mauro (Paris: Payot, 1972), pp.155–6.
Fig. 4.2  Illustration from Hungarian journal *Fidibusz*, 1900, repr. in Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), trans. James Strachey (London: Allen & Unwin 1954), p. 368.
This is the decisive moment in the history of theories of images, in which the notion of ‘figurability’ (Darstellbarkeit) was to achieve full recognition as a result of psychoanalysis, with its extraordinary heuristic value and its ability to function as a means of conversion between different levels of reality, perception and sensation. Thus the interplay becomes explicit between nymphs as gracious characters from classical antiquity and the French usage of nymphes to designate the labia minora of the female sexual organs – not to mention the metamorphic meaning in reference to butterflies. There is a similar interplay between the innocent grace of the flower (‘fleur’) and the menstrual reference of flow (‘flueur’). A beautiful drawing by Gustave Klimt, dating from 1916–17, depicts a young woman masturbating (fig.4.3).

The realism of the pose goes along with an overall impression of disorder, as if the artist had decided to avoid representing the shapes precisely as he saw them. This disorder, in fact, arises from a notable decision about figurability: it is a likeness, not of the anatomical aspect of the body represented, but rather of the process observed by the artist in the intimacy of this presence – and still more of the feeling that is the predominant motif, or indeed mystery. The woman’s drapery is therefore drawn as a disarray of lines returning feverishly to their starting point – evident in the way the material of her blouse is rumpled, but most of all in

Fig.4.3  Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), Reclining Female in Underwear with Spread Legs and Head Bent Backwards, Masturbating, 1916/17, pencil, white chalk on Japanese paper, 37.4 × 57 cm, Leopold Museum, Vienna, Inv.1355. © Leopold Museum, Vienna.
the backwash of her pleasure itself. One might almost say that the artist himself drew his own finger over the sheet of paper, precisely at the point where the hand he has drawn was moving agitatedly, creating a central and blurred area on the sheet of paper – even more fluid than elsewhere. Here is the exact place where the viewer’s glance questions female desire.

Going far beyond the depraved nymphs conjured up by Pierre Louÿs – one of them was called Chloris, although her friends were Connette, Laqueue, Vagine, Rosette and even Anus – Georges Bataille took these themes to their landmark limits. In an article for *Verve* in 1937, the author of *Madame Edwarda* addressed the motif of female hair using alliterative wordplay, in which fluidity seemed to arise spontaneously from expressions such as ‘fiery figures’, ‘fleeing figures’ or ‘fugitives’.

On their heads are their flowing locks, as far removed from the fixed nature of worries as the most transparent jellyfish bathed in light, seen through the waves. Nothing appears closer yet nothing is further away than this hair as a body of light and water, so far away that the night sky, which is receding prodigiously, barely suffices to conceive of its strange presence. […] If it were possible to *live* a hand or a foot, to *live* useless locks, it would seem that nothing would hold this life back at ground level, it would be nothing more than a lost flow of light in a dark space and it would no longer be anything more than the irremediable loss of self that a river represents.

The most fleeting figures are therefore projected within the spirit and the figures flee the spirit: but is it certain that true unhappiness might not befall those who would not flee these figures just as they themselves flee it?59

Thus, from Aby Warburg to Georges Bataille, we understand that ‘accessories of movement’ – hair, draped clothing – will lose their classic status as ‘decoration’ or *parergon* and will be given new meaning in terms of intensification or even excess. In Bataille’s *Le Mort (The Dead Man)*, for example, the character of Marie will take her pleasure – not in the storm or in the wind, but, as it were, from the storm and from the wind.60 Surrealist ecstasy fragments the body into pieces, from which drops or spurts of fluid are generated, like sperm. We find this in Salvador Dalí’s texts for *Minotaure* in 1933, or in Jean Arp’s contribution to *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* that same year. In this illustrated poem the word ‘root’ is associated not only with the idea of ‘air’, but also with an undefined field of fluid shapes through which strange equivalences pass (fig. 4.4).
The air is a root
stones are filled with innards, bravo
bravo, stones are filled with air.
stones are watery tributaries,
stones are as tormented as flesh.62

And thus the nymph, having left her watery traces behind her – some emanating from her mouth as in photographs of ‘psychic materialisations’
(fig. 4.5) – will herself become a character of sea spray and foam, as if to be reabsorbed into Hesiod’s fantastical description of the birth of Aphrodite (fig. 4.6).

Going beyond the ‘time-lapse effects’ produced in the ‘photodynamic’ experiments of the Italian futurists, the surrealists were to embark on an infinitely varied experimental realisation of a veritable *eroticism of fluids*. For example, in the admirable photographs of Rogi André (the male pseudonym of Rosza Klein, a Hungarian artist married to André

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**Fig. 4.5** Albert von Schrenk-Notzing (1862–1929), *Le Medium Stanisława P. avec un voile ectoplasmique*, 1913, photograph, Fribourg-en-Brisgau, Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene. © Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie & Psychohygiene e. V. (IGPP), Fribourg-en-Brisgau.
Kertész), a naked ‘liquid woman’ is depicted, swimming underwater in an aquarium (fig. 4.7). The most famous image from this series, sometimes entitled La Nymphé, taken from Jacqueline Lamba, André Breton’s ‘muse’ and companion, was published in Minotaure in 1935, and then in the edition of L’Amour fou in 1937.\textsuperscript{54}

But no one travelled as far down this experimental route as Man Ray. From 1923, in Le Retour à la raison, Man Ray treated the roll of film as a single, directly imprinted photographic negative. The ‘nymph’ lying

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Rogi André (Rosza Klein) (1900–70), Jacqueline Breton: la nymphé, Recueil.EP-825-BOITE FOL. © Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). Photo © BnF, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image BnF.}
\end{figure}
on her back is only visible if one has the film in hand: she disappears as soon as the image is projected onto the screen (fig.4.8). As Patrick de Haas has commented in *Cinema intégral*:

Whereas, in order to restore the semblance of continuous movement, cinema must be recorded discontinuously and projected discontinuously (with camera shutter and Maltese-cross projector mechanism), Man Ray makes continuous impressions which are then separated by the projector. Nothing more can be grasped by the eye.\(^{65}\)

A radical way, in short, to create the ‘dissolved young girl’: she will have been pulverised within time itself, as in the sensory mechanism of the persistence of vision. Man Ray, we know, went on to make many other experiments of this type, particularly in *L’Étoile de mer*. Here the optic itself has become a *fluid medium* as if the nymph – Kiki de Montparnasse, in this instance – was being viewed through eyes filled with tears.\(^{66}\)

This is what Pierre Kaufmann, in his great work on *L’Expérience émotionelle de l’espace* called the ‘emotional spatialisation of desire’: a process which generates all the dynamics of images, confronting us with the experience of a ‘fluid world in which the fickle polarities can easily be reversed [as can] the content itself of what is being represented’.\(^{67}\) To cite only one of many possible examples, when Jean Painlevé exaggerates the disproportion of a photograph of the male hippocampus, he produces an image that inescapably evokes a vulva with all the detail of its ‘nymphes’, i.e. the labia minora (fig.4.9).\(^{68}\) This can also be observed in many cases of ‘integral’ or ‘experimental cinema’ which often evoke the effects of the *generalised fluidification* of the visible, moving world which these films show us.\(^{69}\)

Before Eric Thouvenel mapped it out precisely,\(^{70}\) Gilles Deleuze had expressed a philosophical view of the importance of the *fluid motif*

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**Fig.4.8** Man Ray (1890–1976), *Le Retour à la raison*, 1923. Segment of the film roll, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou.
in 1920s French cinema. Starting from his idea of cinematography as involving ‘mobile sections’, he observed that in Jean Epstein’s work this created an original ‘temporal perspective’, inscribed in the image like an ‘undulating’ effect. It is as if, at a certain time:

Fig. 4.9 Jean Painlevé (1902–89), Ouverture de la poche incubatrice du mâle hippocampe, 1931. Silverprint. © Paris, Les documents cinématographiques.
the transition from a mechanism of solids to a mechanism of fluids[...] was going to find in the liquid image a new extension of movement in its entirety: better conditions in which to move from the concrete to the abstract, a greater possibility of communicating an irreversible lifespan to movements independently of their figurative character, a more certain ability to extract the movement of the object moved. [...] It was the French school that liberated the subject of water, giving it its own purpose and making it the form of things that lack organic solidity.72

Thus, in the work of Jean Renoir, Jean Vigo, Marcel L’Herbier, Jean Grémillon and Jean Epstein, Deleuze found that ‘water is the medium par excellence from which we can extract the motion of the object moved and the mobility of movement itself’. This can be achieved through something that Deleuze would eventually call a ‘liquid abstract’, through which pure rhythms pass.73

What, then, is this ‘liquid abstract’ that Gilles Deleuze wanted to isolate in time itself, where it is also a question of isolating – abstracting, indeed purifying – this movement, starting from the moving subject? How is this possible in an image? Is it really possible to abstract ‘pure movements’ in the films in question? It is easily understood that they are ‘aberrant’, as demonstrated by David Lapoujade; this seems to be an essential element of their singularity.74 But why do they need to be ‘pure’? And why are they excluded from any form of ‘organic consistency’?

No doubt Deleuze was seeking to liberate movement from its single figurative meaning, and that was why he proposed such a transition from the ‘concrete’ to the ‘abstract’. But this is, in fact, a false polarity – or a false problem – as when a wave is photographed like the ghost of a body (fig.4.6) or when a simple, blurry opening conjures up a sexual organ in the montage itself and within the Stimmung (mood) that this image insinuates into our thoughts. How can we desire without our organs? And how, without our organs, would we feel desire taking hold of us? When we are looking at – and indeed even more when we imagine looking at – the intimate parts of a body or inside a body, does the opposition between the abstract and the concrete not fall away before the emotional strangeness of the space which comes into play at that moment? If there is a ‘wave of hypochondria’ in Victor Hugo’s work – but also in that of Vigo or Epstein – is this not a question of organic intensity in the ‘aberrant movements’ and in the de-figurative space, rather than of an abstract or a-figurative grandeur?

In his 1931 film La Natation par Jean Taris, Jean Vigo in no way
showed a ‘pure environment’ of fluidity or an environment of ‘pure movements’. He rather portrayed the dialectic of a fluid environment, resculpted at every moment by the swimmer’s organic and technical gestures – even down to his breathing – which transforms the watery space into a scene full of the splendour of the motions of the air and light escaping from his mouth.\textsuperscript{75} In \textit{L’Atalante} Vigo shows us in lyrical terms, just as Victor Hugo once did in \textit{Les Travailleurs de la mer}, what it is to \textit{sink into love} when love is unhappy. Here, the nymph becomes all too present and yet inaccessible. Inhabiting the depths of the water, she dances slowly down there like a ghost, while the man who still desires her is at the point of expiring (fig.4.10).\textsuperscript{76}

Jean Epstein, for his part, never advocated nor filmed ‘pure abstract movements’, detached from the organ or material that produces them. When the movement of the waves goes into slow motion in that famous, magical moment in \textit{Tempestaire}, a sort of anthropomorphism or animism (both words used by the director himself) is at its peak: the ocean becomes the organ of excess, \textit{par excellence}. When the storm blows itself out, it is almost as if it had stopped breathing, or decided to suspend its murderous attack on the creatures that had set off on their marine

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig4.10.png}
\caption{Jean Vigo (1905–34), \textit{L’Atalante}, 1934; photographic still from the film.}
\end{figure}
adventure. As early as 1928, Epstein had written that slow motion was a technique for making visible the idea of ebb and flow, the intimate backwash of emotion itself, whether it is the emotion – the motion, the internal movement – of a cloud, a wave or a face:

I know nothing so completely moving as a slow-motion depiction of a face shaping itself into an expression. First the preparatory movement, a slow feverishness – we are unsure whether to compare it to a morbid incubation, to a progressive maturity, or, more crudely, to a pregnancy. Then, finally, all that effort overflows, releasing the stiffness of the muscles. Contagious movements animate the face. The eyelashes flutter and the chin trembles. And when the lips finally separate to let out a cry, we have been witness to a prolonged magnificent dawn.

Both in his techniques and in his overarching themes, Epstein always conceived of cinema as an anthropomorphic drama consisting of ‘moving spaces’ and ‘floating time’; it is driven by a ‘fluid logic’, created above all to ‘penetrate into the self’. The essential fluidity of cinema, its psychological effectiveness, was still a question of ‘pathos formulae’, empathetic processes and even survival. From that point onwards cinema did not need to choose to be ‘concrete’ or ‘abstract’, ‘figurative’ or ‘non-organic’, a ‘thing in motion’ or ‘pure motion’. It generates all these states simultaneously and invents their very point of coalescence, in the place where milieu and passion are no longer opposites. Interestingly, in his famous article on ‘cineplastics’ of 1920, Élie Faure took issue with this opposition, using the paradigm of a cloud of dust and a volcanic eruption to make us understand that this opposition cannot exist – as within cinema, as we so often see, the milieu is the passion and the passion is the milieu.

One classic example of this coalescence is in Victor Sjöström’s film The Wind. In his analysis of it Gilles Deleuze was anxious to maintain the distinction between the ‘physical duel with the milieu’ and the ‘sentimental duel’ that causes the heroine to struggle between the ‘boorish cowboy who is in love with her’ and the ‘livestock merchant who wants to rape her’. The whole film proceeds, right from the start, towards the ineluctable conclusion of a rape by the milieu itself, that is to say, by the wind. The significance of survival in this film becomes clear. Certainly, times have changed since Botticelli – the American desert lacks the charms of the Florentine springtime and Zephyr is no longer there to puff out his cheeks and launch the beautiful body of an antique god into flight.
But the terrible gusts of the desert wind, thrusting against the windows of the train and then against the young girl herself – surrendered to the elements as if to some cruel divinity – possess no less organic and ghostly power. This force is that of a *genitalis spiritus*, an atmospheric torment taking on the character of a terrifyingly violent sexual one.\(^8^4\)

In this sense, we could take a fresh look at a number of famous films, starting with Roberto Rossellini’s *Stromboli*, in which the excellent *mattanza* (tuna fishing) sequence engulfs the heroine in the cosmic and sperm-like aggression of the sea spray, whipped up by the slaughter.\(^8^5\) Whether epic (as in John Ford’s *The Hurricane*) or burlesque (as in Buster Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill Junior*), the wind often appears as a separate character in itself – sometimes monochrome and evanescent, like Zephyr in Botticelli’s *Primavera*, a god of desire in incessant pursuit of his nymphs. Just as it blows up faces out of proportion on the big screen (described so well by Jean Epstein), so cinema *blows up desire out of proportion* and takes it to fantastical levels of metaphor – as with Shohei Imamura’s moving female fountain in *De l’eau tiède sous un pont rouge*, or in Hiroshi Teshigahara’s troubled *Femme des Sables*.

*Ninfa fluida* is like the wind, which nonetheless threatens her: she can go anywhere, intrude, curl up or whirl here and there[…]. Her very grace is the tenuous but tenacious sign of her survival. What an ignorant error it is to claim, as Alain Corbin did recently, that ‘the girls who are the stuff of dreams vanished’ after the nineteenth century!\(^8^6\) What pessimistic hyperbole it was for Peter Sloterdijk to draw a direct connection between ‘being born of the foamy surf of the waves’ (from Hesiod to Botticelli) and the gases used in the trenches of the First World War and in the death camps of the Second.\(^8^7\) What reductivism to make a direct association between the ‘life in liquid’ and the ‘life in fragments’, as Zygmunt Bauman has done,\(^8^8\) along with the idea of the ‘young girl’ as a pure product of commercial society.\(^8^9\) Without even mentioning Warburg, should we not rather extend the ‘domain of the nymph’ in the terms that Elias Canetti might have used in *Crowds and Power* – to evoke the sea and the wind as paradigms that are always susceptible to new values?\(^9^0\) Should we not simply say that *Ninfa* is indestructible in the sense in which Freud, following Spinoza, spoke of desire itself (a desire *Ninfa* embodies) as motion that is supremely indestructible?

*Ninfa*’s youth is therefore ageless. For us she is so ancient only because she is able to navigate our contemporary era. She is so contemporary only because she never ceases to return from afar. She travels through the ‘liquid intelligence’ of photography referred to by Jeff Wall, and the ‘poetry of fluids’ of cinematic montage discussed by Térésa
She is everywhere in the ‘figural unease’ inherent in video images, from Nam June Paik to Bill Viola or Thierry Kuntzel. We can recognise her just about everywhere, in the most diverse contemporary art forms. Michael Diers has found her in the Dionysiac character invented by Pipilotti Rist; Luis Pérez-Oramas sees her once again in the dancing draperies of Brazilian parangolé, as interpreted by Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark or Willys de Castro. Nor should we be surprised that the bouquet of flowers dragged along by the current in Jean Vigo’s L’Atalante evokes some metamorphosis or immemorial ceremony, while at the same time pointing forward to the performances and films of Ana Mendieta – that contemporary Ninfa who wanted to dissolve her desire, and indeed her body, in the fluidity of the world (fig.4.11).

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Fig.4.11 Ana Mendieta (1948–85), Flower Person, Flower Body, 1975, Super-8mm film transferred to high-definition media, colour, silent; running time: 6:20 minutes, edition of 6 + 3 Aps (GP1218). © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.
Notes


3 Paul Mantz, ‘Galerie de M. G. Rothan’, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 2eme période, VII (1873): 283; repr. Paris: J. Claye, 1873, 11. I should like to thank Jean-Didier Wagneur for his help with this research.

4 Gustave Mendel, Catalogue des sculptures grecques, romaines et byzantines (Constantinople: Musées impériaux ottomans, 1912), 301.


6 Warburg, The Renewal, 112.


14 See Gerhard Neumann, Günter Schnitzler, Gabriele Brandstetter and Brygida Ochaim, Loïe Fuller. Tanz, Licht-Spiel, Art Nouveau (Fribourg: Rombach 1989); Giovanni Lista, Loïe Fuller:


17 Dilthey, 1892, 188.

18 Dilthey, 1892, 182–3.

19 Dilthey, 1892, 175.

20 Dilthey, 1892, 176–7.


22 Dilthey, 1892, 211.


27 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, The Notebooks 1975, 18 (as well as 76–80).


29 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, The Notebooks 1975, xvi.


38 Bachelard, Air, 1988, 6–7.


47 Proust, Lost Time, 2005, 337.


Deleuze, 1983, 65.

Deleuze, 1983, 111–16.


Vigo, Œuvre, 311.


Deleuze, L’image-mouvement, 198–9.


See Frank Fehrenbach, ‘Mare nero. Meereshilder bei Visconti, Rossellini, Antonioni und Fellini’, in Das Meer, Der Tausch und die Grenzen der Räpresentation (Zürich: u.a., 2010), 163–90.


See notably Body as Membrane, ed. Lene Burkard, Kirsten Justesen and Karsten Ohrt, exh. cat. (Odense, Denmark: Kunsthalen Brandts Klædefabrik, 1996); Karlheinz Lüdeking, Grenzen des