

Rethinking the Warburgian tradition in the 21st century¹

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Part one: why go back to Warburg?

The ideas of Aby Warburg, who died in 1929, are still alive. This can be seen in the renewed interest in his writings as well as in the continuity of his topics, questions and intuitions in the work of distinguished scholars who, in their own ways, have given shape to the Warburgian legacy. The importance that European historiography has dedicated to Warburg in the last three decades, especially after the publication of Carlo Ginzburg's article 'Da Aby Warburg a Ernst Gombrich. Note su un problema di metodo' in 1966² and the biography written by Ernst Gombrich in 1970,³ coincides with the disillusion caused by the major 20th century historical narratives. In particular Michael Foucault's studies on madness and the history of sexuality showed that the mechanisms of repression, marginalisation and punishments of differences and disagreements had been more relevant and effective in building the image of the modern rational subject than the Hegelian progress of self-consciousness. Foucault's work put into question fundamental aspects of the modern historiographical paradigm such as the existence of individuals with a clear consciousness of action, confidence in the continuous progress of human reason and the development of one objective account in History. On another level of controversy, Hayden White's *Metahistory*⁴ discussed the epistemological status of historical discipline, highlighting the rhetorical dimension of history, which was seen as a linguistic construction (with certain tropes and figures) that did not differ from fictional narrative. Consequently, *Metahistory* inaugurated a linguistic turn that reduced cultural history to the study of texts and linguistic artefacts, perfectly coherent and comprehensible on their own, without any relation to actual realities; a position that implies, as has been recently discussed,⁵ a dangerous ethical relativism towards critical historical facts such as the Holocaust. In this context, Warburg's ideas (through the influence of Gombrich and Ginzburg) have provided on one hand an alternative fresh perspective to combine the study of microphenomena and detailed information for short periods of time with more general views of historical change; while on the other they have reaffirmed, in the case of cultural historiography,

1 This is an extended and more complete version of the article published in *Intellectual News* No. 15, Winter 2005, pp. 13-17

2 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Da A. Warburg a E. H. Gombrich (Note su problema di metodo)', *Studi medievali*, year VII, fasc.II, December 1966, pp. 1015-1065.

3 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual biography, with a memoir on the history of the library of F. Saxl*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1970.

4 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

5 Carlo Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce. Vero falso finto*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006, pp. 205-224.

the importance of articulating major explicative models (dependent on sociology and anthropology) with an exhaustive approach to empirical research (especially regarding the use of pictorial images).

The Argentinean art historian José E. Burucúa,⁶ the author of *Historia, Arte, Cultura: de Aby Warburg a Carlo Ginzburg*,⁷ believes that a Warburgian approach could help us to reflect on cultural phenomena that seem to be strikingly dissimilar such as Nazism, the persistence of magical practices in contemporary societies and the figure of Eva Perón, as it was understood by Montoneros, a well-known guerrilla group that played a key role in Argentinean conflictive political history during the 70s (see the interview below). Burucúa's book —devoted to revise, with exquisite erudition and conceptual clarity, the core of Warburg's thought and trace its vast influence in Europe, the States and Latin America— shows not only why Warburg's most significant concepts have kept their relevance during decades but also how they could be fully applicable to cultural studies. These concepts are: (i) *das Nachleben der Antike* (the coming back to life of Antiquity); (ii) *Denkraum* (or thought-distance that shapes a space for devotion and thought) and (iii) *Pathosformeln*, a set of artistic cultural formulae which, intended for recalling primary experiences of mankind, present continuities and transformations on the historical *longue durée*.⁸

Warburg considered that *das Nachleben der Antike* was a key concept to understand a crucial feature of Quattrocento culture: the discovery and revival of classical Antiquity as the way in which the *uomini nuovi* (or dynamic members of the bourgeoisie) explained their new experiences as well as overcame their fears by means of a cultural framework entirely different to the one set by Medieval Christianity. However Burucúa observes, in agreement with Erwin Panofsky, that the revival of the ancients (as an intense emotional and intellectual experience) could be applied not just to Renaissance period but also to the series of awakenings that defined the history of Western civilisation from the 13th to the 16th centuries.⁹ Particularly, Burucúa considers that this Warburgian concept gives a remarkable insight into a recurrent conflict in the history of mankind between cultural inheritance and complete otherness; a conflict that defines our paradoxical situation as human beings. In this view, the Argentinean art historian notes that as 'sons of the past' we are obsessed with the conservation of a historical heritage and legacy. Nevertheless, at the same time, we

6 José E. Burucúa: was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1946. He studied art history and history of science under Prof. Héctor Schenone, Carlo Del Bravo and Paolo Rossi. He completed his PhD in Philosophy and Literature at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (1985). At the same university Burucúa was appointed Professor of Modern History, vice dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature (1994-1998) and director of the Institute of Theory and History of the Arts "Julio E. Payró"(2001-2004). At present Prof. Burucúa teaches and runs the master's programme on Art history at the Universidad Nacional General San Martín. He is also member of the National Academy of Art. Among his titles are: (as Editor) *Historia de las imágenes e historia de las ideas: Aby Warburg y su escuela*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1992; *Sabios y marmitones. Una aproximación al problema de la modernidad clásica*, Buenos Aires: Lugar editorial, 1993; *Corderos y elefantes. La sacralidad y la risa en la Europa de la modernidad clásica (siglos XV al XVII)*, Buenos Aires-Madrid: Miño y Dávila, 2001 and the most recently published: *Historia y Ambivalencia. Ensayos sobre arte*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2006.

7 José, E. Burucúa, *Historia, Arte, Cultura: de Aby Warburg a Carlo Ginzburg*, Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003.

8 See also: José Burucúa et al., *Historia de las imágenes e historia de las ideas. La escuela de Aby Warburg*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1992, pp. 7-15.

9 José, E. Burucúa, *Historia, Arte, Cultura...*, pp.14-16 and pp. 51-54.

show ourselves as a 'living proof' of something completely new, of 'what is still to come', of a justice, kindness and beauty that, although we have promised to ourselves from the very beginning, remain unfulfilled. This is the ambivalence and greatness that guides, for Burucúa, the research of historical truth: we discover ourselves bearing the full pain and always frustrated beauty of the past and yet builders of a new home, more radically human and brighter in the future.¹⁰

Secondly, Burucúa argues that the tension — as implied by the concept of *Denkraum* — between magic (composed of emotional matter) and reason (also called the first technological domain) is still appropriate to understand certain attitudes taken by contemporary societies and individuals in moments of an extreme social or economic crisis, despite the fact that after the scientific revolution any conciliation of modern science and magical thought (considered false, illegitimate and deceptive) turned out to be impossible. For instance, he refers to the ethnological studies of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965),¹¹ who proved that this lack of conciliation did not work for post-war rural Southern Italy, where peasants resorted to the magical domain as the only way to endure the suffering and losses caused by industrialisation. On the other hand, according to Burucúa, in the case of urban over-technologised societies, where experiences of fear and horror (as described by Warburg) exist but cannot be conquered by magic (already discredited as a valid domain), people have been obliged to take refuge in something 'monstrous' that, although it is a human phenomenon, involves a total alienation of their will. A process that on an individual scale leads to homicide, whereas on a social one consists in delegating our power of decision to other person, such as the Germans did with Adolf Hitler.

Thirdly, Burucúa concentrates on a conflictive point of the Warburgian legacy: the relation between history and the *Pathosformel*. It is problematic that Warburg never gave an explicit definition of this concept and used it for the first time in a late text about Dürer and classical Antiquity.¹² Nevertheless, the Argentinean art historian concludes that even though some Warburgian affirmations might suggest that these pathos formulae are "an anthropological and universal tending configuration" (as in the case of Michael Steinberg¹³ and Georges Didi-Huberman,¹⁴ who studied the phantasmagorical and perennial presence of the Apollonian-Dionysian dyad in Warburg's artistic-historical projects, mainly *Mnemosyne*) he prefers to assume that the manifestation of a *Pathosformel* (understood as the first synthesis emerged from a mixture of forms and meanings) is above all an historical event that can be located in time and space.¹⁵ These pathos formulae have been passed from one generation to another, gradually building 'an horizon of civilisation' and going through different

10 José, E. Burucúa, *Historia, Arte, Cultura...*, p. 148.

11 Ernesto De Martino, *Il mondo magico: prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*, Torino: Einaudi, 1958. This point is discussed in further detail in the second part of this article, below.

12 A. Warburg, *La Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico. Contributi alla storia della cultura*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1966, pp. 195-200.

13 A. Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, translation and interpretative essay by Michael P. Steinberg, Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 100-104.

14 Georges, Didi-Huberman, *L'image suivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris: Minuit, 2002.

15 José E. Burucúa, *Historia, arte, cultura...*, pp. 26-34. See also from the same author, *Historia y ambivalencia...*, pp. 11-13.

stages of concealment, recovery, appropriation and metamorphosis. In this view, the assimilation of *Pathosformeln* to Carl Jung's archetypes is completely rejected, since Warburg had never been interested in the analogy of *formae mentis* but in the contradictory, emotional and artistic responses triggered by similar human experiences.¹⁶ As a result, Burucúa provides a resourceful interpretation of *Pathosformeln* that paves the way for further interdisciplinary studies into the historical development (with all its conflicting and tragic aspects) of other significant and representative aesthetic forms that (besides the Warburgian nymph) have constituted the cultural experience of European-Atlantic modernity in the Old and New worlds.

The publication of *Historia, Arte, Cultura: de Aby Warburg a Carlo Ginzburg* is the result of a long Warburgian tradition in Argentina. The interest in Warburg's works and life, which today has attracted the attention of the international academic community, has a more important history in this country than many may think. To begin with, Warburg's interest in the *Nachleben der Antike* caught the attention, during the 40s and 50s, of important intellectual figures such as Vicente Fatone¹⁷ (a philosopher engaged in the comparative study of religious thought in Mediterranean and Asian civilisations), Arturo Marasso¹⁸ (who found traces of Ancient Greece in Castilian poetry and literature) and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (a literary man who made an inventory and left an exegetical lecture of different *topoi* or persistent symbolic formulae in Argentinean and Latin American cultures). A decade later, Ángel Castellán¹⁹ and

¹⁶ José E. Burucúa, *Historia y ambivalencia...*, pp. 11-12 and p. 86.

¹⁷ Vicente Fatone: (1903-1962) was born and died in Buenos Aires. His interest in metaphysics (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Spinoza) and Eastern religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) encouraged his trip to Calcutta to study with S. Dasgupta (1937-38). During the 50s, Fatone was one of the most erudite Argentinean scholars in Eastern philosophy and mysticism. He was appointed dean of Universidad Nacional del Sur (1956-57), Argentinean delegate to the IX Unesco General Conference and ambassador to the Indian independent government (1957-58). One example of Fatone's original approach to philosophy is *El existencialismo y la libertad creadora* (Buenos Aires: Argos, 1949), in which Sartre's position is discussed in relation to Pascal's Jansenism and Western negative theology. Another interesting book is *Lógica y teoría del conocimiento* (Buenos Aires: Kapeluz, 1952), one of the first manuals intended for secondary education to deal with symbolic and Hindu logic.

¹⁸ Arturo Marasso: (1890-1970) was born in Chilecito (La Rioja) and died in Buenos Aires. He was a specialist in literary criticism, devoted to tracing classical and cultural sources. His major work is considered to be *La invención del Quijote* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1954). As a poet, Marasso developed an impressive oeuvre: *La canción olvidada* (Buenos Aires: Roldán, 1915), *Paisajes y elegías* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Selectas América, 1921), *Tamboriles* (Buenos Aires: Academia Argentina de Letras, 1930), *Melampo* (Buenos Aires: Estudio Tipográfico Futura: 1931), *La rama intacta* (Buenos Aires: Del Plata, 1949) and *Poemas de integración* (Buenos Aires: Academia Argentina de Letras, 1964). From the popular Riojano identity of *Tamboriles* to the Hellenic reminiscences of *Melampo*, Marasso's style was versatile and diverse, often defined by the critic as 'post-romantic' with a 'classical touch'.

¹⁹ Ángel Castellán: (1919-1995) was born in Bernal (in the province of Buenos Aires) and died in Córdoba (Argentina). He was appointed dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (1969-1972). With Professor José L. Romero, Castellán was one of the first Argentinean scholars to teach and lead research on European Modern History at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. His articles about the intellectual circle of Juan de Valdés, published in *Cuadernos de Historia de España* during the 60s, have been quoted extensively as bibliography in Protestant Reform studies (for instance by Marcel Bataillon and George Williams). Other important works of his authorship are: 'Variaciones en torno a la Cosmo-Antropología del Humanismo. Del "microcosmos" al "microtheos"' (*Anales de historia antigua y medieval* N° 15 and N°16, 1970-71, pp. 7-108 and 189-280); 'El sol en la mitología del Renacimiento' (*Anales de Historia Antigua y Medieval* N°11, 1961-62, pp. 57-152); *Algunas preguntas por lo moderno*, Buenos Aires: Tekné, 1986.

Adolfo Ribera started to teach and promote Warburg's theories from their chairs at the University of Buenos Aires. In the 80s, Héctor Ciocchini²⁰ — who was appointed several times Honorary Visiting Professor at the Warburg Institute in London to pursue his research in iconography and rhetoric— continued with the task. Following the return of democracy, José Burucúa (who recognises himself as a disciple of Ciocchini, Castellan and Ribera) and Ana María Tedesca (with whom Burucúa applied the Warburgian method to the history of Argentinean impressionism)²¹ felt, as other colleagues, the need to 'rewrite' Argentinean cultural history.²² Hence, an identification becomes clear: as Warburg, motivated by the traumatic experience of Nazism in Germany, decided to rebuild the memory of Western Europe through an atlas of images, Argentinean intellectuals, shocked by the atrocities committed by the dictatorship that ruled the country for seven years (1976-1983), considered it vital to rescue (through Warburg's legacy) the social memory of a painful past that the majority of people resist to recognise as their own.

Part two: Interview with José E. Burucúa

2.1. Aby's Road

Aby Warburg was born in Hamburg in 1866, into a wealthy and powerful family of Jewish bankers. From his youth, Aby decided that his destiny would not be linked to economic affairs and, by previous agreement with his brothers, managed to dissociate himself from the family business, assuring beforehand that he had enough financial support to carry on his research. Warburg studied philosophy, history and religion in the universities of Germany, France and Italy.

Present even in his very early work was the topic that would be the centre of his preoccupations: the transmission of ancient iconography to different cultures, particularly in the age of the European Renaissance. Famously, in 1896 Aby travelled to New Mexico, where he stayed for six months among the Indian communities of Pueblo and Navajo. The experience allowed him to broaden the universe of his studies beyond Mediterranean cultures.

20 Héctor Ciocchini: (1922-2005) was director of the Institute of Humanities at the Universidad Nacional del Sur (1956-74) and chief editor of *Cuadernos Sur*. He was professor of literary style, Spanish medieval literature and Spanish Golden Age literature. Ciocchini was not only awarded the Fritz Saxl Fellowship in the 60s but also appointed Honorary Visiting Professor by the Warburg Institute on different occasions (1964-65, 1970-71, 1977-78). He published a variety of works on theory and literary criticism: *Temas de crítica y estilo* (Bahía Blanca: Universidad Nacional del Sur, 1960), *Góngora y la tradición de emblemas* (Bahía Blanca: Universidad Nacional del Sur, 1960). In collaboration with J. E. Burucúa and Omar Bagnoli, *Iconografía de la imaginación científica*, Buenos Aires: Hermathena, 1988. Among his most important poems and fictions are: *Los Dioses* (Buenos Aires: Delphica, 1949); *Los sagrados destinos* (Buenos Aires, Delphica: 1954), *El sendero y los días* (Bahía Blanca: Universidad Nacional del Sur, 1973) and *Los relojes solares* (San Antonio de Areco: La rama dorada, 1990). Recently an anthology of Ciocchini's poetry was published in Spain under the title of *Como espejo de enigmas (1949-1999)*, Orense: Linteo, 2000.

21 Ana M. Tedesca- José E. Burucúa, 'El impresionismo en la pintura argentina. Análisis y crítica', *Estudios e Investigaciones* N°3, Buenos Aires: Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte 'Julio E. Payró', 1989, pp.67-112.

22 José E. Burucúa, *Historia, arte, cultura...*, pp. 9-12.

Being always interested in the relationship between magic, thought and art as well as between science and religion in the Renaissance, Warburg added to his impressive collection of books, rare copies on subjects such as anthropology and natural history. In 1909 he bought a house in Hamburg with the aim of transferring his library and founding a research institute, a task for which in 1913 he hired the young art historian Fritz Saxl.

The outbreak of the 1914-18 war and a prolonged period (from 1918 to 1923) in the asylum postponed the opening of the institute until 1926. After Warburg's death and with the Nazis in power, the future of Warburg's library was uncertain. Saxl, in a bold move and with the help of the British government, succeeded in escaping political persecution and transferred the library with its 60,000 volumes to London. In 1993 the city of Hamburg purchased the old building on Heilwigstrasse Street, where a second Warburg Institute now stands, paying homage since 1997, as a research centre of cultural history.

In the late 80s and 90s, Aby Warburg's personality and work began to be more widely appreciated, says José Burucúa, who has followed the intellectual career of Aby Warburg and his disciples. If Warburg 'resurrected' the study of iconography, so Warburg's biography written by Ernest Gombrich 'resurrected' the man.

S. V. - Silvina Vidal / J. B. - José Burucúa

The first version of this biography published in 1970 passed unnoticed, however the text published in 1986 was well prepared and more detailed —before this publication some seminars around Warburg as a figure took had taken place. Nevertheless, Gombrich gave a definitive boost to interest in Warburg, because after *Art and illusion*²³ everything that he published had a great impact. In the same fashion, Carlo Ginzburg published a collection of articles on historical methodology, one of them called 'From Aby Warburg to Ernst Gombrich'.

I believe that after the disappointment caused by the major narratives of the 20th century, and in particular after harsh criticisms by Michel Foucault, intellectuals began looking for new approaches that they might apply to a large amount of historical information they had accumulated. In this sense, Warburg provides an exemplary model. After we read Ginzburg and Gombrich, many of us realised that, perhaps, the keystone for our research was there.

S. V. - What would you think are the main points, as well as the significance of Michel Foucault's criticism?

J. B. - Foucault put into question the three pillars on which the paradigm of modern historiography rests: (i) the existence of conscious historical individuals, with clear and rational motives to act; (ii) the idea of continuity in the history of man, due to the advancement of learning, science and rational knowledge and (iii) the existence of a possible, unique and objective account in History.

Foucault's studies on madness (*Historie de la folie à l'âge classique*, 1961; *La*

23 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial presentation*, London: Phaidon, 1960.

naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical, 1963), the creation of modern prisons (*Surveiller et punir*, 1975) as well as the history of sexuality in the modern bourgeois West (*Histoire de la sexualité*, 1978), have revealed the mechanisms of repression, marginalisation and the punishment of differences and disagreements. These mechanisms have proved to be more relevant and effective in constituting the image of a modern rational individual than the dialectics of revelation or the progress of self-consciousness, as described by Hegel. The temporary existence of man as the leading character in an Illuminist version of history as well as the proclamation of his death are two of the most striking topics of *Les mots et les choses*, a complex and disturbing text published by Foucault in 1966.

Warburg studies were centred in the Renaissance. However, some puzzles remain about how the concept of 'the coming back of Antiquity' should be defined in relation to the Renaissance as well as how such a concept could be applied to other periods of art history. For these puzzles, Burucúa gives some possible answers:

J. B. - The first one to notice this problem was Erwin Panofsky, an indirect disciple of Warburg. Panofsky realised that there was not one but several revivals of Antiquity. According to Panofsky, many renaissances had taken place before the arrival of the 14th and 15th-century Renaissance, which was the last in a whole cycle of awakenings. In this fashion, the revival — an awakening — of the ancients means in the case of the trecento, quattrocento and up to the sixteenth century — a basic, intense, emotional and intellectual rebirth of Antiquity. This meant the advent of a perspective (the revival of Antiquity) that was completely different from that of the Medieval or Christian one. According to Warburg, in Renaissance culture there was the existence of a horizon that signified complete otherness, although men felt that such horizon belonged to them by inheritance since they owed their existence to classical Antiquity. It is this that caused a terrible conflict, a tension, an intense clash that had never been experienced before.

Due to the creation of the library and research institute, Warburg acquired prestige as cultural organiser; however, the rediscovery of his persona returns his intellectual role to the fore. For Burucúa, an 'irrationalist' interpretation of Warburg has brought new life to his ideas:

J. B. - The current success of Warburg is owed to a Nietzschean interpretation of his teaching that is quite different to that of Gombrich, who was rather positivist. The Nietzschean approach is based on two points: firstly the relationship between the ambiguity of the nymph and other *Pathosformeln* and secondly the idea, which was defended by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The origin of tragedy*, that the opposition of Apollonian and Dionysian elements gave birth to Greek civilisation. An example of this approach in Warburg can be found in a recent text by Georges Didi-Huberman (*L'image survivante...*, 2002). It is probable that Warburg knew and appreciated *The origin of tragedy* by Nietzsche, for in Warburg's work these two elements — magic and reason — are present in permanent and perfect tension. Although Warburg believed that the destiny of man was in the development of the *ratio*, he was very much occupied with the persistence of magic.

2.2. The Sorcerer

The preoccupation with the function and persistence of magical thought in the development of civilisations is already present in the earliest works of Aby Warburg. The topic appears in the study of Schifanoia, more precisely, in his second work on magic and astrology in times of Luther.²⁴ In this essay — the longest essay he ever wrote — Warburg discusses medieval interpretations of the Protestant reformer from an astrological point of view.

Completely different, although no less important, is Warburg's essay on his 1895 journey to the Indian communities of Navajo and Pueblo in New Mexico.²⁵ This essay has become famous for the photos that Warburg took of the old Navajo Indians and the ritual dance with the serpent, a dance that he related to the cult of Dionysus in the beginnings of Greek. In this trip, Warburg tried to establish the role of magic in relation to the process of becoming human. This is a late text of 1923 and was written after his works on Renaissance magic.

S.V. - Regarding his trip to New Mexico, was Warburg's intention to test a hypothesis or did he come up with new ideas inspired by the study of archaic societies?

J. B. - Warburg had worked previously with the reports of American ethnologists in the Smithsonian Institute. I think that there, he began to plan a series of hypotheses so that he could explore the first stage of the ceremonial, magic and ritual dances in a culture in which none of these was attainable from direct experience.

S. V. - Did Warburg give magic a central role to culture?

J. B. - Magic is the centre, however, Warburg sees another centre too, the *ratio*, which is also present. We could say that there is a domain of magic, composed of emotional matter and a domain of the *ratio*, also called the first technological domain. Of course, life passes somewhere between the two. It depends on what things are at risk.

S. V. - Could this be related to the emergence of magical thought in critical times?

J. B. - Yes, in Warburg that is clear. Civilisation seems to evolve towards technology from the domain of *ratio*. Nevertheless the constructions done in that domain grow in complexity and subtlety, so in critical times they are the first ones to crumble and fall, whereas other constructions that take place in the magical domain can co-exist with the more rational ones or be perfectly compatible without clashing. The problem is that modern civilisations after the scientific revolution cannot accept, in fact, any conciliation with magical thought. One big issue of modern civilisations is that the domain of magic is illegitimate and incapable of justifying in itself; magic is synonymous with falsehood, deception and blindness.

S. V. - It could be said that there is also an important tension between magic and religion throughout the Renaissance because, in some way, they had disputed about the power

24 A. Warburg, *La Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico...*, pp. 311-390. Also see: J. E. Burucúa, *Historia, arte, cultura...*, pp. 20-21.

25 A. Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1995.

of incantation.

J. B. - Exactly, this came to pass because Christian religion has always presented itself as incompatible with magic, and the church fathers have insisted on this point, from Tertullian to Saint Augustine. What they espoused was not thaumaturgy or clairvoyance, but a miracle in which the apostle or saint is no more than an instrument. This is not a clairvoyant who has power over occult forces; this is a lie, a trick, and a falsehood. There is no possible conciliation between magic and Christianity. Concessions between the two only came afterwards, regarding the use of images, particularly the use of miraculous images.

S. V. - What happens in the case of modern science?

J. B. - Modern science has never compromised with magic; from the very beginning it claims to be incompatible with it. Magic is the world of lies and deception. Therefore, the modern world can be seen as the first civilisation to raise the issue of its incompatibility— on principle— with magic. I think it is the only case in the history of mankind.

Professor Ernesto De Martino, an Italian anthropologist, has discussed the issue in detail in a wonderful book called *Il mondo magico*. De Martino argues that the persistence of magical practices in the South of Italy is owed to the great deal of suffering that it had to endure, which was a consequence of industrialisation. In this sense, modernization hasn't brought solutions but unbearable suffering, so this particular society has resorted to the magical domain.

S. V. - What would be the alternative in contemporary societies?

J. B. - If you live in an urban environment in which everything that had been built from the magical domain had been discredited, how would one respond to a social crisis? Two answers are possible: (i) we would become animals, experiencing fear and trying to escape (which never takes place) or (ii) we would take refuge in something 'monstrous' that is difficult to define although is a human phenomenon. We would need to take refuge when the magical domain smashes to bits on account of the seriousness of the social crisis. While on an individual scale we could define this refuge as a homicide, on a social one it seems to be something similar to homicide, that is, a complete alienation of our will, transferring as a result our power of decision to other person.

S. V. - How would the phenomenon of magic work on a social scale?

J. B. - I consider that on a social scale the most striking example would be National Socialism. In this case there is a sensation of terror in which the possibility of recreating something out of magic, in the over-technologised and industrialised Germany, didn't exist. Therefore, the reaction was simply to submit oneself to the will of the Führer and obey his orders without question.

S. V. - Professor Silvia Magnavacca in her classes on medieval philosophy at the

Universidad de Buenos Aires, used to say, a bit provocatively, that in major moments of crisis the West looked at the East for answers... however the West couldn't find any answers there.

J. B. - Certainly, that is the problem. The West has systematically and persistently discredited the magical domain. There is no legitimacy for magic.

2.3. If the Nymph lived

Warburg studied recurring phenomena in relation to the way societies were represented, what he called Pathosformeln, the formula of Pathos or the emotive formula. These visual representations produce an emotional response as well as referring to a meaning that is shared by the members of certain cultures. The formula has a historical origin and evolves in time within a certain cultural tradition. Perhaps the emotive formula of the nymph is the most famous of those classified by Warburg. This formula can be traced from the 4th century B.C. in the beginnings of Greek culture and remains, more or less visible, throughout the Western tradition as the representation of the power of youthful life. In Middle Ages the formula changes or remains hidden yet it appears in the age of Renaissance, when the nymph becomes the most popular rescued image of classical thought. According to Burucúa, Argentineans have their own nymph:

J. B. - With her loose hair and a calm but exulting face, the image of Eva Perón was 'brought back to life' by the juvenile political movements of 70s. The image didn't circulate during the first years that the Peronist party was in power and after the overthrow of President Juan D. Perón in 1955, even less so. However the same dazzling image appears resignified some decades after.

On Warburg's method which established relationships between representations of societies distant in both time and development:

J. B. - The starting point is the analogy of the form. Not only in reference to what could be called the general compositional principles of forms but also regarding certain questions of detail, where some sort of material derivation could be seen. It is from here that there arises a relation with Ginzburg's semiotic paradigm (*paradigma indiziario*). He believes that it is better not to look at the larger form but to study what happens with the representation of nails or with the way in which the hair is disposed in the skin. Once details have been studied, it is possible to conclude that this is derivative from this or that element and so on forth, as if it were a written document.

Warburg always began by choosing a form in the quattrocento and cinquecento that interested him, in order to search for its origins to go back in time and create a derivation, a sort of lineage. In this way, Warburg discovered the existence of forms that hide themselves. In certain moments they decline to reappear soon afterwards. Moreover, he used to trace forms in the opposite direction: from their ancient origins to their new version, caused by the 'bringing back to life' process.

S. V. - Do you see any relation with Jung's archetypes?

J. B. - No. Some people had tried to relate Warburg's method with Jung's archetypes but

I don't see it as possible. It is true that in Warburg there is a temptation to establish static relationships that go beyond historical circumstances. Nevertheless, in Warburg the search is rather based on association and analogy, such as in the case of relating the serpent with the stairs or with the lightning and seeing how the serpent acts as the connector of three worlds. Warburg thinks: if they have this symbol, it wouldn't be hard to believe that the Greeks had also the same symbol.

S. V. - Is there an analogy in mental configurations when reacting to the same passion or stimulus?

J. B. - No. In that case, there is analogy of experience but never of *formae mentis*, they don't coincide. In view of a similar experience, of man's contact with such a terrible and ambiguous creature as the serpent, it is not absurd to think that the situation will turn out to be critical for both groups of men. Nonetheless I don't think there is an archetype there. Warburg had never mentioned such a thing. Only two similar experiences exist. The way, in which these experiences become a *pathos formula*, it is a completely different process because it is historical. The most recent interpretation of Warburg insists a lot on this static aspect, in brief, that Warburg was always looking for big eternal cores, but I disagree.

2.4. The Dreamer

In the 90s the images that Warburg had gathered (from 1924 until his death in 1929) as part of a research project that he called Mnemosyne began to be exhibited.²⁶ The panels gathered on a black background several images from a classic sculpture to a painting by Botticelli or even to film shots of Warburg's contemporary Olympics. The images were developed in black and white to produce an effect of homogeneity and ordered according to themes, disregarding any artistic or chronological classification.

J. B. - Warburg aimed to build an atlas composed mainly of images, a sort of memory of European civilisation, in which he could cross and relate all the forms that he loved. He was constantly changing the atlas, he used to put in the panels some little texts or sometimes he just talked about these images.

S. V. - Would not the absence of texts or the presence of 'little ones' be deliberated?

J. B. - This is paradoxical, because we know that Warburg used to give talks about these images and those talks used to last between four and five hours. Although there wasn't a written text, there was some kind of discourse. Furthermore, Warburg believed that images had the power of triggering a capacity of association and discovery, only through visual thought, that is, a non-discursive thought. Looking at the memory panels of Western civilisation, it would be possible to recreate the very paths of memory. This doesn't mean that Warburg stopped writing; however he reduced the text to a minimum. Warburg believed that by showing related images on a black

²⁶ Italo Spinelli and Roberto Venuti (eds.), *Mnemosyne. L'Atlante della memoria di Aby Warburg*, Roma: Artemide Edizioni, 1998.

background, he would be able to trigger a sort of mechanism in order to activate our own memories. In this way we were supposed to know what was in our earliest 'hidden' memories and recover all this visual and emotional experience.

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