A Note on Warburg

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Abstract

Before the Transtech seminar on the Mnemosyne Atlas, I had never heard of Aby Warburg. I found that fascinating in and of itself considering how important it turns out Warburg was to mid 20th century art history through the legacy of the Warburg Institute in London no less the fact that he had been inspired by his anthropological experience with the Hopi and even organized the Warburg library along Hopi ritual principles. Thus discovering first which art historians and philosophers he had influenced and then the degree of the expanding interest in his work in art history in recent decades was a powerful experience for me on various levels. First I was embarrassed for my ignorance having read a certain amount of art history. Second I was fascinated at the inter-disciplinary nature of his earliest work. Third I was drawn to the context of his life in terms of the end of the Weimar period as it expanded upon my interests in World War One and Two and the Holocaust. Fourth, I found the art historical literature on Warburg deeply compelling, above all the critique by David Freedberg. This short essay, essentially a mere note, simply revisits Freedberg’s criticism from my perspective as a symbolic anthropologist interested in art and ritual.

Introduction

David Freedberg provides us with the most express caution about being uncritical of Warburg’s art historical legacy. Being the author of The Power of Images he has a particular authority to comment upon the Mnemosyne Atlas. In ‘Warburg’s Mask: A Study in Idolatory’ in Made To Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology, Freedberg judges it very critically, no less the “talismanic” “objet A”, the Hopi snake lecture and photographs which served as a cause célèbre for “all the romantic impulses of scholars who think that art history is best seen as anthropology” (2005 p. 10). On a very different level, in a closely related article ‘Pathos at Oraibi’, Freedberg raises an even more interesting question that “…the implications of his rejection of Judaism and his consequent romanticization of the Red Indians” remain obscure. And there he writes that “[t]he full problem of these relations has been massively avoided in the vast literature on Warburg” (2004, p. 21, note 14) [1]. There is much to explore here for art history and anthropology. Consider then Anne-Marie Meyer who has written: “Exactly what was the relation between Warburg’s research on paganism in the Renaissance [sic] and his meditations and fears about Judaism (and Jews) remains of-course the problem.” (see Anne-Marie Meyer 2008 p. 452, also see Freedberg 2004, p. 35, note 92).

The Freedberg Critique

Citing Warburg’s insightful sentence in the introduction to the Atlas, “The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the outside world can be described as the founding act of civi-
lization”, Freedberg emphasizes a perhaps all-important point (2004, p. 9). Considering that “the lecture on the Pueblo snake ceremony stands at the real intellectual origin of Warburg’s great project on Memory” and keeping in mind that even Warburg’s organization of his books is based on Hopi ritual concepts of sacred space and prayer, “…he seems to have forgotten only one thing; his pictures of the Pueblo and Hopi Indians, none of which appear in the Atlas.” (ibid., p. 9). If Warburg’s ultimate project was to show the pagan roots behind Classical art, and if his ethnographic appreciation of pagan religion came about from his touristic encounter with the Hopi, and a complete misunderstanding of Hopi aesthetics and religion, then what should we make of the absence? And what are the consequences of his interpretations being based on ideas drawn from the Hopi, which simply do not exist? As Freedberg emphasizes these are serious problems indeed.

Referring to the power or lack thereof of the images in the Atlas, and the absence of the Hopi photographs, Freedberg writes very negatively of Warburg’s Mnemosyne project. He also states that the Atlas eventually drove Warburg insane. Perhaps though we might posit it more sensitively that the Atlas emerged as an expression of a mania for seeking relations between images to explain and balance an inner frenzy with the calm repose of the Classical. Regarding Warburg’s thesis on the difference of Classicism and pagan frenzy and the roots of Classicism in paganism, to the contrary, the Hopi snake ritual and the Kachina dolls have absolutely no element of frenzy to them being religious and aesthetic exercises in control, stability and if anything a calm stasis. In the end, as Freedberg notes: “…he [Warburg] ended up with his Bilderatlas, where the images have little of their original force, and in their servitude to a curious kind of genealogical encyclopedism, all are strangely and improbably drained. Why has the mythomania that surrounds Warburg not grasped this yet?” (2005, p. 17). Leaving aside the anthropological problems, I must concur that the reason I was never able to choose a page from the Atlas, though I did try, the reason why I could not focus an analysis on it was that my reaction to the panels was precisely the same as Freedberg’s. They simply left me cold. For myself, the power of those images was completely drained, lost in translation and duplication.

Freedberg’s critique is deft and deeply anthropological. Here it is: “What Warburg’s failed Bilderatlas, pathetic in its reliance on reproduction and multiplication, foretells, is the etiolation of contemplation that is implicit in the modern multiplicity of images… But at least, at bottom, before they drove him mad, Warburg knew what images of every kind really betokened” (2005, p. 17). What did Warburg know? He knew that “[t]he tension and power at the heart of every image lies in its substitutional status. It has the full force of the fetish” (ibid., p. 18). Freedberg extends this through referring to Michael Steinberg’s work thus: “Steinberg believes that Warburg had drawn a connection between Hopi and Hebrew culture” and asks, “what is the nature of recurring irrationality of culture which precludes a victory of modernizing rationality?” (ibid. p. 24). There has been a fascinating debate underway here as played out in Christa Maria Lerm’s ‘Das jüdische Erbe bei Aby Warburg’ in Menora: Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdisch Geschichte (1994, pp. 143-171) and in Raulff’s attack on Steinberg in Guidi, Benedetta Cestelli and Nicholas Mann’s edited illustrated volume Photographs and the Frontier: Aby Warburg in America 1895-1896 (1998). As
Greenberg adds: “…not even Steinberg saw the directness of the link between Warburg’s rejection of his Jewishness and his clear misunderstanding of Pueblo culture” (ibid., p. 35, note 92).

To make matters worse, the photographs Warburg took at Oraibi and the objects (fetishes) he acquired there have a deeply politically compromised story to them, so much so that Michael Steinberg, as referred to above, even famously compared the photographs of the Hopi being sent to Alcatraz as prophetic of what was to occur to the Jews of Lodz (see Steinberg 1998, pp. 82-87, figures 34 and 36 and Raulff in Cestelli, Guidi and Mann, 1998, pp. 67-68) keeping in mind that emancipated Jews such as Aby Warburg and Hannah Arendt felt a far deeper affinity with elite Prussian culture than with their Eastern European Hebrew brethren seen as similarly a primitive and superstitious Other, even dirty.

Why then are the Hopi photographs not in the *Atlas*? Sure it was not because Warburg could not see the relevance of his American research to his theory on the pagan roots of Classicism? Maybe the answer is very simple. Why include images of a distant culture with no connection to the analysis at hand in the *Atlas*? Yet the questions and possibilities raised by Freedberg multiply. Certainly Freedberg’s comments on the problem in ethnographic museums where the objects speak to the history of the rape and pillage, the dehumanization and colonization of the Other are prescient. And there, connecting us to more recent political events relating to fetishes and the power of art in history, he emphasizes the pathetically tragic story of the Contemporary Indian Museum in New York and of why the Taliban had to destroy the Bhuddas of Bamiyan. Those dark and powerful contexts provide the answer. The graven image provokes desire, power, spirit, what have you. Images are powerful things. Here lies the answer.

In Judaism, as in Islam, the graven image is forbidden because of its fetishistic potential. No other image is more symbolic than the Golden Calf, no folkloric European Jewish pagan-esque tale more enduring than that of the Dybuck, no less the intense current cultural wars over the sexualization of the unveiled woman for the sake of advertising commodities, free will and the exploitation of either base or romantic desire. It is thus possible to argue that had Warburg had a greater acceptance for and sensitivity towards his own cultural history rather than having so concerned about escaping from its ‘irrational’ nature and the traditions which separated Jews from Christian society, granted a typical and necessary feature of the ‘emancipated’ figure then as now, that he might have been less conflicted and more able to understand Pueblo culture rather. Instead, in adoration for the Classical in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, he worked out his social and inner conflict through a forced and meaningless corollary between frenzy and repose, his fascination for images of snakes, desire and nude women in the history of European painting and sculpture. Is not the Old Testament biblical imagery of the temptress Eve, the snake and the apple of knowledge in the Garden of Eden more central ultimately than the ritual at Oraibi?

**Warburg’s Legacy and Identity Politics**

Freedberg’s critique in terms of crime and tragedy, pride and prejudice is a powerful one. It is worthy of reflection not only in light of the anthropological literature on the study of ‘primi-
tive’ ritual but in terms of better appreciating Warburg’s identity, his psychological struggles and the politics of the period in which he lived. As Hans Liebeschutz wrote in ‘Aby Warburg (1866-1929) as interpreter of civilization’, “Warburg’s ‘Jewish roots’ were not a source of positive identification, but rather the source of a never ending disquiet” (in Freedberg 2004. p. 18).

Warburg’s reverse anti-Semitism is an important issue to revisit considering the nature and content of this essay. It takes us back to his early American days in the Southwest thus: “I only noted here that I do not like Jews” (in Freedberg, 2004, p. 23, note 26). Indeed, one can learn a great deal about Aby Warburg’s struggles with his own identity from Freedberg’s work and from the other literature on Warburg. It provides us not only with a window into the conflicts, prejudices and emancipated desires within German Jewry in the Weimar period. It also allows us insight the instability, sensitivity and transgressive nature of Aby Warburg himself in terms of his relation to the orthodoxy in which he was raised and from which he sought escape as elaborated upon by Charlotte Schoell-Glass in her article ‘Aby Warburg and anti-Semitism: Political perspectives on images and culture’ (2008) and previously by other authors. However in this essay, rather more a note, I shall not explore this issue, that having been in great part the subject of the original extended and lateral creative submission which I retracted for the sake of this more scholarly and surgical engagement [2]. In this form instead, my purpose is to provoke future reflection on Warburg’s legacy and identity politics by those who might read this. To that end the extended bibliography refers the reader to some of the literature on Warburg as well as to a more expansive and all encompassing relevant historical literature as briefly considered below.

Mathias Bruhn writes in the all important article ‘Aby Warburg (1866-1929): The Survival of an Idea’ on-line in the Enciclopédia e Hipertexto that though “Warburg’s method of iconology became one of the most applied methods in art history… [i]n the end, Warburg became one of those tragic names of academic life that are always mentioned with veneration but no longer really read”. Thus while the writings of emancipated German Jewish figures born of the troubled Weimar Republic such as Theodore Adorno, Hanna Arendt and Walter Benjamin have an iconic presence and influence, recognition of Aby Warburg’s (1866-1929) predating and comparative presence has only relatively recently become a subject of major interest and renewed recognition.

Indeed, Warburg influenced the leading art historians of the mid 20th century, namely Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, Bernard Berenson and Sir Kenneth Clark and they in turn significantly influenced all subsequent art history (Bing 1999; Burucucua et al., 1992; Forster 1976, 1995, 1996; Freedberg, 2005; Gombrich, 1986; Kwiatkowski, 2003; Ventrelle, 2011). In the end, for art history, what was to England and America’s gain was the Hamburg School’s loss. But that is a topic for art history, and a somewhat separate and fascinating literature in its own right. What follows below takes a different, more applied and global political tack keeping in mind the truncation of this German legacy by the Holocaust. In this view, the Warburg legacy at the University College of London is as much a Holocaust related phenomenon as a modern temple for the study of classical art history. Therein I hope to add below a dimension to the Mnemosyne seminar at Plymouth University which may not have been explicitly considered during the seminar itself.
There is an extensive literature on Warburg as a highly conflicted emancipated Weimar Jew. That work on the relationship between his writings on Renaissance paganism and the way in which he rejected his Jewish heritage while completely misunderstanding Pueblo Indian culture is fascinating in and of itself. But anthropological and identity issues aside, Warburg has become something of a cult figure recently and considering that David Freedberg qualifies that we should be careful not to over-romanticize Aby Warburg, particularly the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

Recall that Paul Warburg (1868-1932), Aby’s youngest brother was the first President and architect of the United States Federal Reserve. His brother Max (1867-1946) was the head of the secret service in Germany in the last days of Weimar, a key figure in the handling of the economics of the 1914-1918 war, the negotiations at the Treaty of Versailles and the attempt to keep the loan payments on track. Naturally he became a celebrated Nazi scapegoat. The two other brothers were Felix (1871-1937) and Fritz (1879-1964), the family having been one of the most illustrious German Jewish families of the Weimar era and beyond (Ascheim, 2007; Berghahn, 1997; Chernow, 1993; Gay, 1978). After World War Two, Max’s son Eric (1900-1990) took it upon himself to rebuild the German Jewish community. In essence then, discussion of Warburg can easily turn to politics, to German history and politics, to World War One and Two and the connected subsequent conflicts.

That is the task if only briefly attended to below as I have developed at more length elsewhere (Zilberg, 2011 a and b, see note 2) by drawing attention to collective symbolic memory as being one of Warburg’s enduring interests and that context having been recently highlight in the powerful works by Elon Amos *The Pity of It All* (2003), Margaret McMillan’s *Paris 1919* (2003), Niall Ferguson’s *1914-1918* (1998), Adam Hochschild’s *To End All Wars* (2011), and Deborah Lipstadt’s reflections on Hannah Arendt in *The Eichmann Trial* (2011). Such studies keep alive our collective memory of the recent past. As such they are directly relevant to any larger appreciation of Aby Warburg’s legacy in providing the context of the world he lived in.

For myself, Warburg’s legacy ultimately speaks to the failure of *The Final Solution* to extirpate the German Jewish legacy. In that context I ask: Can the Mnemosyne Project be read as a part of a continuing national project to attend to the rupture with the past that occurred in the Nazi era? Does it acknowledge the effective truncation of an intellectual legacy in which the most emancipated Jews in Europe in the 19th and first two decades of the 20th century saw themselves as proudly German as so powerfully given in *The Pity of It All* by Amos Elon (2004)? Is there no more tragic or symbolic instance of this than in the person of Ratenhauer, featured in the documentary film *Paris 1919*, keeping in mind that he, Melchior and the Warburgs were members of the same inner circle of powerful Weimar bankers and technocrats devoted to rescuing Germany from the economic disaster brought upon by World War I?

How strange, how Adorno-esque perhaps, that through responding to this seminar I find myself experiencing a sense of return to my own truncated European past, to some degree finally coming to yet uneasy terms of relation with Germany through reading about Warburg and his legacy. To put it briefly then, engaging Warburg turned out to be deeply personal and political,
overly so, but I did not at all intend this engagement with the seminar to be an essay on identity politics in art and history. I merely leave that as an open question for others to follow considering that it is one of past and current interest as best illustrated in Charlotte Schoell-Glass’s work on Aby Warburg and anti-Semitism in Weimar Germany (2008). My interests in this are rather more in terms of contemporary identity politics, collective memory, memorials in general and Holocaust museums in particular but that for another time and place.

Conclusion

To end then. Let us return to Freedberg’s critique. Why were the Pueblo images excluded from the *Mnemosyne Atlas*? What difference might it make to the overall analysis of the iconological, philosophical and historical importance of any claims made as to the value of the Atlas for the study of the Renaissance and Warburg’s theory about its pagan origins? Might their exclusion mean nothing at all in that the topic of analysis was simply Classical art itself? If so, how would it alter the power of Freedberg’s critique - if at all?

My original paper for this seminar, subsequently posted as two separate photo-essays on *scribd*, sought to first revisit for the sake of memory some memorials in London, DC and Plymouth and second revisit some of my reviews of documentaries about war and war crimes for *Leonardo*. The exercise was to compare them, to draw them into productive relationship, as others might compare images within a Mnemosyne panel. Doing so also would have provided me with the opportunity to present some of my image based work on metropolitan memorials just as the seminar offered other participants the opportunity to present and reflect upon their art. But I retracted that creative exercise because I found the result embarrassingly strained, overly romantic and emotional being driven by what I believe is a Jewish Holocaust consciousness at work.

Nevertheless, that engagement with the seminar did cause me to pause to realize something about my reviews of image based media. Reading back over them and working with photographs of war memorials I realize that what I was trying to achieve there was to express myself artistically through images and invoke the power of images through the written word. I recognize that there is a fetishistic element to that creative aesthetic process. The purpose is to attempt to memorialize the dead and the suffering inflicted upon them and the survivors through art. That is a very different topic under investigation in the analysis of pages of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* though I imagine that with Ruskin’s observations of the links between the history of war and art, one could analyze and link the illustrated art works with the history of civilization in terms of murder and mayhem in mind.

But let us return to Greenberg who is after all again, the author of *The Power of Images*. Though not bowing down to Greenberg as an icon of power and knowledge in art history, our Jewish heritage forbidding that, I find Greenberg’s critique unassailable as unpalatable as it might be for some. Greenberg shows just how pertinent is the critique of anthropology in the 1980s and beyond to a more critical appreciation of Warburg. I have not investigated the anthropological
literature, as to whether a debate over Warburg has appeared in those circles yet, but it certainly is merely a matter of time if the debate is not already underway.

Notes


Bibliography


