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Pathos at Oraibi: What Warburg did not see*

On May 1, 1896 Aby Warburg saw the Hemis Kachina dance at Oraibi, the ancient and remote Hopi pueblo on Third Mesa in the wash below Tuba City in Arizona.¹ Though Shongopovi was settled a little earlier, twelfth-century Oraibi is probably the oldest continuously inhabited place in the United States.² The date on which Warburg saw the dance is not often recorded in the voluminous literature on the lecture he gave on the Serpent Ritual some twenty-seven years later – and this is just the least of the many strange omissions and distortions in the history of what has become a landmark in the intellectual history of the twentieth century.³

Warburg's lecture is fraught with the tension between paganism and classical culture, and with the implications of this tension for the human soul. It is unresolved in its view of the psychic and cultural resonance of the rational versus the irrational. It is full of the then modish preoccupation with the relations between Athens and Alexandria -- that is, between classical civilization and its roots in something wilder and less restrained. Underneath it all lies Warburg's anxiety about what he felt to be the tragic split between man's need for distance and his lost and irrecoverable ability to control nature directly.

For all the enthusiasm the lecture has evoked, none of its many commentators have noted

*Published as "**Pathos a Oraibi: Ciò che Warburg non vide**", in: **Claudia Cieri Via and Pietro Montani, eds., *Lo Sguardo di Giano, Aby Warburg fra tempo e memoria*, Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004, pp. 569-611.**

¹For the date on which Warburg saw the dance, see the entry for May 1, 1896 in his *Ricordi*, as cited in Cestelli-Guidi and Mann, p. 155 ("Stomach upset. In the morning I saw the Hemis Kachina. Picturesque impression. In the afternoon the clowns, very obscene").

²Eg. Waters, pp. 109-112 for a brief account. The sequence is also noted by Scully, p. 303, and expanded on his pp. 305, 309, and 214, in what remains one of the most sensitive treatments of Pueblo dance and architecture available by an outsider.

³See Gombrich (1986) for the basic context; but now see also, amongst many others, the texts by Forster, Naber, Steinberg, Raulff (the best commentator so far on the ethnographic context of Warburg's interest in the Pueblo), Michaud and Didi-Hubermann (1999-2000), especially p. 230 and note 59 for a few more comments within the context of Warburg's work as a whole. For a selection of the many other articles and books on Warburg's lecture,

the fact that Warburg misunderstood a central element in almost all the dances of the Pueblos, and that when he visited the Hopi, he ignored the critical context of the dances he both saw and did not see. The consistent refusal to appreciate where Warburg went wrong, to note what he failed to see, is not only symptomatic of a more general ignorance of Pueblo art and ethnography, but also of the larger ramifications of the whole Anasazi and Pueblo tradition for the relations between nature and art. The story is well known. Two years after completing his dissertation on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, the twenty-nine year old Aby Warburg went from Florence to New York in September 1895, to attend the wedding of his brother Paul to Nina Loeb, the daughter of another German banking family, in New York. Put off by the empty materialism of well-to-do life on the East Coast,⁴ he went West. Before doing so, he prepared himself for his journey by going to the ethnographic libraries at Harvard and in Washington, and meeting with authorities like Franz Boas and Cyrus Adler, as well as Frank Hamilton Cushing and "most of all" James Mooney.⁵ He studied what was then available about the cliff dwellings of the ancient Anasazi and the ceremonies of their modern descendants, the Pueblo Indians. It is important to remember just how recent were the Wetherill brothers' discoveries at Mesa Verde in 1888, as well as Nordenskjöld's publication of the ruins five years later. The years between 1893 and 1895 saw the publication of the critical work by Cushing, the Mindeleff brothers, Mooney, and Jesse Fewkes on the contemporary customs of the Pueblo Indians.⁶ Warburg

see the further references in the bibliography below.

⁴His dissatisfaction has been much recorded, as in Gombrich (1986), pp. 88-89, Naber, p. 89, Steinberg, p. 60, and so on; Also compare Warburg's statement that "die Leerheit der Zivilization im östlichen Amerika [mich] so abstieß, dass ich eine Flucht zum natürlichen Objekt und zur wissenschaft auf gut Glück dadurch unternahm" and that he thus went down to Washington to consult the library and researches of the Smithsonian. This has been much cited as well, first in Gombrich (1986), p. 88, and then by many others, sometimes with acknowledgement to Gombrich (eg. Raulff, "Nachwort", p. 65) and sometimes not (eg. Forster (1990), p. 12-13 Forster (1996), p. 6). The case is typical.

⁵Gombrich (1986), p. 88; Naber, pp. 90-91.

⁶For a selection of their writings, see also the bibliography below, as well as the very useful if sometimes overwrought survey by Donaldson. I have omitted from this selection the very many excellent articles on the archeology of the Anasazi sites – notably Mesa Verde – by Fewkes. For a very good account of Warburg's study of

made a point of meeting all of them before beginning his journey West. These were the golden years of the incomparable Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology -- incomparable not least because they convey a sense of the excitement of the ethnographic discovery of an ancient culture still surviving in the midst of a growing modern America.

In his Botticelli dissertation of 1893, Warburg set out his view that ancient sculptures and reliefs provided Renaissance artists and advisers with their models for the representation of inner emotion through outward movement -- and in particular through fluttering drapes, garlands and hair.⁷ For Warburg, such movements, whether on ancient reliefs or in literary descriptions were and always would remain the outward signs of an intensified inner life. How excited, then, the young student of Botticelli, Poliziano, and Alberti must have been to read on the very first page of Mooney's *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Rebellion of 1890* the following words: "The doctrines of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew messiah, the Christian millennium, and the Hesûnanin of the Indian Ghost dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope and longing common to all humanity".⁸ Here, directly transposed to the dance, was a notion very close to Warburg's heart. It is not so dissimilar from one of Warburg's favorite mottos, which he took from Part II of Goethe's *Faust*: "Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern; von Harz bis Hellas alles Vettern." "It is an old story: From Harz to Hellas all are cousins". The significant difference, of course, is that the non-European, and the apparently more primitive, are now

all these writers, as well as those of the remarkable Matilda Coxe Stevenson, see Raulff, "Nachwort", pp. 67-71. In his lecture, Warburg spoke fondly of the remarkable Frank Cushing, and what he learned from him; see Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 27. See also Curtis M. Hinsley, "Ethnographic Charisma and Scientific Routine: Cushing and Fewkes in the American Southwest, 1879-1893", in *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, ed. George W. Stocking, pp. 53-69, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

⁷Sandro Botticellis "Geburt der Venus" und "Frühling". *Eine Untersuchung über die Vorstellungen von der antike in der Italienischen Frührenaissance*, Hamburg und Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1893 (available, like most of the other articles by Warburg cited in this essay, with the exception of the separately published Kreuzlingen lecture, in all the collected editions of Warburg's writings, from that first edited by Bing and Rougemont in 1932 until the Wuttke edition of 1980 and later; much the most useful edition) and finally the Getty edition of 1999 (Warburg, *Renewal* (1999), pp. 89-156).

⁸Mooney, p. 657.

included too.

As has often been pointed out, what Warburg hoped, indeed what he sought to find amongst the Pueblo and Hopi (or Moki as he and others often called them), was the answer to the question: “to what extent can these remnants of pagan cosmology still obtaining amongst the Pueblo Indians help us to understand the evolution from primitive paganism, through the highly-developed pagan culture of classical antiquity, down to modern civilized man?”⁹ Amongst the Pueblo Indians Warburg hoped to encounter modern survivals of practices that would illuminate his study of classical paganism.¹⁰ Like so many of the commentators – and tourists – of the time, he felt he had to rush West to examine a group of people who represent a primitive and ancient survival, whose rituals, it was felt, would soon disappear under the inevitable advance of civilization and progress. In this significant respect Warburg was altogether of his time. Tourist companies made much of the fact that you didn’t even have to go Europe to find ruins and ancient or primitive rituals; primitive culture was still alive and present at home in the Southwest.¹¹ One had to go and visit (or study) it before it disappeared, before it was swamped by civilization and overtaken by progress.¹² Warburg was familiar with the work of the Berlin

⁹Warburg, (1939), p. 277. The question which Warburg himself posed in his lecture: “Inwieweit gibt diese heidnische Weltanschauung, wie sie bei den Pueblo Indianern noch fortlebt, uns einen Maßstab für die Entwicklung vom primitiven Heiden über den klassisch-heidnischen Menschen zum modernen Menschen?” (Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 12) for all its rather dubious teleology, does not contain the qualifiers “highly developed” and “civilized” inserted by Mainland and (presumably) Saxl in the 1939 publication of the lecture (Warburg, *Serpent ritual*. For a more accurate English translation of Warburg’s text, see Steinberg’s edition (with this passage on p. 4). The differences between the text published by Saxl and Mainland and the later ones have not been sufficiently commented upon. They are most significant, especially given the date – 1939 – of what was, after all, the first publication of the lecture.

¹⁰For this general idea, see also Teggart, pp. 94-97. The summary of Warburg’s Berlin lecture in February 1897 puts Warburg’s position *in nuce*. According to the minute-taker at that meeting, for Warburg the Pueblo Indians represented people at the “primitive stage of the pagan hunters, shepherds, and peasants” (Warburg/Goerke (1897), p. 61.

¹¹Dilworth, pp. 5, 16, 80, etc. gives some examples, including the enthusiastic Charles Lummis’s “Among the Pueblos it is possible to catch archeology alive!” (p. 103).

¹²Cf. Dilworth’s comment that “the explicit ethnographic mission to salvage information about the primitive life of Zunis and Hopis before they ”disappeared” had the effect of making the last two decades of the nineteenth century a kind of “ethnographic present -- the moment when these cultures were last perceived to be culturally intact before the transforming influence of civilization” (Dilworth, p. 16), as well as the remarkable comments by Theodor

ethnologist Bastian – the well-known proponent, then, of the concepts of *Elementargedanke* and *Völkergedanke* – who had emphasized that native cultures were disappearing everywhere, and that if the material they provided for the study of primitive man were not immediately collected, it would be lost forever.¹³ Native American ethnologists like Mooney subscribed to the same conviction; for them the task of anthropology was to describe societies that were soon to be irretrievably lost, yet in their eyes represented the common human past. Warburg's teacher Hermann Usener had repeatedly insisted on the usefulness of studying surviving primitive religions as a aid to the understanding of Greek and Roman mythology, and believed that the symbolism of ancient paganism might be explained by similar symbolism in still existent primitive societies.¹⁴

In addition to all this, the Pueblo Indians offered Warburg the opportunity of exorcising some of his own demons. Already obsessed with the problem of the Laocoon,¹⁵ that archetypal classical expression of agony in art, and having just studied the Florentine intermezzi with their central episodes of the battle between Apollo and the giant Python,¹⁶ as well as the dance of the demons, he became particularly interested in the Snake Dance of the Hopi. For him, the dance

Roosevelt to this effect, following his visit to the Snake Dance in Walpi in 1913 and cited in Dilworth, p. 63.

¹³As so often, it was Gombrich who most clearly set out Warburg's indebtedness to Bastian and his ideas, as well as that of the neglected figure of Tito Vignoli; cf. Gombrich (1986), pp. 89-90 and 285-287.

¹⁴Warburg followed Usener's courses in Bonn in 1886-87. The topic of Warburg's relationship with the anthropological and anthropologico-historical thought of his time has been much discussed (by Gombrich, Kany, Sassi and many others), and it is not my aim here to enter into any discussion of the relationship of his own thinking with that of figures such as Wilhelm Wundt and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl or with anthropologizing and psychologizing art historians who attracted him such as August Schmarsow. Cf. now also Didi Hubermann 1999-2000 p. 232 and notes 68 and 69, as well as in several of Didi Hubermann's other studies of Warburg.

¹⁵On his study of the Laocoon with Reinhard Kekulé von Stradonitz (whose *Zur Deutung und Zeitbestimmung des Laokoon*, Berlin-Stuttgart, Spemann: 1883 Warburg owned), see Gombrich, pp. 37, 46, 57, as well as Didi-Hubermann (1999-2000), p. 225 and note 42.

¹⁶In the essay of 1895 entitled "I costumi teatrali per gli intermezzi del 1589 – I disegni di Bernardo Buontalenti e il libro di conti di Emilio de' Cavalieri", first published in Italian in *Atti dell'Accademia del R. Istituto Musicale di Firenze*, 1895. *Commemorazione della Riforma Melodrammatica*, pp. 133-146, and then with further notes in *Gesammelte Schriften* (1932), pp. 259-300 and 394-438 and of course in Warburg, *Renewal* (1999), pp. 349-401 and 495-546. On the obvious relevance of this essay for Warburg's interest in the snake dance, see especially Michaud, "Florence in New Mexico" (1998), who also cites in this connection a number of relevant passages from Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which I plan to discuss in another essay on the subject of the fascination of snakes, both

seemed to have two rather different implications, which he would struggle to reconcile. The poisonous reptile, as Warburg said later, represented “both the inner and outer demoniacal forces that humanity must overcome”.¹⁷ The Pueblos were people who still felt they could directly influence the forces of nature either by symbolic means (by dancing with the snakes symbolizing lightning, the bringer of rain) or directly (by clutching the snakes, the living embodiment of those demoniac forces, in their own hands). Man had to choose between the originary contact with direct natural causality on the one hand, and the need to keep a certain distance through symbolic means on the other. The renunciation of direct control in favor of distance, of emotion in favor of reason, was inevitable and tragic -- but necessary. Warburg’s schizophrenia was apparent early on. It appeared nowhere more clearly than in his eventual lecture on the Serpent ritual and in the self-deprecatory views he held about this same lecture.

The struggle Warburg tried to clarify in his lecture (or at least one of the struggles) was between the ever-present primitive aspects of civilized man and what had been lost through the renunciation of direct contact with nature. In his dissertation Warburg gave a compelling account of how he saw the relations between movement in dance forms, both ancient and modern, and the expression of inner emotion; and in Mooney he found a larger context for this view, and an inspiration for his interest in the Pueblos and Hopi: “The Indian messiah religion”, wrote Mooney, “is the inspiration of a dream. Its ritual is the dance, the ecstasy, and the trance. Its priests are hypnotics and cataleptics. All these have formed a part of every great religious development of which we have knowledge from the beginning of history”.¹⁸ In such a notion the young student of the expression of emotion through frenzied movement could find a

for Warburg and others.

¹⁷As Steinberg translated “ein sinnfälliger Maßstab für die Entwicklung von triebhaft-magischer Annäherung zur vergeistigenden Distanzierung, die das giftige Reptil als Symbol dessen bezeichnet, was der Mensch äusserlich und innerlich an dämonischen Naturkräften zu überwinden hat.” Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 57, translated by Steinberg, p. 53.

universal anthropological basis for his own struggle. As always in life, there were unwitting and unresolved connections between his own psychic problems and the subjects of his research.

In December and January 1895-6, Warburg travelled in Northern New Mexico, beginning with the spectacular ruins of Mesa Verde, which he visited with the slightly dubious figure of John Wetherill himself and then going down to Santa Fe and Albuquerque. He saw the Cochiti Dance on January 16,¹⁹ the Corn Dance at San Ildefonso on January 23,²⁰ and finally, after a trip to the West Coast, he returned in April to go to Zuni and to observe the Hemis Kachina Dance at Oraibi (figs. 1 & 2), which he visited between April 28 and May 1, 1896.

Tired, but deeply excited by what he had seen, Warburg returned to Germany. Using his own now over-publicized photographs,²¹ he gave what seem to have been three rather amateurish lectures about his trip (or so it would seem from the brief surviving reports on them). The first was to the Photographic Society of Hamburg, the second to the American Club in Hamburg, and the third to the Freie Photographische Vereinigung of Berlin between January and March of 1897.²² He also brought back with him some 120 objects -- vases and kachina headdresses in particular, as well as photographs and paintings -- which he soon presented to a grateful Museum in Hamburg (figs. 3 and 4).²³ At this stage, as Salvator Settis has pointed out, Warburg was chiefly interested in the history of symbolic and ornamental forms as represented by the artifacts of a surviving pagan religion, namely that of the pueblos.²⁴ For Warburg, Settis also noted, the ornamentation of the vessels and kachina headdresses represented a contemporary

¹⁸Mooney, p. 928

¹⁹[Cochiti] "I saw the dance. Main figure female, painted all over, naked men. The "Delight Makers by Bandelier". From Warburg's *Ricordi*, cited in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, 1998, p. 153.

²⁰Another date never noted in the literature, but recorded in Warburg's diary, as cited in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, p. 153.

²¹As well as those by others, as noted by Cestelli Guidi in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, pp. 33-44.

²²On these three lectures, see Steinberg, p. 95.

²³See *Jahrbuch der Hamburgischen Wissenschaftlichen Anstalten*, IX (1901), Museum für Völkerkunde, pp. CX-CXVII, and Naber, p. 92. In a further essay on Warburg's lecture and his notion of distance (cf. notes 14 above and 38 below), I discuss some of the further implications of Warburg's acquisition of these objects.

reprise of ancient Anasazi forms, in a way that was not so dissimilar to Botticelli's and Bertoldo's reuse of antique reliefs.

If only Warburg had worked more on this! One wishes that he had elaborated his views on these pictorial forms of the American *Nachleben* of its own antiquity. The extraordinary persistence of ancient motifs in both its art and architecture is one of the most striking aspects of Pueblo culture. Such a study would surely have turned his own ethnocentrism on its head. But nothing came of it. As if threatened by what he had seen – or rather between the perceived connection between surviving customs in America and his own demons -- Warburg set aside his interest in the topic. In 1907 he wrote to Mooney in English, expressing his regret that because of his research on the Renaissance, he no longer had the time to read the reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology. But he did acknowledge that without his study of the primitive culture of the Pueblo Indians, he would never have been in a position to find a broader basis for the psychology of the Renaissance. For this reason he began his letter with the words, “I always feel very much indebted to your Indians”.²⁵

“*Your* Indians”? It is a slight turn of phrase, but its patronizing tone is inescapable (even if one assumes that Warburg was thinking in German while writing in English). They were “your” Indians, presumably, because he could not cope with them and what they stood for at all - at least at that point in his life and for many years after. To all extents and purposes, then, the Indians disappeared from Warburg's work from now on until their reappearance in the lecture of 1923.

It was more or less at the same time as he wrote to Mooney that Warburg began working seriously on the subject that culminated in the famous essay, only published after he had begun

²⁴Settis, p. 145.

²⁵Warburg continues: “Without the study of their primitive (?) civilization I would never have been able to find a

his descent into madness, entitled *Pagan-ancient prophecy during the age of Luther*.²⁶ It dealt, as Warburg frequently put it, with the renaissance (or even more strongly, the *Wiederbelebung*)²⁷, of demoniac antiquity in the period of the German reformation.²⁸ In it, Warburg reached his comparatist peak, finding Hellas in the Harz – Greece in Germany – and in it he set out, in learned guise, his tortured view of the desire of classical civilization to return to its pagan roots. It is an essay about the war between the new rational cosmos of Dürer and Luther and the irrational cosmos of astrology and demoniac symbolism – or is it about the fear that all civilization in the end must yield to its tragic wild past, and to its direct relationship with nature? All the old themes return, even in Warburg’s analysis of a woodcut of a monk with a little devil on his shoulder, and a cowl that falls *schlangenartig*, like a snake, to the ground.²⁹ For Warburg, the demons were always embodied in the serpents, descending to the darkness of the netherworld. And yet, in them lay salvation too.

No wonder, then, that the Indian subject simmered just beneath the surface of Warburg’s researches. And then, all of a sudden, as he lived through his illness, and slowly crept out of it, the subject emerged once more with an ambivalent flourish.

In 1923, as a way of proving to his doctors in the Sanatorium at Kreuzlingen that he was of sound enough mind to be released, Warburg drew on his memory of his trip to the Southwest. He gave a lecture simply entitled, “Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-

larger basis for the Psychology of the Renaissance.” Meyer, p. 450.

²⁶“Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten”, submitted on 25 October 1919, and published in the *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1919, 26. Abhandlung, Heidelberg, 1920

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁸ In fact, Warburg saw it as a “provisional contribution”, as he put it in the second paragraph of this essay, as a contribution to a larger work on the Renaissance of Demoniac antiquity in the Renaissance” (*Ibid.*, p. 4).

²⁹ For the woodcut from the Mainz 1492 edition of Johannes Lichtenberger’s *Weissagungen*, a crucial text for Warburg, see not only *Ibid.* p. 40, but almost every other publication and commentary on the *Schlangenritual* (eg. Steinberg, p. 93).

Amerika”.³⁰ It was not entitled “A Lecture on the Serpent Ritual”, which was Saxl’s name for it when he had it translated for the Journal of the Warburg Institute in 1939 (of all years). He himself did not so explicitly bring the serpent into his title. At this stage Warburg was still seeking distance, as if to prove to his doctors (and maybe to himself) that the lecture was about the cool rational not the wild irrational. Hauntingly and repetitively he exploited the topic of how the Indians succeeded in their struggle to overcome the serpent-demons from the underworld. It was a way of showing his own mastery of and distance from his personal demons.

The richness with which Warburg developed his theory of distance, and then complicated it almost beyond reason, is confusing. When Warburg confirmed, partly through the drawings he had made for him by a father and son from Cochiti, that the snake was a symbol of lightning,³¹ he thought he had the rudiments of a theory; but it was a terribly divided theory. Warburg’s view was that the snake dance had a dual function, “as an act of primitive magic and as a quest for enlightenment”.³² In it, “the Indians actually clutch their serpents and treat them as living agents that generate lightning at the same time that they represent lightning. The Indian”, Warburg explained, “takes the serpent in his mouth to bring about an actual union of the serpent with the masked figure”.³³ This magical union, as Warburg repeatedly stressed, then produced rain. “The masked dance”, as he put it, was “danced causality”.³⁴ In the dance, the Indian could

³⁰ It is altogether typical of the extraordinary way in which this lecture has been abused in one form or another that even as devoted an editor as Raulff should have given his edition of Warburg’s “Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo Indianer in Nord-Amerika” (as in fact he himself reproduces the title on p. 7) the title of *Schlangenritual* (or have allowed it to be thusly titled, probably following Saxl’s own title for the Lecture on the Serpent Ritual and the shortened version thereof published in 1939). This is the way the lecture has generally – and misleadingly -- been referred to, though at least Steinberg’s translation returns to its correct title.

³¹The drawing has of course been very widely reproduced. See Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 17; Steinberg, p. 9; and so on. It was made for him at the Palace Hotel in Santa Fe by Cleo Jurino and his son (as is often noted), not by any member of a Hopi pueblo, far away, it should be emphasized, from the Hopi.

³²Gombrich (1986), p. 224.

³³Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 55

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 54.

thus actually control the cause of lightning -- embodied by the natural symbol of the snake -- and so manipulate the weather.

Here the theory such as it is, becomes still more complicated. Warburg was convinced that surviving primitive practices such as this could also tell one about man's originary state. Once upon a time, so Warburg thought, one could manipulate nature directly by means of the hand, an extension of one's own body. A neatly unitary view of early man! The borderline between ego and non-ego, between our body and the outside world, was not immediately given to primitive man. But man (as Warburg put it) inevitably began to use tools, and thereby transcended his own organic extension. And so, by wearing or using objects which his bloodstream could not reach he learned to manipulate nature more effectively. "The tragedy of costume and implement is ultimately the history of human tragedy", Warburg wrote, citing Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, strangely enough one of his favorite books.³⁵

At this point readers may have some difficulty in following the train of Warburg's thought. Gombrich attempted to reclaim what he regarded as the more rational aspect of Warburg's fraught argument about the relationship between primitive behaviour and modern civilization by maintaining that underlying his thinking was his sense of a polarity between superstitious cause projection and logical discursive thought. Evolutionarily speaking, according to Warburg, religious and artistic activities stood somewhere between these poles. As always, in both Warburg and his successor, mathematics and logic overcame superstition and a belief in the possibility of direct control of nature by magical means. Gombrich was consistent here, Warburg less so – but perhaps more realistic in his sense of the tensions at stake. For Warburg,

³⁵Gombrich (1986), p. 221. Didi-Huberman (1999) has rightly insisted on the relatively uncommented influence of the works of Edward B. Tylor on Warburg's view of the relevance of the study of primitive survivals in the non-Western world, but failed to remark (as his own illustrations make clear) on the importance of the Tylorian analysis of primitive toolmaking on this particular aspect of Warburg's thinking.

the Indians had “a crude magical desire to enter the realm of the serpent”.³⁶ Civilization and culture, it could be assumed, had progressed beyond such a stage.³⁷

But Warburg could not let matters lie there. He proceeded to draw a parallel between lightning and electricity. Electricity was lightning imprisoned in wire. Modern civilization could control nature even more directly than the Indians, without magic or symbolism. There was no longer even a shred of symbolism to mediate between man and nature -- and so chaos threatened to overwhelm the cosmos. According to Warburg, at the end of his lecture, “telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos”. The civilization of the machine age destroyed what science, emerging from myth, had painfully established, namely the remoteness needed for contemplation. Immediacy allowed for no contemplation, no logical, discursive, distanced thought. One can only imagine how much Warburg would have hated the computer – and the internet in particular.

This suggestive but flawed view of things oscillates between the appeal and attractiveness of empathy on the one hand, and the need for distance on the other, between the untragic state in which man was once in direct or magical contact with nature, and his modern mediated state, in which even mediation is curtailed. Such thinking is a clear symptom of Warburg’s bipolarity. No wonder Warburg concluded that “all mankind is eternally and at all times schizophrenic”.³⁸ “Wherever suffering and helpless humanity is found in a blind quest for salvation”, he wrote, “the snake will be close by, as an explanatory image of the cause”.³⁹

³⁶As translated slightly misleadingly by Steinberg p. 43 from “den drastisch-magischen Annäherungsversuchungen an die Schlange” (Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 48). This particular passage, along with several other more critical ones, is omitted in Mainland’s translation of the text edited by Saxl for publication in 1939.

³⁷ Despite the appearance of acts that were “identical” with the desire of the Indian to approach the snake in the rites of the Asclepian serpent cult of Cos -- a typical Warburgian flourish (Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 48)

³⁸As cited from Warburg’s notes in Gombrich (1986), p. 223.

³⁹Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, p. 291, coarsely translating “Wo ratloses Menschenleid nach Erlösung sucht, ist die Schlange als erklärende bildhafte Ursache in der Nähe zu Finden” (Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 55). Steinberg, p. 50, has a more precise translation. Saxl’s moves in his 1939 publication of the lecture -- his abbreviation, supplementation, and toleration of inadequate moments of translation -- remain surprising, especially given his

Warburg lamented the loss of mythical symbols as explanations for causes; and yet he believed that science and reason could provide a new sanctuary for devotion and contemplation.

“The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the outside world can be described as the founding act of human civilization”⁴⁰ he wrote in the last piece of writing he ever did, the introduction to the famous Picture-Atlas entitled *Mnemosyne*. Indeed, the lecture on the Pueblo snake ceremony stands at the real intellectual origins of Warburg’s great project on Memory – from which, however, he seems to have forgotten only one thing: his pictures of the Pueblo and Hopi Indians, none of which appear in the Atlas.

Warburg never wanted his lecture published, perhaps for the very reasons already hinted at here. He specifically instructed his chosen intellectual heir, Fritz Saxl, not to communicate it to anyone besides his wife, his brother Max, his doctor, and Ernst Cassirer.⁴¹ Yet Saxl went right ahead and published it. “I do not want even the slightest trace of blasphemous science-mongering to be found in this comparative search for the eternally unchanging Red Indian in the helpless human soul”, Warburg wrote.⁴² Justly modest words, I think, for so bold an attempt. With the typical candor of the depressed, Warburg concluded that what he had said in his lecture were “the confessions of an incurable schizoid, deposited in the archives of mental healers”.⁴³ Even more self-stringently, he described the piece as “formlos und philologisch schlecht

evident devotion to it.

⁴⁰“Bewusstes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Aussenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen”. Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. Martin Warnke with the assistance of Claudia Brink, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000, p. 3 – the first words of the last piece ever written by Warburg. I will deal in my next essay on this topic (cf. notes 14 and 22 above) with the relationship between the implications of the snake dance analysis and this last great projects of Warburg’s.

⁴¹In his letter of April 26 to Saxl, he could not have been more explicit about this: “Gezeigt werden darf dies gräulichen Zuckung eines enthaupteten Frosches nmur meiner lieben Frau, mit Aswahl Dr Embden und meinem Bruder Max und Professor Cassirer... Gedruck soll aber von diesem Zeug absolut nichts werden”, published by Raulff in Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 60. Cf. also Steinberg’s comments on this letter in his Prefatory note (p. vii).

⁴²Gombrich (1986), p. 226.

⁴³*Ibid.* p. 227.

fundiert”.⁴⁴ There is something to this, though one need not be anything like as disparaging about it as he himself was when he exasperatedly referred to it as his “Schlangenquatsch”.⁴⁵

Even so, Warburg felt that his piece might be of some use. “The images and words are intended as a help for those who come after me in their attempt to achieve clarity and thus to overcome the tragic tension between instinctive magic and discursive logic”.⁴⁶ This insight into the soul is precisely what makes this lecture moving, more, much more I think, than its ethnological insights or even usefulness.

Despite Warburg’s high hesitancy about what he read to his doctors and fellow patients, already in his Warburg-biography of 1970, Gombrich wrote that “more has been published on this episode in Warburg’s life than on any other aspect of his work”.⁴⁷ And since the second edition of Gombrich’s biography in 1986 the situation has only gotten worse. Warburg’s piece has become talismanic. It has become the *objet à* of all the romantic impulses of scholars who think that art history is best seen as anthropology. Yet most of the work on this piece is repetitive and uncritical. And the lacks and lapses -- of which Warburg himself was at least partly aware -- have scarcely been identified.

The lecture is undeniably poignant, beautifully and suggestively written, full of contradictions between Warburg’s beliefs in rationality and the need to be in touch with inner irrational self and the expression of agony and emotions. From its first publication on, it has been illustrated with the fascinating and often self-revealing pictures largely taken by Warburg

⁴⁴In the same letter in which he made the even more self-deprecatory remarks cited in note 39 above (published by Raulff in Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 60).

⁴⁵Steinberg, p. 97.

⁴⁶“Ene Hilfe ... bei dem Versuch der Selbstbestimmung zur Abwehr der Tragik der Gespanntheit zwischen triebhafter Magie und auseinersetzender Logik”, Gombrich (1986), pp. 226-227.

⁴⁷Gombrich, p. 90 (although by now – as the bibliography below will make clear – the publications in English have been outnumbered by those in German and probably in French too. Even so, Gombrich's essay remains what is probably the best piece on the subject of Warburg’s lecture, despite its characteristic prejudice in favor of what Gombrich regards as the rational).

himself of a civilization which he believed to be dying (though to some extent it was already dead, and to some extent no more dead now than it was then).

Anyone who has been to the Pueblo dances will know of the rather strict prohibition against taking photographs of most of these events, so Warburg's own photos, like all the early photos of the dances, remain of particular interest. In them he took something of the soul of the Indian dance, in a way that would now arouse irritation, and, I suspect, would then have too. It is worth noting this in any context that deals with the history and use of images. We should never forget what pictures, especially photographs, are capable not just of taking, but of stealing.⁴⁸

There can be no doubt of the control which Warburg displayed in returning to this vexed subject. But he does not seem to have realized that if he had reflected more on the subject of control he might have uncovered some critical parallels with precisely what was constitutive of his topic. He could not do this, not simply because he was troubled, but because he wanted to see something else – namely “the eternally unchanging Red Indian in the helpless human soul”⁴⁹ – scilicet his own soul. He remained blind to the intense and apparently obvious political dimensions of his topic, as well as to some of the basic elements of Pueblo art and architecture – which remain fundamentally different from, rather than similar to anything in the West.

So what more precisely was it that Warburg did not see? For him the crux was the snake. Warburg's studies of the Laocoon and images such the Brazen Serpent at Lüdingworth on the Elbe and the serpent-bearing Asclepius in a thirteenth-century Spanish manuscript in the Vatican had led him to set out a whole series of connections between snake struggles, emotion,

⁴⁸ On this topic, see now Lyon, Dilworth, and Faris, *inter alia*.

⁴⁹Gombrich (1986), p. 226

salvation, and healing.⁵⁰ In his work on the Florentine intermezzi, completed just before he left for America, the struggle between Apollo and Python had rekindled his interest in both the symbolism and the psychological implications of the snake. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* had still recently set out, in powerful terms, the fundamental aesthetic opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac; and from the dancing maenads that attend Dionysius, Warburg was led to compare the Kachina dances with the choruses in Greek tragedy. If only he had stayed with the old Winckelmannian paradigm of the ideal, of serenity, of perfect internality, of tranquil grandeur. Then he might have understood more of what he was looking at; but he was determined to see something else. The serpent stood for too much.

According to Gombrich,

Warburg used to tell that it was the reading of Lessing's *Laocoon* with his teacher Oscar Ohlendorff that gave direction to his thoughts... The whole problem of emotional excess, of what the ancients call *parenthyrsus*, plays a central part in Lessing's doctrine. Such extreme pathos could never be legitimate in the visual arts, precisely because the visual sign is static and can only hint at movement. In abandoning this restraint, painting and sculpture transgress their proper domain, which is that of visual beauty.... Warburg remained deeply preoccupied by the problem of pathos, of violent movement and gesture, but he never ceased to regard these extremes in art as a sign of weakness rather than strength as a token of moral decline.⁵¹

There is more than a little of Gombrich's own prejudices here, but the just assessment of Warburg's own inclination in favor of the static and against violent movement and gesture, of how most adequately to reflect pathos, raises an important question: How is it that Warburg failed to notice precisely these aspects of Pueblo art, and of the dance in particular?

On the face of it Warburg seems to show a remarkable understanding of native American culture, but as one reads his lecture now, it is hard to understand how he could have had so little

⁵⁰On the Luudingworth Brazen Serpent (as well as other illustrations of this theme), See Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, pp.50-53. For the Vatican page (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. Lat. 1283, fol. 7), see for example Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, fig. 24, p. 49. For the other image often used to illustrate this point (Leiden, Cod. Voss. Q79, fol. 10b), see Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, pl. 47d, as well as in many of the later editions and commentaries (eg. Steinberg, fig. 26, p. 43).

⁵¹Gombrich (1986), p. 23.

to say about either about the context of the dances he saw, or about Pueblo and Anasazi architecture, which not only provides essential architectural framework for the dances but also perfectly embodies the characteristics of staticity, control, distance and at the same time a connection with earth that is transcendently non-transcendent.

Despite the seductive parallels between the Snake Dance on the one hand and Laocoon and Asclepius with their snakes wrapping themselves round the bodies of the central figures on the other, there really is no parallel. When Warburg saw a snake, he saw excess; or rather figures with snakes posed the problem of excessive motion and emotion, as in the dancing maenads of antiquity. But Kachina is not Laocoon. There is no agony, no struggle in any of the dances of the Pueblo tribes, -- including the snake dance of the Hopi, which Warburg did not actually see, and the Hemis Kachina which he did. Warburg shared the all-too common need which Westerners seem to have to see the primitive not just as pagan, but as wild. But the dances are calm, rational and controlled. Like the architecture of the Pueblos and their ancestors the Anasazi, they bear an unparalleled unity with the earth itself. This is the whole lesson of Pueblo myth and Pueblo art. There is no such organicity in the West, ever, anywhere.

Warburg's epigraph "Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern" is thus misleading, if not empty. If he had stayed with Winckelmann, if he had concentrated on the serene and more static elements of the ancient classical, for example, it might have yielded some grains of truth. In the dances there is stillness. There is no betrayal of inner emotion. The Pueblo dances -- including the Snake Dance -- are the soul of deliberateness, of self-control, of contact with the earth. The dancers seemed inescapably rooted to it. Warburg himself comments on the Hemis Kachina dance at Oraibi as "reverential, calm and unperturbed [by the activities of the "chorus" of clowns]";

earlier he described the dancers as “unwearied grave and ceremonious”.⁵² But he forgot this. Even in the Snake Dance, there is little writhing, as in the Laocoon, or as in the Lüdingworth and other Brazen Serpents, or as in several of the other images which Warburg illustrated in his lecture, precisely because of the stability, both mental and realized, of contact with the ground, with the beneficent, not the maleficent, underworld. There is no issue here, as in Warburg’s writing, of the terror of the snake that forms a link with the underworld of European myth. On the contrary.

When the snakes are first collected at Walpi, and Oraibi, they are taken back down into the earth, into the kivas, there to remain for three days with the men who are not and will not be their opponents, but their calm handlers. In this mutual proximity man and snake become familiar with each other, and join in a spiritual union. Together they become one with the earth. There is no struggle. Here, within the earth, the demons of the earth become one with those who will dance with them. But “dance” may even be the wrong word here. It will not be one that is filled with excessive movement or frenzy. There will not be the slightest parallel with the dancing and snake-bearing maenads of antiquity.

All this would not have fitted with Warburg’s views that somehow the dance of these primitive peoples could tell one about the primitive mind of man, that the struggle with the snake was a kind of testament to the quest of “suffering and helpless humanity for salvation”, that fierce outer movement testified to titanic inner emotion. The Pueblo dances seem to reach into the viscera of the earth. They last from midmorning till sunset; and the complex but regular syncopations of the drumbeats, punctuated by calculated ululation, is serious and deep,

⁵²Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, p. 285. For the original words – “unermüdlichen ernsthaften Feierlichkeit” – see Warburg *Schlangenritual*, p. 37. For those describing how, despite the interventions of the clowns, the dancers remain “ruhig und in ungestörter Andacht seine Tanzbewegungen weiter vollführte” see *ibid.*, p. 40.

as if to echo the metaphorical depths of what is at stake. In May 1877, at the beginning of the sad war of the Nez Perce, Toohulhulsote, the principal Dreamer priest of Chief Joseph's band asserted that "the earth is part of my body, and I never gave up the earth. So long as the earth keeps me I want to be left alone".⁵³ Warburg, like so many other whites, like General Howard, the destroyer of Chief Joseph and his band, could not grant that.

As is well known, Warburg believed that the fluttering drapes of ancient dance figures provided the model for Renaissance artists, like Botticelli, who wished to show the outward forms of internal emotion. He found the proof for this not only in works of art, but also in a series of texts, both ancient and modern. For example (one amongst many), in his Botticelli dissertation, Warburg cited a passage in Alberti's *Della Pittura* in which Alberti described how "hair should twist as if trying to break loose from its ties and ripple in the air like flames, some of it weaving in and out like vipers in a nest, some swelling here, some there..."⁵⁴ Here Warburg could find the basis for his parallel between Laocoon and the Snake Dance. It was in the same passage that Alberti conveniently went on to recommend that the painter use "a graceful touch for the body beneath the garments, on the side struck by the wind, to reveal its nude form; on the other side the garments will fly in the air, blown by the gentle wind".⁵⁵ Both of these features – the revelation of the nude body beneath or through the garments, and the garments blown by the wind -- Warburg found in Botticelli, as well as in a slew of texts, especially from Ovid.⁵⁶ Such images and texts obviously had great appeal to the prurient young man who emerges from the

⁵³Mooney, p. 713.

⁵⁴Warburg, citing the Italian text of the *Della Pittura*, comments that "At such moments he sees snakes tangling, flames licking or the branches of a tree" Warburg, *Renewal*, p. 96, though in fact the Latin text of the *De Pictura* (II.45) makes no mention of snakes at all (the Italian text has "quasi come serpe si tessano fra li altri", for the Latin "modoque sub aliis crinibus serpant, modo sese in has atque has partes attollant").

⁵⁵Warburg, *Renewal*, p. 96, citing the *Della Pittura*, II.45

⁵⁶For all these passages in Ovid, almost all from the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*, see Warburg, *Renewal*, pp. 98-99.

travel notes to America and some of the photographs he took there (figs. 5 and 6)⁵⁷, but could he not see how little any of this applied to the very dances he was seeing as the primitive embodiment of Western ideas? Pathos at Oraibi did not consist in movements of the hair, or folds of garments, such as those described by Alberti or painted by Botticelli. There was no frenzied, viper-like movement in these dances, and no breezes rippling through sheer or wet garments. Nothing could be further in mood from the Snake Dance, or from anything else, for that matter in the Pueblo art forms.

But can the soul be revealed through non-frenzied movement, whether of body, hair, or ornament? Of course it can. There can be emotion without motion. But to understand how this might be so in Pueblo art forms, one must first renounce ones prejudices and ones need to see the origins of Western phenomena illustrated in non-Western “primitive” culture. It is hard to divide the idea of *Bewegung* into two separate concepts, rather than just one!⁵⁸ Three of the four theses at the end of Warburg’s dissertation are about the relations between motion and dynamic states,⁵⁹ and it is with them in mind that he went prepared to see the Indian.

When Warburg went to Mesa Verde, he described it in a letter to his family as the “American Pompei.”⁶⁰ It was as if he could not see the ruins without the crutch of his own culture; but perhaps one should not make too much of a family letter. The willed comparatism

⁵⁷ Cf. his remarks in his *Ricordi* for this journey, as published in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, pp. 150-151, as well as my further remarks on his attitudes towards Protestant, Jewish and Indian women below.

⁵⁸The same problem, of course, has long plagued the interpretation of Rembrandt’s famous – and much discussed – phrase, “die meeste ende die naetureelste beweeghegheijjt”, which he applied to his own paintings of the *Entombment* and *Resurrection* for Prince Frederick Henry in a much quoted letter to Constantijn Huygens of January 12, 1639. As so often, the problem is formulated in Alberti’s *De Pictura* (II.44), where he says that *Denique pro dignitate cuique sui motus corporis ad eos quos velis exprimere motus animi referantur. Tum denique maximarum animi perturbationum maximae in membris significationes adsint necesse est, atque haec de motibus ratio in omni animante admodum comunis est*⁷. One is tempted to ask: and in snakes too, to say nothing of their dancing handlers?

⁵⁹Warburg, *Renewal*, p. 144.

⁶⁰Letter of December 14, 1895 from Santa Fe to Hamburg, cited in Naber p. 96, note 21. Since Mesa Verde is actually in Colorado, Claudia Naber’s title “Pompei in New Mexico” is not entirely right; but this is a mere

that never renounces its origins may be even be discerned in one of the scarce footnotes which Warburg provided to his lecture. When he recalled his finding that the female figures at the head of each line of dancers in the Antelope Dance at San Ildefonso were referred to as the “mother of all animals”, he could not resist putting in a spurious reference to the equivalent Greek phrase, *πορνία θερών*, sending his reader off to consult Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Fair enough; but it’s as if Warburg were unable to see the dance except through the eyes of a *Gelehrter* from Hamburg. Perhaps *we* would not do much better either, but how much more sage and tactful do Vincent Scully’s words seem in his incomparable book on Pueblo architecture: “the dance was so accurately described long ago, and has been so picked over since, that I have no heart to describe it in detail”.⁶¹

A large part of the problem arose from the fact that Warburg could not shake off his obsession with Athens and Alexandria. “Athens must always be reconquered again by Alexandria” he wrote, in a much-discussed passage.⁶² By this Warburg clearly meant that classical culture always contains within it the seeds of its wilder roots, straining to undo, as it were, its essential composure. Thus he sought to justify the presence of the irrational in the rational, the ever-present pull of paganism within civilized culture, the threat of disturbance within himself, the tragic loss of contact with nature that his own learning entailed.⁶³ It is in this context, too, that we must also understand his reformulation, at first sight so moving, of the motto from Faust 2 into “Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern; Athen-Oraibi alles Vettern”.

peccadillo besides the lack of irony in her title.

⁶¹Scully, p. 339

⁶²“Athen will immer wider neu aus Alexandria zuruckerübert sein”, at the end of “Heidnisch-antike Weissagung” (as cited in note 24 above), p. 70; discussed by Gombrich (1986), p 214 and more fully by Steinberg, pp. 69-70

⁶³Similar aims and fears underlie other efforts of the time, like Joseph Strzygowski’s romantic and fascist obsession with the triumph of the Orient over Rome -- really a version, as he himself sets out, of the talismanic opposition between Alexandria and Rome (Josef Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Spätantiken und Frühchristlichen Kunst*. Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1901).

But perhaps the Indian wasn't so primitive after all. The Pueblo dance reaches a level of sophistication – way beyond wildness and sacrifice – that Warburg could not grasp. It is all about control and direct contact with the earth – something Warburg could not really imagine. His own sickness might have been healed if he had been more willing to renounce Laocoon in favor of Kachina, to renounce Botticelli for Nampeyo, the woman from Hano who transformed the ancient symbols of her people on the pots she made (eg. fig. 7).⁶⁴ Sometimes it seems that as far as he got was to perch a Kachina mask, insultingly, on top of his head, in one of the most embarrassing of all the photographs he brought back with him (fig. 8). If he had pulled the mask over his head, as he should have done, and as was required by the dance, he would have seen through different eyes (cf. fig. 9).⁶⁵

When James Mooney wrote about the spread of the Ghost Dance religion, he justly posed the question of the extent to which the Ghost Dance, like other Indian Dances, might have been a form of religious response to social stress. Of course, the snake dance, like the other Pueblo dances, was a regular seasonal event, but it is hard not to wonder whether Warburg might not have understood a little more of what he saw (or of the snake dance he did not see) if he had been even remotely responsive to at least one area of social stress amongst the Hopi at the very time he visited Oraibi. I am not referring to some hidden area of tension, but rather to one that was splitting the community apart and that would have been obvious to even the most inattentive of observers.

At exactly the time of Warburg's visit, a wrenching and recurrent drama was being

⁶⁴Settis, pp. 147-8 also comments on the importance of Nampeyo's work, and justly cites Jesse Walter Fewkes, *Designs on Prehistoric Hopi Pottery*, New York, 1973, pp. 36 and 177, as well as Ruth Bunzel, *The Pueblo Potter. A Study of Creative Imagination in Primitive Art*, New York, 1929, pp. 55-56, 88.

⁶⁵ He might have seen the dance through the much more appropriate eyes of the mask, not through his own, not by reducing the kachina to a piece of decoration (which in any case looks patently absurd here).

played out between the Hostile and the Friendly factions within the community at Oraibi. This was the struggle between the conservative forces attempting to preserve the old ways of the Hopi, fiercely resisting the inroads of white culture, and the forces friendly to Washington, modernization and secularization.⁶⁶ In fact, ever since the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 – itself provoked by long-standing Spanish mistreatment of the Pueblo peoples -- “the general stance of Oraibi to Euro-Americans had been almost without exception one of hostility and obdurate rejection of their attempts to impose religious and political dominion”.⁶⁷ In his romanticization of what he saw, he made no mention of any of this at all, nor, indeed, of the ways in which the old antagonisms between the so-called Friendlies and the Hostiles were beginning to flare up with unprecedented intensity. The Hostiles were determined to resist the efforts of Christian missionaries and the military inspectors to acculturate them and to make them reject precisely the heathen ways that Warburg purported to be so interested in.

Let us look more closely at the situation at the time. When Cushing first visited Oraibi in 1882, the railway west of Gallup had just been opened up. Tensions between Hostiles and Friendlies were already apparent. The Hopi leader Loololma had just visited Washington for the first time, and he favored a conciliatory stance towards the government, which was trying to force the Hopi to settle down on surveyed parcels of land. But the locals were less than happy. They refused to send their children to the school at Keam’s Canyon, where just a few years later Warburg would interview the schoolchildren about the equation between snakes and lightning.⁶⁸

⁶⁶The contemporary literature is full of this; Warburg had only to look at the vivid summary of the tensions within the Oraibi community in particular in Donaldson’s vivid and well-documented study of 1893; for a modern summary, see especially Whiteley, with a good selection of the earlier literature on this fraught topic.

⁶⁷Whiteley, p. 5

⁶⁸You could control the lightning by manipulating its symbol; and so he had a perfect illustration of a vague but much applauded claim that appears in a just published manuscript of 1927, namely that “the work of art is the instrument of a magico-primitive culture”. *Il Sole-24 Ore*, March 11, 2001, pp. II-III. For the drawings which Warburg elicited from the children, see Gombrich (1986), pp. 91-92 and pl. Xa (often reproduced; cf. Steinberg, fig. 29 and Cestelli Guidi and Mann, fig. 45).

It was there that he extracted further drawings confirming this equation by telling them the old German story of *Hans-Guck-in-die-Luft*. When the Hopi continued to refuse to support the school, and the efforts of Loololma failed, and the first allotment surveyors arrived in 1891, the Hostiles grew even more concerned about the possibility of losing both their culture and their land.⁶⁹ Fewkes noted that “the chiefs were very much disturbed and resented the white people looking over the land.... Desiring to know the meaning of this, it was explained to them that the white man was preparing to grant each family a plot of land which would be registered in Washington and be protected as the property of their children forever”.⁷⁰ The catch was that the Hopi would be made to move away from the mesa-top villages and build houses on individual allotments in the valleys. No wonder they resisted. In June 1891 the Hostiles pulled out the surveyors’ stakes around Third Mesa, and stepped up their opposition to the Keams Canyon School. Soon troops were called in to arrest the Hostile leaders.⁷¹

When we entered the village we were confronted by about 50 Hostiles armed and stationed behind a barricade. They openly declared hostility to the government.... A strong force should sent here with Hotchkiss guns, as I anticipate serious trouble if the hostiles are not summarily dealt with,

wrote Lieutenant Brett.⁷² The Hostile leaders were arrested and imprisoned in Fort Wingate.

In the course of the following year, 1892, the superintendent of Indian schools reported that

The Oriba village has always been the farthest removed from the whites and the most conservative. About one-half the village is reported as hostile to education to white men’s ways and to the US government.... They are all heathens of the worst type, and exceedingly selfish with one another, as well as with outside persons.... Like many white people, the main aim of the better class, in relation to Government, is to make all they can out of it. The more advanced are tenacious for their old customs.⁷³

Despite the fact that these tensions were being played out before his very eyes, and were plain

⁶⁹As frequently noted in the contemporary accounts of visits to the Mesas; cf. Whiteley, pp. 77-78, with citations from both Fewkes and Donaldson.

⁷⁰Fewkes (1922), pp. 273-274.

⁷¹Whiteley, p. 78.

⁷²Donaldson, p. 37.

for all to see, Warburg does not even hint at them.

In August 1893 the Mennonite missionary, Rev. H.R. Voth arrived on the scene. It was he who would be Warburg's chief host and informant at the time of his visit to Oraibi. Voth was a complicated figure, who swiftly learnt the Hopi language, and tried to be sympathetic to native customs, but was prevented by his own cultural and religious preferences.⁷⁴ "What a pantheon, what a religious system, what rich language, what traditions, what organization! And yet how utterly little to satisfy the longings of the soul, to give peace to the heart for this life, and a hope for eternity...." he wrote with chilling ambiguity.⁷⁵ Voth worked diligently but with some scepticism and without any awareness of how invasive he must have sometimes seemed to his hosts (for that, in the end, is what they were):

I knew that much we could need in our religious work was hidden in songs, prayers, speeches and symbolism of their secret religious performances. And in order to get it genuine I would have to get it where it was in the religious ceremonies in their underground chambers (kivas). What little I could pump out of the priests was, I soon found, misleading, distorted and unreliable. The priests were not very anxious to furnish me anything that I wanted to use to undermine their religion.⁷⁶

No wonder the reputation of Voth amongst the Hopi is not very high,⁷⁷ but his awareness both of the hesitancy and reluctance of his informants as well as of his own motives, reveals a self-awareness greater than Warburg's.

Voth wrote a number of useful monographs on the Hopi,⁷⁸ but did so at the cost of describing some of the most jealously guarded secrets of their rituals, notably the Powamu and

⁷³As cited by Whiteley, p. 83.

⁷⁴For a selection of Voth's works, see the bibliography below; for an evaluation of his complex personality and status see Eggan.

⁷⁵And then came a kind of grudging – though revealing – admission: "Stacks of straw and chaff with here and there a grain of truth as is the case in all religious systems", as cited in Harry Clebourne James's extracts from Voth's letters to the Mennonite General Conference, James, pp. 153-154.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁷⁷For a sampling of characteristic negative views, see the several references in Don Talayesva's *Sun Chief*, eg. pp. 6, 41, 252, et passim.

⁷⁸See the bibliography below for a representative selection.

Soyal ceremonies.⁷⁹ Some of the replicas he made of ritual altars for public exhibition were so accurate that more than once efforts were made to claim them as originals.⁸⁰ He was able to make some friends amongst the Hostiles and even served as an intermediary between them and the more tactless Government agents. On the other hand, the church Voth so provocatively built on the mesa top was burned out in 1901-2 and never rebuilt.

It was in the fall of 1894 that matters between the Hostiles and Friendlies came to a head over some land near Moencopi. The Hostile representative made it clear to Captain Williams, acting Indian agent for the Navajo and Hopi, that

they do not want to follow the Washington path; they do not want their children to go to school; they do not want to wear white man's clothes; they do not want to eat white man's food; they do not want the white man to let them alone, and allow them to follow the Oraibi path; and they totally condemn the Friendlies for departing from the Oraibi path.⁸¹

With the Hostiles now threatening to drive the Friendlies into Mexico, Captain Williams took two troops of cavalry to Oraibi in order to bring the Hostiles to their senses. He arrested nineteen of them, and shipped them all off to Alcatraz.⁸²

Aby Warburg arrived at the Hopi mesas less than a year later; and yet there is not a word about any of these tensions either in his notes or his lecture, or in any of the voluminous literature that has sprung up about it. But they lie at the core of the matters he was supposedly investigating and commenting upon.

Warburg was not, of course, the only one to be interested in Hopi customs, particularly the snake dance. This had long aroused the interest of both ethnographers and tourists. There is abundant evidence of the influx of just such visitors in these years.⁸³ Often they took the side of

⁷⁹ Voth (1901, No. 1, and 1901, No. 2); for a typical dismayed reaction (and in this case for good reason), see Talayesva, p. 344.

⁸⁰ See Eggan, p. 6.

⁸¹ As cited in Whiteley, p. 86.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88

⁸³ Whiteley, p. 93; Dilworth, especially pp. 21-71

the Hostiles, as Warburg probably would have too, if he had been aware of what was going on -- but was he? How could he not have detected the attitude, for example, of the new superintendent of the Keam's Canyon school, Charles E. Burton, who at one point he expressed the wish that all government employees be forbidden to attend these dances, except such as may be detailed to prevent evil practices....the schools are interfered with, the time and energy of the Indians wasted, immorality encouraged, old superstitions and customs kept alive.⁸⁴

Warburg was better than this, of course; but why is there so little reflection in his words and notes of what actually lay beneath the sad romanticism of his lecture, rich and complex as it is?⁸⁵

In his eagerness to see only what he needed to see (an understandable flaw, since we inevitably share it too), Warburg does not seem to have registered one critical point made in the very first paragraph of Mooney's great book. Here Mooney used one of the most plangent phrases in our culture, which Warburg himself must surely have reflected upon, and which would later become so resonant in the work of one of his most famous pupils, Erwin Panofsky. Knowing just where his story was to go and where it all would end, Mooney reminded his readers that though the wise men tell us the world is growing happier, "deep in our hearts, we know that they are wrong. For were not we, too, born in Arcadia?"⁸⁶

This, of course, is one of the most profoundly connotative phrases we have about the

⁸⁴*Ibid.* pp. 92-93. Accused of interfering with the Hopi Ceremonies, Burton then responded in a way that showed his true colors. "I have not tried to break up their religious ceremonies including their snake dances (shades of Warburg's own reference to "your Indians" in his 1907 letter to Mooney, as noted above-- as always, the use of the possessive pronoun is revealing) I have not given the dances my approval and stood for hours in open-mouthed ecstasy at revolting and immoral and heathenish exposure of human forms"

⁸⁵For the tragic outcome of the tensions between Hostiles and Friendlies, between the Government inspectors and the Hopi, one need only consult Whiteley's carefully documented book. It draws on many of the sources which Warburg himself had available at the very time he was an apparently unconscious witness to that split.

⁸⁶Mooney, p. 657 ; see too, of course, the famous essay by Panofsky, first published as "Et in Arcadia ego: On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau" in: *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and H.J. Patton. New York, Harper and Row, 1936, and revised as "Et in Arcadia Ego. Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition", in: *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, 1955, pp. 340-367

relations between memory and forgetfulness. Mooney knew it all too well, as he continued with his inevitable reflection on how all we are left with as we face the awareness of death is the dream of an old-time happiness left far behind. Strangely for so sensitive a soul, Warburg did not grasp this at all; he could not, because he himself so early and so swiftly denied his own originary Arcadia, in order to romanticize Arcady in Thebes.

In his edition of Warburg's lecture, Michael Steinberg drew a visual parallel between one of the Rev. Voth's photos of the Hostiles and an identification photograph of Jews in Lodz a few years later from Warburg's own collection.⁸⁷ The parallel (from which Steinberg extracts some observations about Warburg's sense of the primitiveness of his own race) is not really convincing; but one still wants to know what exact purpose the 20 or so photographs of Jews served in Warburg's files.

In their edition of Warburg's photos, Benedetta Cestelli Guidi and Nicholas Mann cite some hitherto unknown material, including the passages in Warburg's diary about his trip to America. Dorothea McEwan notes that in comparison with his later diaries, these passages offer "remarkably few emotional or confessional insights, such as we might have expected from a young man who was constantly introduced to young women and who was susceptible to what he saw, often remarking "pretty face", "lively and self-assured".⁸⁸ But it is not quite as simple as that. We think twice about Warburg's entry in his diary for a Thanksgiving Day party he attended in Colorado Springs in 1895, a few days before he went to Mesa Verde. He likes Dr Bill's pretty daughter and "ladylike" English wife; he comments on three other "pretty girls", to which he adds a self-reproachful emphasis "Aby!"; and then continues: "I only notice here that I

⁸⁷Reproduced in Steinberg, figs.35-36, and discussed on pp. 82-87. For criticism of Steinberg's views on Warburg's sense (or lack thereof) of his Jewish identity (and therefore of the implications of the alleged parallels between the photographs of Jews in Lodz and the Hopi prisoners shipped off to Alcatraz see Raulff in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, pp. 67-68.

⁸⁸Dorothea McEwan in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, p. 150.

do not like Jews. The type is a mystery to me and is here without background and overtones”.⁸⁹

When, on the other hand, he sees two Navajo Indians for the first time a few days later, he comments: “A beautiful chap. Strong features with vivid emotions”.⁹⁰

Perhaps the obvious has to be stated. What has never been adequately pointed out is the extent to which Warburg’s obsession with the Pueblos arose out of a deep repression -- a well-known repression, it is true, but never really examined for its implications for Warburg’s research. Everyone knows of Warburg’s refusal to attend the funeral of his own father -- the time he really should have been reflecting on Arcadia -- on the grounds that he was too embarrassed to take part in the primitive benediction of Kaddish for the departed soul.⁹¹ It would be too obvious to say that Warburg’s rejection of his Jewish faith was tied to his obsession with the remnants of paganism in Christian culture; but I think this rejection is more critically relevant when it comes to his views of the Pueblo.⁹²

Gombrich, who himself had a complicated relationship with his lost Jewishness, cites what I believe to be a critical passage in Warburg’s notes:

A single visit to the bedside of my poor and distracted-looking mother, the company of an inferior Jewish Austrian student who had to function as my tutor, made for an atmosphere of inner despair which came to a climax when my grandfather arrived and said: “Pray for your mother”, whereupon we sat down on suitcases with Hebrew prayer-books and rattled out

⁸⁹Cestelli Guidi and Mann p. 150, entry for Nov. 28, 1895.

⁹⁰Cestelli Guidi and Mann, p. 151, entry for December 3, 1895. See also photographs such as those of the Hopi women illustrated in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, p. 129, as well a number of the Navaho photographs and the slightly repellent photograph showing a US Army Officer and his and Warburg’s guide fingering a Navaho woman’s hair (*ibid.*, p. 96, taken on the same occasion as the officer took the picture of Warburg reproduced here as fig. 6).

⁹¹For the letter he wrote to his brother justifying his unwillingness to participate in his father’s funeral, or in the saying of the Kaddish, see Meyer, pp. 450-451 (where one may also find a relevant extract from his diary for February 25, 1910, on the subject of the Memorial service for his father).

⁹²The problem of these relations has been massively avoided in the vast literature on Warburg. It is not that the problem of Warburg’s sense of and resistance to his own Jewishness has not been discussed (especially when it comes to the Renaissance: see, for example, the sensible but trenchant words by Anne-Marie Meyer “Exactly what was the relation between Warburg’s research on paganism in the Renaissance and his meditations and fears about Judaism (and Jews) remains of course the problem” (Meyer, p. 452). Amongst the many works attempting to set out the issues, see Christa Maria Lerm, “Das jüdische Erbe bei Aby Warburg”, *Menora, Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte*, 1994, pp. 143-171, and the words by Raulff attacking Steinberg in Cestelli Guidi and Mann, p. 67. But not even Steinberg saw the directness of the link between Warburg’s rejection of his Jewishness and his clear misunderstandings of Pueblo culture.

something. Two things served as counterpoise to these deeply disturbing events: a grocery shop downstairs, where for the first time, we could contravene the dietary laws and eat sausages, and a lending library which was full of stories about Red Indians. I devoured these books in masses, for they obviously offered a means of withdrawing from a depressing reality in which I was quite helpless...the emotion of pain found an outlet in fantasies of romantic cruelty. This was my inoculation against active cruelty⁹³

Rejection of his own Judaism – note the childish glee in eating sausages – went hand in hand with the fantasy of his engagement with the culture of the Red Indians. He saw his own heritage as depressing, shameful, even cruel; and he looked to the Indians as a means of withdrawing from it, of going downstairs. He escaped from the binding restrictions of his own culture to the romance of the Indians. But perhaps if he had attended more to the reality of those bonds, instead of projecting his struggle onto the Laocoon, he would have been better prepared to understand the still more depressing reality of what was happening at Oraibi. Instead, he concentrated on the dance and his strange idea of it, thereby perfectly exemplifying what he perfectly understood, namely that “the emotion of pain found an outlet in fantasies of romantic cruelty...this was my inoculation against active cruelty”. He rejected his Jewish past in order to romanticize the Indian; but this in turn, as he was himself aware, was just a fantasy too.

Modern admirers of his lecture on the Serpent Ritual seem to have been altogether incapable of recognizing this.

On the face of it then, Warburg had a deep understanding of Native American culture -- but only on the face of it. In his eagerness to see only what he wanted to see, he actually understood very little of Hopi culture. If one listens to local informants, for example, on the snake dance, there is not much talk of the snake as symbol of lightning – and this in a people who are not unsophisticated in matters of symbolism. I do not wish simply to claim that for all its sensitivities and apparent admiration of Pueblo culture Warburg’s lecture presents just one

⁹³Gombrich (1986), p. 20.

further aspect of the old and still fundamental anthropological problem of how an outsider can ever see in. After all, one has only to visit the Museum of the American Indian, one of the saddest places in all of Manhattan, to understand the difficulty of ignoring the view from outside, and of neglecting the arrangements of the past in relation to the present.

There was much that Warburg did not see that was critical to the dance, and much that was fundamental to its setting. Indeed, in his excitement in describing what he wanted to see, he failed to perceive some of the truly great aspects of Pueblo art. In wanting to associate snakes with magic, frenzy and sacrifice, and oppose them to calm rationality, and mathematical logic – even though he recognized what man had lost thereby – he shortchanged the dance. Forgetting his own heritage, he wanted the parallel between Kachina and Laocoon, between ancient paganism, and the contemporary paganism of the Indians. But in looking for parallels, he could not see what was distinctive about the culture he visited, what was genuinely remarkable, and what was of an entirely different order from anything in the ancient or modern Western world. Ironically enough it might have been just this that could have soothed his soul and its desire for relief in order.

Briefly: In Pueblo architecture, Warburg could have found the survival of the truly classical. Here, if anywhere, he might have interrogated the implications of the survival of forms that have lasted over a thousand years. Much Anasazi architecture dates from around the twelfth century, and against contemporary Pueblo architecture he could have plotted the immensely subtle variations on this ancient theme. The subject remains shamefully neglected, and Warburg himself had very little to say about it. Yet Pueblo architecture exemplifies some of those very qualities which he regarded as redemptive, as the antithesis of the demonic – namely control, deliberateness, rational logic, and an unimaginably direct and intimate connection with the earth. These are villages -- constructions -- that show no signs of motion, on the contrary. They are

profoundly *sesshaft*, to use Warburg's own word.⁹⁴ There is nothing in the West to compare with the way in which these buildings seem to grow out the earth, with the way in which the wild and dry earth itself generates and brings forth the structured essence of rationality. What one has to acknowledge -- as readers of Warburg have not -- is that he could not have imagined the possibility of something quite so redemptive in a primitive culture, or in what he regarded as primitive. We do well, now, to avoid that word, whatever it may mean, in speaking about architecture like this.

At the start – to return to his lecture – it looks as if Warburg would indeed have something to say about the architecture. “In the first place”, he wrote, “I shall deal with the rational (that is, architectonic) element in the culture of the Pueblos: the structure of their houses with some examples of their applied art”.⁹⁵ But Warburg barely deals with this at all. He immediately moves on the problem of symbolic ornament. Later, it is true, he returns to the architecture, in a comment that is as fantastic as it is superficial and perfunctory:

The native village consists of two-storeyed houses entered from above by means of a ladder, there being no door below. This type of house was probably intended in the first place as a means of defence against attack; the Pueblo Indians have thus produced a cross between a dwelling-place and a fortress... the houses are built in tiers, a second or even a third dwelling of rectangular shape resting upon the first⁹⁶.

Instead of commenting on the implications of the geometry, he invents an architectural aetiology that is pure invention.

A few pages later Warburg has another idea about the architecture of the Pueblos. More or less forgetting his functional claims for the architecture, he now cannot resist its symbolic elements. He writes of one of his illustrations:

In the photograph an Indian is standing in the doorway... A denticulate ornamentation is visible, which represents a staircase – not a rectangular stone stairway, but a much more primitive form, cut out of a tree – a form still to be found in use among the Pueblos. I later found one in the

⁹⁴Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 10

⁹⁵Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, p. 277; not in the original text, so perhaps added by Saxl.

⁹⁶Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, p. 279; original text in Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 13.

plain leaning on to a little granary. Steps and ladders are an ancient and universal device for representing the growth, the upward and downward motion of nature. They are the symbol of achievement in the rise and descent through space, just as the circle, the coiled serpent, is the symbol for the rhythm of time...”⁹⁷

At last Warburg has something more serious to say about the architecture; but it is largely symbolic analysis (of an awkwardly proto-Jungian kind). He no analysis to offer about what is plainly most distinctive about the architecture and arguably most important about it. He cannot reach to the level at which symbolism can be dispensed with. I refer to the ways in which geometry in form touches the soul and structures and organizes response. This is an aspect of the architecture which Warburg cannot deal with. He concludes by saying his brief remarks about Pueblo architecture with the remark that

the Indian establishes the rational element in his cosmology by depicting the world like his own house, which enters by means of a ladder. But we must not think of this world-house as the simple reflection of a tranquil cosmology. For the mistress of the house is the most fearsome of all beasts – the serpents.⁹⁸

He simply could not stay with the stillness of Pueblo and Anasazi architecture -- in a way its greatest achievement. When he might have, what does he do? He recalls the cliffs of Heligoland: “We travelled through this gorse-grown wilderness for about six hours, until we could see the village emerging from the sea of rock, like a Heligoland in a sea of sand”.⁹⁹ One would not bother to comment on this apparently innocuous parallel, were it not for the fact that both Steinberg and Philippe-Alain Michaud reproduce a photograph of a Heligoland village from Warburg’s files beside one of the Hopi mesas.¹⁰⁰ With the typical ignorance of almost every commentator on Warburg’s piece, neither of them realizes that Warburg was actually drawing a comparison not with any of the Hopi settlements, but with the site of the Pueblo of *Acoma*. In any case the parallel is absurd -- since there is almost none. Unless one thinks of the skyward-

⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 22-23; this translation from Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, p. 281.

⁹⁸Schlangenritual, p. 24; this translation from Warburg, *Serpent Ritual*, p. 281.

reaching parallels with the ladders, there is nothing, for a start, like the steeples and lighthouse of this village, with its peaked roofs and white painted houses. The Pueblo and Anasazi settlements are rooted in the earth; there is no sense of this in the Heligoland photograph at all. In Warburg there is already enough of the notion that Athens and Oraibi are cousins; but Oraibi and Harz, or even more ridiculously, Heligoland? Little is gained by such superficial juxtapositions.

If only Warburg had stayed with that aspect of Pueblo architecture that was still, *sesshaft*, rooted, and that exemplified the very core of the restraint he himself tried to find. Then he might not have been so misled by his need to see agitation in the dance, and he might have begun to understand how Laocoon had nothing at all to do with Kachina.

Despite all his disapproval of modern America, Warburg joined with it in making the Indians primitive, in ignoring what was truly different and important within Pueblo culture, in not documenting what was really significant about it, either with regard to the dances or to their sites. He could not grasp the element of stillness that pervades either dance or architecture, he could not understand what it is about the construction of stillness and rationality that has such a deep impact on the mind. This has nothing to do with movement or agitation. It has to do with a rootedness in the earth, and the physical and mental bond with certain kinds of geometric structure. He ignored this precisely because he could find no parallel in the West. He had no lenses with which to perceive this aspect of the primitive, by which Athens itself might indeed have been reclaimed once more from Alexandria, if one so wished. In his concern with Alberti and Botticelli and the relationship between the agitation of bodies and clothes on the one hand, and emotion on the other, Warburg overlooked all of this. It may seem unfair to be so critical of

⁹⁹Warburg, *Schlangenritual*, p. 18; cf. Steinberg, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰Steinberg, p. 11; Michaud, p. 197.

Warburg when he himself, recognizing the shortcomings of his lecture, never wanted it to be published. But his own plea turns out to be not dissimilar, both in its aim and in its unfortunate fate, from the much-infringed request of the Pueblos not to be photographed¹⁰¹ lest the soul be misrepresented, or even taken away. The fact that now needs to be acknowledged is that in his lecture Warburg becomes the very type of someone unable to relinquish the set-pieces of his own culture – above all the supposedly redemptive quality of the Greco-Roman classical. Ironically, if we think of the ways in which Warburg is idolatrized these days, it turns out that he could neither acknowledge his own past, nor fully grasp that of others. The clear result is that he did not, or could not, give the Indian his due. It remains for the rest of us, in a sense all followers of Warburg, to think much harder about doing just that.

¹⁰¹Cf. Warburg's own comment in the *ricordo* for May 3, 1896: "The Indians do not like to be photographed. I photographed the albino girl". For recent discussions of the much discussed Pueblo resistance to photography, see now Lyon (1988), Faris, and Dilworth, pp. 72 and 119-120. Both Lyon and Dilworth note that resistance grew only gradually, since from 1870 to ca. 1910, there were far fewer formal restrictions on photography than later on.

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