

„Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern” (?)

A Historical-Anthropological Reading of Aby Warburg's *Schlangenritual*¹

Ildikó Sz. KRISTÓF

The paper on *Schlangenritual* is perhaps the most enigmatic text left behind by the excellent German art historian, Aby Warburg. It is a remarkably fluid, multivocal writing, resistant to any direct, one-sided, philological analysis. So it is its history, textual, editorial and biographical alike. Its original title, „*Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*” seems, however, to offer a key concept - that of the *image* - to open it, as one of its recent interpreters, Michael Steinberg suggested (Steinberg 1995). I will rely upon this concept in the current reading of Warburg's „*Images*” but, being a historian of cultural anthropology, I will use it somewhat differently - more “anthropologically” perhaps - than Steinberg did.

Before immersing in Warburg's way of seeing the Southwest and its native cultures and his understanding of cultural history, let me enumerate some reasons, why it is so difficult to interpret this text. First, there is an interval of almost thirty years between Warburg's journey to the Southwest America -between November 1895 and the spring of 1896- and the elaboration of his paper on the *Schlangenritual* of the Hopi Indians of Arizona in 1923. Second, apart from his diary notes made during the trip, three slide show lectures that he gave to different civil societies in 1897 in Berlin and Hamburg, his correspondence with his family and with American and German scholars during and right after his journey, and finally, his lecture notes put in writing immediately before the lecture of 1923 (which itself was a slide show), Warburg has not written anything relating his American experiences and revealing directly their impact upon his thinking. Third, the text of the *Schlangenritual* contains more vague ideas, various associations, impressions - i.e. *cultural subtexts* - than easily identifiable, clear concepts, notes and references. And fourth, this text, written and delivered in the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen was meant originally as much a scholarly work as sort of a psychological test to check Warburg's recovery from his enduring mental illness.

It is thus no wonder that the later interpretations of this text differ considerably from one another, and no wonder either that there are still some particular points and concepts around which these interpretations seem to cluster.

The editor of the complete text of the Kreuzlingen lecture, Ulrich Raulff and the already mentioned Michael Steinberg have identified recently at least three

¹ A brief version of this paper was given as a talk in the international conference *Renaissance and Rencascences* organized in July 2003 in Szeged, Hungary by the Mellon-CAORC Foundation for its East-European grantees. A longer version of it was published in Hungarian in 2004 in Budapest (see Sz. Kristóf 2004a). Touching upon a „contact zone” between art history and cultural anthropology, I am dedicating this essay to Professor Cornel Tatay, an excellent researcher and a friend.

such points of views, but there are certainly more. One is, no doubt, *intellectual history*: art historians and cultural historians like Ernst Gombrich, Salvatore Settis, Carlo Ginzburg, Peter Burke etc, attempted to contextualize Warburg's ideas either by „unraveling the threads of this text and weaving them into the existing threads of his intellectual life” or by demonstrating Warburg's „originality in the historiography of his discipline” (Raulff 1998a, 66-67 and 1998b). Another, and more recent focus was of *identity and psychology*: scholars like Sigrid Weigel, Michael Steinberg himself and others tried to identify the „psychotropic connexion” (Raulff 1998a, 67-69 and 1998b) of the Kreuzlingen paper to the actual process of Warburg's sickness and recovery, focusing more on the act of performing the lecture than on the philological aspects of the text. Finally, another recent approach is that of *symbolic visibility*: an iconography that declares itself „anthropological,” and of which the best example is the edition of Warburg's American photos in 1998 by the Warburg Institute, London. The studies in this photo album strive to find/establish connections between Warburg's way of seeing the Pueblo region, and his methodology as an art historian or cultural historian in general. Most significantly, but not without precedents (Ginzburg 1990; Steinberg 1995), the album suggests/constructs a powerful image of *Aby Warburg, cultural anthropologist*, and moulds his figure in that of a conscious, tireless fieldworker, focusing specifically on the ethnography of the Pueblo Indians and other indigenous people of Arizona and New Mexico (esp. Cestelli Guidi 1998).

It is this interpretation, no matter how fashionable it has become recently (also in Hungary, see Biczó 2004, 9), that I, as a (historical) anthropologist, would like to challenge, and modify, if possible: We should see more clearly than we do now, *what kind of anthropology* it was that Warburg got acquainted with and got involved in. And we should understand much better how much, how deeply he was committed to this approach. Unfortunately, my arguments cannot be based upon a profound and comprehensive survey of the related sources yet. It is just a preliminary image - another „image” or interpretation - that I can propose in this paper, based on my journey in the land of the Pueblo Indians in 2001 and my readings about the cultural-historical circumstances of Warburg's trip (see Sz. Kristóf 2004a, 2004b, 2007; and Benedict 1963; Basso 1979; Graburn 1988; Washburn 1988; Dilworth 1996; Weigle and Babcock 1996; Geertz 1998).

First, it is worth noting how clearly Warburg himself saw his deficiencies in the specific methodology of ethnographic research. His lecture on the *Schlangenritual* starts with the following remarks: „...even at the time, I was unable to give depth to my impressions, as I had not mastered the Indian language. And here in fact is the reason why it is so difficult to work on these Pueblos: Nearby as they live to each other, the Pueblo Indians speak so many and such varied languages that even American scholars have the greatest difficulty penetrating even one of them. In addition, a journey limited to several weeks could not impart truly profound impressions”. („*Images*,” in Preziosi 1998, 177) Notes in his diary also confirm his awareness of the difficulties of doing fieldwork. A remark from 30 January 1896, while he

stayed in Laguna pueblo, New Mexico reads like this: Also, my lack of Spanish is regrettable, because it hampers communication with old Indians.@ (Diary, in *Photographs at the Frontier*, 153)

Lack of knowledge of the indigenous languages, lack of knowledge of Spanish (which functioned at that time as a mediating language), lack of time to get closer to indigenous Pueblo life; several times Warburg admitted the specific cultural anthropological shortcomings of his work. A well-known note to his Kreuzlingen lecture put in writing in 1923 may suggest, among other things, that he continued seeing himself later on as well as more of an *outsider* to the Native American cultures of Arizona and New Mexico, and not a committed student of fieldwork anthropology: „What I saw and experienced can be represented only in its outer appearance [*Schein*], and I have the right to speak about it only if I say first that its insoluble problematic has been so pressing a burden on my soul, that in my healthy time I never would have dared to say something scholarly about it” (cited by Steinberg 1995, 73).

If this passage relates indeed to his experiences with the indigenous cultures, too, we may suppose that he was well aware of the fact that he remained, stopped indeed at those „outer appearances,, of American Indian life. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by other data of his biography as well as numerous references in the text of the lecture of Kreuzlingen, too.

As for his biography, it is well-known that the professional anthropologists working for the Smithsonian Institution, Washington - especially James Mooney and Jesse W. Fewkes - attempted to turn his attention toward collecting ethnographical data before, during and also after his trip to the Southwest. But they seem to have failed to attract his attention. (Fewkes wrote him explicitly that they needed a scholar of German formation and knowledge, see Cestelli Guidi 1998, 28-32; Steinberg 1995, 61-62). It is also significant that after having returned to Germany, Warburg gave his above mentioned three lectures about his journey not to circles of professional ethnographers, but to civil societies. One was given to the Hamburg Photographic Society, the other to the American Club of Hamburg, and the third to the Free Photographic Union of Berlin, and all the three in the same year, i.e. 1897 (Steinberg 1995, 95; Cestelli Guidi 1998, 33-34). Although Warburg contacted the ethnographic museums in Germany - for example the *Museum für Völkerkunde* in Hamburg and that in Berlin - in order to offer parts of his collection of American Indian objects and artifacts to them (Cestelli Guidi 1998, 42-47), and he kept on corresponding with American anthropologists, missionaries, photographers for some years (Cestelli Guidi 1998, 42-47, Steinberg 1995, 66), there is no indication that he ever intended to cross the border between the life of an armchair scholar and a fieldworker. His correspondence with his brothers in the fall of 1927, concerning his plan to make a second trip to the USA is revealing in that respect. This time Warburg's goal was to establish connections between his library and the William Hayes Fogg Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the Columbia University in New York. He also planned to give a series of

seminars in these institutes but, as he explained both to his brothers and Franz Boas, leading anthropologist at Columbia University at that time, „he would no longer have the energy for a side trip (*ein Abstecher*) to Arizona and New Mexico” admitting, as he did, that „I am a very bad traveler” (Steinberg 1995, 106-107).

It is no surprise then that the text of the *Schlangenritual* conveys an image of Pueblo Indian culture which itself is built rather on „outer” than inner „appearances” Warburg described the landscape, the way of settlement, the costumes, various objects and utensils of the Indians (especially, pottery), and he provided a somewhat detailed analysis of their „primitive” religion. The latter was based on the amount that he grasped from it while observing dances and certain ceremonies with the help of Catholic priests, or missionaries, like the Mennonite Henry Voth was in the Hopi Indian village of Oraibi. Warburg had a certain „intellectual filter” which explains why he described things in the way he did, and I will return to it soon. What seems rather *missing* from his image of Indian country is the particular social-political world in which the indigenous people lived there i.e. were forced to live. There is no mention of the characteristics of the structure of their society (the importance of the latter as a sign of the depth of an anthropological insight is emphasized, among others, by Blanckaert 1985), and no mention of the reservations themselves. It is only in his diary that Warburg made some remarks on military garrisons, forts or, for that matter, Indian servants to white landlords (there was one even to his own landlord in Keam’s Canyon: a certain „Percy” mentioned in the Diary in *Photographs from the Frontier*, 155). Christian churches and boarding schools appear on his photos, but one has the impression that they are noticed only when they have to do more closely with Warburg’s special interest in ornamentation and symbols. (Such institutions seem to appear only in two cases among the eight Pueblos that he visited).

I do not want to question that Warburg, having seen the miserable conditions in which the American Indians found themselves felt compassion for them. What I miss in his files and photos about his journey is a deeper social – and a *par excellence* anthropological- insight into and an understanding of these conditions. Let me refer only to two examples.

For the Hopi Indians, the time of Warburg’s visit was an especially agitated and troublesome period, the time of what present day anthropologists call the „Oraibi split”. During the 1890s the Pueblo of Oraibi was torn between harsh factional struggles of the so - (from the white’s point of view) - called „friendly”, i.e. the modernist/assimilationist group of the Indians, and the so-called „Hostiles” i.e. the traditionalist group which fought against the white domination in order to preserve the native ways of life. The struggles led finally to the effective split of the village in 1906, the traditionalists were expelled from Oraibi and had to found a new village. Warburg spent almost a week in the Hopi land, he was hosted by Henry Voth, the Mennonite missionary of Oraibi (see Voth 1923; Schmidt 1966). He visited the village of Oraibi itself, talked not only to schoolteachers, shopkeepers but some Indians as well, he attended (with the help of the missionary) some ceremonies of the latter, and still, one does not find even the slightest hint in his files about that

social-political conflict, extremely important in the life of the American Indians of the period. (His photos of Indian children transformed by boarding school regulations may refer at least to pieces of such a knowledge, but he is nowhere explicit about it.) (See James 1974, 130-145; Whiteley 1988 and 1998; Geertz 1992 and 1998; see also Sz. Kristóf 2004a and 2004b).

The second example is related to photography. As some of his remarks testify, Warburg was well aware of the general reluctance of the Indians to being photographed, but he does not seem to have understood - and, sometimes even respected - the cultural reasons for it. As he noted in his diary on 30 May 1896 while in Keam's Canyon in the Hopi land: „The Indians do not like to be photographed. I photographed the albino girl” (Diary in *Photographs from the Frontier*, 155). There is no mention, however, of *her* - or any other indigenous - reactions. And then, apologizing for the quality of his pictures before the Free Photographic Union of Berlin in 1897 he argued: „My photographs are all >snapshots=... Almost none of the pictures is perfect; would you please consider -as an apology - that these photographs often had to be taken in inconvenient circumstances and that almost all of the Indians have a superstitious shyness towards the photographer, which makes long preparations impossible” (cited by Cestelli Guidi 1998, 37). Snapshots were thus justified; but not in the eyes of the Indians. One of the most famous photos made of Warburg during his trip in the Southwest is the one which shows him standing smiling next to a rather gloomy Hopi Indian, a ritual dancer. This photo was taken during the break in the so-called *hemiskachina* dance, one of the most important fertility dances of the Hopis. The Indian took off his mask just as his fellow dancers did around him. Warburg's comment on that particular moment of the dance can be read in the text of *Schlangenritual*: „The dance lasts from morning till evening. In the intervals the Indians leave the village and go to a rocky ledge to rest for a moment. Whoever sees a dancer without his mask, will die” („*Images*” in Preziosi 1998, 190). Which means that photographing the dancers exactly in that moment was something like a sacrilege for the Indians. (For the culture of the Hopi Indians, their own point of view, and the American Indian interpretation of the practice of contemporary photography and anthropology see Connely 1979; Dockstader 1979; Ortiz 1979 and 1983; Geertz 1992; Whiteley 1988 and 1998; Rushforth and Steadman 1992; Lippard 1992; Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997; Tsosi 1997; and Sz. Kristóf 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008 and 2012a.)

In sum, Warburg seems to have been interested more in the art styles, objects and artifacts than the individual beings belonging to particular *socio-cultural* groups producing them. The native inhabitants of the American Southwest -Navahos, Zunis, Hopis etc. - were for him rather objects of museological-historical interest, and particularly, parts of that grandiose puzzle of universal cultural evolution. Just as they were for most of the contemporary anthropologists of that pioneer period of the social sciences, who themselves were rather armchair scholars.

Unfortunately, no one has attempted to put together a *complete* list of Warburg's readings in ethnography and anthropology, although it is obvious that he had

insights in the contemporary debates on the social and cultural evolution of humankind. (The most important efforts to trace his readings were made in the following works: Steinberg 1995; Burke 1998; Raulff 1998a és 1998b; and Cestelli Guidi 1998). It is necessary to understand that the paper on *Schlangenritual* represents a characteristic *mélange* of the main lines or trends of thought in late 19th century German, British and American anthropology, and this is what seems to have constituted much of Warburg's „intellectual filter” through which he looked at and interpreted the native cultures of the American Southwest as well as other cultures and historical periods in Europe. *Schlangenritual* provides, on one hand, a rather mechanical, evolutionary scheme of the development of human culture and religion in general, dividing cultural development into three consecutive stades (*nomadism – agriculture – civilization*), and rendering to them the respective triad of religious forms, too (*worship of animals – worship of spiritual beings – gradual loss of religious worship*). It is in the first two stades of evolution that Warburg placed the Pueblo Indians (their different groups altogether); so what he did was constructing a *chronological* series out of cultures living *simultaneously* side by side. Greece i.e. Europe was placed in the beginning of the stade of „civilization” which was defined by a gradual development of scientific thinking and the fading away of religious feeling. The great British and American „fathers” of cultural anthropology -Herbert Spencer, Edward B. Tylor, Sir James Frazer, or Lewis H. Morgan - would have found that classification quite close to their own; the most widespread of those stadial concepts made up the following schemas of universal social and religious „development,” applied abundantly in late 19th century anthropology: *savagery – barbarism – civilization / magic – religion – science* (Harris 1968; Stocking 1991; Sz. Kristóf 2004a). Hermann Usener, Warburg's professor of classical mythology at the University of Bonn himself would have found those ideas familiar and close to his teachings. It is remarkable how Usener's concepts of the making of religious history coincide with those of the above mentioned British anthropologists; Usener himself suggested to organize what he called „primitive” cultures existing side by side (*Nebeneinander*) into a chronological line of development (*Nacheinander*) (see Usener „Mythologie” 1904 in his *Vorträge und Aufsätze*). In my view, the terms *Nebeneinander* and *Nacheinander* in the Kreuzlingen lecture could as well refer to that particular text of Usener as –according to the suggestion of Steinberg- to the text of Lessing's *Lao-koon* (Steinberg 1995, 99). Usener's methodology of constructing religious history represented a method *par excellence* in the making of the contemporary theories of social and cultural evolution.

On the other hand, the characteristic German tradition of *Völkerkunde* (a more geographical than evolutionary way of thinking) is also present in *Schlangenritual*. Warburg's comparative approach which consisted of identifying and explaining the presence of the „same” cultural elements in different and distant cultures –e. g. the presence of the belief in the ambiguous power of the snake in ancient Greek, Hebrew, medieval and Renaissance European, and Pueblo Indian cultures - would have been appreciated by Adolf Bastian, leading ethnologist in Berlin in the turn of

the 19th/20th centuries. Bastian's own theory concerning the so-called „elementary thoughts” (*Elementargedanke*, i.e. the appearance of the same ideas in different cultural contexts) was rather vaguely elaborated (Bastian 1884 and 1895). It could be merged easily - and this is what Warburg seems to have done - with certain evolutionary concepts, especially with that of Edward B. Tylor about the so-called „survivals”. In Warburg's words, it was explicitly „the *survival* of primitive paganism” that he was looking for; „the identity - as he put it - or rather the indestructibility of *primitive man*, who remains the same at all times” (cited by Raulff in *Photographs from the Frontier*, 66, emphasis mine: I. Sz. K.).

It is, however, equally important to realize that the evolutionary ideas that Warburg applied in *Schlangenritual* went gradually out of fashion during exactly the thirty years that had elapsed between his trip to the Southwest and his elaboration of the Kreuzlingen paper in 1923. By this time, evolutionary universalism constituted rather an embarrassing, unpleasant relic in many circles of the newly born discipline of cultural anthropology which itself left the armchair and turned more and more towards fieldwork and cultural relativism in the USA (under Franz Boas and his disciples), and cultural geography and the study of „culture areas” in Germany (under Leo Frobenius and Fritz Graebner; see, among others, Kuper 1991 and 1996; Stocking 1991; Hinsely 1994; and Sz. Kristóf 2004a). British social anthropology in particular was advancing towards the elaboration of fieldwork methodology at that time; intensive, small-scale research and the method of the so-called „participant observation” emerged as long lasting research models indeed for future anthropologists (under scholars like Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and, especially, Bronislaw Malinowski) (Kuper, 1996, 1-65; Sz. Kristóf 2004a).

In sum, the period between 1895/96 and 1923 was a period of most significant methodological transformations in the discipline of cultural anthropology which places Warburg on the crossroad between the old and the new. It would be crucial to know whether he noticed these changes or not. Could we perhaps attribute his long lasting hesitation to write about his American experiences to the fact that he realized how old-fashioned his evolutionary ideas become, but he could not work out any other way of thinking about the American native cultures yet? Could we explain the fact that he did not take up ethnological work later on, did not establish firmer contacts with professional ethnologists in Germany, and did not want to go back to the Pueblo Indians by his reluctance to accept the new requirements of fieldwork in cultural anthropology? (He said explicitly, as was cited above: „I am a bad traveler”...) And, to ask it on a more general level, did its own uncertainties about the making of cultural history in the period reflect those of contemporary cultural anthropology, too? (He said explicitly, as was cited above: „in my healthy time I never would have dared to say something scholarly about it”...)

One thing is sure. Warburg's ideas concerning socio-cultural evolution did not convey the same innocent joy of progress as those of Comte, Spencer, Tylor or Frazer did. Observing evolution from what he called „primitive” cultures to civilization in 1923 Warburg was more melancholic - or, more pessimistic - about the

process as a whole and its „results”. He put the word „progress” into quotation marks, and provided a rather critical image of his own (Western European and also American) culture: „The replacement of mythological causation by the technological removes the fears felt by primitive humanity. Whether this liberation from the mythological world view is of genuine help in providing adequate answers to the enigmas of existence is quite another matter” („*Images*” in Preziosi, 204).

I cannot conclude otherwise but by suggesting that Aby Warburg should not be considered a cultural anthropologist in the current – modern / postmodern - sense of the term. He was definitely not a fieldworker, and his is not the kind of social or „understanding” anthropology that attempts to grasp the Other in and through its particular *socio-cultural* world, and that takes stands and action representing their interests (D’Andrade 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1995; Tsosie 1997; and esp. Whiteley 1998). Peter Whiteley, American anthropologist, one of those who have the most profound knowledge about Hopi cultural and political issues – apart from the Hopis themselves – calls what Warburg wrote in *Schlangenritual* „para-ethnography” (Whiteley 1998, 12). Warburg was still sort of a prisoner of old universalistic, classificatory (comparative) and progressist (evolutionary) models of human history which go back - through many of their Enlightenment representatives - to his favorite period, the Renaissance; namely to the neo-Aristotelian classification of Jesuit authors like José de Acosta (1539-1600) (Hodgen 1964, 313-385; Pagden 1990, esp. 146-197; Del Pino-Díaz 1992; Gemegah 1999; and Sz. Kristóf 2012b, esp. 172-174). Warburg seems, however, to have been a rather rebellious prisoner, hesitating to make too sharp distinctions between „primitiveness” and „civilization,” and to accept the values of his own culture without reservation. That is why I am convinced that a more thorough knowledge of his anthropological learning -especially before, during and after his American journey - would help us understand better not only his methodological originality as an art historian, but also the seeds of his *critical* – and in this case, truly *anthropological* - attitude.

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