

## Culture, change, and intellectual relations

Review of:

José Emilio Burucúa, *Historia, Arte, Cultura. De Aby Warburg a Carlo Ginzburg*, Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003, ISBN 9505575580, 199 pp., £ 24.94.

*Historia, Arte, Cultura* describes the intellectual development of a group of scholars with wide ranging interests and diverse approaches to the history of art and culture, centered around the figure of Aby Warburg (1866-1929) and his collection of books and images. Displaying singular erudition, José Emilio Burucúa discusses their theories and studies, as well as their institutional affiliations. This issue brings into consideration the history of the Warburg Institute itself, its hazardous transfer from Hamburg to England, and its incorporation to the University of London. The relevance of the book as a general introduction to the group is enhanced by a forty page appendix which includes texts written by distinguished members of the Warburgian tradition.

The introduction to the book highlights the increased interest that European historiography has devoted to Warburg, his theories, and his methods in the last decades. In 1970, Ernst Gombrich published an intellectual biography of the German art historian, revised and expanded in 1986.<sup>1</sup> That same year, Carlo Ginzburg included the article 'Da Aby Warburg a Ernst Gombrich. Note su un problema di metodo' in his book *Miti, Emblemi, Spie*.<sup>2</sup> Gombrich's and Ginzburg's reflections heralded the appearance of several translations of Warburg's texts that made them accessible to the non-German speaking world. Until the 1990s only an Italian translation, *La Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico*, edited by Gertrud Bing,<sup>3</sup> was available. In 1990 part of the book was translated into French; in 1999 it was published in full in English. Other texts followed, including a selection of *Warburgiana* in Spanish, published in Buenos Aires in 1992 by Burucúa and his colleagues,<sup>4</sup> which revitalized the Argentine Warburgian tradition, started in the 1970s by Héctor Ciochini, Ángel Castellan, and Adolfo Ribera, three of Burucúa's professors.

In the first chapter of the book, Burucúa studies what he considers the three main nuclei in Warburg's work. First, his conception of the Renaissance as the historical time that inaugurates western modernity. Second, the devising of a methodology for research and discovery in the field of cultural history. Third, his approach to ethnology to understand the meaning of magical practices, both in

1 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An intellectual biography, with a memoir on the history of the library by F. Saxl*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1986.

2 Carlo Ginzburg, *Miti, Emblemi, Spie. Morfologia e storia*, Torino: Einaudi, 1986. Originally published in Carlo Ginzburg: 'Da A. Warburg a E. H. Gombrich (Note su un problema di metodo)', *Studi medievali*, year VII, fasc. II, December 1966, pp. 1015-1065.

3 Aby Warburg, *La Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico. Contributi alla storia della cultura*, Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1966. With an introductory essay by Gertrud Bing, it was republished in 1980 and 1996

4 José Emilio Burucúa et al., *Historia de las imágenes e historia de las ideas. La escuela de Aby Warburg*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1992.

ancient and contemporary cultures. Warburg devoted part of his intellectual efforts to the understanding of the complex relationship between *das Nachleben der Antike* (the coming back to life of Antiquity) and the awakening of modernity in the Renaissance. According to this explanation, the active and dynamic members of the bourgeoisie that controlled the Italian city-states were leading lives different to those of their Medieval predecessors. Hence, these *homines novi* found it difficult to comprehend their new experiences and ideals in the cultural framework set by Christianity. The discovery and renewal of classical human and philosophic experiences allowed them to overcome some of the fears and anxieties of their own times. In the course of these explorations, Warburg encountered certain continuities and transformations in a set of artistic and cultural formulae that were at the core of the issues that interested him. Those *Pathosformeln* became for him the key to understanding the cultural history of humanity. Warburg studied one of these motifs (the figure of the nymph) from Greek vases to Botticelli's paintings and, based on his discoveries, conceived an ambitious project to build an iconographic atlas of our civilization: the never concluded, although properly named, *Mnemosyne*. Regarding magic, the German historian produced a study of the religious and political uses of ancient fortune telling and astrology in the times of Martin Luther. But also, in 1895 and 1896, Warburg headed his own ethnographic expedition to analyze the rituals of the Hopi and Pueblo Indians in New Mexico. Besides his detailed description of the role played by the serpent and the serpentine form in those ceremonies, Warburg derived another key concept from this trip, the *Denkraum* or "thought-distance": 'Mythical and symbolic thinking strive to form spiritual bonds between humanity and the surrounding world, shaping distance into the space required for devotion and reflection'.<sup>5</sup>

The rest of Burucúa's book studies the development of several international Warburgians, from Warburg's disciples themselves to Carlo Ginzburg. Chapter 2, 'Intellectuals and works in the Institute in the 1920s', discusses the activities of the group prior to the relocation of the library to London, in 1933. It was in those years that several scholars explored subjects neighboring Warburg's interests. Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky analyzed the theme of Melancholy in Dürer, fruitfully studying the relationships between art, science, religion and philosophy.<sup>6</sup> In 1927, Panofsky himself attempted to understand the development of linear perspective as symbolic form during the Renaissance, both in terms of individual subjectivity and universal representation.<sup>7</sup> There is also room for a discussion on the implicit and explicit links between the Institute and Ernst Cassirer's early studies, as well as with Walter Benjamin's reflections regarding *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, his doctoral dissertation.

The third chapter addresses the activities of the Institute after Warburg's death, once it was established in London. The relocation, an adventure led by Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, was an attempt to preserve the collection of books and images that Warburg had gathered from the threats posed by Nazism. It was Bing,

5 Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 54.

6 Dürers 'Melencolia I'. *Eine quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1923.

7 'Die Perspective als symbolische Form', in the *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, 1927.

precisely, who edited Saxl's works posthumously, in 1957: in those texts, later criticized by Ginzburg as tautological, the history of images is always studied in relationship with contemporary religious and political developments. Other sections include a study of Panofsky's research in Princeton,<sup>8</sup> away from the Institute but always linked to Warburg's original interests, and a discussion of the production of Daniel P. Walker<sup>9</sup> and Frances Yates<sup>10</sup> regarding magic, hermetism, and philosophy in their connections to religion during the Renaissance. There is also a detailed analysis of Ernst Gombrich's works on the psychological aspects of mimetic representation<sup>11</sup> and of his Popperian approach to Warburg's theory of culture, which are relevant in themselves, but also because Gombrich was the director of the Institute between 1959 and 1976. Discussions of the works of Rudolf Wittkower, Svetlana Alpers, Michael Baxandall and Héctor Ciocchini ensue. In every case, Burucúa reviews the innovations and discoveries of Warburgian scholars, but also gives examples of their shortcomings and of the criticism that arose after the publication of their research.

The final chapter studies the Institute's historiography and its relations with Italian scholarship. Burucúa recognizes that echoes of Warburgian scholarship can be heard in France, Spain, and the Americas, and he cites several instances of such appropriations. However, he believes that 'it is in Italy that the Warburgian tradition has borne its fruit in a fashion comparable to that of London'.<sup>12</sup> The author considers that both Salvatore Settis and Carlo Del Bravo are major exponents of the tradition under study in the field of art history.<sup>13</sup> He also provides evidence of the Institute's *modus operandi* in Paolo Rossi's and Eugenio Garin's studies on magic, science and philosophy in the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> But Burucúa is convinced that the works of Carlo Ginzburg provide the best examples of the vitality of this tradition, not only because of the thematic proximity to the interests of other scholars in the Institute (magic, witchcraft, religion, symbolic continuance, relations between texts and images), but mostly due to Ginzburg's proposal of a semiotic paradigm, based on signs and clues, which Burucúa defines as 'an enhanced version of Warburg's method'. Ginzburg himself chose Warburg as a methodological model, quoting Aby's *dictum* 'God is in the details' in the epigraph to his article.

Such diversity of scholarly interests as analyzed in this book implies that the term "School" might be inadequate to describe the Warburgians. Nevertheless, these academics are part of a common tradition that stems partially from Warburg's large collection of books and images, described by Carlo Ginzburg as a "machine for thought": the library preserves today, as part of the Institute in London, the original

8 *Studies in Iconology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, New York: Almqvist & Wiskells, 1957.

9 *Spiritual and demonic magic from Ficino to Campanella*, London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1958.

10 *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

11 *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon 1960.

12 *Historia, arte y cultura...*, p. 111.

13 Carlo Del Bravo, *Le risposte dell'arte*, Florence: Sansoni, 1985. Salvatore Settis, *La "Tempesta" interpretata. Giorgione, I committenti, il soggetto*, Torino: Einaudi, 1978.

14 Paolo Rossi, *Francesco Bacone. Dalla magia alla scienza*, Bari: Laterza, 1957; Eugenio Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita. La polemica sull'astrologia dal Trecento al Cinquecento*, Bari: Laterza, 1957.

topography devised by its founder, which encourages the research of relationships and associations between texts, images, people and ideas. Burucúa's book provides other possible signs of participation in the Warburgian tradition, common to the scholars included in his study, but not necessarily to every interpretation of Warburg's legacy available today. Firstly, Burucúa's description of one of Warburg's most important concepts, *i.e.* the notion of *Pathosformeln*, emphasizes that such formulae take shape historically and that they change in time. Consequently, they should not be considered as psychological or anthropological constants. Secondly, the author's insistence on the links between Warburg's method and the one put forward by Ginzburg underlines the importance of an interest in very specific subjects, only to find in such details the greatest issues of mankind's cultural history. At the same time an intellectual, institutional and cultural history that grants access to Early Modern European culture through the study of the works and troubles of twentieth-century academics, Burucúa's *Historia, arte y cultura* is also a subtle proposition of a model of interpretation of human culture and the explanation of historical change.

Nicolás Kwiatkowski  
IDAES-CONICET  
Paraná 145  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Buenos Aires  
Argentina

nkiako@gmail.com