

CULTURE AS A *ROLE-GAME*: THE WARBURG COMMUNITY

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“Gespenstergeschichte für ganz Erwachsene“
Aby Warburg

I would explore in this paper an experience in art history that, though not connected with literature, shows some features that can be defined as ergodic at some degree, requiring, using Aarseth's often quoted statement, a “non trivial effort to allow the reader to traverse the text“ (1997, 1).

The experience is that of the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), and my reflections concern not so much his original researches but the way scholars and experts with different competences are investigating his work today, applying efforts and energy to recombine the unfixed tesserae of his changing cultural mosaic.

Warburg, born in Hamburg in a rich family of Jewish bankers, travelled and studied all his life long, mainly art history and archaeology, but also history of religions, psychology, even ethnology. His interests were deeply and sincerely interdisciplinary; they focused on the permanence and the revival of the antique in the Renaissance culture, through certain patterns that are able to preserve the energy of the antiquity and to enliven new artworks with it: these figurative formulae (*Pathosformel*) express many kinds of human passions via fixed body gestures, facial expressions or additional elements; during the centuries, they transform themselves according to the evolution and metamorphosis of styles and cultures, but always maintaining their power of communication.

To this main theme, which evidently involves art history and history of culture, other topics are closely connected and interrelated,

such as the relation between magic and natural science, and the pervasive role of memory in human culture and civilization.

During his life he also travelled through the United States, where in 1896 he visited the reservations of Hopi Indians, to compare their rites and figurative world with the traditions of the Western culture. During the 1920's he suffered of depression and schizophrenia and he was hospitalized in the neurological clinic of professor Ludwig Binswanger in Kreuzlingen (Switzerland).

As a scholar, he left a variegated corpus of researches:

- a number of essays about Renaissance art in Italy and Flanders published in a traditional printed form, in a very dense and cryptic, "refined and creative" style;

- a Library (Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, KBW) with a unique system of classification and retrieval, originally settled in Hamburg and transferred to London in 1933, where the Library became a cultural institution with the name of Warburg Institute and is now annexed to the London University¹. The books in this library were not classified in an alphabetical order, but considered as inseparable parts of changing contexts: the place of a book depended (and depends) on the neighbouring books on the shelf, and the locations of volumes changed in order to create efficacious links in cultural and historical analysis, according to the so called "law of good neighbourhood". The Library, it has been said, "was more than just a storage for books, but [that] it had, in a certain sense, envisioned the idea of a library as a creative place, a 'generator' that combines objects and concepts of all kinds in a limited space...". (Bruhn)

- an unfinished, prototype project known as *Mnemosyne Atlas*, consisting of a number of panels where photographic reproductions of artworks could be fixed in different ways in order to show certain patterns in the circulation of images, meanings, formal details, through space (Middle East, Mediterranean world) and time (from antiquity to Renaissance and later, up to present days, in some cases). The scientific form of the Atlas, adopted by Warburg in cooperation

with his friend the scholar Fritz Saxl, could provide a visual, synoptic approach to the problems displayed; the photographic material consisted of reproductions both of famous or secondary artworks, such as pieces of decoration, architecture, documents such as maps, cards, objects, technical devices, newspaper articles, stamps, photos of historic events, contemporary people, advertising etc. This collection of thousands of images could generate different configurations that were photographed on the panels and changed again. It's a highly multifaceted universe, in which the reader/spectator/user has to immerse and find his orientation; it's an "open text", as has been said, which cannot allow any closure (Mnemosyne 1929, 2002).

Forerunner to Hypertext

Since some decades, the work of Warburg has been investigated with increasing attention, from different viewpoints: as well as the philological approach found out and recollected the documents from archives, a number of researchers have been dealing with Warburg method applied in their own studies (ethnography, anthropology, philosophy, oriental studies among others). Approaching the present day, Warburg's legacy has been considered significant by semiologists, cognitive scientists, neurologists, genetists and more recently, by experts in computer sciences and new media.

His writings, full of "textual synopsis on certain topics, and drawings combined with text", as in storyboards (Bruhn) and flowcharts; his creative efforts to find out original ways to communicate the intricate, multidimensional core of his researches, have suggested analogies with the following concepts: association, connection, nonlinearity, mobility, link and hyperlink, hypertext, the web. Plenty of references has been proposed (paraphrasing Jonathan Rosen: *From the Talmud to the Internet*) with all sort of nonlinear, fluid, interrelated, multidimensional, rhizomatic structures. As António Guerreiro efficaciously synthesized, it is no surprise that Warburg can be considered a forerunner of the hypertext: "Não admira, por isso, que ele possa ser considerado un precursor do hipertexto".

*Mnemosyne and the Memex: association, memory extension,
trails in mind and culture*

The *Mnemosyne Atlas*, projected from about 1926 to 1929, and the Warburg Library may even be compared with the Memex, the device imagined by the American engineer Vannevar Bush (1890-1974). Bush, author of the essay “As we may think” (1945) is often quoted as the forerunner of hyper and cyberculture, as far as information storage and retrieval are concerned. The Memex, though never materially realized, is considered one of the starting point of the humanistic use of machines: it had to be “a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory” (quoted in Kahn & Nyce 1992)². Memex, as the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and the Warburg Library, is connected with the ideas of association, extension of memory, active conservation and sharing of culture.

The human mind with one fact or idea in its grasp “snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain”, Bush asserts.

“To liberate us from the confinements of inadequate systems of classification and to permit us to follow natural proclivities for ‘selection by association, rather than by indexing’, Bush therefore proposes a device, the Memex, that would mechanize a more efficient, more human, mode of manipulating fact and imagination” – these words by George P. Landow (1997) could fit to Warburg Library as well, a Library where the classification of books has to be done by association, rather than indexing, in order to reflect more vivid, living links in human culture and thoughts.

Both Warburg and Bush, from very different contexts, grasped the need of modern culture to find alternative forms for the storage, retrieval and communication of personal specialised researches, in order to make them usable and re-usable, in a sort of creative, cooperative, unending work in progress. These new forms, according to Bush, could be mechanized; for Warburg, they’d lead to interrelated, recombinable entities based on image and book collections: a sort of database that the users may visit, enhance and extend, creating new configurations of meaning.

Interactive formats and immersive exploration

What is really astonishing is the variety of people who feel necessary, at present, to penetrate Warburg's method: "There is no conference where his name wouldn't be mentioned at least once" Bruhn notices. A net of researchers all over the world, often independently from each other, focuses on Warburg even if they are not directly interested in the field of art history. Besides the institutes in Hamburg³ and London, which devote plenty of resources in specialised researches and publications (both printed or electronic), a sort of community is growing larger and larger, whose members seem to assume the above mentioned Warburg's characteristics as useful directions for their own studies.

This is worthy of notice: it is a phenomenon that rose from a category of competent users, as if they were testing a new tool for cultural investigation (and even for knowledge management). And they do that on their own initiative, responding to the necessity of finding out an advanced, interactive method for specialised researches, with a new kind of interface.

In the last thirteen years, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* has been diffused in different formats: full size reconstructions of the panels have been exhibited in several occasions, offline and online electronic versions have been released in different languages, and three printed editions have appeared. One of them (*Mnemosyne 1929, 1998*), besides a bound book, offers a blue box, where the reproductions of the panels are at disposal as independent cards. This box with the untied cards is a fascinating object, attractive as a treasure box or a portable *Wunderkammer*. It's a precious document which becomes a personal property in an interactive way. Users know that penetrating the inner meanings of Warburg's selection is a hard task; nevertheless, one may get intellectual profit just making the action of displacing the cards. This format shows its ergodic potential, because a variety of configurations is possible, due to the user's selection. Therefore *Atlas* can be traversed in a personal, interactive, mobile, extensible way.

As far as the Library is concerned, the concept on which it is based is the following: in cultural researches, it is much more important to build a net of links and connections among the events and the problems, rather than to find a single solution or a definitive answer. According to that, in the Warburg Library, besides looking

for specific books, you are allowed to wander in the building, exploring its four levels (Image, Word, Orientation, Practice); to walk along the corridors, scanning the books on the shelves, which are linked together in semantic chains, in an unending row of correspondences and consequences. It's a physical site in which culture is displayed in a real 3D space, where the user is immersed and performs an active role. Often described as a disquieting labyrinth, a magic place created by a wizard, the Library, as the *Atlas*, reveals extraordinarily advanced intuitions about what could be called a semantic information retrieval and an immersive knowledge system.

Knowledge (and culture) generator

Present interest on Warburg's works can thus be found at different levels: there are attempts to understand his investigations on culture; to apply his investigations to connected issues; to extrapolate from his method some general tools. At each of these levels, the emerging characters are all bound with assemblage of recombinable fragments (documents of different nature); construction of hypermedial, complex entities; challenging (ergodic) interaction with collections of data.

No surprise that, following Warburg's trails, groups of researchers have produced refined and creative electronic resources, such as the electronic version of the *Atlas* by Peter van Huisstede⁴; or "La Rivista di Engramma", where you can find, besides the panels of the Mnemosyne Atlas, also some virtual panels, obtained applying his method on different subjects⁵; or The Warburg Electronic Library (WEL), "conceived as an open platform for interdisciplinary discourses. (...) Its structure is based upon the "MNEMOSYNE Bilder Atlas" compiled by the scholar Aby Warburg in the late 1920s to visualize his complex studies in cultural history. (...) Warburg's "gute Nachbarschaft der Bücher" additionally served as an inspiration in designing the searching tools".

Warburg's unending project (*Mnemosyne Atlas* + Library) works also as what could be called a "knowledge generator" (Frieling 2004) that allows users to recombine not only cultural data, but also research trails and tools, using a spatial, topographical interface (both real and virtual).

Warburg's method is one of the best, though highly sophisticated mirror of present way of investigating and performing knowledge. His brain was the machine (*cyber*) who conceived a system of tools both cognitive and semantic.

All the people who today feel involved by this experiment contribute to weave a net. Inside this net a sort of game is played: a serious game, whose scenario is the history of culture placed in the space of an extraordinary library; the pieces are all sorts of documents reversed in reassemblable collections, and the goals are different, quite peculiar and personal, for each player involved, who has to find, as in a role-game, his orientation through word, image and practice.

NOTES

1. [Http://www.sas.ac.uk/warburg/](http://www.sas.ac.uk/warburg/)
2. Online text of Bush's article:
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/194507/bush/1>. I'd like to thank Paul Kahn for bringing to my attention the simulation of a *working* Memex.
3. Warburg- Haus in Hamburg (Aby Warburg Stiftung):
<http://www.warburg-haus.hamburg.de/>
4. A project by Akademie Verlag in Berlin and mnemosyne.org, a semantic web company specialized in metadata, taxonomy, thesauri, based on the Iconclass system.
5. "La Rivista di Engramma", www.egramma.it (abstracts in English and Latin)

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