

The Technical Apparatus of the Warburg Haus

This article is written in the context of a collaboration with the Bilderfahrzeuge research network¹ in relation to which Martin Westwood and I were invited to visit the Warburg Haus in Hamburg with the aim of proposing a possible intervention there. The article discusses a particular line of thought that was taken away from that visit.

A brief history of the Warburg-Haus is that it opened in 1926 as the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* (the KBW) and was built on a plot of land next to Warburg's home. His house had evolved into an institute under Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing's leadership during Warburg's illness from 1921 to 1924. The KBW was thus the site where the Mnemosyne Atlas was produced from 1927, and linked to the material used for his Hertziana Library lecture of 1929 in Rome. 1929 was also the year of Warburg's death. Saxl undertook the successful migration of the contents of the KBW to London in 1933 as he rightly perceived that the Nazi regime represented an increasing threat to the KBW's existence. The active history of the building is only about 7 years and only 2 – 3 years during Warburg's own lifetime.

In 1993 the building was acquired by the City of Hamburg who renovated the building due to the state of disrepair it had fallen into. Most of the original fittings of the KBW are long gone. A series of photographs from the KBW's early years serves as a record documenting the fact that it was much more than a library and reading room and points to it being a complex apparatus serving the production of the panels that make up the Atlas.² This also points to a methodology submerged in Warburg's relationship to photographic media dating from at least 1907. Panels for exhibitions were regularly produced by Warburg's team but the Atlas, produced in the late 1920s marks a distinctive moment in Warburg's relationship to photo media.

The early 1900s is significant as Warburg bases himself in his home city of Hamburg from 1902. He lived in Florence between 1898 and 1902 where the primary sources for his studies in the early renaissance were

situated. Of course his choice of returning to Hamburg could have been because it was his family's city but equally it was an excellent choice for a scholar who was consciously choosing to base himself within secondary and documentary sources for his research. It was not until 1919 that the University of Hamburg was founded and Hamburg was far from being the natural choice of a base for a scholar of the renaissance and especially one who had such extensive material financial means at his disposal. Spoliation is possibly a way of thinking through Warburg's relationship to such secondary sources and underlines the importance of the installation of a highly complex reprographic technical apparatus at the KBW and in parallel to the library that numbered 60,000 books when it was shipped to London in the 1930s. Warburg's favouring of second order material was also due to his engagement with panoramic time frames, across vast geographic spaces, rather than generational and relatively localized stylistic influences that dominated the discipline of art history in his time.

The KBW is known in the most part from iconic images of the reading room taken in the first few years of the library's existence (see figure 1). The perspective is toward the entrance, with bookshelves to each side, above which are projectors and a shelving system possibly for journals and slides. Tables are arranged around the space, underneath a partial view of the distinctive oval ceiling window. Other views of the reading room document its use as a means to display exhibition panels against the bookcase that seem to be especially designed for this purpose. Such images highlight the reading room's utility as a library, a space for slide presentations and exhibition. A less reproduced image shows the reading room's other side. A small curtained proscenium has a lectern in front of it. An oblong wooden strip on the floor, running counter to the floorboards, concealed a screen that was revealed with the aid of a pulley system (see figure 2). Above the proscenium there seems to be a support that could also act as another screen.

The oval ceiling window, with its lights orbiting the ellipse (possibly a reference to Leibniz's design of the library at Wolfenbuettel that used a Kepler ellipse as the shape of its central plan (Recht 2012:16), is more visible in other images taken from the reading room's mezzanine showing how the room's space echoes the oval shape of the elliptical ceiling. Other documentary images from the 1920s show the roof space above the oval window where an elaborate mechanical screening set-up

controls the light in the reading room. All of this is automated by means of a motorised winch.

The projectors are visible in the most circulated images of the reading room but their identity is difficult to ascertain. However another image reveals (see figure 3) there are 3 projectors. The 2 circular forms at the rear suggest 2 slide projectors for different format glass slides. The large machine at the front of this apparatus is an overhead projector. Thus the projectors could display transparencies and hard copy images, the latter most probably from books and prints.³ The projectors, and especially the overhead projector, dates from at least 1926 but their robustness is demonstrated by a photograph taken at the Thames House, Millbank site in London, that the Warburg Institute occupied before moving to its present location. The image shows the same projectors being operational after 1933.

Plans of the KBW (Calandra di Roccolino 2003), indicate where it is thought there was a photographic studio situated in the lower ground floor and below the reading room. However a photograph of a photographic studio implies that a studio was housed in the eaves of the building (see figure 4). When the KBW moved to London literally everything was dispatched. This included several medium and large format glass plate cameras and enlargers.. It can be concluded that these were the contents of the KBW's Photo studio. Research by Joacim Sprung points to there being an early photo-stat machine in use in the KBW, possibly manufactured by Clark in the USA (Sprung 2011). The supposition is that the studio would have been used for copying, resizing and developing images in the darkroom

Other plans indicate a dumb waiter system was installed in the house but this did not survive the years between 1933 and the renovation. Images of the house clearly indicate its presence and this was probably how, books, documents and photographs were transported between floors (see figure 5). The telephone visible in the image of the photo studio (see figure 4) was one of more than twenty in the house and served as much as an internal communication system as a link to the outside world. Also visible in photographs is a pneumatic tube system for sending documents around the KBW. Such systems were common in stores and banks from the mid 19th century on. Again this system has not survived. However a large safe, in the downstairs office areas has

survived (see figure 6). This was used to store the many extremely valuable books and documents that the KBW possessed.

All of these details point to the KBW being a highly technically sophisticated structure by 1926 standards. The communication systems point to an administrative apparatus much like that of a bureaucratic complex. With Warburg's family background in mind of course a bank comes to mind. The photographic studio points to a use of reprographic means that goes beyond what a library of that period would normally accommodate. The integration of the photo studio into the KBW doesn't mark the beginning of working with photographic means. Photo boards were used from at least 1907 for exhibition and display purposes. The KBW reading room is synonymous with the production of the Mnemosyne Atlas that sources date from 1924, before the construction of the KBW began, continuing until Warburg's death in 1929. The KBW's apparatus confirms that a reprographic methodology was fully integrated into the KBW's design and the reading room functioned as a polyvalent space; as a library reading room, a lecture theatre, a photographic studio and, most probably a space of montage.

The production of the Atlas brings the KBW into focus in a very particular way. What has survived of it are photographs of 79 panels. The images of each panel were taken in the reading room in exactly the same position. This is established by the books visible to the left and above the panel and the bolt of the reading room's doors visible to its right. The question of how many panels were actually used is interesting. The panels were assembled to be photographed and not to be displayed. There certainly were not 79 panels used but perhaps as few as 1-4. The panels were thus assembled, photographed and then disassembled, ready for the next montage. Panel 76 (see figure 7) points to an interesting aspect of the material composition of the panels. To the centre right are 2 identical images (a detail of an illustration by Jacobus Villanus) except that one is reversed. This tiny detail demonstrates that a photograph of a detail of the image had been made and the slide reversed to achieve the second image. Interesting here is that some images are simply photographic prints and others are mounted using corner fixings. All the mounted images are in the Warburg Archive in London, the rest are subsumed into the wider photographic collection. The point here is that the process of assembling the boards involved a complexity in terms of the selection of

images and their ultimate materialization. The photo studio seemed to play a crucial role in this process to the extent that a large part of the 900 odd images, used in the Atlas, were produced solely for this purpose and were not a part of a standing archive. The mounted images seem to represent this production. Ian Jones, from the Warburg Institute in London, and who directs their photographic resources, suggests that the quality of the images produced for the boards was provisional and only served their function as material for a photographed and published document and not as exhibition material. In this way their production is akin to a paste-up publishing process, where the aspect of montage is far from being one of just image selection but is more a specific image production in terms of sizing, selection of details and, in the case illustrated here, reversing an image.

Recognition of the complexity and the labour involved in producing the panels raises an interesting question about Warburg's specific position within the process. That the process was a methodology, that involved extensive collaboration, is demonstrated by a series of panels produced in the 1940s by Saxl, probably in collaboration with Wittkower, and with Otto Fein's technical assistance. They were made for exhibitions at the Courtauld and the National Gallery and concentrated on the relationship of British Art and Mediterranean culture. The motivation here was certainly linked to the Warburg Institute's German identity, as a refugee organization, based in London during the Second World War. The war panels clearly show that the photographic equipment was not just transported to London but also that the working method was deeply embedded in the institute's practices. Saxl and Fein were at the centre of this. An image from the book *British Art and the Mediterranean* by Saxl and Wittkover (Saxl and Wittkower 1969), demonstrates the link between the production of the exhibition boards and the images in the book (see figure 8). The text structure resembles the succinct introductions Gertrud Bing wrote for the Atlas, where the text is narrated directly via the images through a series of numbered references. It's far from certain if the form of Saxl and Wittkover's book is what the Atlas would have taken if it had been published in Warburg's lifetime but it does give an indication of how montage is at the inception of the book's form and that the images are not secondary, serving simply as illustrations of a continuous text. In many respects the text of this book functions as much as a script than as an academic essay. The text narrates the images and not vice-versa. However there is a major

difference between the character of the Saxl and Wittkover boards and the Atlas. The Atlas is more speculative, arguably esoteric and not didactic. It does seem to be an object where Warburg's thinking is both at work and represented.

Photographs taken in the Hotel suite where Warburg stayed, when he made his famous Herztiana library lecture in January 1929 in Rome, show a large board, very different in form from the earlier exhibition and Atlas boards, that he was possibly using to prepare his lecture. Perhaps this demonstrates the role of the photographic image in his thinking beyond simply being a means of presentation but more as a way of constructing themes, motifs and connections; as a means through which to think through ideas and juxtapositions. Here is where perhaps the historical importance of Warburg's method resides, at least as a way of prefiguring how forms of mediation potentially transform a discipline. The image reproduced here is a complete view of the board that is partially seen in other images taken in the hotel suite (see figure 9). The composition of this board seems more systematic than the organisation of individual Atlas panels and perhaps it is an index tool from which successive panels are constructed? This sense of his methodology being, linked to a complex technical apparatus, raises more questions about how the Atlas works and how specific lines of thought can be applied to successive technical modalities. In relation to this are another series of curious connections.

It is well known that Kenneth Clark attended Warburg's Herztiana library lecture in 1929 and that the experience had a considerable influence on him. He was in Rome at that time assisting Bernard Berenson (Stonard, 2014: 22) When Saxl was seeking a safe haven for the KBW Clark was instrumental in helping the Warburg's cause. Even when it was installed in its series of temporary homes Clark continued to give the Warburg Institute his support and during the war helped many of its academics become British citizens. Clark was also involved in helping Saxl mount the *British Art and the Mediterranean* exhibitions that was in part a way of bringing the Institute's activities to bear upon questions of British identity as part of the war effort. One of these exhibitions took place in 1943 at the National Gallery in London when Clark was its director. What Clark obviously understood, and perhaps more than Warburg's deeper and more significant methodology, was the role of the image and montage in narrating historical spaces.

The making of the BBC series *Civilisation* was the ultimate expression of this and is comparable to Warburg's technical relationship to the KBW in terms of an art historian utilizing a complex technical apparatus, but in this case courtesy of the BBC. Second order visual material takes precedence in *Civilisation*, even when Clark is seen before works of art in a multitude of locations.

It is possible to see how Saxl and Wittkover's *British Art and the Mediterranean* reads as much like a script for a montage than a standard academic text. Perhaps this served as a model or was important context for Clark's television projects? The book was first published in 1948 and was successively republished as late as 1969 which was also the year *Civilisation* was first transmitted. From the perspective of 1969 it was living evidence of a method that links directly to Warburg's thinking and is also, aptly, the product of migration and transmission. The considerable impact of *Civilisation* was of course the transmission of a cultural narrative to a mass audience. In British terms this was toward establishing a sense of an ideologically patriarchal cultural consensus. The ideological implications of *Civilisation* was *the* contested ground upon which the polemic under-pinning John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (Berger 1972) was constructed, as a book but most importantly as a TV programme (*Ways of Seeing* 1972). Berger famously evokes Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* as the background to the thinking behind the project. The English translation of this essay dates back to 1968 and Jonathan Cape first published *Illuminations* in translation in 1970. It can be assumed, in this period, that Warburg and his methods would only have been known to a particular discipline and a relatively small circle of people. The inner circle was comprised significantly of people who had had actual contact with him or the inner workings of the Institute. In short Warburg was an obscure and esoteric figure in the early 1970s and he does not seem to be a direct influence on Berger or even on his radar. The book version of *Ways of Seeing* suggests the project's DNA was in many ways closer to Warburg's than Benjamin's methodology and in fact Berger's response to *Civilisation* entailed questions arising from constructing discourses from within an image/montage process rather than originating them from a textual source (see figure 10). It is of course possible to attempt situating Berger soundly within a Benjaminian constellation but it is doubtful that Berger was accessing

any more than the translation of the text of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Aptly what seems to be more at work is an engrammatic transmission of the possibility of a visually based iconographic method. The basis of this resides in the problematics presented by the medium of film and TV but I don't think it's far fetched to view *Ways of Seeing* as a residue of a Warburgian methodology that was ironically sparked in his polemical confrontation with Clark's broadcasting projects.

As I write this presentation I'm also compiling and arranging images in PowerPoint. Often a sequence, or finding a new image, will determine the trajectory of a thought. Even as I write this I am aware of the technical sensorium that is at work in its production. However I do not possess the means of banker's son as Warburg did. I'm also not privileged to the image production apparatus and resources of an organization like the BBC as Clark and Berger were. However the fact there have been successive transformations of modes of technical reproduction since Warburg does not render his relation to questions of montage methodology obsolete. A colloquium, organised by myself and Martin Westwood, that will take place in June 2016 at the KBW will aim to open up a series of questions relating to aspects of the technical apparatus described here. The fundamental point here how a technical apparatus facilitates and develops ways of thinking and not how it simply serves to illustrate or present an already elaborated and concluded text.

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¹ For details about Bilderfahrzeuge go to <http://iconology.hypotheses.org> Accessed 28 December 2015.

² Details of the history of house are taken from Rachiele, V. (2004) article 'Mnemosyne, tappa Amburgo Appunti per la storia della *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*'.

³ For a discussion about the projectors of the KBW see Thomas Hensel, *The Mediality of Art History: Aby Warburg and Photography*.