

The Ritual of the Serpent: Image Analysis and Psychic Healing in Aby Warburg's 'Serpent Ritual' Lecture

Zizheng Zhou

Department of Fine Arts, Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China

Abstract This article analyzes Aby Warburg's Serpent Ritual lecture—delivered at Bellevue Sanatorium during his recovery—as both visual analysis and therapeutic act. By adopting a shamanic role and using slides as ritual instruments, Warburg transformed scholarship into a performative healing practice. Using his iconological method, cultural psychology, and the concept of Pathosformel, the study interprets the lecture's images as mediators between inner psychic states and cultural symbols. The lecture emerges as a symbolic act of self-rescue and a rehearsal for his interdisciplinary “nameless science.” Anticipating the Mnemosyne Atlas, it demonstrates how image, ritual, and mental crisis intersect, underscoring the lecture's originality and lasting significance in the history of visual thought.

Keywords Aby Warburg; Serpent Ritual; Image Analysis; Psychic Healing

1. Introduction

Aby Warburg's 1923 lecture “The Serpent Ritual,” delivered at the Bellevue Sanatorium during his recovery from mental illness, has drawn diverse scholarly interpretations across art history, anthropology, and visual studies. The lecture recounts Warburg's early ethnographic encounters with Pueblo and Navajo serpent dance rituals during his 1895–96 Southwest journey, and despite being originally addressed to a clinical audience unfamiliar with art theory, it has been recognized as a complex convergence of image, ritual, and psychic crisis. Existing research on the “Serpent Ritual” reflects several distinct approaches. Early accounts – notably the intellectual biography by E. H. Gombrich – highlighted the lecture's iconological insights into symbols and images while downplaying its pathological context, treating the event more as an extension of Warburg's art-historical inquiry than as part of his psychiatric

condition. In contrast, later scholars have foregrounded the psychopathological dimension: for example, psychohistorian Peter Loewenberg examines the lecture in light of Warburg's psychosis and treatment under Dr. Ludwig Binswanger, viewing it as a therapeutic exercise and a literal “test of sanity” that Warburg had to pass to secure his release from the asylum. Indeed, many interpretations now regard the 1923 lecture as symbolizing Warburg's triumphant recovery from mental illness – his ability to coherently reengage with an uncanny cultural encounter and thus to demonstrate restored lucidity.

Other analyses approach the “Serpent Ritual” through the lenses of iconology and visual studies. Art historians following Warburg's own methods have examined the images and motifs in the lecture as part of his broader investigation into the survival of antiquity and symbolic imagery. Philippe-Alain Michaud, for instance, re-evaluates the lecture in

the context of early cinema and anthropological visibility, linking Warburg's observations of the snake dance to his fascination with moving images and cultural memory. Michaud's work connects Warburg's thought to "the histories of early cinema, dance, Renaissance theatre, and the serpent ritual of the Hopis," underlining how Warburg traced expressive gestures and *Pathosformeln* across time and cultures. Meanwhile, theorist Georges Didi-Huberman offers a more personal reading: he argues that one cannot separate Warburg's intellectual endeavor from his emotional and psychological ordeal – "one doesn't separate Nietzsche from his madness, nor Warburg from the 'losses of self' which put him for five years behind the walls of a psychiatric asylum," Didi-Huberman insists. From this perspective, the lecture becomes an act of "image-based self-rescue": Warburg's detailed analysis of images and rituals was not only scholarly but also a means of healing himself, converting personal fear and chaos into order and meaning through visual symbolism. In fact, Didi-Huberman and others see the "Serpent Ritual" presentation as a prelude to Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, foreshadowing his later method of arranging images to wrestle with cultural memory and anxiety.

A particularly nuanced synthesis comes from Joseph Leo Koerner's 2012 essay "Writing Rituals: The Case of Aby Warburg." Koerner closely examined the surviving manuscript and image sequence of the lecture, revealing how Warburg deliberately structured the talk as a process of working through trauma. He shows that Warburg, with the support of his doctors and colleagues, effectively turned the lecture into a performative cure, "changing fear into thought" by translating his inner terrors into a scholarly narrative. Rather than an impersonal art-historical report,

the Serpent Ritual lecture emerges in Koerner's account as a complex ritual of self-healing through intellectual endeavor – a controlled reenactment of encountering the "other" (the indigenous ritual and by extension the irrational forces in himself) and mastering it via reasoned analysis. Notably, Koerner and others point out that Warburg's lecture was delivered to an audience uniquely suited to appreciate this aspect – doctors, fellow patients, and friends – and that its success directly secured Warburg's release from Bellevue, underscoring the lecture's dual role as scholarly communication and therapeutic act of self-redemption.

In summary, prior research has variously interpreted Warburg's "Serpent Ritual" lecture as an iconographic study of symbols, an anthropological and visual culture analysis, a case of psychological crisis and recovery, or even a personal ritual of self-salvation. Each of these angles – iconological, psychopathological, visual-cultural, and auto-therapeutic– illuminates different facets of this extraordinary event. However, the present study sets itself apart by integrating and extending these perspectives with new insights, materials, and methodological approaches. Firstly, this research emphasizes the performative and intercultural dimensions of the lecture in ways that previous scholarship has only hinted at. It argues that Warburg effectively assumed the role of a shamanic facilitator during the presentation, using his slide images not just as illustrations but as ritual instruments in a healing ceremony – a perspective that combines art-historical analysis with an understanding of ritual performance. By examining previously overlooked sources (such as Warburg's own field photographs, drawings, and correspondence surrounding the lecture), this study sheds new light on how the sequence and selection of images functioned as a deliberate therapeutic

mechanism. Methodologically, the paper bridges Warburg's iconological approach with modern psychology: it applies cultural psychology and the concept of *Pathosformel* to show how visual symbols mediated between Warburg's inner psychic turmoil and the external cultural memory he was exploring. In doing so, it demonstrates how Warburg's scholarly praxis and his personal recovery were deeply intertwined.

Moreover, this study fills a crucial lacuna by bringing Warburg's Serpent Ritual lecture into sustained focus within Chinese-language scholarship. While Warburg studies in China have flourished in recent decades, they remain largely confined to his Renaissance iconology and the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, leaving the 1923 lecture—his only public act of intellectual self-rehabilitation—at the margins of discussion. By approaching *The Serpent Ritual* through the intertwined lenses of art history, cultural psychology, and performance, this research redefines the lecture as both an act of analysis and an act of healing. It argues that the serpent ritual was not merely a case study in iconology but a lived experiment in the curative power of images. Seen through this perspective, the lecture becomes a hinge between Warburg's scholarship and his psyche, demonstrating how thinking with images could itself become a mode of survival.

The following section turns from this theoretical framework to the concrete visual materials of Warburg's lecture, examining how his iconographic method and psychological insight were enacted through specific images and narrative sequences.

2. Iconographic Analysis of the “Serpent Ritual” in a Narrative-Historical Context

The lecture centered on the Native American

“serpent dance ritual” and was based on Warburg's field observations of the Pueblo and Navajo peoples (Preziosi, 2009). Interwoven with a series of impressions from his North American journey, the lecture took a cultural-iconological perspective, analyzing pottery motifs, symbolic elements of tribal life, and visual representations of myth and ritual. Although Warburg never witnessed the serpent dance firsthand, he studied it extensively through visual and textual sources (Warburg, 1939). The ritual's primary aim was to invoke rain.

A deeper investigation into Pueblo religious life reveals that a persistent geographical factor—water scarcity—shaped their cosmology. Before the arrival of the railroads and irrigation systems, this lack of water inspired magical practices designed to appease or confront hostile natural forces. The need for water taught people the arts of prayer and sorcery. For the Native peoples of the arid Southwest, the serpent bore visual resemblance to lightning, a frequent precursor to rainstorms. Consequently, hope for rain and fear of drought were both projected onto the serpentine form. Warburg's early academic training under Hermann Usener at the University of Bonn (1886–88) had already attuned him to the expression of primitive forces through symbolic imagery.

During his transition from New Mexico to California in early 1896, Warburg was introduced—through a friend—to Professor Earl Barnes, a psychologist specializing in child development. This encounter provided Warburg with preliminary training in psychological methods and led to one of the earliest visual-psychological experiments he conducted. At a hotel in Santa Fe, he invited a Native American father and son to participate in an informal drawing session (Figure. 1).

Warburg invited a Pueblo boy, Anacleto Jurino, to produce drawings of his cosmological vision.

One sketch condensed the Pueblo belief in the serpent as a weather deity associated with lightning and rain. Rather than treating the image as mere ethnographic decoration, Warburg interpreted it as a psychological experiment: the child's drawing revealed unconscious associations between natural phenomena, ritual symbols, and collective fears of drought (Warburg, 1939). For Warburg, an image

was never just a static cultural sign; it embodied a spiritual life-force. He regarded pictures as charged with the “energy” of past rituals, akin to living batteries of history. Indeed, Warburg traveled to study Native American ritual dances precisely to grasp the “animistic power” of images as transmitters of what he called “mnemonic energies”.



Figure 1. Drawing by Anacleto Jurino, created during a psychological test conducted by Aby Warburg in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1896. The image depicts a Native American cosmology featuring a serpent-shaped weather deity. Warburg used this drawing to illustrate the visual association between serpents and lightning in Pueblo belief systems.

(Source: Aby Warburg and W. F. Mainland, A Lecture on Serpent Ritual)

To further investigate the visual correlation between the serpent and lightning, Warburg adopted a psychological approach by analyzing children's drawings as expressions of unconscious associations. This method resembled what is now recognized as projective psychological testing, akin to the modern House-Tree-Person (HTP) test, in which non-verbal drawings are interpreted as manifestations of personality and the subconscious. By selecting a child as his subject, Warburg sought to minimize the influence of external cognitive conditioning and thereby isolate a purer form of image-based expression. Yet in practice, his recovered gaze often slipped into reverie. Warburg's pure, unspoiled way of seeing—almost a regression to childhood wonder—may thus be read as a psychological defense during his convalescence, a passive retreat into the innocence of youth.

Through this experiment, Warburg explored the “gaps” between image and meaning, attempting to identify the symbolic threshold where magical and rational thought converge. His effort to decode psychological content through visual signs—especially among indigenous subjects—constituted a foundational case for what would later become his concept of “cultural psychology.” The intersection of visual form and emotional projection in the child's depiction provided Warburg not only with insight into the symbolic universe of Pueblo cosmology but also with an experimental basis for analyzing the affective power of images across cultures and epochs.

3. The Duality of the Serpent Imagery Across Cultures

The very title of Warburg's lecture—The

Serpent Ritual—evokes layered meanings, both cultural and psychological. The term Serpent, as opposed to the more generic snake, carries deeply charged connotations in Western iconography and religious texts (Simpson, 1989). The serpent is traditionally associated with Satanic evil, deception, and chaos, as seen in figures such as Python, the snake-haired Medusa, and above all, Laocoön—the tragic Trojan priest tormented by divine serpents. For Warburg, the serpent was not merely an anthropological motif but an enduring personal symbol of inner terror and ritual dread.

Unlike Snake, which may carry more neutral or zoological associations, Serpent in the Judeo-Christian tradition invokes the creature that tempted Eve, and thus symbolizes the primordial betrayal and curse. The demonic serpent is said to possess scales as impenetrable as gold, eyes that blaze like fire, and a body dripping with poison. Its forked tongue and towering form make it a recurring embodiment of mythic horror and symbolic otherness. Warburg's preference for the word serpent thus foregrounds the archetypal and affective dimensions of the ritual, tying the Native American rain dances to a broader cross-cultural visual heritage of serpents as both feared adversaries and mystical intermediaries.

In early civilizations, however, the serpent was not uniformly perceived as a symbol of evil. Rather, it frequently signified speed, vitality, fertility, and cosmic power. Ancient Egypt, India, and China each developed complex symbolic systems that revered serpent-like beings. Recent advances in genetics and archaeology have confirmed that the ancestors of Native American populations migrated across the Bering Strait from Asia, likely of Mongoloid origin (Fang, 1989). This anthropological lineage suggests a deeper, transcontinental continuity in symbolic thought—especially regarding the serpent.

In Indian and Khmer mythology, the Nāga, a divine multi-headed serpent, acts as a guardian and protector of sacred spaces. In Buddhist cosmology, the serpent king Mucalinda shields the meditating Buddha with his hooded coils, preserving him from distraction and harm. Similarly, in Chinese mythology, Fuxi and Nūwa—primordial ancestors—are depicted with human heads and serpentine bodies. This veneration of the serpent as an ancestral totem resonates with the symbolic logic of Native American cultures. In Hinduism, Vishnu reclines on the cosmic serpent Ananta, floating upon the ocean of chaos; from his navel grows a lotus, inside which Brahma emerges to create the world. This myth, which links dream and cosmos through a serpent intermediary, reflects a radically different cosmological imagination—one that privileges symbolic intuition over empirical rationalism.

Warburg's interest in Eastern cosmology and astrology further anticipated this symbolic continuity. He was particularly concerned with how Eastern astrological systems, unlike their Greco-Roman counterparts, had abandoned accurate astronomical representations and mathematical planetary models in favor of schematic calendars and abstract symbols. In Warburg's view, this shift undermined the directional and historical orientation of symbolic systems. His critical stance reflected a broader concern: the detachment of image from its cognitive foundation.

For Warburg, images operated “on the image and beyond the image”—they were not merely representations but dynamic agents that mediated between magic and reason, nature and abstraction. This anthropological insight allowed him to trace the latent persistence of archaic visual forms within modern contexts. It also revealed how deeply embedded emotional energies—*Pathosformeln*—could survive through visual memory. In this

framework, the serpent became not only a mythical or cultural emblem but a vessel of psychological intensity that crossed temporal and cultural boundaries.

A paradigmatic moment of symbolic contradiction in Judeo-Christian iconography occurs in the biblical account of the bronze serpent and the fiery serpents. During his studies in Florence, Warburg would have encountered Michelangelo's

fresco *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* in the Sistine Chapel (Figure. 2). The narrative derives from the Book of Numbers: after the Israelites cursed God during their desert wanderings, Yahweh sent venomous "fiery serpents" among the people. At Moses' plea, God instructed him to craft a bronze serpent and lift it upon a pole; those bitten who gazed upon it would be healed.

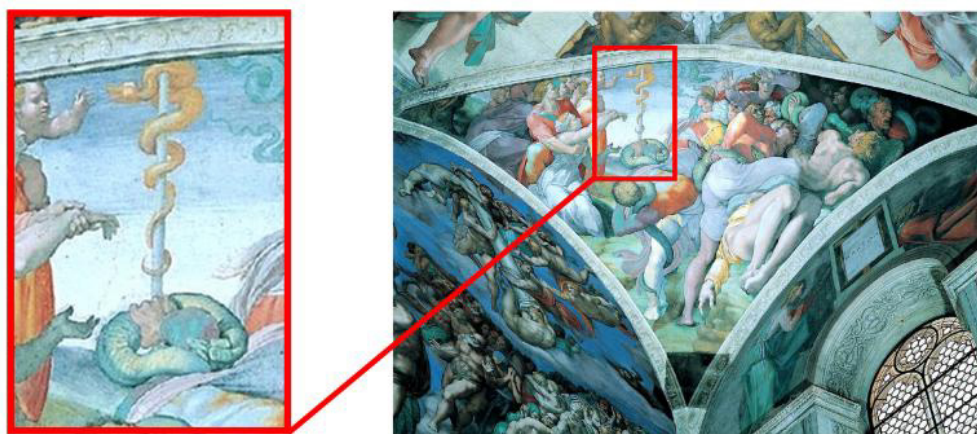


Figure 2. The Brazen Serpent (detail), ceiling fresco by Michelangelo, 1508–1512, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. The composition depicts the biblical episode in which Moses raises a bronze serpent to heal those afflicted by divine punishment. This image was referenced by Aby Warburg to contrast the opposing forces of destructive "fiery serpents" and redemptive "bronze serpents."

(Source: Vatican Museums)

The tension between the punishing fiery serpents and the salvific bronze serpent encapsulates the duality of destruction and healing. The bronze serpent itself possesses no medical power—it operates as a symbolic confrontation, demanding that the afflicted face the very image of their suffering. In this act of fearful recognition lies the possibility of redemption. The image of the serpent becomes a paradoxical emblem: both curse and cure, both demonic and divine, representing the oscillation between death and salvation that underpins faith and visual authority.

At the end of his lecture, Warburg provocatively compared Edison's invention of the electric light bulb to the bronze serpent, claiming it had "captured nature's lightning." This metaphor underscores his belief in the therapeutic potential of

illumination, while simultaneously warning of the destructive counterpart—the modern fiery serpent of unchecked technological advancement.

Like the bronze serpent entwined around Moses' staff, ancient healing symbols often merge the serpent with the staff to create potent visual archetypes. The rod of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, features a single serpent coiled around a wooden staff, while the caduceus of Mercury (Hermes) bears two serpents intertwined, crowned with wings. Although the two emblems have been historically conflated—especially in modern medical institutions—their symbolic functions differ. Yet both are rooted in the same composite icon: the fusion of the serpent with the rod as a symbol of healing authority.

The duality of the serpent—as both toxic

and therapeutic—underscores the dialectical logic of these images. While the fiery serpent or mythological monster often appears as an isolated threat, the healing staff always involves the controlled union of serpent and hand (or arm), with the rod acting as a prosthetic extension of the healer's agency. In this union lies not only a visual metaphor for mastery but also for domestication—an iconography of taming fear through ritual gesture.

In his lecture, Warburg referenced a ceremonial object used by the Pueblo called the bahos—a small stick adorned with feathers, placed before altars or graves as a medium of prayer. The Pueblo explained its function: the feather served as a wing, carrying prayers to the spirit world and pleading for protection against natural forces. This example, like the serpent staff, demonstrates how composite visual forms—serpent and rod, stick and feather—embody not only symbolic fusion but also intercessory and therapeutic function. Such combinations are never arbitrary; rather, they emerge from a deeply embedded anthropological

logic in which different natural forms are unified to mediate between the sacred and the mundane. The winding of the serpent around a staff or the attachment of feathers to prayer sticks such as the Pueblo bahos suggests a deliberate visual strategy of containment, channeling, and symbolic flight. Warburg emphasized that the Pueblo explained the feathers on bahos as wings that could carry prayers to nature's spirits—an articulation of animistic belief materialized through a visual object.

It is worth recalling that as early as 1893, in Warburg doctoral dissertation *Sandro Botticelli's Geburt der Venus und Frühling : eine Untersuchung über die Vorstellungen von der Antike in den Italienischen Frührenaissance*, Warburg observed that Mercury, positioned at the far left of the Primavera composition, is depicted raising a caduceus entwined with two serpents and adorned with wings. This image, inherited from classical mythology, signifies not only communicative power but also the divine function of dispersing chaos and miasma. (Figure. 3).



Figure 3. Mercury in Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1478–1482), depicted at the far left of the composition, is depicted as wielding a winged caduceus entwined with twin serpents, symbolizing the dispersal of miasma and chaos. Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

(Source: Harvard Fine Arts Library, Digital Images & Slides Collection)

A gesture long interpreted as a symbolic act of purification. The motion of the serpent staff clearing

the air evokes parallels with plague-era medical practices. During the Black Death, physicians

wore bird-beaked masks filled with aromatic herbs, believing they filtered disease from the air. These masks became symbolic costumes for doctors, still echoed today in the masked figures of Venice's annual carnival.

Beyond their practical function, the bird masks conveyed spiritual authority. The doctor became a "medicine man" of sorts, assuming a liminal role between life and death. This performative transformation, rooted in ritual mask traditions and animistic belief, cast the physician as both healer and shaman—an intermediary channeling supernatural power. The visual morphology of the bird-beak mask, especially the feathered imagery and air-clearing motion, can be seen as resonating with the Pueblo's bahos stick or the symbolic power of Mercury's serpent staff.

Warburg's own physician, Ludwig Binswanger, had noted his patient's peculiar behavior upon entering the clinic, including conversations with butterflies. The fluttering wings of the butterfly, like the feathers or wings of serpents and birds, evoked for Warburg the therapeutic power of lightness and transformation—a symbolic antidote to psychic heaviness and despair (Michaud, 2007).

At the center of Plate 6 in Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* stands the sculptural group of Laocoön and his sons entwined by serpents—a visual focal point of intense anguish and mythic terror. For Warburg, the image of Laocoön represented the apex of "pathos formula"—a convergence of bodily contortion, emotional violence, and cultural memory (Bordignon, 2017). He had already explored this motif in his 1889 academic essay on Laocoön's influence in 15th-century Florentine art, where he identified the serpentine motion as a conduit of subterranean, chthonic fear. The Laocoön figure embodied the mythic imagination of annihilation, an image of

divine punishment that collapsed the boundary between aesthetic form and existential threat.

In contrast, the image of Asclepius, the Greco-Roman god of healing, appears in the heavens—his constellation fixed above the zodiac sign of Scorpio and surrounded by serpentine stars. Warburg interpreted this heavenly image as a rationalized transformation of the same visual energy found in Laocoön. "Asclepius is both a mathematician and a fetishist," Warburg famously remarked, capturing the duality of ancient astrology as a fusion of numerical logic and magical symbolism.

The serpents coiling around Asclepius' body no longer attack—they cure. Through this celestial symbolism, Warburg enacted a symbolic reversal: the same serpentine form that embodies fatal horror in Laocoön becomes an emblem of cosmic order and therapeutic power in Asclepius. In this reversal lies Warburg's broader theory—that the polarity of image (between fear and healing) is not an opposition to be eliminated, but a tension to be held and interpreted.

In Warburg's prolonged confrontation with the serpent image, repeated acts of iconographic analysis served as ritualized releases of stored psychic tension. Through this recursive engagement, the serpent was transformed from a menacing archetype into a symbolic medium for the articulation—and containment—of fear. As an image-form, the serpent embodies structural polarity: it is both sacred and profane, violent and healing, rational and magical. It is precisely this ambivalence that gave the serpent its unparalleled visual potency.

Warburg's effort to interpret and integrate the image of the serpent can thus be read as a psychocultural strategy of reconciliation. He did not seek to expel the image of the serpent but rather to dwell within its contradictions—to understand it as

a boundary form that mediated between the realms of myth and science, pathology and theory, image and intellect. In doing so, Warburg demonstrated that healing does not arise from the suppression of symbolic fear, but from its interpretation, its sublimation, and its transformation into knowledge.

As Joseph Koerner underscores, Warburg's Serpent Ritual lecture enacted "the labor of changing fear into thought." (Koerner, 2012) It was not merely an academic presentation but a psychic reconstruction, wherein Warburg, no longer merely a patient, assumed the symbolic role of a "scholarly shaman," using cultural imagery as therapeutic instruments. Koerner notes that the Hopis "turned objects of terror into means of control"—a logic that Warburg mirrored through his iconographic mastery of the serpent image. The lecture, then, was more than cognition: it was an affective performance. Through the structuring and narration of images, Warburg re-channeled psychic intensities, enacting what might be called an image-based affective negotiation. This not only marked a turning point in his psychiatric condition but also prefigured the methodological core of his later iconological project.

4. The Image-Based Self-Rescue: Warburg as a Shamanic Healer

The immediate trigger for Aby Warburg's psychological collapse was the military defeat of Germany in 1918. In October 1919, he was officially diagnosed with schizophrenia. By April 1921, he had been transferred to the Bellevue Sanatorium in Switzerland, where he was placed under the care of Ludwig Binswanger, a student of Sigmund Freud. On February 6, 1923, Warburg's condition was classified as schizophrenia with a mixed state of mania and depression—what we now refer to as bipolar disorder.

Viewed in historical context, Warburg's breakdown can be traced to several interwoven causes: first, the traumatic shock of war; second, a fractured sense of identity, caught between his position as a Jewish intellectual within the German bourgeois elite and his imagined kinship with Native Americans; third, the internal conflict between rational inquiry and magical thinking; and fourth, a deep-rooted fear embedded in both images and texts. Throughout his life, Warburg oscillated between these polarities, which generated a persistent psychological tension—one that defined not only his personal struggles but also the structure of his scholarship.

Warburg's engagement with iconology and cultural history unfolded within a distinctly temporal and psychological arc. Around 1893, in his study of Botticelli, he explored the polarity between Apollonian stillness and Dionysian motion. By 1902, during his research on Florentine portraiture, he shifted toward examining the tension between contemporary Christian religiosity and the residual imagery of pagan antiquity. Around 1920, his focus turned to medieval astrology, tracing a new oscillation—this time between the gods of Olympus and the magical systems of the Orient. In each case, Warburg's intellectual labor mirrored the broader existential struggle between rational clarity and mythic dread.

Ultimately, Warburg envisioned the contours of Western culture through a pathological lens, suggesting that human destiny might be understood as a perpetual "dance with the demon." His diagnosis, rather than undermining his scholarship, offered a new interpretive framework—one that saw cultural forms not as stable symbols but as volatile expressions of psychic polarity. He wrote: "Primitive humans manifest religion through memory-images; civilized humans, by contrast,

achieve detachment through naming... All human beings are, in essence, permanently and perpetually schizophrenic.” (Gombrich, 2018) In his view, symbolic thought emerged as a transitional mode—bridging raw sensory impact and reflective interpretation.

Warburg’s attending physician, Ludwig Binswanger, initially trained in Freudian psychoanalysis, later turned toward phenomenological psychopathology, believing it offered a more effective framework for alleviating patients’ psychic suffering. In Warburg’s case, Binswanger encouraged him to write, read, and deliver lectures as a means of reclaiming his “authentic” intellectual self. Through this academic re-engagement, Warburg began what can now be described as an “image-based self-rescue.” Preparing for the lecture required him to organize visual material, a process that forced him to confront the coiled, writhing serpent imagery embedded in his memory.

Whether through external medical intervention or an internal, self-directed effort at recovery, Warburg’s work during this period points to a successful therapeutic outcome. The Serpent Ritual lecture, conceived during this time, became the climactic gesture of that process—an image-theoretical ritual of healing in which the patient temporarily assumed the role of a scholar-shaman, translating trauma into a visual narrative.

In the lecture, Warburg adopted the role of a shamanic figure. The projected slides functioned as emissaries of light and fire, visually echoing the ritual power of the bronze serpent. These images did not merely illustrate an academic argument; they became ritual instruments of psychic calibration. As he spoke, the audience—composed of fellow patients and physicians—was invited to imagine the choreography of the serpent

dance, synchronized with Warburg’s verbal and visual exposition. Neuroscience today affirms that the autonomic nervous system can be influenced through suggestion and image-induced emotion—precisely the method by which ancient shamans once treated psychological distress.

In letters exchanged between Warburg and the anthropologist Franz Boas—compiled by Georges Didi-Huberman—it is evident that Boas provided Warburg with the latest ethnographic materials on Native American cultures as he prepared for the Serpent Ritual lecture. However, a significant intellectual divergence emerged between the two. Boas, grounded in a positivist scientific framework, was skeptical of Warburg’s speculation about the “Nachleben”-Nachleben (German for “afterlife” or “survival”) is a key term in Aby Warburg’s iconological theory, referring to the afterlife or survival of images, gestures, and visual motifs across historical periods. Rather than disappearing with their original context, certain expressive forms persist, re-emerging in later epochs in altered or reactivated states. Warburg used Nachleben to describe how cultural memory and emotional intensity remain latent within images, thus enabling them to function as carriers of historical trauma and affective continuity of forgotten ritual forms. Warburg, on the other hand, was seeking confirmation for what he believed to be an enduring, if obscured, sacrificial practice among the Pueblo Bahos.

The idea that certain ritual gestures or symbolic forms could persist across time—despite the erosion of their original contexts—was for Warburg not merely an aesthetic intuition but a psychological reality. His invocation of Nachleben moved beyond art history into a form of cultural psychology steeped in affective and metaphysical conjecture. Where Boas demanded empirical verification,

Warburg offered a visual hypothesis: that visual forms could function as carriers of psychic intensity and residual belief, even when historical memory failed to retain their original significance.

Warburg's understanding of primitive ritual and sympathetic magic was deeply informed by the anthropological theories of E. B. Tylor and James George Frazer (Warburg, 2008). Tylor emphasized that magical practices precede organized religion, arguing that rituals could influence nature by appealing to supernatural forces. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, similarly described sacrifice as a symbolic transaction—a means of transferring power to appease the divine. Warburg applied these insights to interpret the Pueblo serpent dance not as spectacle but as an invocation of natural forces through symbolic choreography.

Comparing the Hopi serpent dance with the European Bacchic festivals, Warburg emphasized the contrast between control and ecstasy. While the Dionysian rituals of Europe involved frenzied, blood-soaked offerings, the serpent dance was a

carefully orchestrated negotiation with nature. The snake, instead of being an object of destruction, became a ritual instrument—borrowed, danced with, and respectfully returned to the plains. For the Hopi, animals were not inferior to humans but rather superior beings whose instinctive integrity conferred sacred status. The sixteen-day serpent dance culminated in a final gesture of cosmic mediation: the live serpent, held gently in the dancer's mouth, displayed no aggression, embodying instead an almost miraculous calm.

In the hands of the Native dancers, the serpent was not subdued through violence but honored as a living mediator. Its release back into the plains after the ceremony underscored the dance's non-sacrificial nature—this was a ritual that sought not to dominate nature through blood, but to restore harmony through aesthetic gesture. The rain-invoking dance bypassed transactional sacrifice and instead engaged in an expressive act that touched upon the origins of art itself.(Figure. 4).



Figure 4. Hopi snake priest during the Snake Dance ritual, circa 1899. Photographer: Hartwell & Hamaker, Phoenix, Arizona.

(Source: The Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division)

The gesture of reconciliation with the serpentine force was inherently therapeutic—a symbolic enactment of peace between human

and nature. When projected onto Warburg's own psychological state, this process became an allegory of internal reconciliation, a truce between warring

aspects of the self. The most captivating aspect of this ritual, Warburg believed, lay in the moral dignity exhibited by the Native participants. As Immanuel Kant once observed, the capacity to act under the command of moral feeling—rather than necessity—is a sign of spiritual nobility.

The Hopi's reverence for animal vitality was not driven by hunger or survival, but by recognition of an order beyond the human (Tenreiro, 2007). Warburg interpreted this mythopoetic worldview as “the unconscious foundation of our scientific inheritance.” Just as food offerings were first made to the gods and then returned as blessings to the people, so too did the serpent function as a symbolic axis in a cycle of moral exchange, one that paralleled the ritual and aesthetic structures found in the ancestral Chinese Book of Songs and its sacrificial odes (Feng, Ya, Song).

Close examination of the cover page of Warburg's Serpent Ritual manuscript reveals repeated overwritings and serpentine strikethroughs, which reflect his inner ambivalence regarding the unstable boundary between image and text. This visual hesitancy is echoed in a hasty marginal note on the title page: “We recognize the object even if we cannot read it.” The remark gestures toward a foundational tension in iconology itself: the notion that visual forms may carry epistemological weight even in the absence of verbal legibility. This fragment not only signals Warburg's mental state during the lecture's preparation, but also encapsulates the paradox at the heart of his visual thinking—one in which seeing precedes reading, and recognition precedes interpretation.

Koerner positions the Serpent Ritual lecture as a microcosmic prototype of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Koerner, 2012). It constructs a visual grammar in which affective gestures, cultural symbols, and psychic tensions are woven into

a structure of cultural therapy. Warburg's act of lecturing becomes, in Koerner's view, a ritualized “rite of passage,” transforming fractured psychic states into an integrated iconographic order. The constellation logic of the image arrangement in the lecture directly anticipates the layout of the Mnemosyne panels. Images cease to function merely as historical representations; they emerge as active fields of psychic reconstruction, bearing the emotional residues of cultural memory. From the fear of the serpent to the reconciliation enacted in the serpent dance, and finally to the therapeutic cosmos of image-based knowledge, the lecture opens onto Warburg's broader project of a cultural psychology grounded in image survival.

5. Therapeutic Structure of the Lecture Ritual

The narrative logic of the Serpent Ritual lecture follows a distinct psychological trajectory. First, Warburg establishes the serpent as a visual emblem of fear—drawing on its mythic and cultural connotations. Then, by juxtaposing images of serpents with the dynamic states of their ritual use, he initiates a symbolic projection: fear is externalized into the serpentine form, rendered visible and, therefore, manageable. This projection allows for the possibility of affective transformation through the image.

In psychological terms, the structure of the Serpent Ritual parallels the therapeutic stages identified in modern psychotherapy: recognition, projection, and integration. Recognition corresponds to the moment when Warburg externalized his fear through the serpent image; projection occurs when this fear is transferred onto a symbolic object that could be studied and controlled; integration emerges as the reconciliation of opposites within the visual narrative. Through this progression, the lecture itself performs a form of transference and

countertransference, in which the audience, serving as both witnesses and participants, contributes to Warburg's symbolic healing.

The Hopi's ritual attitude toward the serpent offers a critical pivot point. By engaging with the snake not as a threat but as a ritual collaborator, Warburg breaks from his own entrenched symbolic system. He learns, in effect, to reconfigure his own semiotic code—to view the serpent not only as a bearer of psychic chaos, but also as a possible mediator of internal balance. This conceptual pivot marks a moment of rupture in his personal epistemology: a departure from obsessive dread toward dialogic understanding.

Through this reconfiguration, the serpent becomes a mirror of Warburg's psychic tension—a form that absorbs fear even as it reflects it. The visual lecture thus functions as a performative act of what might be called “therapeutic projection,” allowing Warburg to witness his own fears refracted through the lens of intercultural symbolism and ritual logic.

The lecture's ritual structure also mirrors anthropological models of healing ceremonies. Like a shamanic performance, it unfolds through invocation, confrontation, and resolution. The projection of slides replaces drumming or chanting—each image functioning as a rhythmic pulse that modulates collective emotion. Warburg thus reconstructed, within the lecture hall, a secularized version of the healing ritual itself, using visual sequencing as a medium of psychic catharsis.

The Serpent Ritual lecture thus operated on multiple practical and symbolic levels.

First, it enabled Warburg to shed his patient identity by demonstrating restored cognitive function and scholarly capability—ultimately contributing to his discharge.

Second, by studying how the Hopi negotiated

fear through ritual, Warburg devised a method of psychic self-regulation: one in which human beings mediate between themselves and the forces of nature via symbolic acts and aesthetic choreography.

Third, the preparation for the lecture stabilized Warburg's emotions by reestablishing an equilibrium between rationality and the demonic forces he feared.

Fourth, the retrieval and confrontation of serpentine imagery from memory allowed him to recode long-standing visual trauma into a structured narrative.

Fifth, by interpreting serpents and serpent dances through the lenses of medicine and mythology, Warburg reclaimed his social function as a scholar—now doubled as a cultural diagnostician.

Sixth, the lecture offered critical empirical support for Ludwig Binswanger's work on phenomenological psychopathology, and has since been regarded as a paradigmatic example of how image-driven discourse can facilitate psychological healing.

Finally, the experience laid the conceptual groundwork for Warburg's most ambitious project: the Mnemosyne Atlas. This endeavor, a vast compilation of emotionally charged images arranged in associative grids, would become both the culmination of Warburg's intellectual legacy and the extended embodiment of his therapeutic model.

Throughout his career, Warburg was preoccupied with two interrelated phenomena: the expression of passion and the reaction to fear. These emotional dynamics, which had fascinated him intellectually, ultimately overwhelmed him psychologically, manifesting as outbursts of rage, phobic delusions, and obsessive-compulsive

behavior. His condition deteriorated to the point where he became a danger to himself and others, necessitating his confinement in a closed psychiatric ward (Gombrich, 2018).

Warburg's emotional world, his relationship to images, and his memory were marked by ambiguity and non-linearity. Accordingly, any attempt to analyze the Serpent Ritual must proceed along two parallel tracks: one focused on the iconographic content of the images, and the other on the therapeutic logic of what we may now call "image-based self-rescue." This phenomenon was multidimensional—at once a product of institutional therapy, a gesture of reconciliation with his inner demons, and a performative assumption of the healer's role.

Long before iconology emerged as a formal discipline, Warburg began using images to modulate psychic pain. From a contemporary perspective rooted in affect theory, we can reinterpret the lecture as a form of "affective performance," where visual stimuli operate not only as conveyors of cultural meaning but also as vectors of emotional intensity. As Brian Massumi has written, affect is "an intensity" that circulates between bodies and images—often preceding cognition. Warburg's carefully arranged slides—ranging from mythical monsters to healing serpents and stellar constellations—did not simply inform; they incited emotional responses that enabled therapeutic release.

Thus, the Serpent Ritual was not just a lecture. It was a negotiated resolution of affective contradiction—a therapeutic choreography in which Warburg transformed his inner turbulence into shared visual experience. In this way, the serpent ceased to be merely a symbol and became what Warburg most needed it to be: a force to be confronted, translated, and finally, lived with.

Ultimately, the Serpent Ritual reveals that thinking itself can heal. Warburg transformed the structure of scholarship into a space of therapy—an arena where fear was analyzed, narrated, and finally mastered through the image. By turning analysis into ritual and interpretation into cure, he blurred the boundary between knowing and healing. In this sense, the lecture stands not only as a milestone in art history but as one of the first attempts to use image and thought together as instruments of psychic recovery.

6. Conclusions

Aby Warburg's psychological collapse during World War I and his subsequent treatment at the Bellevue Sanatorium have rarely been addressed in detail—even in E.H. Gombrich's authoritative intellectual biography. Georges Didi-Huberman challenged this omission, arguing that such narrative sanitization distorts the full complexity of Warburg's intellectual persona. By suppressing the more troubling aspects of his mental illness, traditional scholarship preserved the image of Warburg as a purely rational art historian. Yet, it was precisely the irreconcilable tension between genius and madness—between analytical order and psychic fragmentation—that triggered Warburg's turn toward what he would eventually call his "image-based self-rescue." The Warburg Library and Institute itself can be seen as an architectural manifestation of this therapeutic impulse: a space where images were used to organize internal chaos.

In response to Jacob Burckhardt's enduring question—"What happens in the mind of the viewer during the act of seeing?"—this study interprets the Serpent Ritual lecture as a form of visual historiography. Warburg's engagement with images was not passive observation but an active, affective encounter. The dynamic psychological

reactions images elicited were themselves part of a broader phenomenological and perceptual process. In this light, Warburg's self-healing began long before the emergence of iconology as a scholarly field. His life's work, culminating in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, exemplifies a uniquely hybrid methodology he called "cultural psychology"—a fluid, interdisciplinary practice that resists closure and welcomes continuous reinterpretation.

From the perspective of art history, the Serpent Ritual lecture may also be regarded as an early prototype of art therapy through image analysis. Long before "art therapy" became a discipline, Warburg and his physician Ludwig Binswanger together transformed visual research itself into a therapeutic practice. Through acts of recollection, sequencing, and interpretation of images, Warburg enacted a process of psychic reconstruction in which he was both patient and healer. The lecture thus marks a historical moment when art-historical inquiry became inseparable from the work of healing, suggesting that the modern use of images for psychological therapy has its conceptual origin in Warburg's performative scholarship.

Warburg's research is characterized by flashbacks, associative montage, recursion, contradiction, and liminality. His work was cross-disciplinary and indeterminate, marked by a radical openness that invites panoramic, multi-perspectival investigation. In this regard, the Serpent Ritual lecture is far more than an isolated ethnographic report; it is a critical experiment in reconstructing psychic and cultural order through image.

Indeed, the core structure of the lecture anticipates the methodology of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*: both employ visual syntax to trace the *Nachleben* of emotional postures and symbolic forms across historical epochs. Whether through the serpent as a fearsome monster or a healing agent,

Warburg demonstrated how one image could sustain opposite tensions—embodying at once dread and salvation. In his framework, images are not inert symbols but active participants in the shaping of human memory and emotional life.

From the dimly lit projection room at Bellevue to the modular panels of the *Atlas*, Warburg sought to map the human psyche through images. His conception of "cultural science" (*Kulturwissenschaft*) was not merely analytical but therapeutic—a system that navigates between reason and enchantment, trauma and reconstruction, past and present.

By treating sequences of images as affective and symbolic continua, Warburg's iconological method assumes the function of psychic and cultural survival. In this sense, the Serpent Ritual is not only a pivotal case in art historical research; it is a healing technique—a performative synthesis of theory, image, and ritual.

Finally, Warburg's concept of image-based therapy opens a new path for reconsidering the affective role of visual culture in our digital era. With the advent of immersive media, interactive installations, and AI-generated imagery, images have transcended their role as passive objects. They now function as "psychological environments" capable of eliciting, modulating, and externalizing affect. As visibility migrates into neuro-aesthetics, computational perception, and therapeutic interface design, Warburg's work reminds us that the image, long before it became digital, was already a site of healing.

References

- [1] Bordignon, G., & Bergamo, M. (2019). Iconographies and pathosformeln of pain in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne atlas*: A pathway through plates 5, 6, 41, 41a, 42, 53, 56, and 58. *Ikon*

- (Rijeka), 12, 219–232.
- [2] Fang, H. L. (1988). The connection between the origin of American Indians and ancient Chinese humans. *Prehistoric Research*, 00, 294–301.
- [3] Gombrich, E. H. (2018). *Aby Warburg: An intellectual biography* (B. Z. Li, Trans.). The Commercial Press.
- [4] Koerner, J. L. (2012a). Writing rituals: The case of Aby Warburg. *Common Knowledge* (New York, N.Y.), 18(1), 86–87.
- [5] Koerner, J. L. (2012b). Writing rituals: The case of Aby Warburg. *Common Knowledge* (New York, N.Y.), 18(1), 92.
- [6] Michaud, P.-A. (2007). *Aby Warburg and the image in motion* (S. Hawkes, Trans.). Zone Books.
- [7] Preziosi, D. (2009). *The art of art history: A critical anthology* (New ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [8] Simpson, J. A., & Weiner, E. S. C. (Eds.). (1989). *Oxford English dictionary* (2nd ed., Vol. 15). Oxford University Press.
- [9] Tenreiro, A. (2008). Immanuel Kant (1764-1804) - Observations on the sense of beauty and sublime. *Edicoes Univ Lusofonas*, 11, 171–174.
- [10] Warburg, A., & Mainland, W. F. (1939a). A lecture on serpent ritual. *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2(4), 278.
- [11] Warburg, A., & Mainland, W. F. (1939b). A lecture on serpent ritual. *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2(4), 281.
- [12] Warburg, A., Boas, F., & Cestelli Guidi, B. (2007). Aby Warburg and Franz Boas: Two letters from the Warburg archive: The correspondence between Franz Boas and Aby Warburg (1924–1925). *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 52, 221–230.

©2025. This article is copyrighted by the author and Hong Kong Science and Technology Publishing Group. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access