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***ITER PER LABYRINTHUM:*
PLATES A B AND C OF BILDERATLAS MNEMOSYNE¹**

THE OPENING THEMES OF ABY WARBURG'S ATLAS

What I am presenting today is the result of research work conducted by the Seminar group at the Centro studi classicA IUAV University in Venice about the first plates of the *Mnemosyne Bilderatlas*².

The first three plates of Warburg's Atlas are headed by the letters A, B and C unlike the plates that follow, which are identified by numbers, 1-79. Their position and identification by letter reveal that the plates are a related group, and are distinct from the other panels. Panels A, B and C – which were probably assembled after the rest of the work had been completed – prove to be an introduction to the themes contained in the Atlas as a whole, a sort of threshold leading to the labyrinth which is *Mnemosyne*, with all the coordinates for making the entire work accessible.

Plates A, B and C present three different approaches to the schematization of the thematic threads running throughout the Atlas and, therefore, through the traces of the repertoire of the western tradition which the Atlas represents.

Plate A illustrates schematically three mapping principles: astro-cosmographical, topographical, and genealogical. Plate B, by subject, presents the development of the relationship between the micro and the macrocosm via anthropocentrism and the figure of *homo cosmicus* in an itinerary that leads from the astrological anthropopathy of the Middle Ages to the anthropoiesis of the Renaissance, and finally to the re-emergence of magical anthropopathy in the modern age. Plate C represents by theme the journey of man through the cosmos together with his understanding of the science of astronomy. At the same time, it also presents the trajectory leading to the acquisition of technical knowledge as the means for achieving victory and learning, which combines the power to create and to destroy.

¹ The text is published as submitted by the author.

² A different version of this article was published in "Engramma", 125, March 2015.



Mnemosyne Atlas,
Plate A, B & C.
London, Warburg
Institute Archive

The composition of plates A, B and C according to layout, subject and theme provides three schemes that encapsulate in seemingly simplified fashion the complex evolution of western civilization: the three opening plates appear to present a method of tracing clear itineraries through the forest of symbols, themes, myths and figures whose wanderings represent the corpus of the classical tradition.

The theme that innervates the Atlas, outlined in the A, B and C group of plates, is “the distance between the self and the external world”, as Warburg himself explains in his *Introduction* to the *Bilderatlas* in 1929¹. It considers the relationship between man and the cosmos and, as a consequence, the relationship between freedom and necessity; a relationship which at times, during the Middle Ages but during the post Renaissance period too, becomes an oppressive fetter, and mutates decisively between the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, and is then reflected into the time in which Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* Atlas is conceived – the historically significant period in which the equilibrium between man and the cosmos is disrupted and then redefined following the outbreak of the First World War.

An internal comparison alone between the three opening plates reveals the weavings and junctures that unravel through images throughout all the plates that make up the Atlas. In this sense, plates A, B and C as the introduction to *Mnemosyne*, point by illustration to the cultural, geographical and historical context of the entire Atlas: the oscillation between the opposite poles of rationality and mathematics, and magic and religion, and the evolutionary lines that lead from astrological superstition to the technological conquest of the heavens, from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe.

¹ A. Warburg, *Mnemosyne Einleitung* (1929), in M. Warnke (Hrsg.), *Aby Warburg. Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2000, pp. 3–6; En. tr. by M. Rampley, “The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past”, in *Art In Translation* 1.2, July 2009, pp. 273–283; now also in “Engramma”, 142, February 2017.

PLATE A

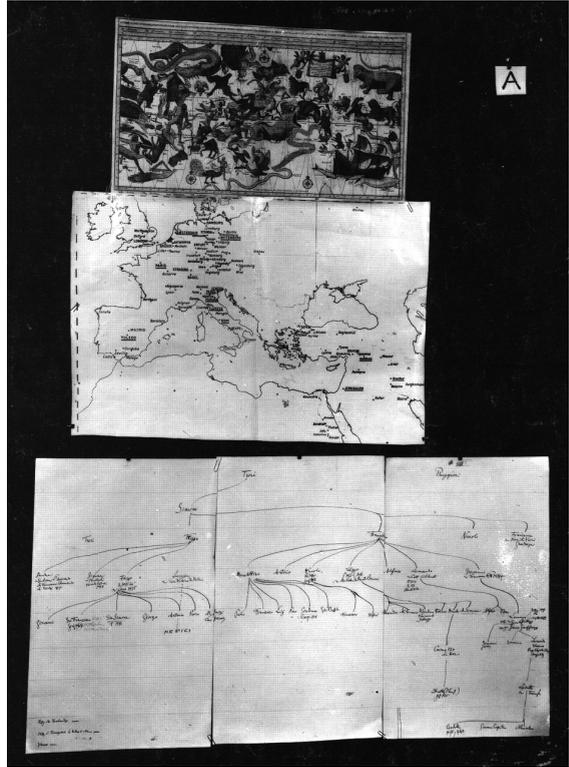
The grid-like scheme of plate A shows astrology as a star, a cosmography that reflects on topography and genealogy and different ways of controlling the heavens, space and human evolution, giving them form and sense. The first plate that opens *Mnemosyne* offers an initial general overview of the historical, geographical, and gnoseological co-ordinates of the Atlas.

The plate, which is probably the most enigmatic of the three, suggests a methodological relationship between the different applications of the same cartographical logic: the recognition of constellations in the heavens by joining up luminous dots of stars in the shape of man and animals; drawing maps and routes on earth; drawing family trees that represent relationships between members of one family, chosen as an example.

Just three figures suffice to display, according to Warburg's notes for the plate, the "different systems of relations with which man is connected": cosmic, with the sky represented via its constellations; earthly, where the signs of western culture around the Mediterranean Basin are disseminated; genealogical, with the ramifications of the family tree of one of the most powerful families of the Italian Renaissance, schematized as a paradigm within a microcosm.

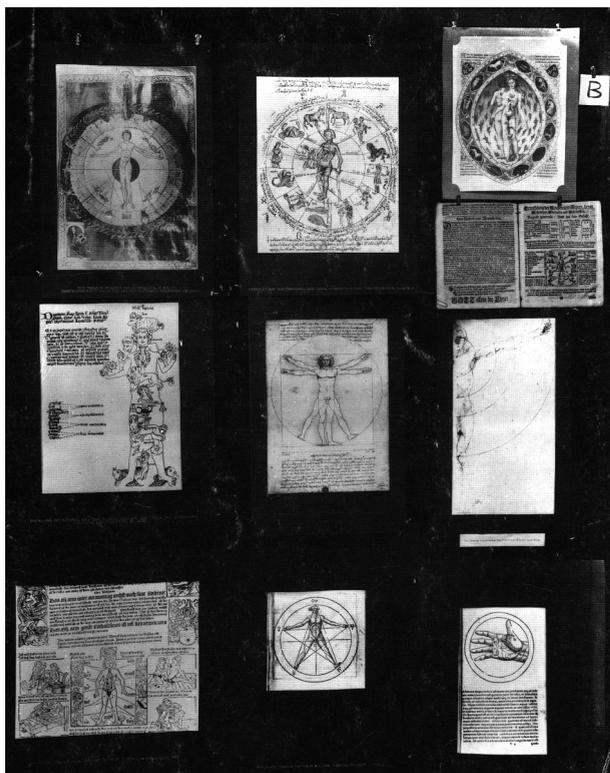
The plate shows from top to bottom, an image of the sky populated by mythological characters; a map that, in order to illustrate transmigrations between North and South, and East and West, starts at Cyzicus and Alexandria, and ends in Hamburg, where Warburg was born; the bottom of the page shows the ancestry of the Medici-Tornabuoni family, during the Renaissance.

The itinerary for reading the plate starts from the top, and travels downwards taking the reader from a general horizon progressively through to a human dimension embodied in the individuals belonging to a specific historical and social context: from the heavens to earth, from earth to mankind; from cosmology to geography, from geography to genealogy, in a process of gradually focalizing specifically on the relationship between subject and object, man and world.



Mnemosyne Atlas,
Plate A, London,
Warburg Institute
Archive

PLATE B



Mnemosyne Atlas,
Plate B, London,
Warburg Institute
Archive

In plate B, the eye is drawn to one of the central themes of the preceding plate: the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the shifts in this system of relations.

Plate B includes astrology in the relationship between the micro and macrocosm, which, from its pagan conception in late antiquity, reappears in the Middle Ages, transfigured into the figurative language of Christianity, to re-emerge during the Renaissance and recover in part its ancient meaning (the first image on the panel is an illustration of a vision by Hildegarde of Bingen).

The ten images pinned to plate B demonstrate and highlight a feature common to them all: the centrality of the human body which is placed at the centre of most of the images. The items displayed on the plate are placed in a discontinuous chronological order: mediaeval illustrations and

drawings of two Renaissance masters, treatises on traditions of magic and the occult, and the survival of iatro-astrology into the C18th. In the sequence, the oscillations between different stages of interdependence between microcosm-macrocosm and an unstable equilibrium between the heavens and the earth are made clear.

The brief note left by Warburg and his collaborators as a comment on the plate explains that it deals with: "Different degrees of the cosmic system's influence on Man. Harmonic correspondences. Later, conversion of harmony to abstract geometry, rather than one that is cosmically determined (da Vinci)."

Warburg himself, then, tells us in his note, what the main theme of the montage is, and its compositional meaning: astral influences that bind man's body to "harmonic correspondences". It is significant that he stresses the moment when, during the Renaissance revolution, Man understands the harmony that binds his body to the cosmos as being a series of norms which give rise to geometric abstractions rather than a burden of "cosmically determined" influences.

Together with the note on plate B, the significance of the montage can also be deciphered by the text of the conference that Warburg held on 25 April 1925,

which has recently been published in Italian together with accompanying iconographic materials, some of which coincide with the images on the plate. The opening lines of this invaluable text read: “The rediscovery of classical antiquity was not a phenomenon generated in workshops, but a process of conflict between a new vitality and the survival of what preceded it”¹. The antiquity that asserted itself, demonically transformed by astrology into religious matter, gave Warburg scope for clearly understanding the rebirth of antiquity as the result of modern Man’s attempt to free himself of practices in Hellenistic magic.

In the montage, the two Renaissance works by Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer respectively – two examples of “modern Man’s attempt to free himself” – are surrounded by various images taken from manuscripts and later printed works ascribable to the tradition of daemonic astrology in which the body of *homo zodiacalis* appears, fully or in part, to be surrounded, marked and constellated by astrological and planetary signs.

In the plate, it is possible to identify three thematic itineraries: the first is cosmological, the second anthropometrical and the last is magico-apotropaic. From the beginning, plate B represents astrology as astropathy, articulated into the derived practices of astrodiagnostics and astrotherapy, and finally becoming the esoteric magic of astrophilia. At the centre of the montage are placed the Renaissance figures of *hominis dignitas* by Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer, the only ones that are free of astral *religio* and who, conversely, impose upon the cosmos their own proportions and limits. With the emergence of the two Renaissance images, man is no longer conceived as the passive victim of a conflict between demonic forces fighting for control of his body. He actively takes part in the battle to re-establish the balance between subjection and cosmic forces.

However, the conquest of equilibrium is never final. The positioning of the two images from *De occulta philosophia* by Agrippa von Nettesheim at the end of the plate illustrates the drift towards astropathy and its magico-esoteric cures.

The subject of plate B, therefore, is the incessant oscillation between classical rationality, which Warburg called “Athens”, and “Alexandria”, the name he uses for the spatial and temporal dimension of Hellenistic irrationality. In his essay *Ancient and pagan divination in the time of Luther*, Warburg writes: We live in the age of Faust when modern scientists, oscillating between magical practices and cosmological mathematics, endeavour to gain for their space for thought that separates them from their object in order to contemplate it dispassionately. Athens must always be conquered afresh from Alexandria².

¹ A. Warburg, *L'effetto della “Sphaera Barbarica” sui tentativi di orientamento cosmici dell'Occidente* (Conferenza del 25 aprile 1925), in A. Warburg, *Per monstra ad sphaeram*, a cura di D. Stimilli e C. Wedepohl, Milano 2014, pp. 43–105.

² Cfr. A. Warburg, *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*, “Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberg Akademie der Wissenschaften”, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Jahrgang 1920, 26, Heidelberg 1920 (GS I, 487–558; Renewal 597–697)

With his montage of plate B, Warburg invites us to acknowledge the oscillation, even within the same historical and cultural era, during the Renaissance between the recovery of the space for thought (*Denkraum*) and its loss, and “the founding act of human civilization”¹, which for Warburg coincides with the creation of distance between the self and the external world.

PLATE C



Plate C is dedicated mainly to the power of Mars, and its theme is the discovery of astronomical mathematics and the simultaneous survival of the magical and demonic aspects of the influence of the planets. The plate has an apparently linear and progressive layout: from the earliest conquests of modern science (the representation of planetary orbits, their trajectories and measurements based on Kepler) to its latest achievements (the transmission of images via telegraphy). The focus is on the power of the various means of representation and reproduction (machinery of technology) and on the resulting enhanced ability to transmit figurative ideas (“pictorial slogans” – *Schlaffbilder* – is an expression of Warburg’s and refers to the circulation of images).

The layout of the six images occupies just a part of the upper region of the plate (it should be remembered, however, that the 1929 version

Mnemosyne Atlas,
Plate C, London,
Warburg Institute
Archive

of the Atlas was a dummy run), and follows a dialectical rather than a linear sequence.

The montage opens with engravings representing orbits of the planets, and, in particular, the elliptical orbit of the planet of war giving the lie to the composure of the cosmos represented with its concentric spheres. The engravings compared with images taken from contemporary tabloids representing the Zeppelin airship accomplishing the feat of circumnavigating the world, recount the story of man’s attempt to measure the heavens, conquer them and rule routes through them. At the same time, the inclusion of a miniature taken from a German manuscript of the second half

¹ A. Warburg, *Mnemosyne Einleitung* (1929), cit.

of the Quattrocento representing Mars and his bellicose sons, (“the wayward sons of Mars” in the caption), is a reminder that, despite technological and scientific achievements, it is always necessary to reckon with the irrational and destructive influence of Mars.

Plate C opens with two illustrations taken from the works of Kepler: even if he had still based his *Mysterium Cosmographicum* on what had until then been accepted as undisputed laws controlling the solar system – uniformity, regularity and the circularity of the movement of the celestial bodies subordinated to a divine principle – in his *Astronomia nova* of 1609, he used empirical data from astronomical observation to confirm that the theory was untenable. Kepler then decided to study the movement of Mars, with the courage to overcome a primitive fear applied to mathematics, and introduced a new solution to calculate the movements of its orbit: the ellipse. Thus, the antagonist of the representation of the cosmos as spherical, perfect and orderly is Mars, and the discovery of the planet’s elliptical trajectory revolutionises the Platonic notion of the harmony of the spheres. The formal constant in plate C is the ellipse, from the shape of the planet’s orbit to the contour of the airship. The heroes of this story, who with their scientific knowledge and their courage succeed in taming the heavens, are Kepler, and, featuring in the closing images of the plate, Count von Zeppelin, and the aviator-entrepreneur Hugo Eckener.

By including an image of the airship Warburg, tells the story of a wonderful invention whilst recalling its prismatic nature: technology can serve destruction. Indeed the airship was used as a bomber during the First World War, while at the same time it can be an instrument of knowledge and communication between people. Indeed we know that in 1929 Eckener circumnavigated the world.

The theme of war is strongly present in plate C, also for this reason the three panels have been part of the exhibition *Mars’ sons. A B C of the war in atlases* by Aby Warburg, Ernst Jünger and Bertolt Brecht, organized by the Centro studi classicA at Iuav University of Venice, in which the works of the three different authors were compared with respect to the theme of representation of the world during the War.

The three atlases or primiers of these authors: Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* (1929), Jünger’s *Veränderte Welt* (1933), and Brecht’s *Kriegsfibel* (1933–1947), are conceived as answer to the revolution of space, time, and perception triggered by the First World War, they constitute an historical-critical and spiritual ‘orientation tool’, in the new era that begins with the twentieth century. In the face of formidable violence of war, as an alternative to aphasia, to the folding in silent pain, they give words to image to rename the world after its destruction.

The main theme proposed in the first three plates of the *Bilderatlas* is the need for *Orientierung*: orientation. *Orientierung* is almost a technical term in Warburg’s lexicon and implies the attempt to discover designs in the heavens and on earth that enable man to plot routes in the search for interior as well as exterior order, giving shape and limitations to

the frightening world, and to the anxiety caused by the demons that inhabit not only the heavens above but also those that dwell inside us, disturbing the psyche.

Plates A, B and C indicate that finding one's bearings is essential in order to understand the purpose of a journey which is always about migration and return. Warburg borrows from Kant's 1786 essay *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?*¹ the notion that finding one's bearings is "to determine when leaving a certain part of the world (one of the four which make up the horizon), where the other parts are, especially the orient". To orient oneself is, therefore, having to decide where the orient is, and reflecting on the continuous to and fro between the East and the West, from one shore to the other of the Mediterranean, displayed at the centre of Plate A as a liquid area through which the classical tradition flows.

In panels A B and C, the theme of orientation is intimately linked to the theme of astrology and its scientific evolution with the astronomy of Kepler. Astrology plays with the relationship that binds man to the cosmos, together with the unceasing effort by man to extricate himself from the need for that bond. The relationship between freedom and necessity with regard to destiny is expressed in the motto, coined by Warburg, "*Per monstra ad sphaeram*" and chosen as an *ex libris* when his beloved friend Franz Boll – the author of *Sphaera*, an essential text for Warburg's analysis of Schifanoia – died. It is a play on words that echoes a famous line by Seneca "*Per aspera sic itur ad astra*" (*Hercules Furens* II, 437), from which in antiquity the proverb "*Per aspera ad astra*" had already been taken.

As regards the Latin source, the change Warburg made by coining a new motto is particularly significant: the adversities one has to survive in order to reach the stars are not just the impervious and difficult routes of the journey; they are also horrible monsters – *monstra*, whose demonic power man has been called to overcome. "*Per monstra ad sphaeram*": the three plates grouped together speak of man's disquiet at being subjugated to the *monstrum*, and of the prospect of ambiguous freedom from that bond that will come with the scientific contemplation of the stars.

For those who enter into the Atlas, the group of Plates A, B and C orientate into the forest of the Atlas whilst simultaneously confirming that the compositional process and the interactive nature of each plate, and *Mnemosyne* as a whole, is greatly complex.

Plates A, B and C advise in advance that the entire Atlas is a journey, a jungle of excursions that cannot be simplified, on pain of tearing apart the discontinuous threads of memory. Through images we are told that the radiating boundaries and the map of the journey are not rigidly fixed and defined. Around the Mediterranean, the routes are drawn by the continuous convergence and separation of journeys between East and West, which at times merge, becoming one path, and are then attracted into other orbits.

¹ I. Kant, *Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?* (1786), *Berlinische Monatschrift Mill*, pp. 304–30; ed. and En. tr. by A.W. Wood, G. di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–18.

In the western tradition – from Classical Greece to Hellenism, from Hellenism to Christianity, via the Middle Ages, up to the Renaissance and modernity – nothing is definite and the ways phenomena appear and disappear are always dynamic and reversible: signs and forms survive only if they withstand the experience of the journey, whether through space or time, and the permeable boundary between East and West that alone sanctions transmigration – physical, conceptual and symbolic. The survival, whether apparent or submerged, is evidence that tradition is not preserved and guarded, nor confined to museums; even when motifs survive merely in the shape of an engraving, if they are strong enough, they can defend themselves.

ABBREVIATIONS AND EDITIONS

GS I

A.M. Warburg, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance*, ed. by G. Bing, with the collaboration of F. Rougemont, Teubner, Leipzig-Berlin 1932; new edition by H. Bredekamp, M. Diers, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1998.

Renewal

A.M. Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, ed. by K.W. Forster, En. tr. by D. Britt, K.W. Forster, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles 1999.