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# Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* as another Iconoclastic Way

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There are other forms of iconoclasm besides the destruction of idols. For example, an iconoclast can be considered one who, instead of eliminating a deified image, reveals the trick of a magician. The manipulator distracts attention with the gesture of one hand while the other acts. This action affects everyone when it is driven by political-economic power. Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* aims to eliminate magic and reveal the hidden plot that seeks to dominate society. His first panel already announces this: at the top, a map of the zodiac constellations; in the middle, Europe; and below, a genealogical tree of the Medici-Tornabuoni banking family. The Renaissance elites accumulate wealth and influence because it is seemingly dictated by the stars from birth. It is an illusion they display on the roofs of their palaces in the same way that a war is justified by a prophecy. There are some coincidences between Giordano Bruno, Aby Warburg and Vilém Flusser, in their respective ways to explain the dual role of image: both as a weapon of propaganda and as a device to disclose the truth. This article aims to reveal two different types of montages: the persuasive one, controlled by people in power through the ages, which is dismantled by the other, the photographic Warburg *Atlas*. A mirror broken into fragments, therefore, breaks the mirage: a new iconoclastic way.

## Magic and Iconoclasm

Persuasion implies that someone changes their opinion or attitude through non-coercive forms of communication (Knape 2013: 33). The act of secretly trying to manipulate the population in favour of those who seek to obtain or retain power through persuasive discourses and images is defined as a type of magic by Daniel L. O'Keefe (1982). Magic can thus be seen as a category of rhetoric since it can be used to persuade a group to act in a particular manner (Covino 1994: 11–12,

32–33). Magic, in this sense, concerns the idea of exploiting the world, as it is an attempt to control it in one's own interest (Halbatal and Margalit 1994: 105; Restuccia 2018a: 293–294). According to the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–1991), this kind of magical action is idolatry. It is thinking that the world is at one's disposal, completely under one's control (Restuccia 2018b: 6). In fact, there is no serious distinction between magic and ritual idolatry, since both of them constitute one ideological and practical unit (Halbatal and Margalit 1994: 107).

Some Court advisors from Antiquity to the Early Modern Age were magicians. They would present themselves as problem solvers, and would offer to the ruler they served their knowledge and wisdom in broad subject matters such as administrative control, political and diplomatic strategy, ideological approach and its historical legitimation, liturgical practice, and the construction of persuasion scenarios in favour of power (Covino 1994: 20, 32). Their persuasive discourses were often justified by the intervention of cosmic and spiritual forces. The receiver of a message could display a more receptive attitude if the communicator used any of the resources of magical language, such as astrological arguments that justify fate or words that seem powerful enough to change reality (Covino 2002: 222). Therefore, the Renaissance or medieval magician presented himself as someone who had a full grasp on the behaviour of the astrological monsters that determined the future, but also as the mediator of the magic mystery contained in certain sacramental liturgies. He was a promoter and set designer of the emotion and ecstasy produced by the pomp and processional triumph. Be it fear, joy, or hope, all the resources used draw on *pathos* (Johnson 2012: 79).

*Pathos* is one of the three Aristotelian forms of persuasion, along with *ethos* and *logos*. *Ethos* is about the reputation, integrity, and image of the sender of the persuasive message; *logos* is about the probative nature of the discourse itself, and *pathos* is about causing a particular state of mind in the receiver (Knappe 2013: 63).

As we will discuss later, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* is iconoclastic, in its own particular way, because it seems to reveal the secret of three forms of magic linked with *pathos*: the idolatry related to imagination, with the emblematic case of the monstrous idols of astrology, on the one hand; the way the ceremonial pomp used emotions related to magical performativity, on the other; and, lastly, the persuasive use of photography.

Iconoclasm can be defined as the act of breaking, destroying, or banning images in order to avoid idolatry, but it can also refer to all those activities that, for religious or political reasons, break with the established traditions, ideas, and beliefs in a broad sense. That means that actions that go from physically destroying images to other more subtle breaking acts could share the goal of overturning the status quo. Thus, iconoclasm has played a very important role as a driving force of history (Camille 2000: 238–239; González 2018: 4, 6–7). Iconoclast, in this sense, identifies whoever denies and rejects the authority of teachers, norms and models. Thus, the objective of the iconoclast to whom this article refers is to reveal the trick of idolatrous magic, understood as the manipulation of the imagination for controlling the masses by means of an image of the world built upon meaningless promises and threats (Halbatal and Margalit 1994: 127).

### ***Mnemosyne Atlas* and Giordano Bruno: Between Astrology and the Battle of Virtues and Vices**

German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) was the promoter of two great projects. One of them was the Library for Cultural Science, initially based in Hamburg and moved to London before the Second World War, a few years after Warburg's death. The library and its unique order system follow the associative and ever-moving thinking of its creator. It is an essential part of the Warburg Institute, one of the leading centres for the study of the interaction of ideas, images and society. The other project, which this article's title refers to, is an ambitious corpus of images that Aby Warburg intensively worked upon during the last years of his life.

Many books have been published on the latest version of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which cannot be considered as the final version. Available in *La Rivista di Engramma*, or from the Warburg Institute website itself, the latest version comprises 63 panels with a total of 971 photographs that, excluding the few images from other sources and the twentieth century, cover the history of Europe from Antiquity to the Renaissance as a non-linear chronological succession. The photographic format homogenizes diverse material such as series of masters' engravings and paintings, sarcophagi, newspaper articles, postcards, and astrology books, among other topics (Warburg 2012: 8–10, 14, 25–26; Cirlot 2014: 37).

The first three panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* – A, B, C – can be considered introductory and methodological, while the last two – 78, 79 – somehow express the last will of Warburg. This testamentary nature of the work is deduced both by its location and by the dates of the newspaper sheets stamped on them that go from 29 July to 3 September 1929, shortly before Warburg died (Mercuriali 2017: 124). As Christopher D. Johnson (2012: 10, 23–25) explains, each panel has a title compiled by Gertrud Bing (1892–1964) in a notebook of ideas expressed by Warburg. These headings, some of which can be found translated here, summarize – almost as a shorthand – the main topics that the set of photographs displayed on each panel addresses.

Panel A is entitled:

Different systems of relations, cosmic, earthly, genealogical, in which humanity is placed. The harmonizing of all these relations in magical thinking, because the separation of heritage, birthplace and cosmic situation already presumes an achievement of thought. 1) orientation; 2) exchange; 3) social classification.

The three images included in the panel establish a framework of domination over society. A map of zodiac constellations is the top image, representing the orientation of the forecasted future, the celestial geography, the cosmic order that follows the laws of prediction. The map of Europe is placed in the centre as it can connect to the present, to terrestrial geography, to the exchange operations of the Medici bank branches, to the economic order based on commercial legislation. The last of the three can be found at the bottom, and it is an image of the genealogical tree of

the Medici-Tornabuoni family, aiming to look deeper into the past, the roots, the underground geography, the social order established in the dynasty, and the succession legislation.

Warburg (2005: 454–473, 512–516) reminds us that at the beginning of modern times, not only did specific star alignments or planetary conjunctions at the time of birth determine the fate of a particular person, but they also announced important events that could incite war or rebellion. The widespread superstitious fear of planets came together with the mathematical and astronomical calculations that added a quasi-scientific character to the predictions. Astrology was, in fact, included in the university curricula at the time, and the importance of it was such that, as an example, it could even lead to the falsification of the date of birth and birth horoscope of Martin Luther (1483–1546) to make it coincide with a major planetary conjunction that heralded the beginning of a new era (Warburg 2005: 449, 452). Zodiac elements and natal charts were also frequent at that time as a decoration for the walls and ceilings of palaces, or they could even be found in the Pope's chamber as proof of the designation assigned from birth that somehow justified their position in society. This belief that astrology and prophecy dominated the future and fate served as a perfect instrument for the elites of the sixteenth century to manipulate and control the population by acting as magicians through suggestion and illusion.

A magician – according to *De vinculis in genere*, written by Neapolitan philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) between 1589 and the beginning of 1592 – was a great connoisseur of the links between the stars, who could manipulate those animals that were raised to the skies by the ‘absurd’ imagination of the ancient people at his whim. When Ioan Petru Culianu (1999: 99–101, 154–160, 167–176) commented on the work by Bruno, he highlighted three different elements in the magical action, understood as the control and manipulation techniques: (a) knowing the population's instincts – what they fear, hate or what disgusts them, but, above all, what they want, deep down, the reason for their hope; (b) creating a sensory scenario that, together with the above information, stimulates both the emotions and the imagination to encourage an attitude in the intended sense; and (c) believing that the manipulator himself, and everyone he addresses, are fully convinced that the magical operation serves as an effective way to create collective hypnosis based on fear, as well as on hope. *De vinculis in genere*, as Ernesto Schettino (2008: 23–25) points out, is not a text on sorcery or witchcraft but rather a magic guide, in the sense of practical know-how, that can be used to teach how to manipulate people through their emotions. Bruno states, for example, that some individuals are more affected by tragedy and can be moved to the point of crying by certain gestures, emotions, or movements. Others, however, find this in comedy. That was the case of Pope Julius III (1487–1555), who refused to attend people who came up to him in tears to beg and plead, but who was pleased when someone, after he had kissed the Pope's feet, approached him cheerfully with a joke, to the point that such person could then get anything he wanted from the pontiff (Bruno 2007: 45–49).

Joachim Sprung (2015) recalls that Warburg and Bing, probably both influenced by Ernst Cassirer, had hopes of finding the missing link they desperately needed to

join the two main themes (orientation and *pathos*) of Warburg's scholarship regarding *Nachleben der Antike* ('the survival of Antiquity') into a comprehensible synthesis, and finally into a picture atlas of the outer (orientation) and inner (*pathos*) world. Warburg and Bing spent a period in Italy from late September 1928 until June 1929. That was the time when Warburg acquired a collection of about 350 books from Giordano Bruno, some of them written by him and others about him. However, Warburg died in October 1929, which did not allow him to study all this material carefully enough to make Bruno the central combinatorial element in the *Mnemosyne*. The most unmistakable evidence of his unfulfilled wish was the 45-page notebook dedicated to Bruno he wrote in the last seven months of his stay in Italy. In one of his last thoughts, he announced the 'liberation of the cosmos from spherical boundaries and monstrous border guards' (Johnson 2012: 194–198). Indeed, in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* (1584), Giordano Bruno addresses the idea of banishing from heaven predestination, greed and ignorant superstition caused by the belief in myth-astrological monsters. He replaces the vices identified with the zodiac motifs with virtues (Johnson 2012: 202–208; Lescourret 2014: 353–356).

The relationship between zodiac signs, vices and virtues is represented, for example, in the Gothic rose window on the west facade of Notre Dame, the Cathedral of Paris. It is likely that Bruno also considers *Psychomachia* with regard to such links. This allegorical poem, the title of which can be translated as *Battle of the Virtues and Vices*, was written by the Hispano-Roman poet Aurelius Prudentius at the end of the fifth century. It is one of the most important and better known works in the medieval world and a source of inspiration for other treatises on the same subject. Through personifications of vices and virtues, he narrates how the soul assimilates itself into a battlefield where these opposing forces fight in a duel. Virtue must defeat vice in order ultimately to achieve wisdom. For its part, Wisdom does not fight against anyone but is the product of the union of the forces of all the other virtues (Solivan 2020a: 335–336; Solivan 2020b: 123).

Some images (*imagines agentes*) act on us, modifying the way we look at the world and therefore our beliefs and our behaviour (Restuccia 2018b: 1). Prudentius created scenes, combining extremely vigorous actions that introduce notoriously morbid, unpleasant, or disgusting elements, to make them especially memorable. Furthermore, miniatures of *imagines agentes*, characterized by a mnemonic exaltation of the senses, can be found in later copies of the poem, such as those from the ninth and tenth centuries. Sometimes, it is the vice itself that commits suicide – as happens, for example, when *Anger* sees that it cannot win over virtue and, in desperation, takes one of the spearheads lying on the battlefield, sticks it into the ground, and runs himself through with it. The victorious virtues are equally unpleasant with the vices: they behead *Pride* and even dismember *Discord* (Solivan 2020a: 340–342). *Anger* is the most enraged of all passions; it turns against itself, it is unable to control itself and it is stubbornly impetuous and violent when it seeks to fulfil its purposes (Zamora 2003: 33–34, 37). The *seppuku* of the samurai in panel 79, the beheading in panel 47, and the dismemberment in panel 25 of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* could be considered a reflection of pride and defeated anger.

*Pathos*, causing a particular state of mind, was seen by the Stoics with deep distrust or even as a destructive force (Cassirer 1988: 34). The struggle between vices and virtues was considered a conflict between *pathos* (the affectation of the passions) and *apatheia* (impassibility), the latter equivalent in a Stoic conception to *sophia* (wisdom) (Didi-Huberman 2013: 183). Warburg's thought and the Stoic thought could be surreptitiously aligned in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* concerning the risk of the political use of the *pathosformel*, the influence of planets on one's state of mind, and the astrological dominance of fate. Moving from the macrocosm of the celestial astrological object of dominion to the microcosm of the person is precisely the subject discussed in panel B. This indomitable nature of the passions, represented by the vices and the zodiac signs, gives the person who awakes them extraordinary power.

In the transition from medieval to modern times, surgeons were assumed to know which zodiac signs govern the different parts of the body and thus avoided operating or bleeding a patient when a wrong constellation dominated the sky. The importance of calibrating the influence of the stars on the human body made the study of astrology even more systematic in the medical schools of that time than in other university faculties (Kieckhefer 1992: 132). That way, the astrological points were healing signs and confirmed the link between mathematicians, that is to say astrologers, and *medici* (Imbert 2003: 25–27). The magician that served the political power acted as a doctor who promised to cure all social ills and predict the future, being aware that it was easier to move the crowd by the force of imagination and illusion than simply out of physical force (Cassirer 1988: 341–342).

In panel B, Warburg establishes a linguistic game between medicine and the Medici lineage of the genealogical tree in panel A. Through the case study of this family of bankers from Florence, the *Atlas* is somehow Warburg's surreptitious way of reflecting on his family, whose main activity was also banking. Georges Didi-Huberman (2011: 5–6, 12–13) explains that the Warburg family participated directly in financial operations related to the First World War, and it is quite probable that Aby Warburg considered this armed conflict a new and radical *psychomachia*. However, the monsters, in this case, are no longer the zodiac constellations, but rather the air combat and gas bombs as reflected in panel C, where a Zeppelin is represented along with the figure of Mars, the god of war. This suggests that, together with the new destructive technology, the dark magic of the political discourse remains in place, arousing the population's credulous emotion to justify military mobilization and heroic combat as the prophetic advent of a new world.

### **Photography in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Flusser and Iconoclasm**

The last two panels (78 and 79) of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* address the political appropriation of the 1929 Corpus Christi procession in St. Peter's Square and, rather than praising the Eucharistic triumph, seem to point out the pontiff's secular throne (Mercuriali 2017: 125–129). The ritual was interrupted in 1870 when the Papal States disappeared with the unification of Italy and was then brought back through

the signature of the Lateran Treaty of 11 February 1929, which was also photographed, and which solved the matter of the Church's statehood, although the latter remained limited to Vatican City. The Italian State and the ecclesiastical institution agreed on the re-establishment of Catholicism as the country's official religion. One day after the treaty was signed, on 12 February 1929, a solemn mass was celebrated in the Vatican to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the coronation of Pope Pius XI (1857–1939), also shown in panel 78 (Johnson 2012: 186; Mercuriali 2017: 124–125, 131). These highly emotional collective scenarios were inspired in the iconographic genre of the *trionfi*, the survival of the Greco-Roman military tradition. Processions, festivals and triumphs of the Renaissance constitute one of the main topics illustrated by the images in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which many panels, such as 7, 27, 28–29, 38, 39, 40, 49, 50–51, 55, 57 and 60, show. They lived on into the public space of the Vatican in 1929, which was photographed and transformed into a persuasive setting. This confirms the importance the photographic montage itself had for Warburg in the construction of themes, motifs and connections, as well as his great interest in the media support of images and the technology allowing their diffusion and transportation (Finch 2017: 35–51).

The images ensure that an essential part of the past is transmitted, and they provide a more durable, stable, and resistant record than any individual's memory. Moreover, they also reorganize and interpret the collective memory. The fact that one image, instead of another, is chosen for its conservation or exhibition involves an intervention in history that can affect the future (Michaud 2001: 42). Warburg dedicates his photographic atlas to Mnemosyne, which is the personification of memory in Greek mythology. As we shall see, this photographic memory anticipates in some respects Vilém Flusser's philosophy of the image.

When criticizing the technology-dominated contemporary society, Flusser (2001: 17–18) gives a central role to photography as the emblematic example of the technical image, an image produced by a device. A photograph produces the illusion that it is at the same level as reality, reflecting it as if it were a clear window that shows whatever has been photographed. The undeniable mimetic capacity of photographs and their automatic, truthful, and objective status make the observer trust them just as much as they trust their own eyes. The trust and lack of criticism in the face of technical images can be dangerous when its receivers no longer see a need to use the text to find an explanation. At that moment, the historical consciousness and the conceptual capacity are replaced by a second-degree magical consciousness. That is when the surface of the image becomes full of gods, of astrological animals once again (Flusser 2001: 18–20; Carrillo 2007: 6–8, 11–12).

Technical images absorbed traditional images in a way that made these last ones eternally reproducible. Everything wants to remain forever in memory, to be eternally repeatable, according to Flusser. By doing this, the events lose their historical character to become a magical rite and a movement that can continuously be repeated (Carrillo and Méndez 2006: 7; Carrillo 2007: 4–12). The magician had no doubt that an exact cause would always produce the same effect, that if he held the appropriate ceremony and cast the required spell, he would inevitably promote

his desired result. That is how the analogy between magical conceptions of the world and technical images is drawn (Cassirer 1988: 13).

Flusser argues that the bytes of chemical or electrical information, or the points collected and calculated by the devices, lack any existential meaning. They are superficial, but connected and invisibly linked. The multitude of different elements determines the meaning of each object, and, at the same time, the objects themselves are decisive for the elements (Carrillo and Méndez 2006: 7; Carrillo 2007: 4–12).

The *Mnemosyne Atlas* presents some aspects that are related to this magic. On the one hand, its different panels and the images in each of them show a great interconnection. The images establish a dialogue between one another beyond the frame of each panel. On the other hand, the *Atlas* has lived beyond its physical state of preservation because of its being photographed. The photo panels no longer exist, but the photos of the panels do; digitized and always repeatable. However, the most important thing is the connection that can be established between the critique of the images, the critique through them, and the photographic format that Warburg uses to make them look the same.

The intention behind the invention of the devices is that they can work automatically, not only to emancipate humans from work but to exclude them while they are monitored through cameras and other devices (Flusser 2001: 69–70). The lack of suspicion when we look at photos allows them to programme a magical behaviour, an uncritical consciousness that puts images before situations and events, without searching for causes or consequences (Flusser 2001: 17–20, 53).

According to Flusser, contemporary magic is based on programmed technical images. An extremely effective sort of magic that acts on the sensorimotor function of the person without the need of slow and tiring symbolic-reconstructive processes (Restuccia 2018a: 276).

Idolatry occurs when images are not simply used as maps that can help us to orient ourselves in the world, but become a screen that disfigures reality, and whoever contemplates them loses the ability to decipher them, forgets that they are human work, and begins to live according to them. Imagination turns into hallucination when this happens (Flusser 2001: 13). Flusser highlights that the capacity to read an image is the same capacity we use to make an image: imagination. Images are worshipped when they are not decoded, when they are not understood or recognized as signs. Undeciphered images keep their charming mystery and replace what they should represent (Restuccia, 2018b: 10). The madness of idolatry is not only limited to the hallucinatory cult of traditional images, but it is also present in the fascination that programmed technical images exert today (Flusser 2001: 120, 123).

## Conclusions

An iconoclast goes beyond breaking an image and, above all, seeks to destroy the set-up structure that sustains power. The objective is to unveil the secret behind the magical means that distract attention. The way Warburg's iconoclasm attacks the magic

of images with its own means is a subtle form of *aletheia*, a form of disclosing the truth. The *Mnemosyne Atlas* does not destroy idols physically, but rather gathers images on panels to provide critical information on what is represented and reveal another hidden reality.

Warburg proves that a photomontage can be a snake that can both heal with its medicinal poison or kill with its bite or constriction. Thus, he acts as a wise doctor, who, like the magician, knows the bonds of friendship and discord that correspond to a single phenomenon and seeks the antidote in the poison itself. That is why he denounces the new type of contemporary magic through a photographic montage, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Images no longer need to use astrology, the fate determined by the stars, to justify power or motivate a conflict situation, as such images can also cause an emotional state used by certain elites to encourage anger and discord among the population. It is a new stage in the struggle between vices and virtues that Giordano Bruno referenced in the sixteenth century.

Flusser's philosophy of technical images shares with Warburg's thought the need to break the magic circle that surrounds us as a photographic universe and the ability this circle has to programme attitudes that are increasingly automated and directed by the different devices that rule society. Technical images, meaning photographs in a broad sense that go beyond their paper format and the devices that create them, such as video surveillance or satellite imagery, could be considered our new astrological monsters. In a magical world where everything can repeat itself and everything is reproducible, is the past so different from the present?

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