

Title: Dead and Alive: Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas

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Abstract: The article examines some contexts that are relevant to the production of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas in terms of the mass dissemination of photographic images and the ordering of images as typologies and taxonomies. The journal, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Ernst Haeckel's illustrations of microscopic bodies, Flinders Petrie's archaeological typologies and photographic methodology and Andre Malraux's musée éphémère are among key references in the discussion. How, in Bernard Stiegler's terms a reifying schema is produced is crucial in the discussion leading to how Ranciere's use of parataxis opens up to the possibility of an organizational order linking the analogue with the digital.

Keywords: Warburg, Mnemosyne Atlas, schema, Stiegler, parataxis, Ranciere.

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Bio:

Mick Finch's research takes the form of studio practice, writing and pedagogical projects. He exhibits his work regularly and internationally most recently in *Engrams*, a one-person show at the Piper Gallery (London 2013) and the group show *Painting, Tableau, Stage* (Urban Space, Columbus, Ohio, 2013). He has published widely on visual art practices and is associate editor of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* and the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* for which in 2015, he co-edited a special edition on Simon Hantai's work. He lived, exhibited and taught for 20 years in France and has written extensively about post war French art. He leads the *Tableau* research project at CSM an outcome of which was the conference *Tableau: Painting Photo Object* at Tate Modern in 2011. He is a member of the French research group *Peinture: un réseau de recherche* funded by the French Ministry of Culture, In 2011 he was an Abbey Fellow in Painting at the British School in Rome and he is a Senior Scholar of the Terra Foundation in Paris.

Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* has received much attention in recent years, importantly in the form of Georges Didi-Huberman's seminars at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris and a recent exhibition he curated, *Atlas: How to carry the world on one's back?*. Huberman's work in turn led to Philippe-Alain Michaud's book, "Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion" (Michaud 2004) that influenced his curation of an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou of the moving image collection in 2006 entitled *Le Mouvement des images*. Giorgio Agamben's essay "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science" (Agamben 1999: 89 - 103), is also notable in this context.

Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* was not a finished or published work in Warburg's lifetime. It consisted of black panels on which photographic images and printed material were pinned and juxtaposed (see figure 1). Benjamin and Warburg's respective projects were viewed as being literally anachronistic until the moment when the anachronistic itself became critically material and an aspect of methodologies, both academic and artistic, that are now well established. This has been especially the case of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* in relationship to the discipline of art history.

The background to the *Atlas* is now well known. Warburg's central concern was the survival of gestural expressions from antiquity through to the renaissance. He viewed the discipline of art history, that he was working within at the time, as a limited and localized reflection upon artistic influence and progress. This limitation denied the possibility of mobilizing the effect of the dead upon a living and vital space that encompasses vast geographic and temporal spaces. As Didi-Huberman says 'The image is not a closed field of knowledge like any other; it is a movement demanding all the anthropological aspects of being and time' (Didi-Huberman 2004: 13). Didi-Huberman describes Warburg's project as a *knowledge-montage* and at its centre the *pathos formula*; manifestations of psychic states rendered fossilized, as images. Again as Didi-Huberman says 'One must look to Freud to understand the metaphysical foundation of the 'psychohistory' asserted by Warburg. Most likely the Freudian concept of the symptom as a *moving fossil* accounts for Warburg's pathos formula and its distinct temporality of oblivion and returns from oblivion, its whirlwinds and anachronisms' (Didi-Huberman 2004: 16).

Warburg was at a frontier of the discipline of art history, his research overlapping with anthropology, ethnography, psychology and biology (to

name but a few). The important aspect of his method here is his relationship to photography that served as a means of materializing his research, as a prosthetic, to establish something akin to *chiastic structure*, a mnemotechnic system, that is arguably the form that the Atlas and his library's shelving structure assumed.

The *Mnemosyne Atlas* manifested itself as a series of black felt covered panels - pin boards, upon which photographic images were attached. In 1923 he gave a lecture using around 40 of these panels while he was still a patient at a mental clinic in Kreuzlingen. The lecture was about the serpent ritual he had observed in New Mexico in 1896 that supported his studies of the Laocoon. In 1929, the last year of his life, he gave a seminar at the Biblioteca Hertziana in Rome that he named *Mnemosyne*. Pathos-formula panels were placed around the reading room and constituted the form of the Atlas we now know. Some 70 panels were made comprised of over 1000 images. Only the photographic documentation of the panels has survived. The images Warburg used were taken from his photographic collection or were reproduced from books and documents. In parallel to compiling his library Warburg also commissioned photographers to photograph arte-facts, primarily in connection with his research into the relationship between antiquity and the renaissance. The photographers were commissioned to record particular iconographies, rather than a selection by artist or period. This aspect of the catalogue system survives in the photo-collection to this day and that now numbers around 400,000 images.¹ Warburg's *Mnemosyne* project was a product of his use of photography. It is probably the earliest instance of where photography is used in relation to art history but not as a means to simply reference using photographic illustrations but more importantly in the development of a methodology, that has at its heart, juxtaposition and montage. His aim was to track and reveal forces acting over extensive periods of time that are distinct from localized mappings of artistic influence that were the norm in Warburg's life time. Memory, in relation to Warburg's methodology, is a question of the transmission of traces of what he thought of as traumatic encounters with threatening external forces. The mapping of this process of transmission he called the pathos-formula. Adi Eyal describes this as:

The "*Pathos Formula*" carries with itself two kinds of memory: on the one hand, it carries the memory of the traumatic encounter with the menacing force; on the other, it remembers the

defensive, fixating act that the consciousness of the recipient performs in relation to this encounter. In the course of time the “Pathos Formula” is fixated as a cultural product, which as history develops, is able to express different and particular contents (Efal 2000: 222).

This operation Warburg considered as a type of screening memory. As he says:

The inherited consciousness of maximalized impressions stamped on the mind (engram) passes them on without taking cognizance of the direction of their emotional charge, simply as an experience of energy tensions; this unpolarized continuum can also function as continuum. The imparting of a new meaning to these energies serves as a protective screen (Warburg 1929: 255). ²

Warburg thought of iconological analysis as necessitating a consideration of the migration of images on an international scale and not simply a matter of localized influences. This sense of the image in transport, or the *bilderfahrzeuge*, brings with it a panoramic sense of world history, displacing it into an expansive idea of evolutionary forces connecting vast geographic territories and temporal relationships. In Warburg’s case antiquity, the middle ages and the modern world are part of a single continuum. The use of the term engram is important here. It served Warburg to situate the transmission of memory traces. It also points to the wider thinking around evolution and the biomorphic that were circulating at the time. Andrea Pinotti in his essay *Memory and Image* sketches out this context:

In order to better define from a terminological point of view, such material traces Warburg would borrow from one of Ernst Haeckel’s pupils and a follower of Hering, Richard Semon, the concept of engram. At the same time, Warburg borrows from him the concept of Mneme, a German grecism employed by Semon to refer not simply to individual memory nor to recollection, but rather to the general complex of collective unconscious memory.

The term “engram” is often used by Warburg, and also modified into that of “dynamogram”: i.e. an energetic sign, or as a “symbol-preserve of energy”: engram, dynamogram and symbol are

equivalent terms in Warburg's conception used to refer to a moment of accumulation of an energetic charge deriving from a sufficiently intense and often repeated event capable of inscribing itself indelibly in the collective memory as a material track. (Pinotti 2004: 5)

These evolutionary models referred to here became contested ground in the period between the wars but the important point here is how Warburg was using ideas derived from biology, and possibly from Bergson, to develop an idea of the image as a form capable of discharging energies, as a vital form, engendering movement through time; as an indelible inscription within collective memory.

Warburg's constellation of ideas and his use of photography seems to point to how reprographic technology created the possibility of the development of his anachronistic methodologies. This also seems to be the case in a wider context and contemporary to Warburg, and will be further discussed here. The conjunction of photography with the questions arising in a discipline, such as art history, raises further questions about the operative means used to manipulate photographic material. In short the operative means used by Warburg can be described as montage. And here his working process can be seen as akin and complimentary to Benjamin's concerns where collage is also an important focus.

The question of how photographic material is generated and manipulated also links to how the shift in printing technologies, dramatically after the first-world war, meant that photographic images could be reproduced cheaply on a large scale. Until that time lithographic illustrations were widely used. In the case of Haeckel, cited above in terms of his interest in the engram as a biologist, genealogies were expressed as illustrations that interestingly used black grounds on which forms such as diatoms and radiolarians are presented, bringing to mind the black grounds of Warburg's pathos formula boards (see figure 2).

*L'Esprit Nouveau*³, published from 1920 to 1925, used predominantly photography and diagrams as its illustrations. Macro and microscopic photographs were often used (see figure 3). Even though photographic technology had since the 19th century the potential to produce such images, the technology that made it possible to widely diffuse them as printed matter came much later in the 20th century. The shift in printing technology that enabled this also heralded a new turn that created a sensorium of objectivity that is distinct from the relatively aestheticised

images produced by Haeckel. It's pure conjecture as to how much Warburg was aware of or was looking at such sources. The point here is that Warburg's marshaling of photographic images, in the service of mapping connections in a panoramic temporal dimension, was emerging elsewhere and across a diversity of disciplines. *L'Esprit Nouveau* journal is a good case in point and possibly reflects its editors interests and backgrounds. Le Corbusier would have been familiar with architectural typologies and Ozenfant's had a developed interest in biology and the biomorphic. There are countless examples of typologies and genealogies in the journal that express pan-cultural connections that, although remote from Warburg's direct concerns, do raise the question of how the possibility not only to reproduce photographic images on a mass scale but also to arrange and juxtapose them was producing a symbiotic relationship between knowledge and the montage of images (see figure 4).

The implication here is that even page layout in addition to photographic images was giving rise to a materiality that signaled a new methodological turn. Introducing here the example of the *L'Esprit Nouveau* alongside Warburg's pathos formula methodology is to point to the wider context, in the first quarter of the 20th century, where photography, by now long since invented and developed, and print technologies were intertwined with ambitions to visualise temporal spaces and construct chronologies and an-chronologies.

The field of archaeology is another case in point where different modes of visualization are at work and that are of interest in this context. This can be seen in the case of Flinders Petrie in the first quarter of the 20th century, who originated a systematic methodology, mainly in the form of typologies of mostly anodyne objects, modest ceramic pots for example (see figure 5). These typologies tracked the evolution of a generic object over a wide period of time, becoming visualized as shape schemas. The direct product of this was a dating system but also a kind of evolutionary tracking of an object, not a pathos formula as such but more as a schematic biography of a class of objects. Just as Haeckel authored and controlled his illustrations Petrie was a photographer. He photographed objects, on site, at excavations mainly for the Egypt Exploration Fund's publications that diffused findings and photographs to its member who were mainly museums who would subsequently bid for individual objects. The visual material he used created intersections of time; the typological schemas of otherwise imperceptible temporal movements and the on-site images of the digs, snapshot collections of

what was unearthed from the excavations. These field photographs were a record in the step in the journey of the objects that would later be dispersed geographically, finding their place in new collections, taxonomies and categories. In one sense these site photographs are a record of a lived, working space. In another sense these are snapshots of their proximity in space and prior to their coming displacement and dispersal.

This instance of photography intervening in the lives of objects and images, at the junctions within geographic transport has an opposing turn in Andre Malraux's capricious *Musée Invisible* project from the 1940s, known in English as the *Museum Without Walls*. Malraux's idea that through photographic reproduction and the book form there was the possibility of assembling images of works of art as an alternative, or as competing taxonomies to exhibitions of artifacts within the confines of an architectural structure. Malraux's proposition is in contrast to what Warburg was putting to work in a more profound way and also the example of Petrie's methodology, imbedded in a discipline as an arguably unconscious force. However the image of Malraux in his apartment, amidst photographs arranged on the floor is of interest. The image is taken from above from the vantage point of a mezzanine space. This brings to mind the architecture of Warburg's Hamburg library building where a mezzanine was a part of the structure. There are stories, possibly apocryphal, that Warburg arranged photographs on tables in the library and looked at them from this mezzanine space. There are also accounts of Warburg using something akin to a drafting table, where photographs would be handled and arranged and that could then be raised from the horizontal plane and into the vertical visual plane. It is not by chance that this level of manipulation of the photograph chimes with Leo Steinberg's account of the flat bed picture plane where the horizontal is the plane of operation, and the vertical is the plane of the visual and looking. The comparison of the image of Malraux dancing amongst images, laid out on the floor, and the famous images of Pollock at work in his studio are compelling only in the sense of how the relationship between organizing and engaging with material, the visual field and the body resonates in the tableau form being moved through two axes.

However Malraux's proposition also brings to mind the album form as a means to organize and catalogue photographic images that could not be diffused more widely as printed matter, as books. In a recent research presentation at Central Saint Martins Dr Michaela Giebelhausen showed

an image of an album that was widely available in France after the time of the Paris Commune. Darkroom produced photographic images of the Commune were collected into the album. A page was set-aside for the album's owner to collect and arrange their images. This raises the question of how, at each stage in the modes of production and diffusion of the photographic image (be it digital or analogue), the image's supports or subtends come into play. The support here can be the architectural configuration of Warburg's library, the design of the tables he used to analyse images, the pin-board, the album, the book form in relation to photo-lithographic technology, and more close to our time, the meta-data attached to images. Questions of support in turn generate distinctions of how planes and supports of operation, Warburg's tables or mezzanine for example can be thought of as dispostifs of analysis while others are of synthesis, for example Warburg's pin-boards as vehicles of presentation. Analysis and synthesis, as used here are borrowed from Bernard Stiegler. This opposition he further twins with production and consumption in what he terms as *reifying schema*. In his essay the *Discrete Image* he says:

...in order for language to be written in an everyday sense, it must *already* be a writing: a system of traces, of "gramme", of discrete elements. I will say, in conclusion, while getting rather ahead of myself and in a purely programmatic way, that we must posit the following hypothesis: life (anima-on the side of the mental image) is always, already cinema (animation – image-object). The technological synthesis is not a replica, not a double of life, any more than writing is a replication of speech, but there is a complex of writing in which two terms always move together, being in transductive relation. Obviously, we would have to do a whole history of representation from this point of view. A history that would be, first of all, the history of the material supports of image-objects. And we would have to mark the specificity of certain epochs: just as certain kinds of writing actually liberate certain kinds of reflexivity (for example certain kinds of linear, alphabetic writing, without which law, science and in particular history would be inconceivable), so certain kinds of image-object are doubtless destined to liberate *reflexivity* in the domains of the visible and of movement, just as alphabetic writing reveals the discrete characters of language. (Stiegler 2002: 162)

Stiegler is pointing to the perhaps simple but important fact the technical conditions of production, put otherwise as the materiality of the image-object, gives rise to reifying schema that are, in turn, the product of submerged processes of manipulation and analysis that entail their own supports and dispositifs. The implication here is that the liberated reflexivity Stiegler refers to, arises from specificities that address what subtends an image; what renders it as being an image-object (that could be extended to saying what renders it visible, diffusible and subject to manipulation)? The implication in Stiegler's thinking, that the discrete image can be thought of as a "gramme" and in turn as an image-object, echoes something of Warburg's use of the engram organism as a model for the potential of an image to be a vehicle of transmission. This potential gives rise to movement, as an animated vital form, insuring life within a temporal continuum.

Building from discrete to linked elements and further on toward a grammar of the image is the heart of the question here. The example of Warburg's Atlas is one of a provisional working process that leads on to a dispositive of presentation. This brings to mind Rancière's formulation of the sentence-image, and particularly in relation to Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in his book *The Future of the Image* (Rancière 2007). Rancière proposes a situation where conventions of representation between text and image have been undone. He says:

The text's part in the representative schema was the conceptual linking of actions, while the image's was the supplement of presence that imparted flesh and presence to it. The sentence-image overturns this logic. The sentence-function is still that of linking. But the sentence now links in as much as it is what gives flesh. And this flesh or substance is, paradoxically, that of the great passivity of things without any rationale. For its part, the image has become the active, disruptive power of the leap – that of the change of regime between two sensory orders. The sentence-image is the union of these two functions. It is the unit that divides the chaotic force of the great parataxis into phrasal power of continuity and imaging power of rupture.
(Rancière 2007:46)

Rancière is here introducing the rhetorical form of parataxis as the defining term to materially situate what the image is within a wider

regime. Parataxis is the form of juxtaposition, unfolding as montage and collage that coincidentally coincides with the collapse of the discrete arts and their mediums. Rancière says when talking of this in relation to Hegel:

This was the argument to which they replied by seeking the principle of their art not in some term of measurement that would be peculiar to each of them, but on the contrary where any such 'peculiarity' collapses; where all the common terms of measurement that opinions and histories lived on have been abolished in favour of a great chaotic juxtaposition, a great indifferent mélange of significations and materialities.
(Rancière 2007:47)

Parataxis is the power of anything having the possibility of being next to, or aligned, with anything else. Metadata, tags and search engines are the most present contemporary example of this as a kind of crushing order of everything, as image, as being subject now to the categorical order of the *miscellaneous*. This, as the chaotic force that Rancière evokes, is dependent upon the division of the 'phrasal power of continuity and imaging power of rupture'. This division can be compared to axes present in Warburg and Benjamin's practices. Warburg seeking the continuum through which the transmission of gestures passes, as an animation that re-animates the past and the dead as vital forces. Benjamin's concerns are famously of the illuminations that happens through juxtaposed encounters. To risk over simplification these are logics, respectively, of montage and collage where questions of medium fall away in favour of the heterogeneous support. The imperative, as Stiegler indicates, of writing a 'history of the material supports of image-objects' is perhaps one implication of what is being laid out here. Richard Prince's gangs, the title being a reference to a standard photographic process, Warhol's Disaster 'paintings' where the uneven registration of the silkscreen image process is important, Richter's Atlas where he mixes images from a range of different modes of photographic production – all these are classic examples from the main frame of recent artistic practice of how a 'history of the material supports of image-objects' could proceed. Other examples are perhaps even more dramatic. For example the visual and audio information, chosen by Carl Sagan and inscribed on a

copper, gold plated disc and then sent into space by NASA on the Voyager 6 probe. Sagan's incommensurable task was 'intended to communicate a story of our world to extraterrestrials'⁴. The 116 images and range of audio elements contained on the disc have been the subject of further mediation most recently Steve McQueen's 2002 exhibition *Once Upon a Time* that was first exhibited at the *Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris* where it was presented as a carousel slide projections with an audio of recordings of people speaking in tongues (that were not a part of Voyager's on board archive). McQueen amplifies the sense of what is unmeasurable with voyager's golden disc; as a form when the 'chaotic force of the great parataxis', in Rancière's terms, are put to work. In the 1979 film, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, Voyager 6 features once again. The probe is found by an extraterrestrial civilization that interprets its data bank as instructions to learn all that can be learned and to then return the information back to its creator. On its return journey the probe gathers enough knowledge to achieve consciousness. All of this could point to a wide spread intuition that images, as a supplementary force act within an originary dimension. With Warburg in mind and when thinking of the images sent into oblivion aboard Voyager 6 we are faced with one instance of oblivion and an example of the possible returns from oblivion.

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¹ Information supplied by the Warburg Institute.

² These translated excerpts, from Warburg's journals, were from Warburg's otherwise inaccessible archive and included in Gombrich's *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*.

³ L'Esprit Nouveau was a journal of art and architecture that was published in France from 1920 to 1925 and was edited by Le Corbusier and Ozenfont.

⁴ From NASA's Voyager web site:

<http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html> . Accessed 5 January 2016.