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## Conquering the Heavens: war and technology

### Guide to reading Mnemosyne Atlas, Panel C

Seminario Mnemosyne, edited by Elizabeth Thomson

Table C consists of only seven figures. It does not seem possible to apply to it the principles that were valid criteria of interpretation for the tables analysed previously. This difficulty in achieving a uniform methodology confirms that the interpretation of the tables of the Atlas does not need a definition of codes of hermeneutic decipherment and previously defined paths.

In table C the first image in the upper left hand corner (Keplero's orbit machine) and the last figure in the lower right hand corner (the photographs of the Zeppelin that were transmitted telegraphically) do not function as introductory and explicit narratives. Neither, as in other cases, can a "key" image be identified around which the semantic paths are woven.

The table presents an apparently linear and progressive lay out. It goes from the first conquests of modern "science" (the description of the measurements of the astronomic orbits) to its latest conquests (the telegraphic transmission of images). Warburg's attention is concentrated on the power of the various means of reproduction (the machines of technology), and therefore on the wider possibility of transmitting "illustrated ideas".

Under this aspect figure 3, the picture of the Children of the planet Mars, taken from a German manuscript dated 1404, is fundamental to the understanding of the table. The picture has various values and functions in the composition of the table. Firstly, it is the only "artistic" representation in the series: it is the only figure that makes table C congruent to the construction of the Atlas of Memory. If figure 3 had not been included, table C could have been a table from an Atlas on the progress of "science and technology" and Warburg a historian of positivist science rather than of culture. Thus, by including the "eccentric" figure of the Children of Mars, Warburg primarily confers table C with a theoretical value and a complication of meaning that is consonant with the polysemy of the other tables of the Atlas. The thematic homogeneity of figure 3 as regards the other figures can be found in the considerations Warburg explicitly made in his astrologi-

cal studies. Standing back from vulgate Enlightenment thinking, Warburg recognises astrology as a scientific form of knowledge. Accordingly, the antique demonic power of ancient divinity, catasterised in astral signs and constellations, becomes a different way of describing the universe (related to the cosmology and astronomy of archaic civilisations). The power of the divinities is transmitted by their material representation: the profiles of the gods and the ancient demonics drawn against the sky become points of orientation. Thus, in its first “technical” schematization (that of astrology), another of the table’s key themes can be seen: the idea that runs through all the figures of the orientation in the cosmos. This theme recurs continually in the structure of the tables. All the figures are linked to the progressive acquisition of a “coherent image of the cosmos” (according to Forster), that primarily takes place thanks to the projection of one of his theoretical configurations. Orientation in the cosmos is the necessary requirement for the conquest of the cosmos, that occurs thanks to men’s inventions which are technologically increasingly advanced, technical instruments, vehicles (aeroplanes, airships), measuring equipment (astrolabe, flight instruments), means of receiving and transmitting pictures through space (photograph, telegraph). Accordingly, the late-antique catasterism (and later mediaeval and renaissance) is seen as one of the attempts to conquer the cosmos through knowledge as the driving force of rapprochement between the earth and sky.

Interest is concentrated on a theme that links the figures in the table: the diffusion and transmission of images, in particular from the point of view of the possibility of reproduction offered by technology.. The Children of Mars (as “the Children of other planets”) in figure 3 still have their place on the page of a manuscript. However, they are soon to decorate the astrological cycles of noble palaces (for example, the decans of Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara), which Warburg studied. Later, at the end of the fifteenth century, thanks to the great improvement and diffusion of engraving techniques, they became a subject that is portrayed very often. With the wings of printing, astrological engravings, which were reproduced in a form that was accessible to everyone, were ready to become an instrument of “scientific” orientation and indoctrination. The migration of the divinities, which had already begun with the process of Hellenistic catasterism, is transmitted (in various disguises), also in passages of “styles” from North to South and vice-versa. In these passages, in their intrinsic tendency to ostentation, the pictures of ancient demons even span the various techniques of reproduction over the ages. The efficiency of printing as a new medium of diffusion, with

specific reference to astronomic-meteorological forecasts, is confirmed by many examples of criticism of the new instruments of the media.

Warburg writes:

“Illustrated painting of a sensational type [is attacked] which, for example, tried to create an effect by using the example of diet at Worms, thus creating panic of a deluge by Seytz. The intervention of the xylographic illustration is perceived as a frightening, powerful new means of influencing an uneducated audience”.

Warburg writes further:

“The fear of natural wonders foretold in the sky and on the earth, shared by the whole of Europe, was used by the daily newspapers. If the scholarly line of thinking had already begun thanks to printing and letters now, with illustrative graphic arts, pictures grew wings, especially since they could be understood world-wide. From north to south these ominous and exciting petrels flitted to and fro, while each party attempted to take advantage of these “figurative slogans” (as they could be called) of cosmological sensations according to their own cause”.

Therefore, at a first glance table C represents the progress of technology as a fight against irrationality and as a completely human means to confront the force of nature. From this point of view the figure of the Zeppelin plays a key role. In September 1929 Eckner’s airship crossed the Atlantic for the second time thus confirming man’s victory against the forces of nature. As is known from passages from Warburg’s diary, he had been particularly struck by the crew’s manoeuvre to avoid a storm that had been identified in time by the modern instruments on board. He vividly wrote:

“The column of mercury as a weapon against Satan Phobos”.

At first Warburg had considered contrasting the picture of the airship (taken from the newspapers) with that of a fish suspended in the air – the zodiac sign in which the ill-omened conjunction of the planets was to have happened that year, taken from Leonhard Reymann’s *Practica* of 1524 (picture on left). The document was already part of his research material on the age of Luther, but in that context, contrary to the meaning it was to assume in table C, it acted as an example of panic caused by astrological superstition. If Warburg had included the zodiac picture of the fish in the air in table C, in association with the other images, the idea from the study on



Luther written about a decade earlier would have been visually concretised. However, the overall meaning would have been turned upside down. The flying fish in an illustration from the sixteenth century, that accompanied the prophesy of an uncontrollable natural disaster would have been placed side by side with the extracts of famous German newspapers with the bold photographs of a completely different type of flying. The astrological fish would therefore have been proposed not as an image of the very demon that science had defeated, but as a foreshadowing of a new technological means (morphologically similar to a large fish), capable of overcoming the power of nature and at avoiding its devastating effects thanks to its sophisticated instruments.

But Warburg, rather than foreshadowing the Zeppelin with the sixteenth century zodiac fish, introduces another deviation in the table. Figure 3 (astrologically oriented) followed by figure 4 (a drawing of the planetary orbits of the earth and Mars) indicates further levels of interpretation. The demon that science should defeat with its weapons is not simply the natural power or generic astrological superstition. God placed side by side the Promethean power of Mar's *téchne*, the demon of war and destruction that, from the point of view of geometric figuration, surpasses the configuration of a harmonic movement of the planetary orbits.

In the pacified and positivistic faith in the progress of science there is a note of anguish. Not only the astrological demons were an attempt of scientific portrayal of the universe. But, even more, the drift of the *téchne* lies in its use that is not aimed at knowledge but at destruction. In the sign of Mars. The apparent scientific positivism of table C is spectacularly denied by the inclusion of figure 3 that is a privileged access to enter into the compositive optic of the table, the key perspective that directs the meaning and places the sequence of the other figures in order.

The incandescent and extraordinary power of technology does not represent a univocal evolution towards good and knowledge. It is the subject of technology at the service of destruction that is at the centre of the post-war cultural debate, which took place in a climate of pathos that Warburg interiorises and embodies to the borders of mental insanity. Already in the too famous conference of 1923 on the Ritual of the Snake, Warburg concluded his excursus on the relationship between rites-superstition-myths and technology with an attack on technology as assassin of the spirit:

“The telegraph and telephone are destroying the universe. Mythic thought and symbolic thought in their attempt to spiritualise the relationship between man and the world surrounding him, create the space for prayer or for thought, instantaneous electronic contact kills”.

In the theme proposed in table C, the consideration of technology is doubtless more complex and articulated and the key perspective is offered to us once again by the image of the Children of Mars in figure 3 (and from the orbit of Mars which is superfluous to any hypothesis of harmony). Technology, Promethean offering, confronts demons and darker powers and sometimes even overcomes the violence of nature. However, the outrage against the artificial attack to conquer the universe by mankind, armed with his intelligence and the instruments he is able to construct, is derived from the technological monstra, wonders and terrible omens. Technology is another form of magic that, due to its nature, is linked to the powers it illusorily believes to defeat. As Warburg says “per monstra ad sphaeram”.. Tragically the theoretical construction of a cosmic order can only be invented with the energy of demonic powers. But that unrelenting force promises, however, the growth of destruction. In this case the links with the preceding table (B) and with the following (I) involve more general themes rather than individual images as the heart of specific paths. It should be noted that table C is found at the beginning of the Atlas: the three initial tables with the letters A, B and C are, to a certain extent, independent, the doorway to possible modes of interpreting the entire work. Table A opens a very precise discussion on geographic and temporal migration of ancient divinities – placed in a meaningful relationship with another chronological path, the bushy tree of the genus Tornabuoni. The images of table B show the human desire to be reflected in the cosmos and to reflect the cosmos in oneself – a measured universe that is represented and conquered by *techne* that reveals its own annihilating drift in table C.

The main theme of table B can be defined as “man and cosmos”: orientation towards man’s drawing nearer to the stars; correspondence between macro-cosmos and micro-cosmos; astral configuration in the body (melotesia) and monster of the body (teratology). These are the first steps of scientific conquests thanks to medical science, knowledge of the cosmic body: the keeping at a distance of the “monstruous” body (B. 5) is the essential requisite to follow the drawing of the “virtuous” body (as will be done by Leonardo and Dürer (B.6, B7). In the same way, surmounting astrology in Keplero by applying mathematics to demonstrate figures, there is a foreshadowing of the “scientific” study of astral orbits. On the other hand, with

the following table 1, the detailed excursus of the diagrams, the immersion in their allotted territories (elementary border areas made of liquid materials that change shape according to their content) seems to begin – also chronologically.

The link between table C and table 1 lies in one image. In figure 1.8 (from an exhibition panel held at KBW 1.8) Perseus appears (already present in C.3 including the Children of Mars) in his different vests during their pilgrimages: from the “homo niger”, demon of the Schifanoia decans, guardian of their own ten days, to the messenger who unites the terrestrial and ultra-terrestrial dimensions, ancient times and Christianity, pacified “demon” of the constellation of the Chigi Chapel.

The theme of “orientation” reappears in table 1 and is considered under the aspect of encipherment. The chosen medium is the divinatory practice of hepatoscopy, from Babylon to Etruria (1.4, 1.7). Warburg writes:

“In a certain way there is only one cosmic liver and the humans and the animals are only individual manifestations of this that are closely linked together.”

In his study on Luther on the pages dedicated to the interpretation of phenomena such as premonitions of important events we can also read:

“To some extent, even so, Durer had already put this Babylonian mentality behind him.(...) The impulse that guided Durer’s burin was his scientific interest in a phenomenon of nature.”

The process of acquiring an “oriented horizon” of the cosmos, of the body of rationality reaches a critical point with the anatomic description of Dürer where what counts is not the difference in characteristics as regards the monstrum but rather the reconstruction of the drawing of a “virtuous” naturaliter body.



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