

la rivista di **en**gramma
2001

9-12

9

giugno **2001**

LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA I | N. 9

DIRETTORE
monica centanni

REDAZIONE

sara agnoletto, maria bergamo, lorenzo bonoldi, giulia bordignon, laura bumbalova, giacomo dalla
pietà, claudia daniotti, silvia fogolin, marianna gelussi, nadia mazzon, katia mazzucco, giovanna pasini,
alessandra pedersoli, daniela sacco, linda selmin, valentina sinico, laura squillaro, elizabeth thomson,
luca tonin

COMITATO SCIENTIFICO

lorenzo braccesi, maria grazia ciani, georges didi-huberman, alberto ferlenga, kurt w. forster,
fabrizio lollini, giovanni morelli, lionello puppi

this is a peer-reviewed journal

©2017 Edizioni Engramma

SEDE LEGALE | Associazione culturale Engramma, Castello 6634, 30122 Venezia, Italia

REDAZIONE | Centro studi classicA Iuav, San Polo 2468, 30125 Venezia, Italia

Tel. 041 2571461

www.engramma.org

ISBN pdf 978-88-94840-07-0

L'Editore dichiara di avere posto in essere le dovute attività di ricerca delle titolarità dei diritti sui contenuti qui pubblicati e di aver impegnato ogni ragionevole sforzo per tale finalità, come richiesto dalla prassi e dalle normative di settore.

Bonoldi | Centanni | Mazzucco | Nanni | Pedersoli | Simonato | Sinico | Thomson

La Rivista di Engramma

9 | GIUGNO 2001



SOMMARIO

- 7 | Giovanni VIII Paleologo: un imperatore e il suo ritratto.
ALESSANDRA PEDERSOLI
- 21 | Incipit Mnemosyne.
Lettture di Mnemosyne Atlas, Tavola A
SEMINARIO DI TRADIZIONE CLASSICA, COORDINATO DA
MONICA CENTANNI E KATIA MAZZUCCO | TRANSLATED BY
ELIZABETH THOMSON
- 43 | P&M | Ritratti alla finestra
SEMINARIO DI TRADIZIONE CLASSICA, COORDINATO DA
LORENZO BONOLDI
- 44 | P&M | Bellezza ab ovo
SEMINARIO DI TRADIZIONE CLASSICA, COORDINATO DA
LORENZO BONOLDI
- 45 | EUREKA! | Odino sul monte Ida in veste di Mercurio
LORENZO BONOLDI
- 47 | NEWS | La tragedia del potere
PEPPE NANNI
- 49 | NEWS | Siete pronti a interpretare un Dio?
VALENTINA SINICO
- 50 | NEWS | Alla ricerca del volto
ELEONORA SIMONATO

Incipit Mnemosyne

Guide to reading Panel A

“Seminario di Tradizione classica”, coordinated by Monica Centanni e
Katia Mazzucco

translated by Elizabeth Thomson

An Introduction

The first table of the Atlas opens the hypothesis that is the basis of Warburg's line of research and method: the possibility of capturing the cultural code, the stages and paths of the classic tradition of western culture in a diagram. The first place of irradiation of the meanings and the starting point of the paths of transfer is the area around the Mediterranean, understood in a geographically wider sense: the mapping of the web takes place through the representation of images (fig. 1), places, (fig. 2), “biological vehicles” (fig. 3) of the transmission of classic tradition.

To achieve this aim, Warburg proposes a line of research that relies on schematic language as can already be seen in the first three figures of the Atlas in the sequence in table A. The implicit hypothesis is that the extreme complexity of the material in question requires and demands a rigorously schematised interpretation. The diagram, any diagram, will only work if it is used in full awareness of its arbitrariness and insufficiency: through its simplified representation, the diagram highlights the dynamics of the web, the shifting of horizon, to visualise the movement of the currents of transferring material and of tradition of the meaning. This mechanism takes place through the proposal, which is clear in the geographic figure (fig. 2) and in the genealogical figure (fig. 3), of showing the world (a world) by means of a concatenation of names.

According to Wittgenstein:

“The elementary proposition is made up of names. It is a connection, a concatenation of names.

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 4.22)

But Aristotle had already written in the introduction of his *Categorie* (2a, 5-7):

“Each of the things is not said as an affirmation that is valid in itself, but the affirmation is derived from the connection and from the network of one thing with another”.

This method of research of an expressive manner that is reduced to a narrative skeleton *per nomina* — from geographic toponymy to genealogical descendancy — apart from its first and foremost descriptive and epistemological function — can consider itself a return to the leanness of the original mythic language. According to this interpretation, not only the names of the divinities who were transformed into constellations in fig. 1, but also the names of places of pilgrimages of the classic tradition (fig. 2) and the names of a family taken as an example of a period and place that was crucial for the Renaissance of the antique (fig. 3), become elements of a *mythos* in its original meaning. *Mythos* that, according to Aristotle's definition in *Poetica*, is essentially the “soul of the account”, the foremost nucleus of the narration, framework of the subject. The same applies to the hermeneutic discourse proposed in this Atlas and told in this table.

Warburg borrowed the categorising style that is presented in table A as a scheme of interpretation of the multiple forms of the data from the scientific language. Accordingly, the much abused and now proverbial topos of attention to detail should be considered from its methodological profile rather than as aphoristic illumination. In its detail rather than in its whole (or even worse, in the “aura”) it is possible to identify the supporting material more accurately (formal, mechanic, subject) of the transmission. It is the very same mistake that sparked off the innovative method of Giovanni Morelli's artistic interpretation “the palaeography of the history of art [that] treasures the authentic fragment in its quality as trace of the “lost original” (to use the words of Edgard Wind). Art criticism that is no longer based on suggestions with aesthetic leanings of “experts”, but on the concreteness of the detail that carries the formal meaning or the detail pregnant with meaning. As did Giovanni Morelli, Warburg could repeat:

“Whoever finds my method too materialistic and unworthy of an elevated mind, can rise to the superior spheres of the hot air balloon of fantasy”.

Warburg is an “interested” reader of Darwin, and in particular in his writings of 1880 *The Expression of emotions in animals and man*; Warburg is

inspired for his analogical construction of his theory of the *Pathosformeln* by this very theoretical text and by the same scientific materials produced by Darwin to support his theory. Warburg adopts the validity of the theoretical model of Darwin's hypotheses on general paradigm, recognisable in the "expression of emotions" without going into the heated controversy regarding the correctness of the experimental data.

However, when applying the theory of the "expression of emotions" to the complex transmission of symbols and a selection of the meanings in the diverse geographical-historical-cultural contexts, Warburg formulates and articulates the hypothesis of the persistence and the dynamics of transformation of the marks made on the cultural code: those that survive are the strongest characteristics according to Darwin's sense of the capacity for resistance and adaptation; the signs that are able to move and revitalise themselves, re-semantised for new functions (and here the classic tradition offers an consistent repertoire of "strong signs"). In his reconstruction of the course of this complex mechanism and of the discontinuous dynamics of genetic-cultural transmission, Warburg uses this suggestion to foreshadow the idea that the support and vehicle for the transmission of cultural characteristics is a series of true and physical segments of personal characteristics. In the field of the cultural code it is the anticipation of one of the most important discoveries of the twentieth century in the field of biology: Watson and Crick's discovery in 1953 of the genetic code based on the spiral of DNA.

Transmigration/peregrination/filiation

At the centre of table A there is a geographical map (fig. 2) which Warburg used for a conference on European festivals:

The map shows the itinerary 'Cizico — Alexandria — Oxene — Baghdad — Toledo — Rome — Ferrara — Padua — Augusta — Erfurt — Wittemberg — Goslar — Lüneburg — Hamburg to show even more clearly how European culture is the result of conflicting tendencies.

At the centre of the geographical map is a system based on the subject-guide of the [migration] peregrination of images and subjects. The stages of the migration are shown at three different levels that correspond to the three figures in the table: the coming-and-going of mythological figures from heaven to the earth and vice-versa (fig. 1), that began already in ancient times; the topographical visualisation of the main places in which classic forms and subjects found fertile ground where they could develop

and express their symbolic force in different ways (fig. 2); the focus on one of these places, more specifically on the family tree (fig. 3) of the Tornabuoni family — the physical support (through genetic filiations, weddings etc.) of the transmission and of the new interpretation of antique figures that were recalled during the cultural revolution of the Florentine Renaissance.

The double meaning of the symbol allows the migration of the figures, subjects and postures according to the assumed conditions of their mobility and therefore by their new contextual adaptation. In each individual field the meaning can be reduced to univocity as in the etching of *Sky and zoomorphic and anthropomorphist constellations* (fig. 1) in which the mythological figures are reduced to mere astral configurations. What are important, however, are the plurality of the valences and the mechanism of tradition that is achieved through passages, misinterpretations, derivations and hybridisations.

Warburg had already showed the idea of a migration within the area of the classic culture of motives-subjects-figures. In 1911 during the scholar's first meeting with young Fritz Saxl, Bing testifies that Warburg was already working on his "migration map". Saxl, who was working on the iconography of the planets and had started his study on the mediaeval tradition of the subject, was particularly fascinated by Warburg's notion of the "pilgrimage" of the antique divinities throughout the centuries as presented in his own *Wanderkarte*. Gertrud Bing writes:

A map of the paths of tradition, showing the places from India to northern Germany where traces of the passage of images and descriptions of celestial figures with the respective data for each of these paths from the end of antiquity to the beginning of the 1500's. Saxl was enchanted by this historic atlas of figurative creation that offered a visual representation of an ample problem down to its smallest details.

Graphic portrayal

The mounting of table A allows the comparison of the three modes of graphic representation: the iconic language of a map of constellations (fig. 1); the cartographic system of a path marked by precise stages on the map of the area around the Mediterranean (fig. 2); the family tree of family Tornabuoni (fig. 3). All three modes of graphic translation use grids of reference and orientation such as the prominence of bi-dimensional development of the celestial vault in the constellation map, the route of the meridians and the parallels of the map of Europe, the lines of generations in the family tree.

The three images at the beginning of *Mnemosyne* are, in these terms, the bearers of a complex meaning and refer to the main themes of the whole of the Atlas and Warburg's work. The graphic representations of which they are an example, from the cartographic tradition of astronomy and geography to the genealogical outlines — or those analogue to antique codes, are not solutions that reduce or trivialise the complexity of thought but rather, owing to their abstract language, can assume a deep meaning in the web of "scientific" and historic-cultural values. Indeed, all three images are translations of the strong idea of a western culture that is both sincretic and conflictual, born from pilgrimages, crossbreeding of antique classic roots.

Gertrud Bing writes the following about the *Wanderkarte*, the map of the principal stages of antique pagan tradition that Warburg created around 1911 (see fig. 2). This historic atlas of figurative creations, [...] offered a visual representation of an ample problem down to the smallest details.

The vertical succession of the three images therefore suggests a reflection that goes beyond subjects and content and highlights a different interpretative plane. The arrangement of representation, that forms the passage from a conceptual dimension to the visualisation in fundamental terms, needs preventive rules and co-ordinates upon which it can be built and followed in the same way that the complex thought needs a skeleton, a hypothesis to be able to express and form itself in a more geometrical manner.

In Warburg's interpretative work, the language of science assumes the significance of a cultural (and not only functional) fertile description owing to a precise philosophic premise, a decisive theoretic movement: with a leave-taking is increasingly more final from the idea of "truth". Science is an art, a hermeneutic *téchne* that once it has abandoned the naïve objective of "illuminating" reality, and has progressively discovered the secret "truths", constructs interpretive models that are artificial and at times artistic: paradigms that simulate reality, not to entrap it but to tell it, to imagine it figuratively.

"The propositions of logic describe the armour of the world, or rather, they represent it. They "discuss" nothing. They assume that the names have a meaning and that the elementary propositions have a sense: this is their link with the world".

[Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.124]

Macro-cosmos/micro-cosmos

In table A, concentrated in the same images, the discourse merges with the oscillation between the magic-religious pole and the rational pole. A discourse that is a fundamental, initial hypothesis of Warburg's theory on the antinomic nature of classic tradition. The magic-religious pole emerges, mainly in the attempt to proceed towards an anthropomorphisation of the cosmos — by means of the figural mythic map of the sky (fig. 1) and by means of the concentration on the migrations within a single family tree (fig. 3). The rational pole emerges from the three figures in the table as the need to propose an interpretative scheme — it is not only the graphic hypothesis, it is what lies beneath but it is also the defining scheme. The same figures that provide the images of the magic-religious pole also represent the patterns of possible directions that can be followed.

According to Warburg:

“[...] A process in which — since these astrological forces of orientation are involved — we should search for neither friends nor foes, but rather for the spiritual oscillations that move uniformly from the magic-religious pole towards the opposite one of mathematical contemplation — and vice-versa”.

The figures in the table therefore stage what Warburg would have defined as “Promethean drama of the star-lit sky”: the deception, the illusion, the composition of the astrals in recognisable figures, are at the basis of the projection of the stars and their constellations. The only possible form of measurement and orientation is that shown for figures by mythic language, or by the topographic conventions, or by the genealogical visualisation of family descendants.

“The entire modern conception of the world is based on the illusion that the so-called natural laws are the explanation for natural phenomena”.
[Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 6.371]

In a vertical sequence that acts like a close up from the sky to the earth, the micro-cosmos — the last image, the closest — is portrayed by the diagram of the genealogical descendants (fig. 3) of a Florentine family in the mid fourteenth century. Gertrud Bing writes the following about the studies Warburg carried out on the middle classes of the Florentine *medicea*:

Each word he wrote about Florence bears the mark of an extremely personal work, something that is not usually found in scientific works. One could almost say that with his works on Florence, Warburg has written his own Buddenbrooks.

It is precisely through this family tree of the Tornabuoni's in figure 3 that it is possible to recover the dimension of the macro-cosmos, by going back over Warburg's account which includes clear autobiographical references of their circumstances as tradesmen, bankers, notables, purchasers and is possible to grasp the description of an entire socio-cultural universe and of an epoch — the Renaissance. This family's exemplary relationship with religion, artistic commissioning, the reemerging of the forms of pagan antiquities in contemporary art are the details Warburg concentrates on in order to be able to penetrate the mentality of that distant age. In one of the letters in his unpublished correspondence with Jolles, Warburg wrote the following in reference to the *Natività del Battista* by Ghirlandaio in Santa Maria Novella (see table 45 in *Mnemosyne*):

“That your pagan petrel [the maid in the *Natività*] can burst in upon this slow respectability, in this controlled Christianity, shows me the enigmatic and illogical traits of the simple humanity of the Tornabuoni's, which fascinates me just as much as you are fascinated by your unknown apparition”.

Once again, in reference to the *Miracolo di San Zaccaria*:

“Now, how does the *Consorteria Tornaquinci* transform this religious drama? In a spectacular passage of an ecclesiastic performance in which the “extras” become protagonists. [...] And since we are trying to penetrate a period when there was the need to invent lavish performances and the creative forces of figurative arts were still in their beginnings [...] just like grafts on a tree trunk, this theatrical programme is something more than a simple jeu d'esprit, it is an extremely fitting metaphor”.

“Warburg felt he was an intellectual scholar, a descendent of the humanists in the age of industrialisation” (Forster), but he was still very far from the widespread “neo-Renaissance” of his times. On the other hand, a strong element of autobiography is clear in two of Warburg's sketches from 1928 — to be compared with figure 2 — included in the mass of unpublished material that was to have accompanied the publication of the Atlas. In one there is a map of the places where Warburg studied during his career (Hamburg, Strasburg, Florence) with two points of orientation, an east that is not specified and a west that is identified as Arizona. In the other sketch,

on a rough plan of the shores of the Mediterranean the paths of pilgrimage of the Jewish people are marked from the Holy Land to Holland, from the Middle East to Northern Europe crossing Spain and Italy; paths that are intertwined with the places of demonic-astrological tradition and the personal circumstances of the scholar.

From cosmography to genealogy and back

In the opening table of the Atlas, along the vertical scrolling line of the montage it is possible to recognise a second line of interpretation.

The first itinerary, that moves from the top to the bottom, accompanies the reader from a more general horizon — the vision of cosmic representation configured in mythological images (fig. 1) — through geographical representation (fig. 2); up to the human representation in the form of the family tree of the Tornabuoni's (fig. 3), whose private circumstances is closely linked to the history of the Renaissance. From the sky to the earth, from the earth to man. From cosmology to geography, from geography to genealogy: a process of focalisation of the scholar and reader of Mnemosyne, that becomes increasingly more specific. However, the second itinerary, from the bottom to the top, allows one to follow the process of dispersion and thus derives its meaning.

In fig. 3 the Renaissance is concentrated and almost coherent in the representation of the descendants of the Tornabuoni. In fig. 2 the geographic migration of motives and figures from the classic tradition are shown, up to their most northern berthing — the last stage being Hamburg, Warburg's own city.

In fig. 1 the etching that is dated 1684, the images of the myth are now captured in the sky, abstract in constellation figures up to the univocal degeneration of their symbolic meaning. It is a shift in stages of a pilgrimage that has its final result in the reconversion of the figures in the myth to their demonic astrological version. It is the same mechanism that had already struck the mythic figures in the late antique age and then in the middle ages when catasterisation assumed the role of a neutralising rationalisation of the plurivocal symbolic power of meanings. It is the translation of the mythic complexity in its unique, once again reduces form of survival: the banishment of the gods, of the mythological *monstra*, and the heroes of the final area of the cosmos in which these disturbing images can still be contemplated, at the right distance. The rational filter of the transposition

is activated by means of a formal analogy: the profile of the mythic figure over the profile of the constellation.

And the border of the sky — as a scientific “idiom” — of the power of the mythic image. The same mechanism that created the phenomena of catasterisation from the learned Hellenistic rationalism to medieval moralisation now becomes — after the post-reform “trade” of the mythic beast — leave taking from all excess of meaning of the new astronomic allegory.



pdf realizzato da Associazione Engramma
e da Centro studi classicA Iuav
Venezia • settembre 2016

www.engramma.org



la rivista di **engramma**
anno **2001**
numeri **9-12**

Raccolta della rivista di
engramma del Centro studi
classicA | luav, laboratorio di
ricerche costituito da studiosi di
diversa formazione e da giovani
ricercatori, coordinato da
Monica Centanni. Al centro
delle ricerche della rivista è la
tradizione classica nella cultura
occidentale: persistenze,
riprese, nuove interpretazioni di
forme, temi e motivi dell'arte,
dell'architettura e della
letteratura antica, nell'età
medievale, rinascimentale,
moderna e contemporanea.