

THE MNEMOSYNE ATLAS AND THE MEANING OF PANEL 79 IN ABY WARBURG'S OEUVRE AS A DISTRIBUTED OBJECT

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Abstract

With his *Mnemosyne Atlas* Aby Warburg set out to find a revisionist method for studying art that surpassed its understanding through language. But his goal set up a new challenge. How does one comprehend what Warburg called an "art history without text" when he offered no explanation for its use? The following essay addresses this question utilizing a theoretical framework outlined by Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency: Towards a New Anthropological Theory*, which views an artist's output as a network of its creator's distributed personhood.

In 1923 Aby Warburg returned to his home in Hamburg after a three-year convalescence in Switzerland for a debilitating psychiatric condition. Almost immediately he began his epic project the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, named after the Greek personification of memory.

The work grew out of the art historian's studies in iconology, which called for art to be analyzed in the context of other cultural phenomena and through the comparison of visual forms. Its foundation became 79 portable frames, upon which Warburg stretched cloth and then pinned hundreds of images—from fields including politics and popular culture, medicine and magic—to create a series

of multi-dimensional image anthologies. His intention was to photograph each screen for a book he described as—an art history without text" [1].

But Warburg died in 1929, leaving the atlas unfinished and art historians baffled. Those who describe *Mnemosyne Atlas* tend to do so with metaphor, characterizing it as a "symphony," a "laboratory" and a "ghost story for adults" [2]. Arguably, an obstacle in understanding the work has been a matter of approach. Since the atlas is unlike anything before or after it in art-historical scholarship, it must be addressed in a new light. It needs to be considered using a method that offers an opportunity to explain art beyond conventional structures, which frequently reduce the discipline to an interpretation of the symbolic [3]. Such a framework can be found in anthropologist Alfred Gell's publication *Art and Agency: Towards a New Anthropological Theory* (1998), where creative output is presented as a graphic form.

Gell argues that our personhood consists of events, material objects, and their traces. These items are indices of our agency; collectively; they testify to our output during a life and may be prolonged long after our deaths [4]. According to Gell, indices of agency circulate in the world, creating an inter-indexical field whose structure is analogous to our consciousness [5]. When these principles are applied to the creative output—or *oeuvre*—of an artist, they can be used to demonstrate his or her externalized cognitive process, as represented in Gell's

diagram "The Artist's Oeuvre as a Distributed Object" [6].

In this model black dots represent constituents in an artist's oeuvre, but as Gell make clear, these nodes may be categorized three ways: as "finished works," as "preparatory studies" (works unto themselves, but items that precede later works) and as "copies" (made after and from completed works). The arrows that connect the black dots reveal classifications. Forward-pointing arrows indicate that a node is a "protention" of a subsequent one, while a backward-pointing line, or "retention," identifies output that recapitulates an earlier subject. Protentions and retentions may be gray or black, the latter shade representing a greater degree of intentionality [7]. For instance, if an artist deliberately creates a preparatory work (such as a sketch) as a means to making a more significant production (such as a painting), the protention is black. However, if the preparation of a work serves as the catalyst toward the creation of another artistic output—though unintentionally—it is gray.

Using Ernst Gombrich's biography of Warburg, 10 elements of Warburg's oeuvre can be identified and plotted following Gell's model (Fig. 1) [8]. These include Warburg's dissertation on the psychological interpretation of gesture in Boticelli's paintings (1891); his study on the symbolism of ornamental drapery in the Early Italian Renaissance (1893); his essay on Renaissance pageantry as a live re-enactment of visual prototypes created in antiquity (1895); Warburg's journey to New Mexico in 1895, when he linked

European art and native American ceremonial practice; his 1901 decision to establish a library inclusive of such art historically overlooked topics as folklore and magic; the publication of "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie" (1902), for which Warburg used the new medium of photography to produce his own study material; Warburg's study of astrological imagery in art (1908-1912); his analysis of superstitious visual forms in the political pamphlets of Martin Luther (1914); his essay on the serpent ceremony of the Pueblo Indians, which identifies ritual as the manifestation of a people who stand on a ground between magic and reason; and the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1923-1929).

Our tendency is to visualize biographical output as a series of events plotted along a straight line, one after the other. Gell's model of the artist's mind, however, allows us to see things differently, and with his methodology Warburg's creative production may be viewed as a rich network of protentions and retentions, in which works are never solitary isolated events but rather components of a multi-dimensional network.

Regarded this way, new understandings of Warburg's output emerge. For instance, while traditionally his 1902 study on Florentine portraiture has been regarded as a minor work, the model of his oeuvre as a distributed object reveals otherwise. Since Warburg used a camera and started manipulating images while researching the essay, it may be linked as a seminal protention to the plates of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*—also a work entirely dependent on edited photographs.

Unquestionably Gell's diagram of the artist's oeuvre as a distributed object has limitations. Not only is there an enormous challenge in trying to distill a complex body of work into a neatly defined set of nodes, Gell offers no system for analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, and comparative values of protentions and retentions. Still, his model is worth further consideration and application to art history as some thoughts on panel 79 reveal [9].

While Warburg generally created the *Mnemosyne* plates in a consistent fashion—assigning each one a topic and then treating its space as a catalogue of images—his approach differs at panel 79, which makes it one of the most enigmatic parts of the atlas. Not only does this final folio of the atlas offer a broader inventory of forms than its predecessors—featuring a diversity of subjects including *hara-kiri*, Giotto's *Hope*, and contemporary sports—it introduces nu-

merous pictures of current events, clipped from newspapers.

Once the component images of panel 79 are connected to the other parts of Warburg's oeuvre, however, it becomes clear that they form part of a larger thematic whole. For example, the plate gives prominence to Raphael's *The Mass of Bolsena*, an image of the Eucharist ceremony in 1223 when bread began to bleed after a priest offering communion doubted the ritual's veracity. Scholarship reveals that Warburg described the Eucharist as "primitive magic" [10]. In this light, panel 79 can be linked to his journey to the American Southwest—the place where he first identified that culture stands between magic and reason.

Little has been said about panel 79 or its use of newspaper images. Gombrich's only commentary is that Warburg incorporated contemporary ephemera to remind us of the atlas's seriousness [11]. More recently, Charlotte Scholl-Glass stated that panel 79 and its focus on the Eucharist is about hope for a new international peace and for the end of religiously motivated bloodshed [12].

The map of Warburg's oeuvre as a distributed object, however, reveals that such interpretations are off the mark. In the centre of panel 79 Warburg includes photographs of a Eucharist parade following the signing of the Lateran Treaty in 1929, an event that formalized the Church's resignation of political power in return for the state's institution of Catholicism. In the bottom lower right side of the plate, Warburg placed a newspaper photograph of a train crash in which a priest offers last rites to a dying victim. All of these mass media images can be linked to Warburg's 1914-1918 study on Luther—a recapitulation of this earlier work—which makes the following point clear: humanity and its cultural output rests in the grip of superstition.

Warburg was part of a generation haunted by the colossal loss of life after World War I and obsessed by the meanings of memory. In academies scientists sought to locate the retention of experience in the organs of the human body, while on the streets human capacity for memory proliferated through recently available mass-circulation newspapers and cinematic images [13]. Yet for Warburg, whose psychiatric breakdown was brought on by the devastation of the Great War, another undisputed characteristic of modern memory was the waning of moral consciousness.

Seen in this light, an interpretation of panel 79 comes into focus: As the world

sits on the brink of transformation, whether through 16th-century religious change or 20th-century peace negotiations—it does so in the shadow of pagan rites, standing in a place somewhere between magic and reason.

In 1929, shortly before his death, Warburg said he wanted the *Mnemosyne Atlas* to be understood as a cultural history that could be used to comprehend contemporary visualizations [14]. Based on this description, and utilizing Gell's idea of how every constituent in an artist's oeuvre is either a protention or retention, panel 79 also reveals how the second half of the atlas might have looked. In those panels, Warburg would have surely explored, through the incorporation of more ephemera from modern life, how the jurisdiction of the art historian includes all pertinent visual matter, regardless of its provenance from the spheres of high or low, to indicate that the study of contemporary culture is inextricably linked to its ritualistic past.

References and Notes

* This paper was presented as a contributed talk at Arts | Humanities | Complex Networks – a Leonardo satellite symposium at NetSci2010. See <<http://artshumanities.netsci2010.net>>

1. E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1970).
2. See Charlotte Schoell-Glass, *Aby Warburg and Anti-Semitism: Political Perspectives on Images and Culture*, Samuel Pakucs Willcocks trans. (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2008); Carlo Ginzburg, "From Aby Warburg to E.H. Gombrich," *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990); Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).
3. David Summers, "On the Histories of Artifacts," *Art Bulletin*, LXXVI, No. 4, 590-592.
4. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: Towards a New Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 222.
5. Gell [4] p. 236.
6. "The Artist's Oeuvre as a Distributed Object" Figure 9.4/1 in Gell [4].
7. Gell [4] p. 234.
8. Gombrich [1].
9. Panel 79 in Aby Warburg, *Begeleitmaterial zur Ausstellung "Aby M. Warburg. Mnemosyne"* (Hamburg: Dolling und Galitz Verlag, 1994)
10. As cited in Michaud [2] p. 197. The links between the host and interpretations of communion rituals as acts of magic is extensive and one that Warburg would have known about. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
11. Gombrich [1] p. 288.
12. Scholl-Glass [2] p. 197.
13. Matt K. Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1996.
14. Gertrud Bing to Senator Biermann-Ratjen: Warburg Institute, London, Archive, dated to July 1967.

Fig. 1. Aby Warburg's Oeuvre as a Distributed Object. (© Sara Angel, 2010)

