

Composing the Symbolic The Denkraum between Warburg and Eisenstein

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In the *Museums at Night*, a chapter from his memoirs, Sergei M. Eisenstein tells of a stirring experience he lived in April 1931, while he was in Mexico. It happened during a night visit to the museum of Chichén Itzá, when a sudden power failure caused the Russian director to light matches to take a glance at the exhibits. There ensued an interplay between darkness and light that made a deep impression on him. This is how he recalls the experience:

But in the museum the electricity went off at the very moment we crossed the restricted threshold of the treasured "secret department" of the museum, where the revelry of the ancient Mayas' sensual imagination is carved in stone. The statues also gained in weirdness, absurdity, disproportion, and scale, because they were suddenly snatched out of the darkness by matches struck now here, now there. Tolstoy, in *Childhood*, – or is it in *Adolescence*? – describes the effect of lightning flashes illuminating galloping horses. So instantaneous were the flashes that each succeeded in capturing only one phase of the horses' movement. The horses seemed motionless... The unexpected striking of the matches in the different parts of this hall, filled with motionless stone monsters, made these monsters, on the contrary, seem as though they had come to life. From the change of direction of the light in the intervals before the matches burned out, it seemed as if, during the periods of darkness, the monsters had managed to change position and place in order to graze with their wide, round, bulging, dead, granite eyes from a new viewpoint at those who were disturbing their age-old peace. [...] Light and darks interrupted each other. Interwove. Followed each other in turn. But the speech of my Virgil, who was conducting me through this dark circled Purgatory of mankind's early notions, came pouring out, uninterrupted. Facts and more facts about the history of the belief in gods endowed with "double strength" eddied

unceasingly through this interplay of light and dark. The interplay of light and dark itself began to seem an intertwining of the light of reason with the dark depths of man's psyche. [...] Suddenly the electricity comes on, and we spent the last part of our pilgrimage to the gods, with their internal contradictions, in the yellowish electric light. The mystery vanished along with the shadows. It was frightened away by the shameless indifference of the low-powered electric bulbs. [...] And this is why everything else connected with them, in the blinding and false electric light of common sense, seemed nonsensical. But the lamp had only to burn out, or the dynamo at the power station had only to catch its breath, and you would be wholly in the power of dark, latent forces and forms of thought. The intertwining of illumination and darkness also provides the imagination with just such fairy wanderings down the mysterious paths of art, like that which we trod at the beginning down that hall (Eisenstein [1983]: 178-180).

This long citation is relevant to the subject of this paper because it contains a number of elements that reflect, both from a visual and theoretical perspective, the architecture of Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* which can be understood as a representation *in figura* of the *Denkraum*, a concept that was coined by Warburg long before the creation of the *Bilderatlas* and is generally translated as "thought-space".

The interplay between light and darkness generated by the switching on and off of matches; the alternation of flashes of light and moments of total darkness; the coming to life of the statues from their stillness like stone monsters; the interaction of light and darkness perceived as an entanglement of consciousness with the obscure depths of the human psyche; the shadowy atmosphere; the "precariousness" generated by the continuous succession of light and darkness are all elements that act as a key to understand the use and meaning that the term *Denkraum* seems to reveal about the configuration of the *Bilderatlas* as well as Warburg's previous theoretical discourse.

In addition to being defined as «creating a space of thought as a cultural function», an expression that features amongst those taken into consideration as a subtitle for the *Bilderatlas*¹, the *Denkraum* is theorized as a fundamental concept in the only completed introduction to the project (Warburg [2000]: 3-6) which Warburg wrote in 1929 in view of the atlas' publication. It is his most mature disquisition as it appears in one of the last text written by Warburg who died in October of that year, leaving his project unfinished.

Here the importance of what he meant by *Denkraum* is fully expressed from the very

¹Cfr. Wedepohl (2014). As mentioned by Wedepohl, the possible subtitle appears in a note of 6 October, 1929.

first lines of the introduction to the project which was born as a new working method for a «science of culture» capable of tracing a «psychological history through images» of the process that has shaped the Western civilization. A process outlined by the pathways emerging from «an inventory of antique-like prefigurations»: images, themes, figures, myths and symbols which, in their wonderings, represent «life in motion» and embody the legacy of the classical tradition of Western culture. As conveyed by Warburg's words, the fabric of *Bilderatlas* consists in the «distance between the ego and the outside world», hence the relationship between man and cosmos and consequently the interplay between freedom and necessity that marks the human condition. An interplay that changes decisively during the transition from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a period of history Warburg's studies are particularly focused on and which is significantly revisited through the experience of the dark years of World War I, another historical phase in which the interplay between freedom and necessity is tragically shaken.

In this text, the space of thought is what underlies the «conscious creation of the distance between the ego and the outside world», that is, «the fundamental act of civilization». This means that the relationship between the ego and the world plays a crucial role in the coming about of a civilization, the distance being the interval in the fluctuation between imagination and rationality, and, ultimately, between the opposite views – religious/magical and scientific/rational – of the world. The distance is created, as an act of thought, by memory: if «rationality» creates the space between man and object covered by thought, «imagination», on the contrary, destroys this space by man's identification, either ideal or practical, with the object. Man, in all ages, is caught by the rhythmic alternation between these two opposing poles of psychic life: the identification with the object, namely the orgiastic abandon, and the serene contemplation that Warburg describes as the «return to *sophrosyne*». And it is art, and in particular the artist, fluctuating from a religious view of the world to a rational one, who inhabits in a privileged way the space in-between, which constitutes the quintessential “substratum” of the creative process. Hence the artistic act turns out to be equidistant from the identification of the imagination with the object and the conceptual contemplation of it. Through individual and collective memory, the artist draws on the «indestructible legacy of phobic impressions» and takes in the energy of phobic passion to create an artistic style. And if the «*monstra* of imagination» are not rendered harmless by the thought, and do not become guides of life, «spiritual tools of orientation», the risk is being overwhelmed by them, and the «fight against chaos» being resolved by the victory of chaos. The artistic style and the artistic creation can then be seen as plastic expressions

of the full range of emotions, and those phobic impressions taken in through memory (*Pathosformeln*) and exemplified by the *Bilderatlas*, are thus transformed into iconic representations of «the process of de-demonization» of the *monstra*.

It is, however, by entering the meanders of the *Bilderatlas*' configuration that one experiences the *Denkraum* as a tangible spatial visualization. Here the space of thought is made visible in the gaps Warburg puts between the images that are pinned on black-clothed display panels. Representing the *Denkraum* are the black empty areas that space out the images at different intervals in each panel.

The first theoretical exposition of *Denkraum* appeared in 1920, in the study *Heathen-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther (Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten)*. There are numerous previous references, both in Warburg's correspondence and in *Fragments on the Theory of Expression (Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde)* where the concept of distance (*Distanzierung*) is already suggested as a «fundamental principle» (Warburg [2011]: n. 1, 25.XI.1896) and its relevance to *Denkraum* that will transpire in later writings, is foreshadowed (cfr. Wedepohl [2014]). *Fragments on the Theory of Expression*, in particular, can be seen as the breeding ground for the insights and the core ideas that Warburg will articulate at a later stage in his writings and in *Bilderatlas*.

In *Heathen-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther*, *Denkraum* is the space conquered by thought between man and object in the context of Reformation. Here Warburg recognizes the influence of belief in pagan cosmology, especially cogent in astrology beside the Christian faith. A space conquered by logic through the concept that defines by distinction and that magic, through belief in astrology, destroys thereby nullifying the distance between the subject and object.² In this context, Warburg, citing Jean Paul, remarks that the era in which logic and magic were thriving grafted onto a single trunk was over.

The concept of *Denkraum*, at the end of the same text, reappears enriched by the word *Besonnenheit* meaning judiciousness, prudence, or rather, sensibleness³ that the modern scientist tries to attain wavering from the practice of magic to the study of

² Warburg (1932): 491. «Die Logik, die den Denkraum – zwischen Mensch und Objekt – durch begrifflich sondernde Bezeichnung schafft und Magie, die eben diesen Denkraum durch abergläubische zusammenziehende – ideelle oder praktische – Verknüpfung von Mensch und Objekt wieder zerstört [...]».

³ Sensibleness (in Italian “sensatezza”) is the expression used by Clio Nicastro, author of a study that digs down to the corporeal roots binding the German word to that of *sophrosyne*. Cfr. Nicastro (2013-2014).

cosmological mathematics. And it is a space that needs to be conquered over and over: «Athens must always be conquered afresh from Alexandria».

Claudia Wedepohl has investigated the concept of *Denkraum* in its applications to contemporary studies and its deep connection with Warburg's reflections on World War I, the tragic event that sent him into a deep depression and kept him in the psychiatric clinic of Bellevue, in the town of Kreuzlingen in Switzerland, until 1924. The space of thought is that moment, that time interval (*Denkzeitraum*) which opens up between stimulus and action, and Italy was not able to grasp when, in 1915, renouncing neutrality, entered the war (cfr. Wedepohl [2008]). Here the sense seems to correspond to the meaning of the term *Besonnenheit*, as it appears to be in what Wedepohl has identified, in the fragment of 2 August 1901, as its first occurrence, namely, «a reviving pause of judiciousness amid the process of self-destruction» («*die Erholungspause der Besonnenheit inmitten unseres Selbstvernichtungsprozesses*»: Warburg [2011]: n. 419, 2. VII. 1901).

The space of thought of sensibleness lies therefore between the poles of deliverance and destruction. In this regard a fragment dated January 29, 1892 is quite indicative:

The moment we move away from things, the moment we create space, we think – !
The moment we are joined, the moment we are assimilated, we are matter – Nothing!
And the artistic process is situated in the middle of these two dimensions: half space and half matter – art. (Warburg [2011]: n. 233, 29.I.1892)

If the concept of *Denkraum* appears for the first time in the essay on the Age of Luther, it is possible to track down the evolution of the concept along the later stages of the Conference of Kreuzlingen (1923) and that in memory of Franz Boll (1925)⁴. As discussed in depth by Nicastro (2012), it is in the conference on the Hopi Indians, held in Kreuzlingen to mark his return to sanity, that Warburg further defines the dialectical nature of the concept of *Denkraum der Besonnenheit*. The constant tension between the pole of imagination, which releases primitive energies, and that of logic, which shapes the rational thought, is not seen as a process aiming at one pole establishing its supremacy over the other, but as an ongoing, unstoppable tension where progression and regression go together and feed on each other, being indispensable to each other. In fact, not only the rites and dances of the Indians that Warburg gets to know in New Mexico (1896-97), are an ideal scenario to observe the relationship between magical/religious and scientific thinking, but are reinterpreted, twenty years later, as a

⁴ For a closer look at the evolution of the concept of *Denkraum*, see Rösch (2010) and in general Flach, Schneider, Tremel (2014); Villhäuser (2002); Brosius (1997).

result of Warburg's psychological breakdown and the tragedy of the Great War. Warburg had a direct experience of the power of mental images which the thought continuously seeks to distance from by objectifying them. The Snake Dance of the Pueblo Indians allowed Warburg to observe the formulation of the primitive and pagan response to the image, which is essentially the «answer to torturing questions on the why and wherefore of things» (Warburg [1939]: 292) and responds to the human desire to create order out of chaos. This is the origin of civilization whose evolution is achieved through the symbolization of what originally is monstrous, that «monstrous concreteness» that eventually becomes «a spiritual, invisible symbol». In this process, art represents a particular way of reacting to the images imprinted in man (Warburg [2011]: n. 48, 07.II.1890).

The culture of the Pueblo Indians is an ideal model to observe because it exists in the middle of the evolution of civilization that goes «from the animal who grasps the object to the man who grasps the concept (*vom Greiftier zum Begriffsmenschen*)» (Warburg [1924]: 42. It is therefore placed between the magic-religious civilization, which sees a total identification of subject and object, the fusion of man and the world into a panic indistinction that is symbolized by the act of grasping the object and the modern Western civilization totally unbalanced on the opposite pole, after its split from the object symbolized by the act of grasping the concept. So in the religious ceremonies that Warburg observed amongst the Pueblos he can recognize the psychological state of the primitive man who, unable of «subjective differentiation», blends with the outer world through the «somatization of sensible impressions» (*Die Verleibung des sinnlichen Eindrucks*: Warburg [2011]: n. 299, 27.I.1896). In *A lecture on Serpent Ritual* the loss of the space of thought is the alarming extreme outcome of the *hybris* of technology which has its emblematic expression in the electric energy. The symbolical analogy between the snake, the lightning and the electric wire, exemplifies the interruption of the dialectic between the poles of magical/religious and scientific thinking. The snake, which is a symbol of «the ambivalence of nature, death and life, the visible and invisible», the lightning, which in the imagination of the Pueblo children appears as a snake, and the electric wire, which is «Edison's copper snake» or «lightning held captive in the wire». The instant electrical contact kills the mythical thought and the symbolic thought that, «in their efforts to spiritualize the relationship between man and the outer world, create the space for prayer or for thought» (Warburg [1939]).

The contents of this conference, disavowed by Warburg soon after he had delivered it because of its philological tenuousness, reveal that the space defined by *Denkraum* has

the connotation of a symbolical dimension which is owed to Friedrich Theodor Vischer's study, *Das Symbol* (1887), a work Warburg had become familiar with since 1890.

In Warburg's writings of 1924, which he worked on after his discharge from Kreuzlingen and after his meeting with Ernst Cassirer that proved to be as uplifting as intellectually stimulating, the function of symbols in relation to the space of thought seems to further clarify. The 1924 writings are significant, not only because they represent Warburg's return to the scientific community and a first tangible sign of his restored ability to do scientific research, but also because they are a prelude to the creation of the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* which, concurrently with the Hamburg Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek, start being developed in 1924. These writings are indicative, to all intents and purposes, of a new phase of research activity whereby the concept of *Denkraum der Besonnenheit* seems to acquire a corresponding spatial extension such as to widen the earlier theoretical perspective. The spatial extension that re-designs the concept of *Denkraum* is emblematic of Warburg's further inquiry into man's experience within the cosmic order and into the dialectic between man and cosmos where the *monstra* faced by the primitive man, are re-conceived through the polar dialectic with the *sphaerae* contemplated by the man of science. The transition from the grasping of the object to the grasping of the concept (*Vom Greifen zum Begriff*) becomes the transition «*per monstra ad sphaeram*» which in the polar dialectic means from the demonic astral bodies, interpreted by astrology, whose uncontrollable forces man is subject to, to the stars the astronomer studies scientifically and in whose respect he experiences his constrained freedom.

It is that «new, wide span» (Warburg [2014a]: 23) developed out of the ideas of Cassirer from whom Warburg had found confirmation to his intuitions about Keplero as a transition figure from mythical thinking to scientific thinking. And this happened in the very day of their first meeting, an event that was crucial for Warburg's full recovery.

In a letter of the 23rd of April, 1924, sent to Ulrich von Wilamowitz (which is an outstanding compendium of Warburg's researches starting from his studies on the frescoes of Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara) the symbol is explicitly understood in its «function of collective memory» that works as «the activating agent – either inhibiting or stimulating – which produces, midway between an instinctual-passional *kinesis* and a regulating cosmological *theoria*, the consciousness and the will to attain a balancing *sophrosyne* (*Ausgleichende Besonnenheit*) as a supreme cultural force» (Warburg [2014b]: 38). It is the transition that in *The forces of destiny reflected on the symbolism of the past* (*Schicksalsmächte im Spiegel antikisierender Symbolik* 1924), is defined as

moving from grasping the object to grasping the concept (*Vom Greifen zum Begriff*), from the act of physical grasping to the act of conceptualization (*von der Ergreifung zur Begrifflichkeit*), identifying the «expression of emotions» (*Ausdruck der Ergriffenheit*) as the unstable stage between the two poles (Warburg [2014a]: 23).

The unstable stage derives from the situation of tension which, according to Vischer, ensues from the empathic experience (*Einfühlung*) set in motion by the symbol (which is related to the Greek verb *συνβάλλειν* meaning *putting together*). The polar tension occurs in various possible stages of connection between image and meaning through a term of comparison, an elementary nucleus constituent of the symbol, hence the fluctuation may regard the union, the conjunction, the identification and the disjunction. Vischer's theory of symbol, so fundamental to understand the symbolic dynamics of New Mexico Indians, can also help understanding the concept of «destiny as a function between the biomorphically graspable element (*greifbar*) and the harmonically cadenced spatial and temporal recurrence» (Warburg [2014a]: 23-24). The rational and irrational elements, in their polar dialectic, are instrumental to understand the interrelation between man and world and microcosm and macrocosm. The subject of the conference held at the Warburg Library on the 25th of April, 1925 to commemorate Franz Boll – an outright lecture with images placed on a panel in the manner that will characterize the *Bilderatlas* – is, as indicated by Warburg, the very struggle for the space of thought, the *Denkraum*, in the specific context of Renaissance culture:

All that will be shown tonight with illustrations, known and unknown, with words and images (*in Wort und Bild*), exemplify man's struggle for the space of thought (*im Kampf um den Denkraum*). Wavering over a causal position figuratively mythological and numerically calculable (*zwischen bildhaft mythologischer und zahlenmässig errechenbarer Ursachensetzung*), the constellations have for him [...] an ambivalent, polarized character which on the one hand demands a cultic veneration with the practice of magic and, on the other, has the value of a detached and objective determination of extension (*Umfangbestimmung*) of the entities that shine in the universe, in the vault of heaven (am Himmelsgewölbe: Warburg [2014c]: 53).

In accordance with Vischer's theory, Warburg argues that the symbol's proper dimension entails a tension between the irrational and the rational, hence the symbolic, which corresponds to the mythological in a free-thinking consciousness, is the form of connection between image and meaning of a mixed kind, that is, consciously recognized as well as unrecognized, predetermined as well as self-determined. This dimension is different from the predetermined connection which pertains to the mythic and religious consciousness, where image and meaning totally identify with one another in an

indistinct blend of subject and object. Moreover this symbolic dimension must also be distinguished from the connection between image and sense of the third kind which is recognized and corresponds to the allegory and, differently from myth, implies a way of thinking completely prevailing over fantasy and a univocal interrelation between sign and meaning.

An eloquent image used by Vischer to qualify the intermediate kind of connection regards the interrelation between light and dark, brightness and obscurity. More precisely it is the image projected by a passage from Goethe's *Faust* which describes the effect of a «foreboding light» – at sunset, cutting through the stormy clouds – that discloses the evoking power of the symbolic – an appearance full of meaning (*sinnvolles Scheinbild*) – both self-determined and necessary and therefore inducing to see the light as a willed entity. And while the polarity light/dark characterizes the crepuscular dimension of the second kind connection, the first kind is characterized instead by dark and the third by brightness. Symbolic is what captivates the soul by connecting image and meaning (*Sinnbild*), a phenomenon both self-determined and necessary, and what enables the captivated soul to animate, to confer purposefulness to what is lifeless – the foreboding light – in both a recognized and unrecognized way. The symbol, then, lies between the opposite extremes of the darkness typifying the mythical-religious consciousness and the light of reason:

Two unrelated elements, on one side the light that glows in the dark, on the other the premonition, are connected by an interposing term of relation: the physical obscurity is likened to the unknown, and thereby to the unconscious; the light represents what is known, intrinsically comprehended and thereby consciousness; in the premonition mode, consciousness and unconscious exert reciprocal pressure fluctuating indeterminately as when the dark is traversed by a flash of light. Nonetheless it is certain that when we make this symbolic connection in our mind, we do not tell ourselves that the connection is merely symbolic. And this constitutes something that is missing, a lack of awareness but only in terms of analytical consideration. If we use fantasy as a measure of judgement and we recognize its value, it is instead quite a good thing, that is the energy of the faculty of producing images (*Bildvermögen*: Vischer [1887]: 167-168)

It is therefore in something that is missing, in the emptiness between the two unrelated elements that the symbolic lies as the true artistic dimension; the something that is missing which reason sees as a fault and fantasy as a richness in creating images. There is non conciliation between the two elements but an indetermined fluctuation, a polar tension resulting in a “*tertium comparationis*” which is a crepuscular zone, between light and dark, the significant and non significant, freedom and necessity, where judgement is

suspended (*vorbehalten*) as suggested by Vischer (Vischer [1887]: 169). In this suspension (cfr. Agamben 2004: 61), which is an intermediate state whereby the observer does not believe anymore in the magic-religious power of the images but is all the same enthralled by them, one can recognize, as argued by Nicastrò (2012), an affinity with the middle ground represented by Warburg's *Denkraum*. This third element, fluctuating between two unrelated or, rather, opposed elements, is brought about by that "antagonistic complex" that Warburg identifies between the primordial drive – the mythical-religious consciousness resting on astrology – and the intellect – the rational mind that contemplates the firmament. The creative, pre-eminently artistic act, generated by confronting the images, is positioned in that median zone, in the middle – «*die Mitte*» – for Vischer and in the intermediate space – «*der Zwischenraum*» – underlying the artistic creation, for Warburg (cfr. Warburg [2000]).

The intermediate, crepuscular zone that is produced by the «flare of light» in the dark, takes us back to Eisenstein's experience that, beyond its obvious reference to light/rationality and dark/irrationality, calls forth a number of cross-references which, building on Vischer's ideas, leads to Warburg and *Mnemosyne's* visual representations of the *Denkraum der Besonnenheit*.

The description of the visit to the museum dates from the period of Eisenstein's 14-month sojourn in Mexico which changed his concept of art and cinema (cfr. Somaini [2011]: 115-116). An experience that became common for many European intellectuals and artists who, especially in the 1920s, went overseas to acquaint themselves not only with an archaic civilization but also with the cultural verve and the contradictions of post-Revolutionary Mexico, a national crossbreed of Christian and pagan cultures. As in the case of Warburg,⁵ who was amongst the precursors of the wave of curious visitors, the underlying idea was to meet the last custodians of a primitive culture, comparable to the ancient paganism and as such representing to some degree the phylogenetic childhood of humanity. Also Eisenstein was fascinated by the intertwining of the modern and the archaic, the rational and the irrational, emblematically expressed by the interplay of light and darkness, a phenomenon that for the Russian cinematographer goes to the core of the question over the role of montage, the value and the use of images in film-making. The pre-rational way of thinking, still quite present in the Mexican culture, is in fact for Eisenstein what cinematography should aim to revive; its expressiveness, its power to impress people, lies indeed in the possibility of film-making

⁵ Cf. Somaini (2011): 116-120, about a comparison between Warburg's and Eisenstein's overseas ventures.

to create a condition of poignant inventiveness (*obraznost*) which also marks the primitive mindset.

As to the significance of this experience, which is just outlined in this study, the description of the visit to the museum of Chichén Itzá, if referred to Warburg's ideas hitherto explained, becomes particularly clear. The monstrousness of the statues, like Warburg's *monstra* of the mythic-religious mindset, represent the «unleashing of the sensual imagination» of the ancient Maya. These monsters acquire bizarreness, absurdity – the «*terribleness*» mentioned by Warburg – owing to their being «suddenly freed from darkness» in an irregular and intermittent way, «by lighted matches flaring in different directions». The image of the gleams of light in the darkness evokes that of the constellation, the starry sky watched at night. Because of the diffusion of light across the obscure hall, the monsters become alive as in Vischer's symbolical interpretation, through a contrasting effect of light and shade, of darkness being broken by a flash of light generating shadows that animate and personify lifeless creatures. The stone statues, otherwise motionless, move, become alive and terrifying. It is the alternation, the switching over of «lighted intervals» and «periods of darkness», the interruption, the intersection, the succession in the transition from light to dark and the coexistence, the simultaneousness of two elements that put in motion something that in itself cannot move. Hence the impression that the monsters during the moments of darkness have moved and traded places. And the effect is such to certify, as it were the Maya images, with their evoking the «mankind's early notions», as belonging to an ancestral past. They are the primordial images faced by man in Warburg's dialectic of the transition «*per monstra ad sphaeram*». The light intervals described by Eisenstein and the flash of light mentioned by Vischer call forth the etymological root of the word *Besonnenheit* used by Warburg to expound the meaning of *Denkraum* whereby *Besonnen* signifies both illuminating and being blinded by a sudden flash of light (cfr. Nicastro [2012]).

In Eisenstein's imagery, the *Denkraum*, the intermediate space of thought between light and dark, is lost when electricity is restored causing the gods to flee. The yellowish rays of electric light with «the shameless indifference of the low-powered electric bulbs» overpower darkness eliminating the differences and reinstating the monsters to their immobility. The sudden return of power, an offspring of the technological *hybris* which, in the conference on the ritual of the snake, kills the mythological and symbolic mindsets, is discussed in the commemoration of Franz Boll as the «promethean tragedy of man» contained in the observation «there is no tight firmament (*festes Gewölbe*)

above us» (Warburg [2014c]: 53).

The firmament, the constellations feed on darkness as they disappear in daylight. The stars vanish like the fireflies in Pasolini's exposé (cfr. Pasolini [1975]) and in Didi-Huberman's comments on it (cfr. Didi-Huberman [2010]); thus, leaving the metaphor aside, the people stamped out by the tyranny of the consumer society denounced by the Friulian poet, is comparable to the disappearance of alternative ways of thinking wiped out by the rationalistic *hybris* or by the uniformity of judgement which, like the polluting light, annuls all differences.

Unfolding the constellation seems instead the aim of Warburg in the architecture of the *Bilderatlas* where the images, laid out apparently with no particular order on black-clothed panels, appear as bright stars in the dark of the night.

If for Warburg responding to images means facing the tremendous question about the first cause of things, he sought to answer it with the *Bilderatlas* where the *Denkraum*, the in-between space amongst the images that cannot be conclusively conquered, is represented by the black empty spaces, by the dark intervals that separate the images. The space of thought, as a memory game, connects the images through ties and leaps in time, spatial migrations, associations of ideas, bipolar tensions amongst forms and imports displayed in each panel and spread out from panel to panel. Significantly, in *Mnemosyne* the interrelation between light/rationality and dark/irrationality, vis-à-vis Eisenstein's imagery, presents an opposite and complementary perspective: darkness is the space of thought and images are the unconscious energy, whereas in the hall of the Mexican museum, darkness represents the unconscious and the light of matches consciousness, the polar relation between darkness and light standing for the complementary opposition.

As it has been widely discussed, is the dialectic polarity that spurs the connections amongst the images, a constant counterpoint that triggers their relation, producing an effect of dynamic opening, movement, *dynamis* impelling the observer to follow the images unabatedly along possible trajectories of meaning. If for Warburg polarity implies a dynamic coexistence, unresolved between the opposing poles, which by remaining in constant tension preserve the ambivalence of the relation, in the context of *Mnemosyne* such polarity is distributed across a multiplicity of images, hence plurally and not exclusively between two single poles.

The distance opened by the space of thought marks the interspace contrary to any collage practice where the images, assembled together in an undifferentiated manner, cram the space (cfr. Centanni [2010]). In *Mnemosyne* the interspace is fundamental. The

black gaps surrounding the images are essential to emphasize, with a diversified critical approach, the single element of the composition: «in the big black panels, every image acquires its own space through a negotiation of its dimensions and its distance from the other images» (Centanni [2010]: 21).

If, on the one hand, the black “spacing” can be compared to the function of punctuation in writing – the marks and signs that separate words to make the meaning of a sentence clear – on the other, the spacing, as argued by Jean-Luc Nancy (cfr. Nancy [1996]: 43), includes the juxtaposition, the negation of any syntactic, as well as logic, determination. Nancy discusses the spacing to signify the free relation between the singular and the plural which transpires when one renounces the univocal relation of meaning amongst the elements at play. And he uses the juxtaposition of words, without any punctuation, to indicate the equivalence of one and many, of «being singular plural» that can be recognized only after relinquishing any metaphysical ontology. In this way he shows both the limit of the discursive signification and the potency of the spatial and visual location in a thought freed from the dominance of concept. So, when the *Bilderatlas* unfolds, it discloses a significant multiplicity of singularities that cannot be boiled down to any unity. Didi-Huberman, referring to a citation from Saxl whereby *Mnemosyne* would provide a «demonstration *ad oculos*», argues that such demonstration does not have «the form of a classic syllogism: it does not reduce what is different to the unity of a logical function» (cfr. Didi-Huberman [2002]: 460).

The *Bilderatlas* shows a distinction between *Denkraum* and *Begriff*, the space of thought as an alternative to the concept. The space conquered by the thought in the intervals amongst the images, configuring itself as a sort of distance from emotion or *pathos* – whose images are their visual expressions – to keep them under control, is an “interstitial” space and, as such, not all-embracing. The control exerted by the *Denkraum* over emotion is not comparable to that of grasping (*begreifen*; *cumcapere*) proper to the concept, that is defining and dominating through the subsumption of the sensitive multiplicity by means of a unifying abstraction. The physical proximity of the space of thought to the image, proper to its being “interstitial”, make it to some extent more similar to the physical grasping (*greifen*) of the mythological thought which by grasping the object blends with it, than to the grasping (*begreifen*) of the abstracting concept. Therefore the *Denkraum* is the space of the tragic fight between physical grasping (*greifen*) and conceptual grasping (*begreifen*) for a precarious conquest of the *sophrosyne* dimension (*Besonnenheit*: Warburg [2014d]: 20). Thereby in *Mnemosyne* the

Denkraum unfolds as an «iconology of the intervals» (*Ikonologie des Zwischenraumes*: cited in Gombrich [1970]: 253), as so defined by Warburg, opening the intermediate zone amongst the images and the signs.

Spacing corresponds in some ways to the discovery of a new syntax or to the syntax of a different form of thought. But it also leads to that mechanism of segmentation of the images by simply laying them out one next to the other without any interconnective signs but interval of darkness, proper to the cinematographic language. The creative process entailing the spacing and the dialectic juxtaposition of sequences, in this case of images, is the montage which is essentially the method used by Warburg in assembling *Mnemosyne* as it is made evident by the presence in his work of the essential elements of montage.

Likewise in Eisenstein's description of his night visit to the museum it is possible to understand the essence of the elementary dialectic of montage. The mechanism of montage is for Eisenstein dynamic and dialectic, and the polarity that pervades it makes it a dramatic rather than an epic principle (see on that Sacco [2013]). The montage in fact does not reflect «a thought made of a succession of pieces but rather a thought arising from the clashing of two pieces independent from one another» (Eisenstein [1929]).

The basic core of the montage implies the juxtaposition, the contrast of two or more still shots or photograms, two or more representations (*izobraženie*), which, projected at a certain speed, generate a movement or an image (Eisenstein [1963-70]: 141). And the image ensuing from the contrast shows both the single autonomous units making it up and the total picture. Hence it is a third thing in relation to the starting representations. The movement produced by the composition is an expression of *pathos* and therefore the ensuing image is always affective, and has the power to move the spectator. Eisenstein's approach to the montage recalls the elements observed in Vischer's passage to describe the symbolic crepuscular consciousness, resulting from the connection of two unrelated elements that generate a third element charged with empathy (*Einfühlung*).

However, the alternation of light and darkness is a fundamental element of the cinematographic implement. The moving image that marks the beginning of cinema is a product of the alternation of light and dark frames caused by the camera shutter. The human eye does not perceive the dark frames interspersed between the photograms and the effect is an illusion of movement. This confirms how the alternation of opposed poles of light and dark is so intrinsic to the possibility of

creating movement and with movement, life. Something that has inspired the scholarly investigations both of Vischer with his theory of empathy, and Warburg who has defined concisely the purpose of his studies as an attempt at developing a «theory of man in movement» (Warburg, Cassirer [2003]: 56).

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