

AFTER LIFE OF MNEMOSYNE ATLAS

1.

Nobody knows, when it was made and why begins with a countdown that gives the impression it would be found footage. The film, which is shot on 16 mm film in 4:3 screen ratio shows black and white images without any sound nor titles for a running time of 10 minutes and 22 seconds. The images are parts of a mysterious piece by Aby Warburg called *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Warburg is considered one of the most significant art historians in European culture. For the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, images are gathered and arranged in specific sequences and attached to separate panels, giving the impression that the editing of the panels is somewhat more important than individual images. From this context, one can easily think of a possible proper cinematic way of introducing the *Atlas* that presents first the panels and then the individual images.

However, the film by Elke Marhöfer that I want to discuss does not follow the predicted way of exposing the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. On the contrary, up until the middle of the film, one sees only individual images one by one, then several panels and a short montage cut of the office furniture and indoor plants in the Warburg Institute, a broken flower vase, a glance out of the window into the moving trees on the other side of the street, to end with a nervous but static shot from the same street on to the facade of the Institute. Considering her way of showing Warburg's work and its current hosting, one could assume that this film is not recorded for the purpose of introducing Warburg's work. Instead, one might consider it as one possible becoming of *Mnemosyne Atlas*. It is difficult to imagine a meaning that both forms have in common; neither Marhöfer's film nor *Mnemosyne Atlas* can be described in definite words or as having a single meaning. However, the film emphasizes certain aspects of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and performs certain transformations that may be specific to their methodologies.

2.

Before exploring what the film does, or rather does not, it is somewhat necessary for us to look at the *Mnemosyne Atlas* briefly. *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927–1929), Warburg's last project, is composed of 63 panels and 971 images from diverse resources, such as books, newspapers, advertisements, magazines and artworks. The research itinerary of the art and cultural historian crosses the boundaries between disciplines, times and spaces. In this sense, it seems more appropriate to call him an "image historian" like the Japanese researcher, Tanaka Jun, does in his biography of Aby Warburg, rather than as an art historian.

The *Mnemosyne Atlas* condenses Warburg's lifelong research on the afterlife of ancient history throughout European culture showing constellations of images on black covered panels. Numerous images of *Mnemosyne Atlas* center on the thematic axes of 'forms of pathos,' and 'cosmography.' Warburg's extraordinary project is a massive one, giving rise and encompassing the European artistic, cultural and

intellectual history as a whole. Yet the method he uses for this purpose is not closed and chronological, he rather forms constellations of diverse images on the panels. Thereby, the senses produced by the *Mnemosyne Atlas* are not determined in a definite way. Instead it functions as an image map (atlas) that can help us to explore the world of collective memories sustaining European cultural history or its imagination of itself in multiple layers and ways of sensing. *Mnemosyne Atlas* now remains in a form of black and white photographic reproductions of Warburg's three versions since the original panels are missing. Moreover, the 1929 version is as well not a finished and ultimate one, but a provisional in progress that was interrupted by the death of Warburg. This fact, together with the original methodology, necessarily intensifies the open structure of *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

Nobody knows, when it was made and why selects specific images of *Mnemosyne Atlas* that stem from non-European regions and show relationships between human and cosmos, or human and animal. The selection is rather different from most common receptions of Warburg's project that focus primarily on Europe and the Greek-Renaissance continuity as the original forms of pathos, or interpretive executions meanderings through the different images of a single panel. How can we think of the different focus and approach to the *Mnemosyne Atlas*?

The film by Elke Marhöfer seems to consider *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a transformable and expandable work. It acts by selecting certain images and by changing the constellation of Warburg's panels. At first, we watch several individual images and then the panels. In the meantime, we realize that the individual images are not belonging to one single, but originate from several panels. In other words, the encounter of Marhöfer materializes *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a work in progress, not as a past and finalized one. One might feel like witnessing Warburg's ghost acting in the film, changing the selection and arranging a new series or assemblage of specific images.¹

This active intervention is really significant, since the act of re-assemblage of the images by the filmmaker (or Warburg's ghost) creates new meanings. Though the project was never finished, in this specific context the selection and the montage of the images really matter. New relations between images signify something very different, transforming the original panels into new ones and even alter the whole project of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. However, *Nobody knows, when it was made and why* does not perform its alternation by applying a transcendental style of critique of *Mnemosyne Atlas*, but engages actively in its multiple cartographies. It creates new maps of images and locates itself inside the act of becoming of the cartography of *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Cartography in such a case means the ever-changing senses of the multiple series of the images, which transform according to the serialization or the editing, a formal feature that enables Marhöfer to significantly deterritorialize the *Mnemosyne Atlas* from its classical reception and reterritorialize it with new relations. The film seems to join into the act of making that went into *Mnemosyne Atlas* itself in order to create new possible maps that do not privilege Europe and the human.

Going back to the contents, the images that contain the cosmology and human-

¹ Warburg describes his work as "ghost story for the full grown-up" (*Mnemosyne. Grundbegriffe*, II, 2 July 1929)

animal relations are stemming from Babylonian and Mesopotamian cultures. They are one of the main themes of *Nobody knows, when it was made and why* and probably of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Already in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* these images signified non-geocentric and nonanthropocentric perspectives, where the earth is regarded as one planet among other planets and the human as one animal among other animals.

Nowadays these perspectives have become again important, since we experience the disastrous consequences of a culture that reproduces boundaries between humans and the natural world everywhere. Selecting and presenting mainly images from non-European regions can mean a criticism toward Eurocentric perspectives that still remains in a domineering political position even after the colonial period. Though images and things of non-European origin were gathered extensively, they nevertheless have often been considered as of minor importance, compared to that of European culture by most scholars. To challenge this reception, the filmmaker repeats

Warburg's method and forms an image map that suggests a non-subordinated relation between European and non-European, human and nonhuman cultures. This is something that might have been Warburg's intention as well but has never reached the surface, even though the free drawing of the cultural and geographic connections is essential for the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. But, in which way does the film perform its methodological amalgamation into the *Mnemosyne Atlas*? In order to answer this question, I will examine a few characteristic features of the film.

3.

Marhöfer's work joins the *Mnemosyne Atlas* by the way it uses cartography, and transforms the assemblage of images from a spatial into a temporal montage. The utilization of black and white film stock can be considered as drawing an additional resemblance to the *Atlas*' black and white photographs on black clothed panels. But these filmic transformations are not carried through without any friction. The frictions or interstices show themselves in subtle movements. They appear in several ways, such as shifting in and out of focus, flickers of the film material, minute trembling of the camera and the sudden and fast montage cut in the last part of the film.

We can assume that the film reproduces exactly what exists in front of the camera. Yet, the camera movements produce some kinds of cracks in *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The cracks, or ruptures appear in the liminal spaces between the images, which function as a space for the creation of senses. Though the images in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* are fixed now on the level of the visible, this way of handling can be understood as a visual expression of their openness, where their meaning can be altered infinitely on the invisible level. The in-camera montage of individual images visualizes the indefinite creation of meanings and creates a new series of images, which 'deconstructs' the established relationship between them and produces new relationships together with the films movements.

Furthermore, it is certain that the person who stands behind the camera is the filmmaker, but she does not seem to want to emphasize her presence. There is no inscribed text in the film. It looks like footage found in attic storage, as if we don't know when it was made and why. Not even the name of the artist or the title of the film appears, similar to the *Atlas* that hardly had any explanation or caption. We can

assume that there must be a specific intention. Perhaps the filmmaker denies, or does not accentuate her self-conscious interpretation, in order to inhabit Warburg's spirit with new perspectives toward the world. While erasing her presence in the film,

Marhöfer seems to summon Warburg's ghost into the present and share it's possible view on behalf of revising the next version of *Mnemosyne Atlas* that prematurely ended by Warburg's death. *Nobody knows when it was made and why* inhabits the ghost and creates a non-centralized perspective on nature or ecology functioning as the 64th panel or an entirely new version of *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

If we compare the manner in which Marhöfer deals with *Mnemosyne Atlas* with that of an art historian and philosopher George Didi-Huberman in his installation work, titled *Mnemosyne 42* in *Nouvelles Histoires de Fantômes* (New Ghost Stories), we can grasp the immanent manner in which Marhöfer's film proceeds more clearly. Didi-Huberman expands Warburg's work massively into a multi-media installation including and combining examples from modern and contemporary cinema: such as Eisenstein with Pasolini, Glauber Rocha with Theo Angelopoulos, Paradjanov with Wang Bing, Jean-Luc Godard with Harun Farocki. This expansion into a contemporary media culture, an homage to Warburg, seems to focus on the most influential media, that is cinema, after Warburg's death in 1929 to date. When we consider Warburg's attitude toward a kind of qualitative indifference between diverse image media, we can understand why Didi-Huberman expands *Mnemosyne Atlas* with contemporary media. His contemporary interpretation might make sense for contemporary viewers, however, *Nobody knows, when it was made and why* investigates the original work or intention of Warburg closely and suggests a possible new version of *Mnemosyne Atlas* in a different current world, and from his time period, in terms of the importance of the perception on nonhuman beings and non-European cultures.

In spite of the differences, Marhöfer resonates with Warburg's work and his affects in the realm of *Mnemosyne Atlas*. She calls into existence the affects of Warburg's work by the movements of film. With *Nobody knows, when it was made and why*, we can sense a sort of overlapped anxiety and sadness. The affects might be composed of Warburg's way of thinking that is not separable from pathos and also of the filmmaker's way of conceiving the archive. The artist might feel that Warburg's ghost is not happy being locked in a storage and the stopping of his work with the image of the broken vase, which should be transformed according to the changes of the world, or with the view out the window into the moving trees. One can watch the nervous wandering of the ghost in the fast montage cut, and in it's fixation of the facade of the Institute.

Moreover, "the illustrated psychological history of the interval between impulse and rational action"² is a subject of a scientific study of culture for Warburg, so pathos can be an important methodology for him in terms of conceptual and rational thinking. The camera movements that cause subtly unstable and sad feelings resonate fundamentally with the core methodology of Warburg's work, or with the memory of

² Introduction to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* by Aby Warburg from "The Mnemosyne Atlas, Aby Warburg—The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past", last modified June 16, 2013, <http://socks-studio.com/2013/06/16/the-mnemosyneatlas-aby-warburg-the-absorption-of-the-expressive-values-of-the-past/>.

Warburg, thus one feels the coexistent affects of the image historian with those of the filmmaker. This sympathetic attitude of the film motivates the spectators to engage with a way of thinking that is rubbed with affects.

4.

The affects we gather from the minor camera movements, the fast montage cut and the static view, makes and incarnates some interstices between images where thoughts emerge. In the liminal space, a network of images can always be broken and relinked, so the state is not stable and fixed. From this context, the camera movements are considered as visualization of the unstable senses relational to Warburg's non-static thinking through pathos. Succession or inheritance to Warburg through affirmation is a very important virtue of the film. It is this attitude through which the spectator enters into the heart of Warburg's work and, is therefore prompted to think about what the work would be like in the present and still remaining unfixed in terms of its possible interpretations. But what the film presents is not merely pathos. The film mediates the photographic reproductions of diverse images that are already memories of the past. According to Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil*, recorded images substitute our memories. The narrator of *Sans Soleil* says,

I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather I remember the images I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember? I know: it wrote the Bible. The new Bible will be an eternal magnetic tape of a time that will have to reread itself constantly just to know it existed.

Perhaps we follow Chris Marker's belief that images aid our memories and that people need images in order to remember, or perhaps we do not. However, certainly there exists strata of multiple memories which were recorded, or not and had substituted some people's memories even before being claimed as pictures by Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. As Marker puts it in the film, "beneath each of these *images* a memory. And in place of what we were told had been forged into a collective memory, a thousand memories of men who parade their personal laceration in the great wound of history."³ In other words, the images Warburg collected were already collective impersonal pre-individual mnemonic strata stemming from diverse parts of the world.

Thus, when the filmmaker shot *Mnemosyne Atlas* the memory of the artist encounters the multiple layers of the collective strata of memories, which can form series of meanings, of all times and spaces, latitudes and longitudes, horizontals and verticals. For this film, serializations of images or collective memories are not making linear sequences. According to Gilles Deleuze in *The Time-Image*, "The before and the after" in the serialization "are [...] no longer successive determinations of the course of time, but the two sides of the power, or the passage of the power to a higher power. The direct time-image here [...] appear [...] in a becoming as potentialization, as series of powers."⁴ What is important in serialization is that it appears "in a

³ I substitute 'faces' with 'images' in this quotation from *Sans Soleil*.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 282.

becoming as potentialization.” In this way, *Nobody knows, when it was made and why* activates serializations of the multi-layered memories traversing *Mnemosyne Atlas* together with the spectators in the present, transforming it into a tangible and actual ongoing work in progress.