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MNEMIC INVERSIONS -
A Lecture on Aby Warburg’s Cultural Semiotics

“The thinking and rethinking of objects by the Brain is actually a language, but not a language like ours (since it is addressing itself and not someone or something outside itself.)”

Philip K. Dick, VALIS

Abstract

Aby Warburg's theory of “social mneme” or living information (“you live and do me no harm”) is a most interesting inversion of Richard Semon's Mnemic Psychology1. This paper will present a bird-eye’s-view on Mnemic Psychology by discussing its two key concepts, engram and mneme, and will reconstruct Aby Warburg's import of Semon’s terms into his enigmatic and “uncanny” (Freud, Derrida) theory of social mneme, by using them in a different context – or, so to say: “invert” their original meaning, and yet benefit from their value as expressive concepts - by a close reading of some significant passages of his famous and unfinished lifework, the Mnemosyne-Atlas.

For Aby Warburg, these mnemic inversions are representing one basic principle of artistic psychology: a visual reconstruction of Warburgs argumentation in his Hertziana-Lecture on “Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’Herbe” will show how Warburg has imagined the wandering and mapping of forms and symbols (engrams) by inversion, much like an “Energiekonserve-Symbol” inside the “social memory” (Durkheim, Halbwachs) or “mnemosphere” (Debray) and how the discovery of mnemic inversions allows art historians to find and use significant oppositions within historical chains of inheritance, or – generally speaking – the “structure of art” (Burnham, Moles) itself.

Finally, with this brief lecture I will provide an outlook towards my current research in Aby Warburg’s principles of archivalic montage, as they show up during some polemic speculations in his unpublished scientific groundwork, the “Grundlegende Bruchstücke”: This sketchy and loose collection of notes, aphorisms and fragments makes extensive use of Warburg’s later much more formalized concept of inversion, as inverted paraphrases like “Kritik der reinen Unvernunft”, “Princip des mangelnden Grundes” or “lex parsimoniae mentis” may show us. Last, but not least, Warburg’s mnemic inversions should be thought of as a philosophical paradox.

Cultural Keywords: Spatial Thinking, Visual Semiotics, Archivalic Montage

1 See therefore also: Richard Barbrook: A Memesis Critique. 