THE PRODUCTIVE DISORDER OF THE ATLAS

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ABSTRACT

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin suggests that a kind of "productive disorder" is the canon of both the collector (*Sammler*) and involuntary memory. This chapter investigates how this "productive disorder" can apply to the conceptual figure of the atlas. Following closely – although with some detours – Georges Didi-Huberman's *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science* and its characterization of the atlas as a visual form of knowledge, it explores a thought space in which fragmentation and reconfiguration emerge as fully operative notions. The different sections complement each other and unfold the "essential dialectic" of the atlas: on the one hand, a materialist dimension linked to the sovereign individuality of things; on the other hand, a psychic dimension linked to association, memory and imagination. The atlas takes part in a struggle against dispersion and chaos and makes productive certain principles of observation linked to morphology and physiognomy. In addition, it entails various forms of exercise related to aesthetic and political issues, to *correspondances* and to the infinite interplay between childhood and adulthood. Two features make up the ambivalence of the atlas and threaten its productivity: the risk of the ever-new and the risk of forgetting the ragpicker (*Lumpensammler*), a figure whose spirit of "collection" becomes an intrinsically economic and urban matter.

KEYWORD

Atlas, Productive Disorder, Exercise, Involuntary Memory, Childhood and Adulthood.

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1.
PRODUCTIVE DISORDER(S)

> Everything we call invention, discovery in a higher sense, is the significant practice [*Ausübung*], activation of an original instinct for truth, long developed in secret, which suddenly and at lightning speed turns into a fruitful perception.
>
> Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, 416.

Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*) is an unfinished work of philosophy of history that delves into nineteenth-century Paris in order to apprehend the features and ambiguities of modernity in its complex relation to the ancient and the present. It consists of a massive collection of quotations and insightful remarks organized thematically in convolutes, the latter bringing order to the seemingly scattered elements and allowing one to more easily detect connections and affinities between them – not only across specific convolutes, but across the entire volume. It is thus a project that is open to countless interpretations and whose fertility extends far beyond the thematic and formal scope envisaged by its author.

Convolute H focuses on the figure of the collector. One of its remarks suggests that a kind of "productive disorder" is the canon of both the collector (*Sammler*) and involuntary memory (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 211 [H 5, 1]). It is important to stress that central figures of *The Arcades Project*, such as the collector, the allegorist and the *flâneur*, are touched "by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 211 [H 4a, 1]). Hence, this scattered state of things can be considered a condition for the emergence of the productive element. In other words: disorder becomes productive if one confronts it directly and "takes up the struggle against dispersion" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 211 [H 4a, 1]). The three figures – collector, allegorist and *flâneur* – reveal a heightened capacity to take up this struggle, and apart from their differences this binds them together. The collector rescues objects from their previous function and from their commodity character,

introducing them into a new and magical world with laws of its own. The allegorist takes things out of their context, transforming them into a fragment that initiates an unpredictable process of meditation. The *flâneur*, part stroller, part detective, deals with the countless stimulations of urban life, reacting in his own rhythm and observing details that reveal the ambiguous confluence of the archaic and the modern in the industrialized and ever-changing city of Paris.

The heightened capacity to counteract disorder is not far removed from the qualities of the physiognomist's gaze, and at times Benjamin uses the semantic field of physiognomy to characterize the task of both the materialist historian and some of the pivotal characters of *The Arcades Project*.[2] Despite the seemingly "dispersive character" of the latter, several of its quotations and remarks were used as source material in important (and finished) essays on Charles Baudelaire, Franz Kafka, Eduard Fuchs, and photography, to name just a few, and even in short stories such as "The Lucky Hand", an enigmatic tale that touches upon another ambivalent figure of modernity: the gambler. Gambling can be conceived of as a "decayed form of divination" (Dolbear, Leslie and Truskolaski, 2016, p. xxix), and, in fact, a theme that underpins the remarks on gambling in *The Arcades Project* and "The Lucky Hand" is the intuitive presence of mind that involves subliminal bodily knowledge. Gambling, although spoiled by money, is a concrete school for this gift, which in its own way deals with chance and disorder – and, against and through them, allows one to make a successful move.

There are several theoretical gateways to the themes of dispersion, disorder and chaos. Philosophy itself, and the manifold concepts that form its history, can be understood as an attempt to deal with them. A good example is to be found in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's definition of the plane of immanence in *What is Philosophy?* If philosophy consists in the creation of concepts, the plane of immanence is the very instituting of philosophy. Although pre-philosophical, it "does not exist outside philosophy" but "implies a sort of groping experimentation[,] and its layout resorts to measures that are not very

2 For instance: "To write history means giving dates their physiognomy" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 476 [N ll, 2]. And: collectors "are physiognomists of the world of things" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 207 [H 2, 7; H2a, 1]). This physiognomic strand equally applies to Benjamin's overall approach to the urban as a space whose traces can be read and deciphered. On this subject, see Gilloch, 1996, pp. 5-7.

respectable, rational, or reasonable" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 41). It operates by sectioning chaos and "acts like a sieve":

> Chaos is not an inert or stationary state, nor is it a chance mixture. Chaos makes chaotic and undoes every consistency in the infinite. The problem of philosophy is to acquire a consistency without losing the infinite into which thought plunges (in this respect chaos has as much a mental as a physical existence). (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 42)

According to this framework, and relying on Jean-Pierre Vernant, the Greek Logos is characterized as a seminal "plane-sieve", i.e. the first philosophical response "to conceive of a strict immanence of Order to a cosmic milieu that sections chaos in the form of a plane" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 43).

How do these different motives – the productive disorder and the struggle against chaos – converge in the conceptual figure of the atlas? In *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*,[3] Georges Didi-Huberman makes use of the Deleuzian and Guattarian notion of "sections of chaos" when referring to Aby Warburg's seminal *Atlas Mnemosyne*, an iconographic project by the German art historian that brings together, in the same plates, images from different epochs and styles, creating a montage of heterogeneous elements (see Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 153). In a more general way, one may concede that there is "an unexpected complicity – of the kind that particularly worries philosophers descended from Plato – between classification and disorder or, if we prefer, between reason and imagination" (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 42). This remark stresses that the atlas form potentiates the tension and complicity between the classificatory arrangement and the possibility of the constant rearrangement of things by way of montage. Moreover, in several respects, this process resembles ancient practices of divination. Although seemingly irrational in the light of a rationalist conception of science, these practices are devoid neither of a spirit of ordering and classification, as anthropology has shown for decades, nor of the capacity to integrate sensible things and their intelligible relations, however "primitive"

3 Written on the occasion of an exhibition designed for the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 2011.

they may seem (see Didi-Huberman, 2018, pp. 34-46). Besides these practices, there are gestures in gambling that resemble those that potentiate the "heuristic configurations" of an atlas:

> To shuffle and to redistribute cards, to disassemble and to reassemble the order of images on a table to create "quasi-divinatory" heuristic configurations, that is, which are capable of glimpsing the working of time in the visible world: Such would be the basic operating sequence for any practice that we call here an *atlas*. (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 48)

Strictly speaking, making an atlas is not equivalent to making a collection (nor is it equivalent to creating philosophical concepts), but the activity of collecting and the mechanisms of its "productive disorder" add important elements to the theoretical elaboration of this conceptual figure. An atlas, like a collection, results from and is indicative of a tendency to arrange things according to their correspondences, and at the core of this tendency lies an acute awareness that things in the world are in a state of dispersion. This is a variant of a general struggle with different names and different forms, a "*struggle against chaos* [that] does not take place without an affinity with the enemy" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 203). As for the productive disorder of the atlas, which often merges various disciplines and forms, Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* can be considered a shining example (this is further developed in section 4 below).

On the other hand, it is not by chance that Didi-Huberman connects the themes of dispersion, disorder and chaos to both the philosophical-historical endeavour of *The Arcades Project* and the methodological principles of Goethean morphology. Which features of the latter allow for this connection? First and foremost, the principle of polarity and the need for organization that can be related to certain principles of observation, comparison and ordering. Putting these principles into practice can offer a glimpse, a point of access, if only momentary, into that which is a primal phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) in them and which is intrinsic to the singular occurrences and the laws that guide their metamorphosis. Moreover, it is a process that knows no end. On this topic, Maria Filomena Molder recalls Johann Wolfgang Goethe's description of the link between authentic

theory and "the inexhaustible life of each and every thing: 'on a daily basis, more relations between the things and ourselves are found, there is always something, coming from things, which awakes in us. I mean, things are infinite'" (Molder, 1995, p. 290).[4] In the first place, the heuristic principles of morphology respond to this "excess of forms" through a description of each singular thing that should avoid any determination that is exterior to it; in the second place, they respond by relating it to the whole. And since a sensitive gaze and the use of memory are not enough to achieve this, the conjunction of comprehensive intuition (*Einsehen*) and judgement (*Urteil*) becomes necessary (see Molder, 1995, p. 220). A delicate form of empiricism (*zarte Empirie*)[5] is the basis for a theory that is intrinsically linked to facts. At the same time, this method allows for the discovery of affinities between the diverse manifestations of the singular.[6]

It is beyond the scope of the present chapter to thoroughly explore the fertility of morphological concepts, but it is symptomatic that Didi-Huberman takes them as one of the main theoretical resources for reflecting on the atlas form. Apart from the aspects mentioned above, he stresses the morphological character of the polarities – between *astra* and *monstra* – and the affinities between images that are made manifest in the montages of Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* (see Didi-Huberman, 2018, pp. 116-138).

Let us now return to the entry from *The Arcades Project* mentioned at the very beginning of this section, which relates collection and *mémoire involontaire* by way of productive disorder. Benjamin refers to a passage from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*:

4 The quotation at the end of this excerpt comes from a conversation that Goethe had with Riemer on 2 August 1807. As with all other quotations in this chapter that do not refer to an existing translation, the translation is my own.

5 Maxim 565 reads: "There is a delicate form of empiricism which enters into the closest union with its object and is therefore transformed into an actual theory" (Goethe, 1998, p. 75).

6 Benjamin mentions that his project on "the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline", grounded mostly in economic facts, owes a lot to morphological notions, and he compares the unfolding "of the arcade's concrete historical forms" with a leaf that "unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 462 [N 2a, 4]). This entails a transposition of the concept of "primal phenomena" from the domain of nature to that of history. On this transposition, see Molder, 2020.

> "And I had already lived long enough so that, for more than one of the human beings with whom I had come in contact, I found in antipodal regions of my past memories another being to complete the picture. […] In much the same way, when an art lover is shown a panel of an altar screen, he remembers in what church, museum, and private collection the other panels are dispersed (likewise, he finally succeeds, by following the catalogues of art sales or frequenting antique shops, in finding the mate to the object he possesses and thereby completing the pair, and so can reconstruct in his mind the predella and the entire altar)." Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris), vol. 2, p. 158. The *mémoire volontaire*, on the other hand, is a registry providing the object with a classificatory number behind which it disappears. (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 211 [H 5, l])

Two aspects of this piece are deserving of attention. The first concerns the pivotal role played by objects in collecting and involuntary memory; in both of them, and contrary to what occurs in voluntary memory, objects do not disappear behind a simple "classificatory number". Another entry in *The Arcades Project* goes in this direction, as the collector and remembrances of the solitary are said to imply a "tête-à-tête with things" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 866 [Qº,6]). In remembrance we are alone with things that, over time, are silently ordered around us, forming the invisible threads that bind them together and that we might one day be capable of apprehending. A few lines after the piece quoted by Benjamin, Proust adds that these invisible threads are also linked to the different roles a person or an object has played in our lives. He then concludes:

> If after an interval of several years I rediscovered in my memory a mere social acquaintance or even a physical object, I perceived that life all this while had been weaving round person or thing a tissue of diverse threads which ended by covering them with the beautiful and inimitable velvety patina of the years, just as in an old park a simple runnel of water comes with the passage of time to be enveloped in a sheath of emerald. (Proust, 1993, pp. 416-417)

Not only does the unfolding of these roles played by persons and objects require time, but all this has, for Proust, the quality of oneiric images. Benjamin doesn't further develop the reasons behind the proposed kinship between collector and involuntary memory. Nonetheless, the passages that explicitly or implicitly point to productive disorder and the role objects play in it seem to be the glue that holds this kinship together. In this Proustian context, it also accounts for the working of time – and of forgetfulness and recollection as the two poles with which life silently weaves its "diverse threads".[7]

Secondly, the art collector and the one who remembers are not given the ability to find the beings and objects that complete each other from the outset, as this can only be achieved after one lives "long enough". Whether this ability is ever attained is another question, but it nonetheless seems to presuppose a particular kind of life experience, and not so much a specific and quantifiable age (more on this in section 5).

The different aspects of the "productive disorder" seen until now can be brought together around two key features of the atlas, which Didi-Huberman, in the wake of Benjamin's work on memory, collection and the world of images, pinpoints as its "essential dialectic": on the one hand, a materialist dimension linked to the sovereign individuality of things, to the attention demanded of us by the endlessness of phenomena; on the other hand, a psychic dimension linked to association, memory, the magic of play and imagination (see Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 63). The following sections will unfold this "essential dialectic" and various forms of the "productive disorder", some of them already outlined above.

2.
ATLAS AND EXERCISE

A particular use of the term atlas by Walter Benjamin allows new aspects of this conceptual figure to be developed. In "Little History of Photography", August Sander's portraits of German society in the first decades of the twentieth century are described as follows: "Sander's work is more than a picture book:

7 For an interpretation of Proust's *Recherche* as a Penelopean work in which recollection and forgetting are interwoven, see Benjamin, 1999d, pp. 237-238.

an exercising atlas [*Übungsatlas*]" (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 520).[8] The "very impartial" but "delicate" form of observation they entail can be considered an heir of Goethe's "delicate empiricism [*zarte Empirie*]" (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 520), i.e. an observation that gives objects a central role.[9] In addition, Sander's work also belongs to a physiognomic tradition and, in particular, to the way cinema and photography depicted anonymous faces. Yet there is more to this:

> Work like Sander's could overnight assume unlooked-for topicality. Sudden shifts of power such as are now overdue in our society can make the ability to read facial types a matter of vital importance. Whether one is of the Left or the Right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way. (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 520)

The physiognomic character of Sander's work unfolds in two essential themes: on the one hand, it concerns reading faces, bodies and the social context (often professional) immobilized in each of the portraits; on the other hand, and concomitantly, it concerns a practical purpose that is social in nature, appropriate to a time of rapid political change and growing racial tensions. Benjamin realizes that the physiognomic question might be the order of the day, but not as a pseudo-scientific revitalization of the positivist approaches developed in the nineteenth century, often with a simplistic reading of the relationship between the exterior (the traits of the person) and the interior (personality, moral characteristics). Rather, it is a matter of attending to a particular social and historical moment. By and large, Sander's work belongs to a Western physiognomic tradition whose main roots are to be found at the end of the eighteenth century, in authors such as Lavater and Goethe, and which in the first three decades of the twentieth century gained renewed impetus and even a social field of action that went far beyond the simple search for a correspondence between anatomical features and the internal characteristics of individuals (see Somaini, 2015, pp. 87-96). In this sense, as

8 Translation slightly modified.

9 For a broader account on this topic, see my "Images to Exercise Ourselves. Morphology between August Sander's Photographs and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*" (Conceição, 2013).

Antonio Somaini points out, Goethe's morphology, and in particular the assertion that "Everything factual is already theory" (Goethe, 1998, p. 77), helped to renew physiognomy in the sense that the surface, the phenomenal manifestation, dissolves the fallacies of the relationship between interior and exterior. On the other hand, the "exercising atlas" responds to a tradition in the field of children's literature with a pedagogical goal, developed over the centuries and particularly since Johann Amos Comenius's *Orbis Pictus*, from 1658 – a tradition that explored not only various areas of knowledge but also different forms of presenting textual and visual data. In this sense, it is worth mentioning the atlas *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* (*Society and Economy*), published in 1930 by Otto Neurath and Gern Arntz. Illustrating the state of affairs of the world in different areas, it stemmed from previous experiments in graphic design, thus providing an album whose images could be "rearranged in different configurations" (Somaini, 2015, p. 100).

Whether or not Benjamin's interpretation was directly influenced by this second tradition, Sander's work, ordered in series with a view to a very particular social typology, contributes to a pedagogy of the gaze that is invested with the aesthetic and socio-political potentialities of documentary photography – at the threshold between art and science. Sander's atlas is infinite, as is the task of visually ordering the scattered elements of society, a relentless exercise whose goal is not given beforehand but rather demands a bold and delicate form of observation.

Childhood is the age of exercise (*Übung*, also translatable as *practice* or *training*) *par excellence*, and in Benjamin's work it is often associated with the mimetic faculty and with play. But to trace the presence of this notion in his early work, one needs to consider a collection of notes entitled "Learning and Exercising" ("Lernen und Üben"), in which the progress of learning is associated with continuity, and exercising with a discontinuity that comes about suddenly. The latter is not a form of acquiring knowledge but the acquisition of the ability (*Fähigkeit*) to have it at one's disposal. In this sense, it corresponds to an intuitive understanding/insight (*Einsehen*) rather than a having (*Haben*) (Benjamin 1991, pp. 77-78).

Besides, exercising, as painters and jugglers well know, has much to do with the repetition of gestures that allow the body to attune its own mechanisms, a repetition that demands pausing and intervals. In this respect,

the juggler Rastelli is the main character of a thought-image (*Denkbild*) that is a little treatise on the virtues and secret mechanisms of exercising (Benjamin, 1999e, pp. 590-591).

By evoking a link between exercise and physiognomy, Benjamin is drawing attention to a "matter of vital importance" that has to do with the historical tensions of his time, but also with the importance of a type of knowledge that is linked to practical life. In "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm", Carlo Ginzgurg describes an epistemological paradigm that connects venatic lore, the history of medicine, the analysis of certain details in works of art, psychoanalysis, detective stories and divination practices. It is a "conjectural knowledge" that also has deep roots in practical life (see Ginzburg, 1989). After establishing the necessary differences between the various domains and the developments that some of them underwent throughout the nineteenth century – moving closer to a positivist approach that understands traces as evidence within the framework of societies of control – Ginzburg poses a question about the scientific character of "conjectural knowledge": is the precision sought by the scientific and quantitative approach important for everyday life? In fact, there are situations in which the "flexible rigour (pardon the oxymoron) of the conjectural paradigm seems impossible to suppress" (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 124). Physiognomy is a good example of this, and in particular the term *firãsa*, a complex notion that was the basis of ancient Arabic physiognomy, implying the use of clues in order to draw a connection between the known and the unknown. Though reluctantly, Ginzburg uses the term "intuition" to describe what is at stake here. *Firãsa* has less to do with any mystical intuition or modern forms of irrationalism, however; rather, it is a "low intuition" based on the senses, implying various forms of life and bringing the human animal closely together with other animals.

Apart from Lavater's naturalistic endeavour and later tendencies that would couple it with phenomena such as eugenics, physiognomy's history is a much more complex issue. Arabic physiognomy, whose roots are prior to its contact with the Greek tradition, had two impulses at its origin: the naturalist impulse, linked to medicine, and the astrological impulse, linked to divination. More than a science, *firãsa* was an art, an exercise of the gift of judging a person on the basis of external signs, "a practice of the *glance* and the art of *detail*" (Courtine and Haroche, 1997, p. 31). This exercise demanded an experienced

gaze and had eminently practical purposes, linked to justice, commerce, sexuality and, sometimes, to predicting the future.

The multitude of faces that compose the ebb and flow of big cities, in a mass movement that makes it difficult to perceive identities and singularities, offers new challenges and new functions to this physiognomic heritage. Nineteenth-century metropolises clearly strengthened and further entrenched the notion that social conditions can have an impact on faces and expressions, and the popular Parisian novels called physiologies are a seminal testimony to the attempt to decipher urban traits. Prior to this, however, ancient practices connected to daily life presuppose that the ordinary man is a physiognomist without knowing it whenever this exercise of the gaze is used to choose one's company, and whom to avoid (see Courtine and Haroche, 1997, pp. 32-33). Thus, it would be no exaggeration to say that Sander's atlas enters fully into a social and political game of differentiations and precautions, of choices and warnings. Benjamin's essay on photography, published in Germany in 1933, foresaw it as an atlas for an endangered daily life.

3.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXERCISES

> *The narrator*. – He who narrates something soon reveals whether he is doing so because the subject interests him or whether by doing so he hopes to arouse interest. In the latter case he will exaggerate, employ superlatives and the like. He will then usually narrate badly, because he is thinking not so much of the subject as of himself.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, § 343

This singular relationship between exercise and the conceptual figure of the atlas raises yet another question: who is given the chance to make an atlas? On the one hand, we can be detached spectators and researchers of the aesthetic forms and theoretical aspects of the "productive disorder"; on the other hand, we can be an active part of its elaboration, each time we actively take on – from within – the task of putting into practice and reorganizing an atlas according to our interests.

On 20 February 2019, I held a seminar that was the basis for the present chapter, risking what I called at the time "my exercise with the atlas". Having worked on different occasions on the atlases of August Sander, Gerhard Richter and Aby Warburg, the time had come to set my own productive disorder in motion under the guise of montage. The autobiographical part of the seminar was tied to a particular constellation of names, places and objects related to the cities in which I was born and grew up, between Germany and Portugal, and crystallized in the *Neue Weltatlas* (*New World Atlas*) that my parents still have in their bookcase, a constellation that cannot be reproduced here. Two years on, its dreamlike character seems to have vanished, or perhaps to be hiding in a secret place. But the tensions brought up by the preparation of the seminar led to the formulation of three heuristic principles.

The first principle is that the most important thing is not the truthfulness of the narrative but the way the selected clues and objects of the past are combined – interwoven, to recall Proust's "invisible threads" – with narrative elements, establishing a game of resonances that is projected into the present. My personal indifference towards the *Neue Weltaltas* was interrupted by a gesture of fragmentation: fragments were torn from it and set a reconfiguration in motion. Its cartographic, social and economic character did not disappear but was combined, as it were, with the aesthetic powers of memory and imagination.

The second principle is that the names of cities, places and streets, as well as certain people's names, acquire a specific connotation for each of us, and it is symptomatic that the cities we know by heart rarely seem to be the cities that others know by the same name. Proust shows this in a subtle way: the names of cities and places – some unknown by the narrator – that populate the *Recherche* are loaded with expectations and fantasies built on fragmentary information. On the other hand, urban places, like objects, can ignite remembrance and the power of evocation. Walter Benjamin extended some of these Proustian themes in *Berlin Chronicle*, and later in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. In the former, he reflects on the characteristics of remembrance as a "deadly game": "What Proust began so playfully became awesomely serious. He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments. No image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside"

(Benjamin, 1999a, p. 597). Filtered through expectation and remembrance, names and places are to be found in the folds – and cities "are" unfolded images.

The third principle attempts to answer the following question: how can individual accounts of the past connect with the present, and thus gain historical relevance? In the prologue to the final version of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin refers to the dangers enclosed in the nostalgic dimension of the memories of a bourgeois child. Hence the need to "inoculate" his images of metropolitan childhood with the vaccine of the irretrievability of the past, "not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 344). It is this inoculation and the experimental form of the images that grant them the capacity to preform "later historical experience" and that link individual and collective life. Benjamin's "'autobiographical' fragments are thus exercises in critical historiography rather than wistful nostalgia" (Gilloch, 1996, p. 60). In this sense, the images of Berlin are also deeply connected with – and somehow anticipate – the physiognomic and materialist approach further developed in *The Arcades Project*.

4.
A VISUAL FORM OF KNOWLEDGE

In its most common sense, an atlas is a collection of maps with graphic representations that may include geographic, social, historical, economic or climatic data. It was Gerardus Mercator (a Flemish mathematician, geographer and cartographer) who, in 1595, first used the term "atlas" in connection with cartography. The name was inspired by the Titan Atlas, who was condemned by Zeus to hold the celestial heavens on his shoulders, but Mercator retrieves a complex mythological genealogy and draws inspiration from the philosopher, geographer and mathematician King Atlas of Mauritania. This is not the place to delve into the cartographic definition of the term "atlas", much less to examine mythological themes and their artistic representations (such as the sculpture Farnese Atlas, the oldest and perhaps the most famous of all). Although cartography can be said to account, in its own way, for a struggle against the dispersion that makes up the world, let us instead analyse the atlas as a visual form of knowledge, on the footsteps of Didi-Huberman's essay.

The gaze that delicately surveys the images and the diverse elements of an atlas, whether it belongs to medicine, cartography or contemporary art, often focuses on a detail, a particular sequence or constellation, an analogy or synthesis, and this presupposes a tension between the singularity of each element and the whole of which it is a part. As with any open device, each visitation can harbour discoveries. According to Didi-Huberman, the atlas implies two paradigms: the aesthetic, linked to the visual, and the epistemic, linked to knowledge. Furthermore, and in the face of the rationalist certainties of science and the predetermined models of art history, it has a destabilizing power, deeply rooted in the procedures of montage: "Against all epistemic purity, the atlas introduces the sensible dimension into knowledge, the diverse, and the incomplete character of each image. Against any aesthetic purity, it introduces the multiple, the diverse, the hybridity of any montage" (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 4). Its driving force is imagination, understood not as a personal and gratuitous fantasy but as a transversal faculty that allows for the discovery of "the intimate and secret relations of things, the correspondences and the analogies" (Baudelaire's words in "Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe", recovered by Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 5).

Among the vast theoretical references in *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*, the role of four themes and authors should be highlighted: the restlessness of Friedrich Nietzsche's gay science; Goethean morphology and its principles of observation and synoptic presentation, through which one can approach primal phenomena (*Urphänomena*); Walter Benjamin's thought, namely his reflections on the concepts of origin and dialectical image, which take elements from Goethean morphology while focusing on the domain of history (and, as seen above, the entire question of productive disorder); and finally, Aby Warburg's intersection of image and memory, which takes the atlas form to a whole new dimension. It is worth emphasizing the central role that his science of culture attributes to the notion of *Nachleben*, of survival. Leaning on it, Warburg's studies on art history establish direct relationships between distant epochs, such as antiquity and the Renaissance. These relationships are not strictly formal, stylistic or thematic, however; they involve a whole series of polarities that unfold the conflicts between the rational and the magical-religious dimension of the human being, between

the Apollonian and the Dionysian, between calm contemplation and orgiastic fervour. As a reader of Nietzsche, Warburg finds in this intensified psychic dynamic the substratum of artistic creation itself (see Warburg, 2003, p. 3). Additionally, the notion of *Pathosformeln*, or "formulae of pathos", concerns the gestures that fixate the deeply rooted energetic and conflicting forces that run through the images. These reflect the schizophrenia of Western culture itself, its psychic conflicts and repressions, its expressive gestures and repetitions. All this presupposes a conception of memory that is not governed by a chronological and sequential order, and the montage that Warburg develops in *Atlas Mnemosyne*, a work that would remain unfinished, aims precisely to create a "thought space" (*Denkraum*) with which to approach a cultural memory whose engrams result from the intersection of the individual and the collective, the cosmological and the corporal. Its goal is to illustrate the process of de-demonization of the heritage of phobic impressions, revealing pre-existing expressive values through the presentation of life in movement (Warburg, 2003, p. 3). Between 1924 and 1929 (the year of his death), and after recovering from psychosis, Warburg worked on this atlas, exploring the possibilities of constructing a history of art and culture through visual means. According to Didi-Huberman,

> The *Bilderatlas*, for Warburg, was neither a simple aide-mémoire, nor a "summary by images" of his thinking; instead, it offered an apparatus for putting thought back into movement where history had stopped, and where words were still lacking. It was the matrix of a desire to reconfigure memory by refusing to fix memories – images of the past – in an ordered or, worse, a definitive narrative. (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 12)

It is its open character and its visual intensity, linked with memory, that make Warburg's atlas so disconcerting and stimulating.

5.
CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

It is now time to explore how the conceptual figure of the atlas relates to childhood, or rather, to the powers of childhood that can be recovered and exercised at different stages of human life. For Benjamin, childhood is the age at which the mimetic faculty is most active, and with it the magical powers that tend to vanish in adulthood. As the "organon of experience" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 868 [Qº, 24]), this faculty lies at the basis of our exercises with objects and matter; not only does it entail a power of imitation and (self-)transfiguration, but it is also what allows us to recognize similarities.

This topic takes us to a set of notes in which Benjamin (see 1999c, pp. 684-685) seeks to lay the foundation for rational reflection on astrology – reflection that is not ruled by the doctrine of magical "influences" or "radiant energies". To do so, it is necessary to start with the question of similarity: on the one hand, from the recognition that, beyond "chance comparisons from our part", there is a "mimetic force working expressly inside things"; on the other hand, from the recognition that the mimetic faculty inherent in the human being has undergone changes throughout history, weakening in certain fields to strengthen in others, and that our ability to create and recognize resemblances (between faces, in architecture and plants, in clouds and skin stains) reaches only a tiny part of those that exist in the "cosmos of similarity".[10]

The exercises with the atlas manifest a desire for clairvoyance, or at least a fascination with the possibility of organizing that which is dispersed and liable to be forgotten or devoured by chaos. But even if this fascination contains something of a childhood playfulness, the truth is that clairvoyance requires accepting that there are things that cannot be controlled, that involuntary manifestations and the need to forget are part of the process. Fed by the "cosmos of similarity", absorbing the dynamism of the faculty of imagination, the atlases that involve traumatic historical events (or at least our own individual traumas and personal *Recherche*, when taken seriously), cannot but respect the destructive forces of time. In an annotation to *Atlas Mnemosyne* (published in

10 For an interpretation of the role of mimesis in Benjamin's thinking, focusing particularly on the notion of a "cosmos of similarity", see Fittler, 2005.

Mnemosyne. Grundbegriffe, dated 2 July 1929) that describes an understanding of its iconography, Warburg says that the story of the influence of the ancients has fantastic elements and can be narrated like a tale, although it is a "history of ghosts for big people [*Gespenstergeschichte f(ür) ganz Erwachsene*]" (Warburg, apud Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 197).

This "history of ghosts" points to an unconscious life of culture that can be extrapolated to more general considerations about the figure of the atlas. If on the one hand the latter draws something from the powers of childhood, on the other it presupposes a maturing of "productive disorder", and therefore a new relationship with life (or a new relationship between history – individual and collective – and life). The unresolved dialectical tension between childhood and adulthood can enrich an atlas as it concerns the need for an exercise in matters of "vital importance". A sentence by Proust already quoted in the first section of this chapter ("And I had already lived long enough…") may set the tone for a further exploration of this dialectical tension. In *Swann's Way*, the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, precisely before the famous episode of the madeleine, he speaks about the limitations of voluntary memory (linked to the intellect) and the existence of two types of chance that condition the possibility of attaining a true image of the past through involuntary memory. The first concerns the impossibility of knowing in advance which object conceals the past; the second concerns death and its unpredictability:

> And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die. (Proust, 1992, p. 60)

In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin reacted against the inevitability of chance, stating that it is not at all evident but rather part of a context of profound transformations in human experience, linked, among other aspects, to transformations in narrative forms (see Benjamin, 2003, pp. 315-316). For

Benjamin, a thinker of history and collective experience, this reduction of chance to an external coincidence related to individual experience could only cause reluctance. Given that chance is not dispelled that easily, however, it is perhaps necessary to think of it not as an external coincidence but as something that requires work, an exercise in the deepest sense of the word, linked, in Jeanne Marie Gagnebin's words, to an effort of attention and to *kairos*, the time of opportunity that must be seized (see Gagnebin, 2002, pp. 119-120). Therefore, adulthood concerns those who have exercised this attention longingly, but also the capacity to integrate the destruction and reconstruction of the connections between things and beings, the passage of time, forgetfulness, death. Hence the importance that Proust concedes to the Baudelairian *correspondances* when, in *Time Regained*, he returns to the theme of the madeleine, commenting on the careful, selective capacity of Baudelaire's poetry to follow the scent of a woman and to link it allegorically to an ideal that exceeds chance.[11] *Correspondances* are the foundation of art that Proust makes his own, though by other means.

Independently of the type of force that is at work in involuntary memory, correspondences, or the cosmos of similarity – which also presupposes the mitigation of chance when understood as an external coincidence – the fact is that the three concepts form a web that is fundamental to the conceptual figure of the atlas: this web works with and against chance; it adds a further order of exercise to productive disorder; it makes the infinite interplay between childhood and adulthood a constructive one.

6.
COMPLEMENTS AND DANGERS

Throughout this chapter, several approaches have been explored in order to better characterize the atlas as a conceptual figure. Defining it in terms of productive disorder allowed us to investigate other features that complement each other – some encompassing the idea of visual knowledge from the outset. In this sense, the struggle against disorder and chaos under the auspices of

11 *Correspondances* are also crucial for Benjamin's reading of these topics, since they are capable of poetically integrating both the historical and the prehistorical (see Benjamin, 2003, pp. 333-334).

careful observation, as well as the aesthetic, political and daily bodily-rooted exercises, often linked to physiognomic perception, are complemented by the relationship between autobiography, memory and life, which in turn demands the infinite interplay between childhood and adulthood.

Nevertheless, there are two risks that threaten the productive side of disorder and the game of shuffling and redistributing cards, risks that lurk within the figure of the atlas like a thief lurking behind a door, waiting for his chance. The first has to do with the modern temporality of the *ever-new*, embodied by mechanized work, by the constant sensorial stimuli in big cities, by the gambler's gestures. After all, the table of heuristic operations may also be the table where the myriorama is laid out, a popular nineteenth-century toy composed of a set of illustrated cards, often representing a landscape, meant to be arranged and re-arranged in order to form different combinations and pictures. According to Benjamin, it provides a paradigmatic account of a world of the most rigid discontinuity, the "time of hell" (Benjamin, 1999f, p. 843 [G°, 19]). If discontinuity and intermittence are part of the exercise of the atlas, the misuse of this ambivalent gesture can create an empty temporality devoid of history, memory and expectation. The disorder that never becomes productive and capitalist productive order are two sides of the same coin of modernity – the cult of novelty that feeds its voracity and its abyss. Our own epoch, dealing with the availability of an overwhelming amount of information about the world and connections that are made ever more quickly and invisibly, is experiencing new forms of voracity and empty temporality, which also raise new challenges. What practices remain to keep the reshuffling game productive? And how does this affect the images we build of our cities? The answer to these questions will have to be reserved for another occasion.

The second risk has to do with *forgetting* a figure that is in the vicinity of everything that has been dealt with thus far: the ragpicker (*Lumpensammler*). As a dialectical counterpoint to the collector (*Sammler*), the ragpicker is someone who collects rags and waste from the streets as a means of survival, thus integrating in a particular way the economic and social system of the city and making us think of a form of collection (and also of a metaphor that is applicable to the historian, as Benjamin proposed) that entails everything that may become valuable. Forgetting this figure is risky because it means forgetting

the intersection between the economic condition of modernity and the fractures of history, as well as poverty itself, literally and metaphorically. In the chapter "Atlas and the Wandering Jew, or the Age of Poverty", Didi-Huberman connects the ragpicker with both the modern city and the figure of the atlas. Portrayed in Eugène Atget's photographic encyclopaedia and included in the gallery of figures of *The Arcades Project*, ragpickers belong to the nameless (*Namenlosen*), to whom Benjamin sought to dedicate his historical approach. Moreover, the task of drawing up modern atlases in the wake of great metropolises, the two World Wars and all the decisive events that shape our (natural) history cannot escape the struggle against a chaos made of poverty, wanderings and restlessness.

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