

## IMAGES AT WORK: NARRATIVES IN WORDS AND PICTURES

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**Abstract.** Images are not innocent. Even though they arise from us, and often are made by us, they face and challenge us as if they lived a life of their own. Once they have appeared or have been produced, they acquire separate existence and indisputable reality of independent beings, which populate and shape our outer and inner world. As sensitive or imagined bodies they enter in resonance with our own sentient and imagining body. Human body is indeed the “locus of images” incessantly moving and acting on the ever-changing scene of our memory and imagination (*i.e.* of our own ‘fluctuating’ Self): thereby images are responsible for what we are as well as for what we wish (or dream) to be. Images are not innocent because they are neither inert nor lifeless. We are never safe in the presence of images: they can be alluring or frightening, reassuring or threatening, familiar or disquieting, lifesaving or harmful; they can impede or elicit action. Such irreducible ontological problematic, yet unmistakably empathic, nature of our relationship with images, is, in this essay, surveyed in the light of the reflections of Aby Warburg and Italo Calvino. Warburg’s theory of *Pathosformeln* and Calvino’s account of the role of visual images in his own verbal narratives, then provide the theoretical horizon for interpreting the narration by images sculpted by the medieval architect Biduinus on the façade of the XII century church of Saint Casciano of Cascina, near Pisa, and thereby unfolding the symbolical, iconological and metaphysical implications of its powerfully empathic imagery.

**Key words:** images, words, memory, empathy, *pathosformel*, Warburg, Calvino, Biduinus.

«Memory, even memory of the objects of thought, does not occur without an image».

Aristoteles, *De memoria et reminiscencia*

«The soul never thinks without an image».

Aristoteles, *De anima*

«Das Wort zum Bild bringen».

Aby Warburg, *Zum Bild das Wort*.

## ABY WARBURG

Images are not innocent. Even though they *arise* from us, and often are *made* by us, they face and challenge us as if they lived a life of their own. Once they have appeared or have been produced, they acquire a separate existence and indisputable reality as independent beings, populating and shaping our outer and inner worlds.<sup>1</sup> As sensitive or imagined bodies they enter into resonance with our own *sentient* and *imagining* body. The human body is indeed the “locus of images”,<sup>2</sup> incessantly moving and acting on the ever-changing scene of our imagination (and of our own ‘fluctuating’ Self): thereby, images are responsible for what we are as well as for what we wish (or dream) to be.

Images are not innocent because they are neither inert nor lifeless. Their apparent inertia retains and conjures up motion, holds and conveys energy. We are never safe in the presence of images: they can be alluring or frightening, reassuring or threatening, familiar or disquieting, lifesaving or harmful; they can impede or elicit action, and even trigger overwhelming panic,<sup>3</sup> as Guy Bara’s 1957 paradoxical comic stripe wittily suggests (Figure 1)<sup>4</sup>:

It is owing to their universally experienced two-fold power that the history of images is characterized by recurrent hostilities and rehabilitations, intermittent censorships and apologies. The historical alternation of iconoclastic crisis and iconophile redemptions depends on the irreducible ontological problematic nature of *our relationship* with images, never immune from iconophobic anxieties.<sup>5</sup>

Aby Warburg (1866-1929),<sup>6</sup> the founder of the eponymous Library in Hamburg, (transferred to London since 1933, when Nazism came to power, and now part of the University as the Warburg Institute),<sup>7</sup> author of revolutionary essays on Renaissance art and culture,<sup>8</sup> was deeply interested in such a relationship. He interpreted, and somehow dramatically *experienced* himself, the disquieting as well as reassuring, controversial

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power of images, their *polarity*.<sup>9</sup> He studied, investigated, explored art history as a complex iconosphere in an innovative multidisciplinary way, open to scientific knowledge (biology, psychology and anthropology), but also to astrological and magical traditions,<sup>10</sup> thereby trespassing the rigid frontiers of conventional academic disciplines, inflexibly garrisoned by those whom Warburg called ‘borders guards’.<sup>11</sup>

Warburg acknowledges the *biological* necessity of images,<sup>12</sup> and searches their history, their evolution and their permanence, their *Nachleben*, their imprint on the individual and collective memory, their multifarious morphology, their function and role within society and culture.<sup>13</sup> He furthermore somehow ‘tested’ their power, exposing himself to the psychic, untamed, however dormant, energy that images enshrine, hold, control, and at the same time *preserve*.<sup>14</sup> Such images are *Pathosformeln*, an oxymoronic neologism Warburg coined joining together contradictory terms: *Pathos* (excitement, anxiety, emotional impetus, implying instability, instantaneousness, mutability) and *Formel*, (formula, or the conventional expressive form which embodies and symbolizes *pathos*, encloses and signifies it by means of a paradigmatic image or gesture, characterized by fixity, stability, persistency and stereotypy). A *Pathosformel* is an superb antinomy, an eloquent paradox, or, as Salvatore Settis writes, ‘an explosive word, encompassing both the rigidity of the formula and the impetus of *pathos*’.<sup>15</sup> Warburg regards *Pathosformeln* as anthropologic constants, as the repertoire of (archetypical) images, symbols, rituals, gestures, by which mankind - since its origin - endeavoured to *orientate* itself into the *chiaroscuro* chaos of both the outer world (*terrifying*, awesome, alien and hostile Nature) and the inner one (wild impulses, violent instincts, ineradicable *passions* and *fears* affecting the Self).<sup>16</sup> *Pathosformeln* were the attempt to keep a safe *distance*<sup>17</sup> from the threatening and inscrutable,

*amorphous*, “monsters” haunting such primordial chaos, by restraining (objectivizing) them *within* the distinct and defined *form* of an image; this was the indispensable device by which those monsters could be *imagined*, that is, confronted, controlled and exorcised, and *Begreifen* (comprehended)<sup>18</sup> within the *Denkraum*, *i.e.*, the organized, well-ordered and reassuring territory of clear rational thinking, grounded on *Orientierung* (orientation). The seminal idea of his planned work on “Denkraum Schöpfung als Kultur Funktion. Versuch einer Psychologie menschlicher Orientierung auf universeller bildergeschichtlicher Grundlage” (“Creation of the ‘space of thinking’ as cultural function. Essay on a psychology of human orientation based on the universal history of images”),<sup>19</sup> was the motto “*Per monstra ad astra*” by which a young and ironic Warburg modified the more conventional *Per aspera ad astra*.<sup>20</sup>

Providing a map for human orientation was the aim of the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, an extraordinary Library, where books found a place according to the principle of “gute Nachbarschaft” (‘as good neighbours’)<sup>21</sup> designed to promote a multidisciplinary “science of culture”. Warburg maintained that human civilisation, its culture, beliefs, symbols,<sup>22</sup> and imagery, were the multifaceted outcome of the never ending combat against ever *resurgent* primeval chaos, crystallized by culture into images which simultaneously neutralize and convey it, in however an attenuated form. Thus chaos is not defeated: its potential virulence and fearsome *disorder* are still latent in the *figurative* (apparently pacified and pacifying) *order* of the image. Trans-figured (and somehow de-sublimated) into the images (bodies and *names*) of the awe-inspiring gods of myth (Warburg, along with Lucretius, believed that *timor facit deos*),<sup>23</sup> both the dark forces of nature and the existential chaos threatening the Self appear less terrifying. When confined within a figure or a picture, or a symbol, a monster, if

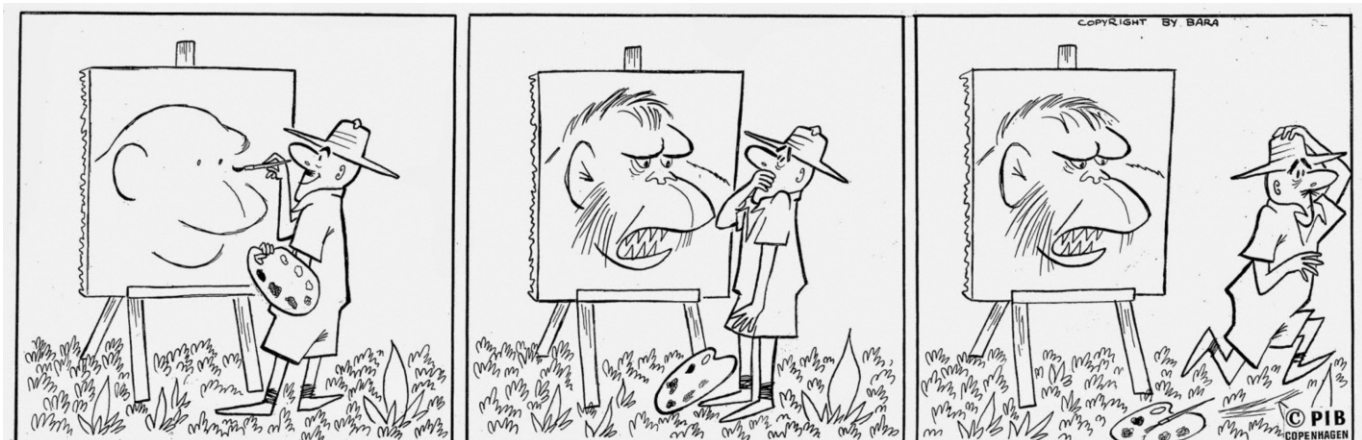


Figure 1.

not annihilated, is nonetheless subdued, and no longer appears as menacing and destructive as before: “you are alive”, Warburg declares “but you do not harm me” (“Du lebst und thust mir nichts”).<sup>24</sup>

Warburg himself had empathically<sup>25</sup> experienced in the flesh such devastating fear: in 1918 he started suffering from a severe psychotic delirium, “obsessed by art”,<sup>26</sup> logic and magic at war in his mind,<sup>27</sup> and, from 1921 to 1924, he had to be hospitalized in the *Bellevue Sanatorium* in Kreuzlingen (Switzerland). There a very worried eminent psychiatrist and phenomenologist, Ludwig Binswanger, struggled to rescue him from his psychotic disorders,<sup>28</sup> which were the pathological response to an exceedingly receptive emotional awareness of the “seismic waves”<sup>29</sup> of the times: the horrible chaos of the bloodbath of World War I had released the primordial chaos enclosed within the numberless images that he had collected in his Library, and which now looked disquieting, malevolent and threatening, out of control, and overflowing from his imagination into his mind, unutterably hostile and gory, besieging and tormenting him. The bipolarity of his personal *psychomachia*, his manic depressive-syndrome,<sup>30</sup> was the psychic manifestation of the intellectual bipolarity, the creative dialectic tension between *logos* (or *ethos*) and *pathos* (“Apollon and Dionysos”; the Nymph and the Maenad), reason and magic, words and images, that characterized his personality and thought.<sup>31</sup> He became, therefore, even more acutely aware that images are not innocent: as powerful *dynamograms*, “visual inscriptions of primal empathic bodily experiences, which Warburg [...] regarded as essentially traumatic and laden with fear”,<sup>32</sup> they connected past and present, could convey the pathemic or emotional energies and the ancient traumas and terrors latent in them. Adequate circumstances (the war, in his case) can always revive and make them harmful again: their *exorcism* is always “incomplete”.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, despite Binswanger’s unfavourable prognosis, it was owing to images, by inverting their *polarity* from negative to positive, that Warburg rescued himself from his psychological and mental drift and confusion, his anxiety of being *lost* in an unfamiliar world, his catastrophic “crisis of presence”.<sup>34</sup> His personal salvific, *cathartic*<sup>35</sup> images were those of the *Serpent Ritual* performed by the Hopi Indians<sup>36</sup> which Warburg had seen in his youth: an emblematic *rebirth* ceremony, where the Serpent, traditionally ambivalent *zoon symbolikòn* (at the same time death and life giver, associated to both *Laocoon* and *Asclepius*), appeared to his eyes as the perfectly appropriate symbol of “immortality and rebirth from an illness or mortal peril”.<sup>37</sup> The extraordinary conference Binswanger allowed him to deliver to his fellow patients was for Warburg self-therapeutic and became his way of recovering his lost “Orientierung”. With this public performance he intellectually and emotionally *reconciled* himself with the terrifying *Pathosformeln* which had haunted his vulnerable, oversensitive imagination

for a long time, and which were now converted into the instruments of his survival, as powerful visual *pharmaka* by which he had been first intoxicated and then healed. So for him, “the *monstra* of imagination become the decisive life guides for the future”.<sup>38</sup> The verbal and iconographical (photographic) organization, the ‘staging’ of the Lecture allowed Warburg to re-experience “die natürliche Zusammengehörigkeit von Wort und Bild” (“the natural cohesiveness between word and image” [my translation]).<sup>39</sup>

After leaving Bellevue, Warburg *redivivus* or rather “*redux*” as he called himself, took up again, “als Revenant<sup>40</sup> his wanderin<sup>41</sup> navigation through the iconosphere now employing a *chart* which enabled him to *localise* images within the *Denkraum*, (the safe space of rational thought where their destructive potential can be stored and *deactivated*, if not destroyed): this map is *Mnemosyne*, or *Bilderatlas*, an *Atlas of images (and) of memory*, his most enigmatic work. This extraordinary inventory of images without titles, or descriptions, regarded by Warburg as a “*Theorie des Funktion des menschlichen Bildgedächtnisses*” (theory of the human *memory* function by image),<sup>42</sup> named after the goddess *Memory* (Mother of the Muses, celebrated by Hermes in the IV Homeric Hymn),<sup>43</sup> is a visible paradox, originally designed to be permanent and impermanent at the same time: the images it enshrines are *restless*,<sup>44</sup> and tend to be indefinitely combined and disjoined, in a sort of unending rhythm of *synkrisis* and *diakrisis* which creates ever changing iconographic configurations temporarily secured with pins on large black panels. *Mnemosyne*, however, is far from being a reassuring cartography of *Pathosformeln*: being the metamorphic mirror of the “inépisable” power of *imagination*, it challenges conventional logic and crystallized worldviews: “l’atlas fait donc, d’emblée, exploser les cadres. Il brise les certitudes autoproclamées de la science sûre de ses vérités comme de l’art sûr de ses critères”. Besides it discloses new unexpected cognitive worlds: “Il invente, entre tout cela, des zones interstitielles d’exploration, des intervalles heuristiques. Il ignore délibérément les axiomes définitifs”.<sup>45</sup> *Mnemosyne* thereby reflects, as an emblematic theatrical distancing *mise en scène*,<sup>46</sup> Warburg’s epic vision of the struggle of culture against chaos. The human body, the “locus of images”, physiologically and anthropologically *colonized* by them, is necessarily the main character performing on the stage of this struggle: its posture, its physiognomy and its gestural language recur as a persisting *recognizable* code, deeply embedded in the social, cultural and biological memory of our species, marked and moulded by primordial *engrams*, somatic memory traces conjectured by Richard Semon and adopted by Warburg.<sup>47</sup>

This complex archetypal expressive code emerges, in Warburg’s view, from the most apparently heterogeneous images (reproductions of ancient or Renaissance works of art, but also contemporary commercial or po-

litical posters) that he relentlessly collected, arranged and rearranged, striving to organize, sort, ‘orient’ them within a convoluted and difficult map of an *iter per labyrinthum*:<sup>48</sup> the *Bilderatlas*, *Mnemosyne*, the Atlas of Images, a visionary “narration through and by images [only]”; a unique, disquieting and ever-changing mirror of a complex and erratic cultural process still in the making,<sup>49</sup> which will remain *unfinished*, (and thus *open* to further developments), at the time of his death in 1929 (Figure 2).

## ITALO CALVINO

Unfinished are likewise Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a series of lectures that were to be held at Harvard, and published posthumously in 1988, the author having died of a cerebral haemorrhage in Siena, at the hospital S. Maria della Scala, the 18th of September 1985. Calvino, celebrated man of letters, novelist and essayist, owes to the powerful presence of images his own ‘narrations by words’. In a “lecture” entitled *Visibility*, he describes with great accuracy the creative processes of his mind, and ascribes the genesis of his verbal narrations to seminal imageries: his words exist from and through images. The *primum movens* of imaginary worlds conjured up by his literary works is not, therefore, the Logos, the Word Creator *ex nihilo*, but a visual image, a *matrix-image*, which unexpectedly emerges from his luxuriant personal iconosphere (the *imagery* we all inherit from our cultural context, which encloses innumerable sediments of *simulacra*, shapes, effigies, portraits, ghosts, figures, shadows, memories and apparitions). Such an image, one among the countless possible, for mysterious reasons, comes forward, stands out, captures the attention, peremptorily activates and determines the writer’s mental processes; this *active* image first catalyzes, attracts, or repels other images, thereby establishing a multiplicity of *visual* kaleidoscopic constellations which exist beyond and *precede* any organized system of *verbal* expression. At some stage however, words start challenging and *interpreting* images: the *Logos* drives the synchronic unrestrained *dy-*

*namism* of the flow of images into the orderly diachronic verbal *movement* of a story:

«In devising a story, therefore, the first thing that comes to my mind is an image that for some reason strikes me as charged with meaning, even if I cannot formulate this meaning in discursive or conceptual terms. As soon as the images has become sufficiently clear in my mind, I set about developing it into a story; or better yet, it is the images themselves that develop their own implicit potentialities, the story they carry within them».

The catalyzing potential storytelling power possessed by images is unrestrained and boundless; it soars on the wings of analogies, correspondences, symmetries, of the laws of attraction and repulsion that make the *iconosphere* a field of metamorphic and living forces,<sup>50</sup> competing and challenging the *logosphere*, where words must oppose the exuberance of images, by supervising, directing and orienting it:

«Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations. Into the organization of this material, which is no longer purely visual but also conceptual, there now enters my deliberate intent to give order and sense to the development of the story, or rather, what I do is try to establish which meanings might be compatible with the overall design I wish to give the story and which meanings are not compatible, always leaving a certain margin of possible alternatives. At the same time, the writing, the verbal product, acquires increasing importance».

In the competition with the visual image, it is the word that ensues the former, first trying to emulate its expressive power, to conform and correspond to it, in a sort of attempted *ekphrasis*,<sup>51</sup> and then gradually assuming command, in a very fruitful *interchange* of roles and hierarchies, *i.e.* developing a visual-verbal, logical and metaphorical, narrative.

«I would say that from the moment I start putting black on white, what really matters is the written word, first as a search for an equivalent of the visual image, then as a coherent development of the initial stylistic dimension. Finally, the written word little by little comes to dominate the field. From now on it will be the writing that guides the story towards the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along».<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, images are still omnipresent, and remain ubiquitous: the fact that they will come forward even when the starting point is a scientific statement (as in *Cosmicomiche*), shows “how the image-speech typical of the myth can be born in any soil [...]. Even reading the most technical scientific book or the most abstract philosophical book you may come across a phrase that unexpectedly makes a stimulus to the figurative imagination”. The image *engendered* by a text, how-



Figure 2.

ever, continues to enjoy its indomitable elusiveness and *autonomy*, since it can have a “fantastic development both in the spirit of the text as well as in a completely autonomous direction”; it may illustrate it or divert from it, as its equivalent metaphor<sup>53</sup> or symbolical cipher. Calvino, recognizing, as Warburg did, the mutual *coessentiality* of image and word, endeavours to “unify the spontaneous generation of images and intentionality of the discursive thought”. Yet, image, in his opinion, exceeds, is beyond, any *normalization*, and unpredictably breaks into our world, subverting or reconstructing it;<sup>54</sup> if it is true that the creating matrix-image “is eventually captured in a network where reasoning and verbal expression impose their logic too, it is to the “other” logic, the logic of the unpredictable visual imagination, that we owe those “visual solutions arriving unexpectedly and that decide situations that neither the conjectures of thought nor the resources of language would be able to solve “(pp. 90-2).<sup>55</sup>

For Calvino, a master of the verbal expression, the image still enjoys its own original *otherness*, its own irreducible autonomy: furthermore it is precisely because of the tension, of the conflicting relationship, the dialectic antagonism which ontologically connects and reciprocally oppose them,<sup>56</sup> that both images and words compose and recompose, at all times, our stories, our world-views, as the necessary (however arbitrary and ephemeral) *map* by which (Warburg believed) we can, to some extent, orientate ourselves: the meaning of our existence is determined by metaphorical cosmologies combining images and stories which, as endless *mises-en-scène* of that meaning, influence our imagination, inspire our actions, and may rescue us, as much as possible, from the anxieties and the perils of the ever incumbent chaos.

## BIDUINUS

Images can also rescue sinners from deadly perils of Evil and the seductions of Sin (the Christian formula for Chaos), and arouse the fear of eternal death: this occurs, for instance, in the *mapping* of the cosmos which the *narration by images* on the façade of the XII century (*unfinished*) church of Saint Casciano of Cascina, near Pisa, enigmatically adumbrates (Figure 3).<sup>57</sup> If interpreted in the light of the reflections of Warburg and Calvino, the imagery of this Romanesque *Pieve* unfolds sophisticated symbolic, iconological<sup>58</sup> and metaphysical implications. Biduino, sculptor and architect, proud of his own knowledge, his *doctrina*, both theoretical and practical, proudly signs the *opus* he accomplished: *Hoc opus quod Cernis Biduinus docte peregit*, (Figure 4) and is also perfectly aware that the imagery of his narrative would influence, through the *pathos* it aroused in the church-goers, their imagination, their actions, their *ethos*.

Images, for their proven pedagogical function but above all their psychagogic power, (around which both



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Plato and Aristotle, not surprisingly, had dedicated crucial reflections for our culture), were very suitable expedients for the evangelization of the illiterate and the conversion of the sinners. Narrations through images, according to Gregory the Great (540-604), were essential to *show* the way of salvation to the illiterate: “ut hi qui litteras nesciunt, saltem in parietibus videndo legant quae legere in codicibus non valent” (“because those who cannot read, can read, watching the images on the walls, what they cannot read in books”). And since “painting teaches the illiterate people what Scripture teaches to the literate” the use of images ought thereby to be permitted in churches (notwithstanding the persistent suspicion of idolatry that had and would cyclically kindle iconoclastic crisis) by virtue of their educational function (as means of information), but also (providing models to imitate) for their *psychagogic* power. Nilus of Ancyra (Vth century) had clearly stressed the point, desiring that: “the hand of the best painter should cover the church with images from the Old and New Testament, so that the illiterate, unable to read the Scriptures, be instructed by watching the glorious deeds of those who have faithfully served the true God and thus be summoned to imitate such a noble behaviour”.<sup>59</sup>

The systematic, active, *synesthetic* contemplation of sacred images was destined not only to instruct the illiterate but was also recommended to everyone because it aroused performative emotional responses. The mechanism of imitative behaviour thus induced appear to be similar to the so-called “embodied simulation” which neurosciences have recently explained by investigating the physiological mechanisms of mirror neurons<sup>60</sup> identified, with the technique of functional magnetic resonance imaging, in specific areas of the brain, and was implied by earlier (conventionally branded as pseudo-scientific) theories. The physiognomic tradition,<sup>61</sup> for instance, that represented the motions and passions of the soul by the movements and attitudes of the body, guided and inspired throughout the centuries the actual image-making of artists,<sup>62</sup> for whom to excel in the art of painting meant precisely producing in the beholder, the spectator, a powerful empathic and mimetic response to the “painted passions” which “move the soul”. This is clearly stated by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in the treatise *De pictura* (II 41):

«Poi moverà l'istoria l'animo quando gli uomini ivi dipinti molto porgeranno suo proprio movimento d'animo. Interviene da natura, quale nulla più che lei si truova capace di cose a sé simile, che piagniamo con chi piange, e ridiamo con chi ride, e doglianci con chi si duole. Ma questi movimenti d'animo si conoscono dai movimenti del corpo. E vegliamo quanto uno atristito, perché la cura estrigne e il pensiero l'assedia, stanno con sue forze e sentimenti quasi balordi, tenendo sé stessi lenti e pigri in sue membra palide e malsostenute. Vedrai a chi sia malinconico il fronte pre-muto, la cervice languida, al tutto ogni suo membro quasi

*stracco e negletto cade. Vero, a chi sia irato, perché l'ira incita l'animo, però gonfia di stizza negli occhi e nel viso, e incendesi di colore, e ogni suo membro, quanto il furore, tanto ardito si getta. Agli uomini lieti e gioiosi sono i movimenti liberi e con certe inflessioni grati».*

*[Then istoria will move the soul [animo] of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movements of his own soul. It happens in Nature that nothing more than herself is found capable of things like herself; we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving. The motions of the soul [animo] are made known by the movements of the body [emphasis mine]. Care and thoughts weigh so heavily that a sad person stands with his forces and feelings as if dulled, holding himself feebly and tiredly on his pallid and poorly sustained members. In the melancholic the forehead is wrinkled, the head drooping, all members fall down as if exhausted and neglected. In the irate, because anger incites the soul, the eyes are swollen with ire and the face and all the members are burned with colour, fury adds so much boldness there. In cheerful and happy men we have movements that are free and with certain pleasing inflection].<sup>63</sup>*

The neurophysiological mechanisms underlying such aesthetic and performative response, have been investigated by the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese together with the American art historian David Freedberg, also drawing on Warburg's innovative ideas.<sup>64</sup>

An outstanding example of such mechanisms and of this deliberate traditional use of images in order to “move the heart [animo]” through a psycho-physical empathic response appears to be the sophisticated iconographic program that a medieval sculptor and architect, Biduinus, imagined for the church of San Casciano a Settimo, with its classical references, with the eloquent poses of the human figures, with its “sculpted passions”, its wild animals, real and imaginary,<sup>65</sup> at war, and his anthropophagus lions. On the façade of the Pieve, Biduinus displayed a sequence of *Pathos-formeln* by which the narrative unfolds through perfectly organized images: a very eloquent iconography where images are not just the mere visual rendition, the sculpted equivalent of the written sources which inspired them (the Old and New Testament and the Bestiaries in particular), but also, just as Calvino believed, the matrix of further interpretations, the precondition of possible new narratives, more “stories in words”.

In the central architrave (Figure 5) of this magnificent Pieve, a baptismal church built in 1165 seven miles from Pisa, near the river Arno, the narrative by images<sup>66</sup> runs horizontally, from left to right, as it occurs in the well-known narrative in words (the New Testament) which underlies it: thus it is not difficult to acknowledge in the body still wrapped in funeral bandages emerging from the sepulchre, sustained by an angel and a male figure, the bandaged corpse of Lazarus hovering on his sepulchre, eyes wide open, be-

tween death and life. His resurrection is not completed yet: Biduino represents the event in the suspense of its temporal imminence. (Figure 6)

Lazarus' sisters are immediately identified from their paradigmatic posture (*pathos formel*) of supplicants: kneeling before Christ they cannot see the impending miracle that a man in an attitude of surprise is pointing at with the index finger of his right hand. The *visual* connection and *narrative* continuity between the resurrection of Lazarus and the subsequent framework scene, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem with the procession of bearded apostles, greeted by joyous children, is assigned to the last of the apostles who turns back to watch the miracle in the instant of its becoming. The bodies and the gestures of the multitudes that swarm the architrave obviously depend upon a pre-existing figurative tradition which crystallized and codified as *Culture* what, for us, is originally *Nature*: this is the reason why we find *familiar* the gestural language (the *Pathos formeln*) employed by Biduinus and

we recognize its expressive and emotional code. We thereby enter in sympathetic resonance with *those* remote "sculpted passions",<sup>67</sup> which, through indisputable psychophysical mechanisms of mirroring, become *ours*, belong to us. This is also why we cannot be indifferent when the eye is struck by the *breach* in the orderly *rhythm*<sup>68</sup> of the visual narrative of the architrave abruptly interrupted by the unjustified presence of a small tortuous *tree* (Figure 7), incongruously engrafted by Biduinus right *into* the sequence of the serene procession of the disciples. This inexplicable serpentine tree, apparently out of place, is in fact a decisive image: with its appearance it compels the eye to change direction, imposes a swerve, a new *trajectory*, breaking the horizontality of the otherwise conventional narration with its vertical thrust, and pointing upwards, beyond the border of the architrave, in the direction of the mysterious head of a bearded man (Figures 8 and 9). This impressive *Cosmocrator* and *Chronocrator*, whose features are a typical *interpretatio*

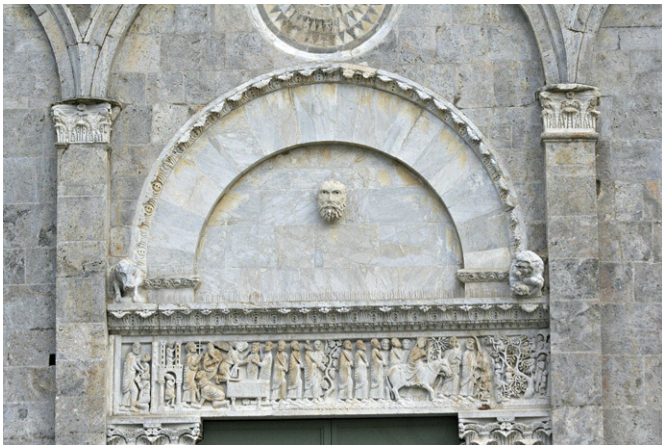


Figure 5.



Figure 7.



Figure 6.



Figure 8.

*christiana*<sup>69</sup> of a powerful pagan god, looks solitary and stern, as a face without a body, in the semi-circular space of the arch, an otherworldly, metaphysical space of perfect stillness, silence and light, from where he severely watches the crowded mundane world below,<sup>70</sup> full of noise and of anxiety, in which life and death coexist, enclosed in the architrave, the image of our very world.<sup>71</sup> The tree therefore is a visual and symbolic *vector* stretching its sinuous branches between earth and heaven, the below and the above, darkness and light: a *tree-of-life*<sup>72</sup> tracing, indicating, the path to salvation, which leads beyond the head of the Cosmocrator, to the symbolical marble rose window which is the ideal centre of the entire facade (Figures 10 and 11): a radiant supernatural and salvific sun perennially at its zenith (“sol occasum nesciens”),<sup>73</sup> the visible hierophanic image of the invisible, the Absolute in its divine transcendence.



Figure 9.

The leitmotif of salvation is crucial in this narrative through pictures: it inspired in Biduino an organic system of powerful interacting polarized *Pathosformeln*, cooperating or conflicting with each other, whose empathic shockwave aesthetically-emotionally reaches us: so the meek and beardless youth whose curly head appears on the right of the central lintel (Figure 12), who seems to surrender to the inexorable force of the lion fiercely embracing him, but still casts his frightened, tearful eyes<sup>74</sup> towards the salvific door (*ianua coeli*) of the Pieve, *moves* our soul for his resignation to a fate that remains suspended, inscrutable and uncer-

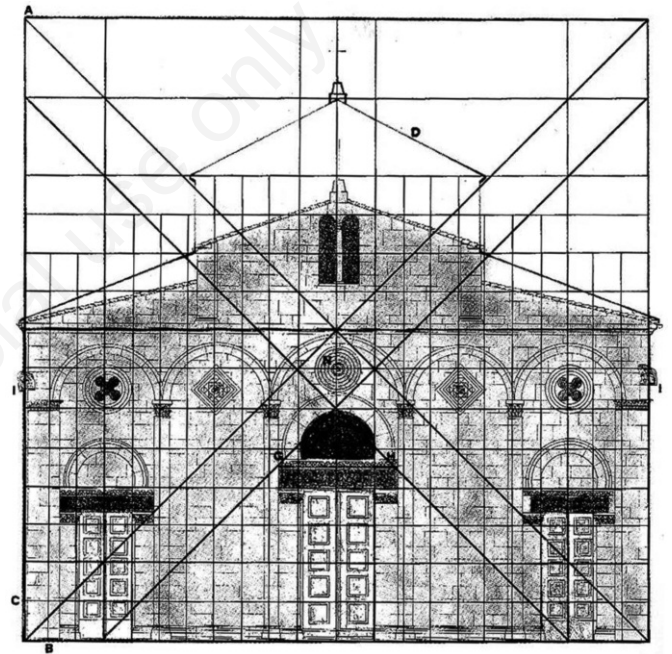


Figure 11.



Figure 10.



Figure 12.



tain. The Lion that has captured him could either kill or save him, stand as Christ and give him, like Lazarus, new life, or as Satan and give him eternal death.<sup>75</sup> The attitude of this Grieving Youth, nesting above the threshold of *ianua coeli*, between life and death,<sup>76</sup> appears to be in perfect symmetrical *opposition* to the violent rebellion expressed by the contracted bodies of two other human preys clawed by man-eating lions, remote from the Door of Salvation, perched on the external pillars of the façade, forlorn and without hope. On the left the *Moor* treacherously tries to stab the Lion that crushes him with his weight, and on the right the *Gladiator* screams his impotent rage against the roaring beast which implacably holds him in a horrible embrace in which the man and beast blend, assimilate,

and share the same fierce bestial mask, as well as the same bestial nature (Figures 13-15).

In the complex play of correspondences and polarizations of “significant forms”<sup>77</sup> set in motion by Biduinus, the ferocious gesture of the Moor and the leonine metamorphosis of the Gladiator, sinners waging an incessant war against God, recall, by way of analogy, the left architrave (Figure 16), which is the theatre of another war waged in a forest by furious animals, both wild and domestic, mutually fighting one another: bears, lions, rams, bulls, dogs, boars, all zoomorphic transformations of sinners: their fierce instincts and passions (*ira et luxuria*, anger and lust, in particular) make them similar to fierce animals destined to eternal death, in a growing proximity ending



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.

into a scandalous metamorphosis<sup>78</sup> that seems to be irreversible, and hopeless. In the *selva oscura*, the “dark forest” of this world without peace, in restless turmoil, which resonates in the roaring, barking, bellowing, of the belligerent animals, however, strangely enough, none of them is actually killed: two men, hunters without weapons, wander about playing the Oliphant as if to announce the imminent, and very likely, apocalyptic hunt. In this wild menagerie, the image of a mundane world in the grip of frenetic chaos, remote from the perfect immobility of the divine existence, emblem of the belligerent tendencies of our species, the outcome of this war between good and evil, life and death, remains uncertain. The entire scene is a sort of still image of this cosmic and eschatological war whose *punctum*<sup>79</sup> is a Deer (Christ), who, having jumped on the back of a Dragon (“the great dragon [...], that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world”: John of Patmos, *Apoc.*, 12:9) (Figure 17), tramples, as deer were believed to do with snakes,<sup>80</sup> on the monster, here the irreducible emblem of Evil and Death, which appears subdued but not yet defeated.

The *pathos* that animates the muscular tension of the agile body of the supernatural Deer, caught in the imminence of further actions, compels the eye to follow a new trajectory ending to the last architrave, on the right of the façade, the most enigmatic of the three (Figure 18). The same kinaesthetic *pathos* of the *forma fluens* of the body of the Deer<sup>81</sup> reappears in the elastic winged leonine bodies of the twins griffins facing each other in a perfect specular symmetry. Affronted as in a sort of sculpted coat of arms, such imaginary “monsters”, hybrids of eagle and lion, coming from the East<sup>82</sup> to represent the twofold, human and divine, nature of Christ, appear to be ready to take flight, and carry along with them upwards, to the sky, a tame and docile captured bear, a former sinner *raptus ad inferos* of his animal form, now no longer rebellious, but not yet returned to the human form, about to abandon this world, still image of the imminence of his dramatic and uncertain supernatural journey to salvation, about to be *raptus in caelum*, as Warburg would say.<sup>83</sup>

This complex network of images, housing bodies in motion or in the imminence of action, (“images of life in movement”, *bewegtes Leben*, caught “an instant before action”, Warburg would say<sup>84</sup>) originally intended to catch the eye and the attention of the illiterate, to orient their *ethos*, appears to be therefore more than a mere mnemonic device conventionally employed by preachers for pedagogical purposes: it stands rather as a complex field or pattern of invisible forces<sup>85</sup> made visible by Biduinus. By conferring them the form, the body, the *life* of images, he endowed them with the nature of (sculpted) *Pathosformeln*, which actively operate on the stage of our aesthetic, emotional and cognitive experience owing to their undiminished power to “muovere l’animo” of those



Figure 16.

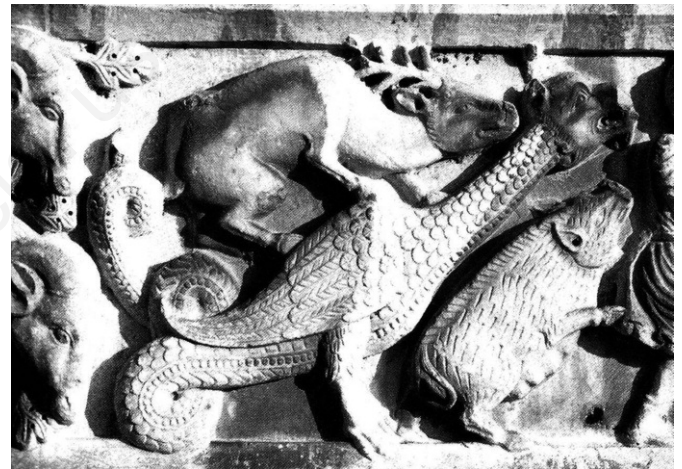


Figure 17.



Figure 18.

who behold them, and consequently shape and modify it.

And it is very likely due to the power of such images that our very identity depends, is influenced, is moulded, and transforms itself in the course of time, becoming, in turns, a kaleidoscopic image of our composite Self which encompasses what we actually are, but also what we would like, or (Figure 19) we fancy or rather *imagine*, ourselves to be.



Figure 19. *Norman Catwell* by Lucia Heffernan.

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*I wish to thank Gabriele Meloni and Carol Berenyi, for the invaluable help provided in the process of translating my original Italian version of this work into English.*

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