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Aby Warburg and the Political Iconography of Fascism: An Analysis of Symbols of Power

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Abstract This paper explores the crucial role of political iconography in conveying power and ideology. It highlights the importance of contextualising images within the public space, examining Aby Warburg's perspective on political imagery, with a focus on Fascist political iconography. Warburg's interest lies in how Italian Fascism revived ancient Rome and reinterpreted symbols of power. He underscores the fundamental role of ancient pathos in the emergence of twentieth-century totalitarianism. This paper seeks to consolidate and shed light on Warburg's reflections concerning Italian fascism, offering a fresh perspective on political iconography.

Keywords Aby Warburg. Political iconology. Political iconography. Fascism. Symbols. Propaganda.

1 Introduction

Since classical antiquity, the West has implemented a complex system of signs to identify itself. In his lecture, "The Capitol during the Renaissance: A Symbol of the Imperial Idea" ([1965] 1990, 186-212), Fritz Saxl proposed the fascinating view that the history of Europe can be understood and narrated through symbols. Saxl tells how symbols, born and raised in classical antiquity, dissolved with the advent of Christianity, only to reappear later in the Christian era, enriched

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by new ideas and forces. He affirms that symbols constitute the very fabric of European history.

Thus, Western identity presents a long series of survivals that reminds us how the history of our culture is a history of force and violence. Aby Warburg developed the Mnemosyne Atlas, a device to investigate these symbols. In particular, political iconography is the discipline that proposes to study the images and representations of power, starting from Aby Warburg's method.

2 The Birth of Political Iconography

However, what is political iconology? In 1999, Professor Lea Ritter Santini held a five-lecture course at the San Carlo Foundation in Modena, whose Italian title was unequivocal: "Iconologia politica".[1]

Lea Ritter Santini, a Germanist, philologist, and Italian literary critic, had a significant interest in the role of images in the history of art and literature, delving into the themes of literary iconology and political iconology. From March 15 to 19, 1999, Ritter Santini offered reflections and analyses to the audience at the Fondazione San Carlo regarding the origin and evolution of this still-defining discipline. She dedicated the first lecture to the question: "What does political iconology mean?".

Within the archives of the Fondazione San Carlo, transcriptions of the lectures do not exist, but there are recordings, which are now over twenty years old. Amidst the rustling of the lecture hall, the scholar ponders that defining political iconology is not as simple as it may seem. Political iconology is not just the study of political images – "that would be simplistic" – but also the political interpretation of these images. Ritter Santini begins by saying: "Among common people things penetrate more effectively through the eyes than through the ears because the populace internalizes what it sees better than what it hears", in the idea that visual perceptions make a stronger impression on the mind than words. Interestingly, Ritter Santini says that political instances primarily adhered to these visibility rules, resigning from direct argumentation.

The resignation from direct argumentation is the matter. "It is a visible sign which" Villacañas Berlanga (quoted in Carbone 2008, 16) says "[that] anticipates primarily a secret".

Ritter Santini's 1999 lecture is a genuine work proposal that is up to us to collect, with the suggestion to look at images differently. The

1 For further information, please see: https://www.fondazionesancarlo.it/conferenza/iconologia-politica/. I extend my gratitude to Fondazione San Carlo for granting me access to the lecture recordings.

scholar asserts that this concept of iconography does not immediately emerge from the studies of Aby Warburg. Although, of course, we must return to Aby Warburg.

As we know, Warburg did not leave a theoretical program. However, from his work and the work of his *Kreis*, from Bing, Panofsky, Saxl, and unpublished material, we know that there was a seed for the definition of the discipline of political iconography, mainly gathered by the Warburg's heirs.

In particular, it was Martin Warnke who dealt with political iconography. Art historian, Warnke worked as a professor at the University of Marburg and Hamburg, becoming later director of the Warburg House, which he transformed into a research centre focused on political iconography, equipping it with an iconographic thematic index of great relevance. Together with Uwe Fleckner and Hendrik Ziegler, Warnke wrote a substantial manual of Political Iconography (2011), and his study perspective was decisive in defining the discipline, influencing his students Horst Bredekamp and Michael Diers, who followed in his footsteps.

Politische Ikonographie

A concrete example in Warnke's essay "Politische Ikonographie" (1992) in *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*, edited by Andreas Bayer, can help us better understand the concept and method of political iconography.

> In 1742, in the Netherlands, a pamphlet was circulated that depicted and commented on a scene from Austrian history. Empress Maria Theresa, at the time of her ascent to power, faced a country in turmoil, beset by credit problems, divisions among ministers, and an unstable public opinion. Additionally, the Elector of Bavaria had occupied Upper Austria. In a desperate move, the empress wrote a letter to her field marshal, Count Khevenhüller, who had initiated the reconquest and defence. This letter was accompanied by a portrait of the empress and her son, suggesting an implicit appeal to their images: "You have before your eyes a young queen abandoned by the entire world: what do you think of her fate? What do you think of the destiny of this child? Look into the eyes of your princess…". The image in the pamphlet shows the field marshal's reaction as he stands before the tent with the portraits in his left hand and the letter in the other, displaying them to all his officers emerging from the tents. The pamphlet's text recounts how the soldiers covered the portraits with kisses, brandished their swords, praised the empress, and renewed their oath of allegiance. This gesture demonstrates how sending portraits profoundly and

> chivalrously influenced the military. In her most significant distress, they understood that their sovereign had made a final effort to communicate through supplicating words and her bodily image. (Warnke 1992, 23-8)

The role of the political image within the public sphere is crucial, as Frederic J. Schwartz (2020) aptly highlighted in his essay "Public Sphere". Schwartz outlines a concept of the public sphere that draws from Jürgen Habermas's theory of "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (141). This space is open to all citizens and is used for discussion and interaction among individuals, following Habermas's ideal type. Within this public sphere, the discussion revolves around matters of common interest, and participants are expected to seek consensus on the common good, transcending individual interests. Khevenhüller steps out of the tent to share it with others instead of examining it privately. It is crucial to differentiate and analyse how something initially private becomes a matter of public interest, especially when an image is used for political purposes. In such cases, it must be disseminated within a public space. However, it is equally vital to consider the originator of this image to ensure it has a substantial impact. The public sphere should be defined as a space with various actors, allowing the political image to serve different purposes. Considering this secondary aspect of the image, its political function, and its underlying message is essential.

We can agree that these ideas and this method are not all immediately linked to Aby Warburg.

However, they are "mediately" linked, as Ritter Santini asserts.

As a cornerstone of political iconology, Ritter Santini points to one of Warburg's essays, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther" ([1920] 1966). In this extensive essay about woodcut usage, he delves into the topic of employing astrological imagery during the German Reformation. He focuses on how both the Catholic Church and Luther's supporters harnessed visual elements for propagandistic aims. Scholars such as Philipp Jost Klenner (2007) and Horst Bredekamp, all agree that this essay is the foundational document "not only for political iconography but also for the history of visual media" (Bredekamp 2003, 418-28).

Warburg did not produce any other essay or didactic document specifically written and published on the subject. Nevertheless, he was deeply involved in investigating iconology to the propagandistic and political space, including that of his time.

3 Aby Warburg and Political Iconography

In his *scienza senza nome*, as Agamben called it (1984), Aby Warburg laid the fundamental visual foundations of Western culture, primarily focusing on the Renaissance. While he never explicitly coined the terms 'Political Iconology' or 'Political Iconography', he had a highly critical view of the political aspect, and his work intertwined with the political analysis of his contemporary era.

The writing of his essay "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther" emerged as a direct response to one of the most dramatic events in Warburg's life and contemporaneous world: World War I. In reaction to the propaganda of the First World War, Warburg noted that "the horror-fantasy of the ongoing war will be inconceivable without a picture-historical analysis of the belief in monsters" (Diers 1997, 29). Concurrently, he endeavored to develop such an analysis of his present, carrying out incredible work in collecting and analysing images from the war, striving to bring order to the complexity of an event that deeply frightened him.

De Laude (2015) notes that from the onset of the war, Warburg devoted time daily to reading ten foreign newspapers. He clipped war news, classified and organized them in his archive, accompanying them with comments or captions. Between 1914 and 1918, the Library acquired at least 1,500 works related to the war. Kriegskartothek was established the *Kriegskartothek* a collection of file cards designed to preserve and categorize elements constituting the complex 'psychomachia' of the modern era. The collected photographs included ancient buildings, religious structures, monuments shattered by bombs, military parades, Greek columns in ruins, aerial images representing modern warfare, and trench scenes entangled with barbed wire (Didi-Huberman 2011). Although not organized into an atlas as initially intended, this documentation exhibits images that already adhere to Warburg's cultural science principles with a precise political dimension. In his titanic effort, he tried to prevent Italy from entering the war and to keep the European intellectual context together, and initiated the publication of an illustrated magazine (*La Guerra del 1914* and *La Guerra del 1914-1915*) in Italian, founded with ethnologist Georg Thilenius and linguist Giulio Panconcelli-Calzia.

A proper analysis of modern *Schlagbilder* (recurrent images) would emerge only later.

The attention that Warburg dedicated to his contemporaneity also pertained to the revival of paganism in the modern era, particularly fascism disguised as Roman antiquity, the central theme of this paper. This observational approach becomes evident in several visual plates prepared for his Hamburg lectures. It is especially evident in the last few plates of the Mnemosyne Atlas, also known as 'political

plates', where Warburg observes his time: Plate 77: *Re-emergence of the Ancient in the Modern Age*, Plate 78: *Church and State*, and Plate 79: *Eating God: Paganism in the Church*.[2] Equally noteworthy are the annotations in the 1929 *Roman Diary* (Warburg, Bing 2005), compiled in collaboration with Gertrud Bing, and the letters sent to Hamburg (stored at the Warburg Institute Archive, therefore WIA). In these letters, particularly those to his wife, Warburg hastily sketched iconographic analyses of the resurgences he observed in Rome in 1929. Warburg closely examined how ancient Rome was reinterpreted and instrumentalized under the fascist regime, shedding light on the complex intersections between art history and politics in his work. His contribution to the emergence of political iconology reflects his dedication to exploring the intricate connections between art, culture, and politics.

Warburg and Fascism

During his stay in Rome on February 11, 1929, Warburg had the opportunity to attend the Mass, witnessing the signing of the Lateran Pacts between the Vatican and the Italian State. Although Warburg remained in St. Peter's Square, observing the crowd's reactions, he later participated in the following papal blessing. The scholar only saw the signing of the Lateran Pacts at the Lateran Palace a few days later at the cinema. In the diary of the KWB, Warburg commented on the cinematic documentation of the treaty signing:

> Im Kino die Conciliazione miterlebt. Eine zauber hafte Mithilfe des Erlebens, trotz allem. Kardinal Gasparri und Mussolini in ihrem Aufstieg aus dem Volk (ärmliche Dörfer erschienen als Geburtsstätten) der Volksseele präsentiert. Man sah vorher den Papst, wie er die Missionare (farbig zum Teil) empfängt, wie er sein neues Auto besteigt. […] Das Feinste: Mussolini erscheint am Versöhnungstage nirgends in der Offentlichkeit: nur die beiden Flaggen erscheinen nebeneinander auf dem Balkon. Ich war erstaunt über sein Lippenspiel: ein böser schöner caesarischer Mund. […] Kardinal Gasparn saß da unabhängig vom Bewußtsein des Beobachtet werdens, wie ein monumentaler alter gewiegter Dorfschulze.[3] (Tagebuch der KBW, S. 410, February 18, 1929)

2 For more information on this topic, please refer to the reading paths of the plates created by *La Rivista di Engramma* and related insights: `https://www.engramma.it/eOS/core/frontend/eos_atlas_index.php?id_articolo=879`; `https://www.engramma.it/eOS/core/frontend/eos_atlas_index.php?id_articolo=880`.

3 Translation by the author: "I experienced the Conciliation at the cinema. A magical participation in the event, despite everything. Cardinal Gasparri and Mussolini, in their rise from the people (poor villages appeared as birthplaces), presented to the people's

As Gino Querini (2015) notes, Warburg's interest in fascism was remembered by several witnesses. Arnaldo Momigliano (1987, 92) reports an account of the celebrations of the treaty as given by Gertrud Bing:

> There were tremendous popular demonstrations in Rome [...] Mussolini became overnight the "man of providence", and in such an inconvenient position he remained for many years. Circulation in the streets of Rome was not very easy on that day, and it so happened that Warburg disappeared from the sight of his companions. They anxiously waited for him back at the Hotel Eden, but there was no sign of him for dinner. Bing and others even telephoned the police. However, Warburg reappeared at the hotel before midnight, and when he was reproached, he soberly replied something like this in his picturesque German: "You know that throughout my life, I have been interested in the revival of paganism and pagan festivals. Today, I had the chance of my life to be present at the re-paganization of Rome, and you complain that I remained to watch it!".

Starting from his studies on the visual survivals of Western tradition, Warburg undoubtedly realized how authoritarian regimes of the early twentieth century, including the rising German National Socialism and Italian Fascism, comprehended and exploited the survival possibilities of political, religious, or astrological symbols, using them for propagandist purposes. In the final part of his life, this theme captured his attention, so it was included within the Mnemosyne Atlas and can be found in panels 77-9, as well as in other studies.

4 Hamburg, July 16, 1927, Erich Rothacker at the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek*

According to the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek* diaries (hereafter: KWB), analysed by Fleckner and Woldt (2012, 135-40), Warburg's work on the political images of his time had already begun to take shape in 1927, in the dawn phase of the development of the Atlas.

On July 16, 1927, Professor Erich Rothacker, a philosopher of culture from Heidelberg, was invited by Warburg to deliver a speech at the KWB, as consideration was given to appointing him as a philosophy professor in Hamburg. The event, attended by a select group of university

souls. Previously, you could see the Pope receiving the missionaries (some of them coloured) and getting into his new car. [...] The most remarkable thing was that Mussolini did not appear publicly on the day of reconciliation; only the two flags appeared side by side on the balcony. I was surprised by his lip movements: a wickedly beautiful Caesar-like mouth. [...] Cardinal Gasparri sat there, regardless of the awareness of being observed, like a monumental old and shrewd village chief".

professors from the University of Hamburg, appeared to test Rothacker's academic qualifications in an unofficial scientific symposium.

Current research on Rothacker primarily highlights the ambivalence of his scholarly activity. On the one hand, the philosopher has been identified as one of the leading figures in the National Socialist philosophy of culture. On the other hand, he is remembered for laying the foundations of modern cultural anthropology. Erich Rothacker developed the concept of a philosophical-cultural dictionary and attempted to combine philosophical, sociological, psychological, artistic, historical, anthropological, and biological approaches. Since Warburg searched for criteria to establish a culture and image-oriented history of modern art, Rothacker's cultural and anthropological approaches must have piqued his interest. He thus arranged for a collaboration with the Heidelberg scholar, organizing the meeting at the KWB where the research project's foundations would be presented (Fleckner, Woldt 2012).

Therefore, at 5:00 pm on July 16, 1927, Rothacker delivered a lecture at the Library. According to Fleckner and Woldt (2012), Rothacker had clearly understood the implications the colloquial lecture would have for his research and career, and despite expressing genuine interest, after the conference, he was not hired by Hamburg University.

The complex figure of the philosopher was accompanied by a latent racial ideology, which could have been the reason for Warburg's rejection. This hypothesis is not unfounded, especially considering Rothacker's subsequent intellectual alignment with the Third Reich and, more importantly, the kind of exposure that Warburg presented to him that day.

On that occasion, Warburg also delivered a brief dissertation, speaking about the function of social mnemonics as engrams of ancient styles of the gestural language of passions. As documented in the KWB diaries on July 14, 1927, he asked his collaborators for assistance in designing an appropriate presentation: "For Rothacker, I must have a wall of images ready". The archive of the Warburg Institute in London preserves a small volume of photographic exhibition boards and schematic drawings that document the series of images created in a few days. However, a complete transcript of the lecture that would allow for the reconstruction of Warburg's exact words for this event cannot be found. Presumably, he improvised his approximately 75-minute speech, taking into account two exhibition boards set up for this purpose.

Once again, the assembly of images for Warburg served as an object of study and an operational and political tool. Perhaps a test for his guest.

The Rejection of Rothacker

As usual, Warburg presented a small series of images on two blackboards. The title of his speech referred only to his work on the "collective memory of expressions", which he illustrated with concrete examples. On the first blackboard, Warburg displayed images related to representations of *Fortuna* or *Kairos* and other motifs within visual usage. In contrast, on the other blackboard, he staged political symbols from the Assyrian Empire to the Renaissance, from Baroque to Fascism. Warburg demonstrated how ancient motifs continued to exist in modernity through images from Mussolini's propaganda. Once he had discovered that the traditional visual formation of this kind was a central topic of his research, Warburg certainly could not ignore how authoritarian regimes of the early twentieth century, including resurgent German National Socialism and Italian Fascism, understood and exploited the possibilities of survival of political, religious, or astrological symbols for propagandistic purposes. His speech undoubtedly drew apparent conclusions from the comparison of these images. His research led him to critically evaluate contemporary visual politics, which served as a testing ground for his theories about the history of culture.

Erich Rothacker, in all likelihood, could not ignore the criticism contained in those images, carriers of a state ideology that was closely aligned with his political convictions. Rothacker wrote twice to Warburg, complimenting him on the fascinating presentation,[4] but he referred only to historical iconographic material, such as *Kairos*, the sail, and the charioteer, without adding remarks on the 'political thrust' delivered by the Hamburg scholar. Sometime later, Rothacker himself gave a lecture in August 1933 titled *The Foundations and Ideas of National Socialist Cultural Policy*. In his lecture, he mentioned the historical underpinnings of fascist ideology, which had previously been critically analysed on Warburg's blackboards. He also discussed the role of Roman civilization in the thought of the Italian fascist state alongside the tradition of the Roman Empire.

The visual clues provided by Warburg regarding Mussolini and his efforts to connect with ancient influences demonstrate how fundamental he considered history in his image-based discipline. From this, Warburg developed an approach to the function of social mnemonics as a conservator of the dynamograms of the gestural language of passions. This approach allowed him to show historical and contemporary worldview forms through images, which he used here as a warning.

4 Letters from Rothacker to Warburg, after the conference: WIA GC/19229 21/07/1927; WIA GC/19230 30/07/1927.

Figure 1 Commemorative stamp of the Italian Social Republic, 1944, depicting the head of a destroyed "Italia turrita" statue with a *Fascio* as a symbol. *50 Centesimi* nominal value, issued as part of the 'Destroyed buildings and monuments – 2nd emission' series. Here reproduced for illustrative purposes, due to the presence of the *Fascio*

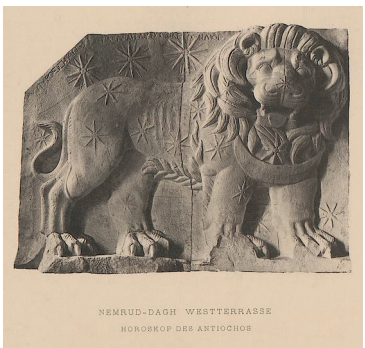

Figure 2 Lion Horoscope from the West Terrace of Nemrut Dağ, Mausoleum of Antiochus I (69-34 B.C.), Turkey

Figure 3 Postes Persanes, 10 kran Iran issue, 1909. Here reproduced for illustrative purposes, due to the presence of the lion

Aby Warburg and his tool, the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek*, foreshadowed the scientific and political development of Rothacker, whose cultural theory would eventually transform into a racial theory in the service of an authoritarian state ideology.

5 The Hamburg Plate of 1927

According to the analysis of the KBW diaries conducted by Fleckner and Woldt, we do not have a precise title for the montage that Warburg presented on July 16, 1927. Instead, we have a description of the themes, which refer to the "collective memory of expressions".

During the preparation of his panels, Warburg took notes regarding the historical migration of images, the roots of reception, and the political consequences of analyzing the motif he was examining, following the continuous destiny of ancient motifs within Italian fascism. As previously mentioned, it is on the second panel that Warburg stages a discussion, if not a harsh critique, regarding the political iconography of fascism and, above all, Mussolini's self-representation.

On the panel, three sections featured a selection of contemporary postage stamps, including Mussolini's emblem of power **[fig. 1]**. Warburg considered postage stamps to be powerful image vehicles and means of transforming visual communications in which the pathos formulas already developed since antiquity continued their journey through time and space into modernity. According to Fleckner and

Woldt, during the conference, Warburg spoke about the motif of bundles of *fasci* and axes, which the Italian Fascists had appropriated. The bundles of *fasci* appearing on the stamps were described as an extension of the external body that conferred omnipotent awareness upon its bearers. For Warburg, it was a sign of an extended form of dominion, a tangible dominion of violent masses.

According to Fleckner and Woldt (2012), the composition of the 1927 table began with Assyrian representations of King Antiochus I Theos at Nemrut Dağ, where the lion symbolizes royal power **[fig. 2]**, and the ruler secures power through a handshake with the God of light, Mithra. The lion, understood as a celestial companion of the sun and simultaneously as the throne of justice, is juxtaposed in the montage with the cover of an Italian book by Paolo Ardali, published in 1926, entitled *San Francesco e Mussolini*.

Warburg's montage highlighted Mussolini's appropriation of numerous political and religious contents across cultures and eras, also based on his studies of postage stamps. He positioned images cut directly next to each other and inserted two Persian postage stamps with a lion emblem **[fig. 3]**, making it clear the fascist visual propaganda's intention to sacralize Mussolini for political purposes. Warburg's interest and fascination seemed to focus not on Mussolini as a person but on his manipulative visual rhetoric.

6 Lack of Distance: The Violence of Fascist Re-paganization

The fascist appropriation of ancient motifs appeared to Warburg as both fascinating and unbearably violent because, in the scholar's view, fascism did not make ethical use of symbols.

6.1 Fascist Emblem on Postage Stamps

In August 1927, Warburg joined a conference on postage stamps. His lecture, later incorporated into Panel 77 of Mnemosyne, revolved around two images that elaborated on ancient models. On one side, there was a postage stamp from Barbados featuring the King of England **[fig. 4]** seated on a marine chariot drawn by sea monsters, and on the other side, representations of *fasci* on Italian Fascist postage stamps **[fig. 3]**. Warburg argued that the King of England on the Barbados postage stamp did not pretend to be the God Neptune but metaphorically attributed power to himself. However, the same did not apply to the Fascist bundles of *fasci* on the stamps, which were seen as a symbol of violence not conceived metaphorically but as a sign that instilled fear and terror of political sovereignty. "Metaphoric distance

[is] destroyed through the immediacy of the violence in the symbol of the symbol, through Mussolini's axe" (Johnson 2012).

In his essay titled "On the Political Use of Images: Some Reflections on the Last Panels of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas" (2015), Gino Querini provides a dense reflection on this, highlighting the concept of distance at the core of Warburg's reasoning about postage stamps.

> The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the foundational act of human civilization. ([1929] 2017, transl. by M. Rampley)

For Warburg, the scientist is the one who seeks to "insert the conceptual space of rationality between oneself and the object" (Querini 2015, 7), the so-called *Denkraum der Besonnenheit*. Therefore, the difference between the postage stamp with the King portraying Neptune and the Fascist postage stamp with the axe should not be read as an opposition between reason and pathos but as an opposition between the balance of pathos and form against an imbalance.

As Warburg noted, the postage stamp featuring the King of England had a peculiar character of proximity and detachment that was lacking in Fascist iconography. Gombrich described Warburg's thoughts on this matter:

> Warburg was pleased to find a contemporary monarch who still exploited the inherent power of this ancient symbol on a postage stamp. According to Warburg's interpretation, this postage stamp obeyed the true laws of symbolism to maintain its metaphorical distance. It does not claim to be reality; it is shown in grisaille, the visual equivalent of the quotation mark in language. The King never pretends to be Neptune. He only compares his power to that of the old God. In Warburg's cryptic terms, a "dynamic symbol with metaphorical distance achieved through the mnemonic catharsis of archaeologisation". (Gombrich 1986, 264)

This use of postage stamps carries a form of respect from its viewers through the visual use of "as if". It is somewhat ethical: the legacy of antiquity acts as a "black box", explains Querini, as an intermediary that provides the right degree of distance and balance. The same cannot be said for the retrogressive representation of antiquity by fascism. Both England and Italy drew from the same mnemonic "figurative archive". However, while the English sovereign saw himself as Neptune, Mussolini saw himself as the "man of divine providence". The crowd manipulation effect was evident: Warburg was an eyewitness that not only did Mussolini present himself as a god but that the masses accepted this view.

Figura 4 'Colony Badge', The British King as Neptune in his Chariot, Barbados Stamp, 1916. Fragment of a stamp panel. © The Warburg Institute, London

Figure 5 Mussolini with his pet lion, press photo, 1924

6.2 Lion

The use of the lion symbol also posed significant problems for Warburg, expressed through the plate montage by juxtaposing Persian postage stamps **[fig. 3]** and the Assyrian representations at Nemrut Dağ **[fig. 2]**, where the lion is present as an attribute of power.

As noted by Jost Philipp Klenner in an essay with the emblematic title *Mussolini and the Lion: Aby Warburg as the Creator of Political Iconography* (2007), another symbol of power recognized by Warburg was precisely the lion as an attribute of the sovereign. Mussolini occasionally self-represented with the lion, in the form of self-stylization that Warburg had first observed in 1924 in a photograph depicting the dictator with a lioness in his vehicle **[fig. 5]**, published worldwide in the daily press.

Mussolini appeared in several photos with his lion. In a letter to his wife dated February 13, 1924, Warburg made notes on observations he had conceived while reading the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*: "Behind this lies something pagan; the domesticated 'Monstrum' (in miniature) as an amplification and elevation of personality; an imperial triumph".[5]

On the one hand, the photograph highlighted the dictator travelling with a conventional symbol of power. However, on the other

5 WIA GC/37309.

hand, according to Klenner (2007), something decisive has changed in the arrangement of symbols since the rise of photography. Mussolini's lion was no longer a symbol of classical origin, as found on coins, emblems, paintings, and sculptures; it was alive. In this way, the beast in Mussolini's arms functioned as a citation of classical sovereignty iconography: the sovereign next to the lion as a heraldic animal. Nevertheless, at the same time, that image was a photograph and immortalized Mussolini with his pet. The further change by photojournalism gave us a portrait of the sovereign through mass media, as underscored by Julia Modes in her essay "Pressefotografie als Spielball der politischen Ikonographie" (2022, 149-71).

6.3 Religious Motif

However, Warburg did not simply mean that the lion belonged to the classical symbols of political domination. "And yet, there is more behind it", Warburg insisted and referred to another newspaper clipping he had already noted in the fall of 1923. As Klenner underscores, Warburg found a sentence from Mussolini's socialist-era memoirs in a review of Fritz Schotthöfer's biography of Mussolini, in which the dictator claimed he was born on July 29, 1883, in Varano del Costa, "on a Sunday, at 2 pm… The sun had entered the constellation of Leo for eight days". Mussolini's astrological annotation inspired Warburg to interpret the photograph with the lion as a survival of an ancient power formula, the Sun god, who ascends to the sky with his chariot. Once again, the presence in the plate of the Assyrian representations of the lion relief at Nemrut Dağ is explanatory: the lion has the moon and several stars over his body, representing the horoscope of Antiochus I Theos.

In Warburg's eyes, the Duce allowed himself an *imitatio deorum*. Here, too, it was not about referring to the representation of the ancient but about the actual solar birth. Klenner highlights that Warburg's analysis went even further. In Warburg's understanding, Mussolini's iconography reunited the ancient and the modern through medieval *imitatio Christi*. By drawing on Italy's religious past, Mussolini positioned himself not only as a pagan god but as Christ, as a genuine saint.

Adjectives attributed to the name of Mussolini and his figure were: "august", "righteous", "saint", and "blessed". In his correspondence, many letters were also from priests or monks, caught up in the emotional involvement of the myth of Romanity and the Empire. The repetitiveness of the concept of Mussolini's divine is truly impressive. Pope Pius XI himself, after the signing of the Concordat in 1929, referred to Mussolini as the 'Man of Providence' who had managed to return "God to Italy and Italy to God". In his book *Duce tu sei un dio*,

Alberto Vacca (2013) identified other categories, as "Savior of Italy", "Defender of Roman and Christian civilization", the "Architect of the Concordat between the Church and the State" and "Angel of Peace".

After his return from Rome in August 1929, Warburg noted: "That Mussolini is seeking the Italian Catholic Empire, these idiots do not know".[6] The cover of Paolo Ardali's book, *San Francesco e Mussolini*, was included in the 1927 plate as an indication of the religious foundation of this aspiration to power, in which the politician was stylized as the successor to Saint Francis (Fleckner, Woldt 2012, 140).

7 Conclusions

In conclusion, Warburg's analysis highlights the two cardinal principles emphasized by Warnke and Ritter Santini: the image resignation from direct discourse and the agency of political images in the public sphere. Warburg notes that this imperialistic power is aesthetically violent because is no longer more allegory or prosopopoeia but an embodied and living idea. The process of decoding these images becomes more complex. Therefore, he fully comprehends that the image of fascist power aims to manipulate and control the masses. Using an aesthetic and aggressive Romanity is just one of the many tools employed by fascist propaganda. The objective of the fascist power is to create a fascist state: the manipulation of public space is intense in the attempt to make every Italian a fascist Italian.

As presented, the work carried out by the scholar is part of the continually evolving field of political iconography, which has garnered increasing attention in recent years, focusing on various themes.

I briefly recall the already mentioned German school, started with Martin Warnke and headed by Bredekamp, Diers, and the *Politische Ikonologie: Bildkritik nach Martin Warnke* edited by Probst (2022); the fundamental work of Didi-Huberman; the analysis provided by W.T.J. Mitchell, the father of American Visual Culture; Carlo Ginzburg's essays on political iconography; and David Freedberg's work on the power of images. I also mention here the work of Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (2005), which reintroduces a Marxist gaze into the science of culture and image that Otto Karl Werckmeister (2006) noted had disappeared in the heirs of Warburgian science.[7]

However, as pointed out by scholars Egea-Medrano, Garrido Rubia, and Rojo Martínez (2021), this discipline remains relatively

6 Tagebuch der KBW, S. 486, August 3,1929.

7 Cf. Barringer 2005; Didi-Huberman 2013; Freedberg 1991; Ginzburg 2015; Mitchell 1986; Schoell-Glass 2001; 2008.

unexplored. Its importance is undeniable since the image has proven to significantly impact reality, acting performatively and contributing to shaping public opinion and collective perception. However, political imagery can be violent and aggressive in its attempt to enchant or confuse us. It is up to us to disarm its power by investigating its hidden meanings.

In our image-centric era, political iconography plays a necessary role. It provides us with essential tools to analyze the hidden meanings of contemporary political images, how images contribute to constructing the collective political imaginary and to read and employ images as politically operative concepts. This discipline certainly needs to be reshaped and updated, preferably transforming it into a "post-colonial concept", as Matthew Rampley would like visual culture to be (2006). Building upon Warburg's experiment and with the support of more recent cultural studies, it can turn examining political images into a subversive discipline.

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