
RESEARCH ESSAY

The Mythological Machine & The Collective Body

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The inner body, the Mythological Machine and the collective body The body politic is conceived through the interaction of a body natural and mysticum body. Why do we need an invisible dimension to explain power? What is the difference between the individual and the community? What do we meant by body, identity, government, narrative or myth? Through two epistemological devises, Furio Jesi's Mythological Machine and Aby Warburg's Bildwanderung (migration of images), we attempt visualize mythologies and images as the evidence of a body collective that moves, speaks and takes infinite forms beyond ourselves. This exo body with no time or space, do not only determines our approach to concepts like truth but the very appearance of the real.

*"There is at the center of the mythological machine a secret room:
the one you find in dreams, that is with high probability empty."*

Furio Jesi

The Two Bodies

Whenever we think in political power, we are immediately seduced to think of a leader in the form of a head that would represent an ideological position. But on closer inspection this figure works at the same time for another representation: the one of the collective. We belong to an ideological tradition where the one in power has always two bodies: a body natural and a mysterious body with a special aura appearing under different figures: a *body politic*.

In ancient Babylon when the terrible omen of an eclipse declared the king's fall of divine grace, a slave was enthroned and then sacrificed to reestablish a new deal between the cosmic powers with the now "new" original subject./It is well known that the Spanish royal family has a secret room at El Escorial called "El Pudridero" (the rotting place) where the putrefied body of the last deceased king lies forever proving everlasting power beyond death./In the Cadaver Synod the exhumed body of pope Formosus was subjected to trial against a jury and declared guilty.

The construction of the actual understanding of the concept body politic nourishes directly from fifteen century when the *corpus mysticum* became the *corpus politicum*,¹ which was used to describe the state of a nation. Since then, the body politic is seen as the power or ideological force and interactions that holds collectivity (individual bodies) as one subject or as a single entity. It is a complex entity because it demands us to understand it from two perspectives; the body politic is a double hinge concept. On the one hand, it refers to body, organism, individual, identity, and on the other hand to collective, government, state, discourse, narrative, history, myth, and truth.

If we first consider the body as a territory and the state as a soul we should go beneath the evident relation continent-content which leads us to physicality-politics. We are compelled to address different consequences of its appearance. Are we dealing with the classical problem individual vs collective? Or the one presented in unit vs. multiplicity? Who is representing the collective? How can we see beyond the individual into the mysticism of other bodies? What is the origin of the power in the collective body?

The body politic metaphor may also induce the belief that different organs or parts of the body mirror the varied functions of society. The sovereign can be presented as the head, the arms as the army or the working

¹ Musolff, Andreas (2010), Political metaphor and bodies politic/Perspectives in Politics and Discourse, J. Benjamin Publishing. Editors University of Lancaster. (pp. 23–42).

force, for example. The frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's "Leviathan" uses a mass as constituting substance of the king's body, portrayed in awe and fear. Aesop's fable "The Belly and the members" tells us of the stomach's revolts against other organs claiming himself as body by own right.

His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age...

Kantorowicz, E., *The King's Two Bodies*

Visibility

Is there any difference between the parts and the body which they belong to?

When seeing someone, that person is immediately identified as a unique and "closed" entity and not as an arrangement of millions of cells or components. Our perception gives us the possibility to recognize one element but at the same time it keeps us trapped in a single unit horizon. Even with the knowledge of this limitation, it is not possible to change at will the ideological unit in which we access the world. In order to see, we choose not to see something else.

The immediate suspicion towards this bias is that it does not only take place through infinite fragmentation of smaller particles, but diametrically happens on bigger scales towards something we can't grasp or define. Maybe it foreshadows the apparition of a larger more consistent body we are not able to perceive within our limited scale.

The appearance of something in reality depends of self-organization strategies. Its form relies in the efficient distribution of energy through circuits which claim personality by closing in itself. This is part of me, that is not. In this sense, there is no limit in the configuration of something insofar as this something it is not "frozen matter" but a multiplicity of organizational pathways constituting the crucial structure.

The individual does not seem to have clear-cut *boundaries*; and second, because the collective of which it is supposed to be a part does not seem to be really *more* than its components.

Who are we as individuals? What is the shape of the larger ensemble inside which we are supposed to live? What are the boundaries that define our collective existence? — these questions are based on a series of concepts *wholly unfit to capture the nature of individuality and of collective*.

B. Latour What's the body of the Body Politic? —Sovereignty, Identity, Ecology, p. 3

Visualizing something implies trust in the conceptual scaffolding and discourse needed for its appearance. It would be impossible to see anything, if we didn't lean on the cloud of relations and forces colliding with its context. To visualize is not only to clarify or define the object but also, and more important to map the way it affects other elements of a horizon. How a part is attached to a set of relations and how our point of view is creating appearance.

To see means to choose implicitly a unit of measurement. Comparing objects is not only to establish relations between them, but to place them in a universe of references where the viewer has a privileged space since s/he decides the reference of all of them. Appearance is understood as filling space and time with a body while no other body can occupy it simultaneously.

Modernity enthusiastically replaced the concept of the unit with the idea of the self. One of the costs of being modern is the incapability of understanding the existence of different units in different scales. Under this frame if something has no visibility by its pairs units it won't be part of the construction and relation within reality.

How to See a Muscle?

When is it that a group recognizes itself?

Italian mythologist and theoretician Furio Jesi noted that an efficient way of recognizing a collectivity (or a social class) happens when a problem gathers entities which apparently have no connection. The unrelated and disconnected elements affected by an opposing force work as one for a solution, acquiring in the process a unified identity.

Let me present a concrete example: If we were committed to define the limits of a muscle (the origin of a movement) from an external point of view, we would face a difficult task since many fibers seem to interlace

on different imperceptible levels. How can we tell where an organ starts or ends? The muscle becomes only when it is called to action and suffers tension or stress. Similarly, only during revolt is it possible to visualize of a social body. It is urgency which forces definition to the collectivity.

Myth – void – Mythologies – bond

The myth is a form of pure attraction because it has no substance. The myth usually signals towards the origins of something without solving any form, which means that it turns into pure desire energy voided of any meaning. It is the promise of an explanation for the appearance of something in the real. Myths are units beyond a scale that haven't been translated, into recognizable elements. They constitute phantasmagoric dimension where "inertia" interacts with the real producing vacant meaning.

But the horizon created by this vacuum opens up an ideological space and time that displays images of pathos and produce a multitude of mythologies. It is through the reaction of our psyche to this unfulfilled desire that variations of things appear. Tension works as a motor of visualization.

Mythologies are a form of social bond based on the negotiation of social imaginary. They could be described as the narrative of different agents taking the form of essential forces, battles, mystic revelations, structural configurations, relations with the past or beyond that constitute the social. We live in a collective not only for its primary advantages but also in order to be part of an exchange of signs and symbols that charge us with meaning. When this narrative densifies, we get access not only to our personal coordinates but also to a wider body which is vaster and more capable. The Mythos is a catalogue of stories and metaphors revealing the mechanics and codes we apply on the social arena. It is the moment in which a dreamed technical origin meets the semiotic meaning producing logos.

Mythology was never, even in its ancient and genuine forms, revealed religion, but participation in the real. An attempt to open conscience to the immediate, to what remained before metaphysics. As long as it remains authentic, mythology can heal and reestablish a deep connection with reality.

F. Jesi. "Vanguard and connection with death", *Myth and Literature*, p. 57

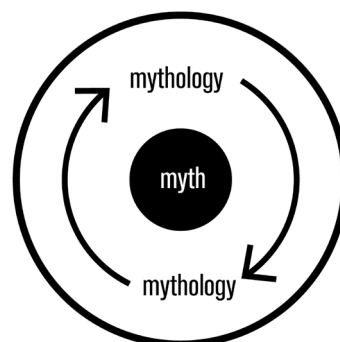
The Mythological Machine

Jesi proposes a gnosiological model to approach the real. What he calls the "Mythological machine" produces narratives, and the core of which implies an inaccessible space, supposed to hide an archetypal, meta-historical vision: the myth. If demanded this machine will never give the truth, but only versions of it in the form of mythologies. The myth will remain as potential (with no real substance) and we only can use mythologies to negotiate with the world.

The Mythological Machine originates from the organic articulation of what constitutes the common denominator of the 'disciplines of the myth' and 'of mythology'. This use of their common denominator as a repertoire of elements destined to compose a gnosiological model, corresponds to our decision to move the research towards a historical image of the 'science of the myth' as a science of circling, always at the same distance, around an inaccessible center: the myth. The horizon within which the model of the *mythological machine* is posed is the space where we can measure this constant equidistance from an inaccessible center, to which one does not rest indifferent, but one is stimulated to establish the relationship of *circling it around*.

F. Jesi, *Il Mito*, Isedi, 1973, p. 105

mythological machine



If we would like to find the “real image” of a stone, by example, the machine will give us an image of one stone and if asked again it will return another image and another without giving the definitive one.

The machine throws us automatically into a loop of infinite forms or mythological versions none of which will drive us closer to the core. In this mechanism, truth is not understood as something we can reach, but rather as an inaccessible answer that teases us with the potential existence of a definite solution. Thus, truth is an infinite series of variables of a dream, all valid, all possible.

This maneuver is a double hinge since it does not only fuel our desire of getting closer to “the one” but also makes evident our understanding of truth and strategies to achieve it.

The western model of knowledge conceives truth as a bright shining figure. Truth offers light from a single, evident source. We can even see other things and perceive our surroundings using this energy and clarity. The closer we are to the source the more of its essence we will receive. Like moths we are attracted to the brightness of knowledge.

The mythological machine proposes a different model of knowledge. It conceives truth as something secret that can never be reached directly. If we want to access the core of the real it will unfold through an interpretation or metaphor and never directly. It is not an emission of energy but a trap of possible meanings. Behind the appearance of a figure we will find always another figure (or meaning). A mask behind a mask behind a mask. Truth is a tension between figures and not a precious element.

Truth appears black and obscure, a gravitational black hole which from time to time bursts fragments of solidified imagery. It is a function to be solved like an enigma.

If we want to know the truth of a myth, the origin of fire by example; the machine will propose a mythology: Prometheus eternally tortured because of the theft of heavenly fire and its offering to humans. What is this story really referring to? It seems a visualization of the hazards we may find if we try to dig in the origins of the fire itself. We are forced to project or read the story as a vehicle of the real story. And if we do we are obliged to read the image through the readers point of view as a filter, we have to incarnate it, and solve it (or activate it) within a subjective precise context. The fable changes accordingly to make sense in the present. The only thing that remains untouched despite the reader is the unsolved problem of the function.

Mythologies are the group of narratives that the collective body uses to communicate within different parts of itself. Since memory is metaphoric energy, it is projected through time to other generations, and by doing so, it delineates a body with no time or space. We talk to ourselves using images, metaphors and metonymies because we are trapped in time and space; we can't prevent or recreate conditions without falling in obvious contradictions or misinterpretations. We can only hold to the description of a process or transformation. This methodology will not describe or give precise indications, but it will provide us with warnings on how energy is distributed in different situations. “Die toten mahnen uns” (“The deaths urgently warn us”) is the epitaph on Rosa Luxembourg's gravestone. We talk in figures to adjust the narrative to a timeless circumstance.

In mythology all versions are welcomed since they help to give consistency to the collective narrative. There are no false or wrong mythologies only more or less intense ones regarding the flux of energy. It is knowledge in which the more varied the interpretation is the more anchor points of activation it may have.

The individual is the possibility to access this polyphonic narrative in one precise point. This singular “reading” is limited and anchored by the unit which allows its ideological framework.

The ideological danger of the Mythological Machine model

Myth is at the heart of ideological mandates. Could it be that the images of the social subconscious incarnate the core of ideological battles? Can we visualize the essence of these social and political struggles? How to map this political psyche? Usually power (as desire) allies with mythologies to control or direct the collectivity. The secret box is a political capital because it creates the unit of scale in the collectivity. How can we escape to the general dictum? Where is power coming from?

“The mythological machine, as soon as it ceases to be considered purely a functional and temporary model, tends to become the captivating center and it pretends from people clear opinions and principle petitions regarding the existence of its presumed content [the myth]. The more we stare at that content (to affirm or negate its existence) the more our gaze is pushed away from the operating modes of the machine's mechanisms. [...] the mythological machine becomes a dangerous device on a political and ideological level, instead of being purely a temporary gnosiological model, when we let ourselves get hypnotized by it.”

We should address the products and their producer rather than the movements of a supposed engine and no longer cling to the problem of truth but to its strategies in the social realm.

Migration of Images

*Nachleben (afterlife) der Antike (of antiquity)*²⁻³ is an idea that Aby Warburg used to underline. It is a trace of continuity between antiquity (classical Greek period) and the medieval and Renaissance culture. If sculpture and painting had reached such a refined representation of human affairs and psyche, what happens to those icons afterwards? Did culture reset its representation and start them all over again in the Middle Ages? Could we forget the forms and emotions of the pagan culture without a trace? Where did all the emotions and social intensities Aphrodite represented go?

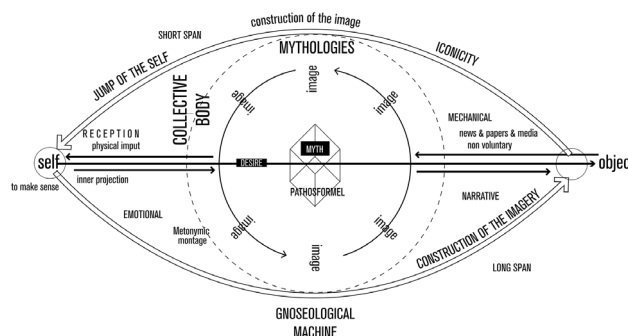
Warburg developed large iconographic collections (*Politik Bildatlas* or *Mnemosyne*) where he concluded, through direct display and comparison, that the motifs he first thought as lost are in fact there, but modified. They had migrated to other forms but still served the same “pathos” in society. During the Middle Ages, the energy Aphrodite represented just turned into a virgin of strong and harsh gestures. The values and meanings present in the Greek representations were still there but incorporated into other figures and other intensities.

The past never dies or closes in packages or periods. It migrates through images or forms (*Bildwanderung*) into the present, but modified in a phantasmagoric dimension waiting to be reactivated by historical and adequate *pathos* contexts. In this sense, it is misleading to even think of a Renaissance (literally: new birth) since nothing was ever gone. Warburg proposes to read the stories or mythologies of images across space and time through different cultures, morphing and negotiating appearance in each context.

The *Pathosformel*⁴ is the figure or visual *tropos* repeated in images that we recognize attached to a specific meaning or emotion. They are an embodied form or gesture tied to the original or fundamental relations in our imaginary. We are able to identify Aphrodite on a sculpture that we have never seen because of the shared *Pathosformel* even if, as individuals, we did not define clearly the image of the goddess in our head. The *Pathosformel* inhabits images each time with a different tone or pose: none of them original, none of them a copy. It is the captured movement of energetic emotion and form in the collective memory.

Warburg devised the rule of “the good neighbour”: “you should pay attention not to the thing you are looking for, but to its neighbour in the first place”.⁵ In this way the focus of the sight is not on objects or particles but on the connection between elements. Attention is fixed in the shared concept through images or the ideological strata that makes something valuable. The *Pathosformel* can be seen as the operation where an iconic myth is solved with mythological images. Always changing always running from us. How can we perceive such links between our everlasting desires and their incarnations in the present? How to capture those examples which link antiquity with contemporary images?⁶

I propose to read **Warburg perspective as a mythological machine** that will produce images in the same manner as Jesi did with mythologies. We can imagine a circular zoetrope where images flow one after another in an endless flux.



² Didi-Huberman, Georges (2009), *La imagen superviviente. Historia del arte y tiempo de los fantasmas según Aby Warburg*, Abada, Madrid. (pp.: 26–42).

³ Vargas Mariela (2014), *AFTERLIFE. THE CONCEPT OF “NACHLEBEN” IN BENJAMIN AND WARBURG*, THÉMATA. Revista de Filosofía, No49 enero-junio, (pp.: 317–331).

⁴ Báez, Linda (2012), *Un viaje a las fuentes; Warburg, Aby, Atlas Mnemosyne*, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas. UNAM, México. (pp.: 26–36).

⁵ Steinberg, Michael P., (2012), *The Law of the Good Neighbor*. Common Knowledge volume 18, issue 1, Duke University Press, (pp.: 128–133).

⁶ <http://www.egramma.it/eOS/>, *Indice Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, (2004), “La Rivista di Engramma”. Issue 35. August/September. Italia.

4Th. Body – Exobody – Movement

If we expand the consequences of this new “mythological image machine” and place ourselves inside the carousel of versions and move along the loop of infinite images, we can discover a crucial detail: all those different images could come to life animated by the circular movement, like a mythological kinetoscope. Since each image and each narrative recalls slightly the neighbouring ones, they will automatically produce all together “cinematic action”. The more mysterious and obscure the myth (the more mythologies we have of a myth), the more detailed and clear a movement we will get. In fact, there is no need to have them in a perfect sequence, the only requirement is to have the endless capability to produce the next frame (version) to complete the animated sequence and make it appear.



The resulting moving image is a collective body that moves through other bodies and also inhabits many individual time frames. It lives in all images, in all spaces simultaneously but keeps all of its individual characteristics. In light of this apparatus, we can say that all bodies are photograms of the actions of the real collective body. The mass never allows itself to be photographed, since it only shows self-fragmentation. In order to fully grasp or understand it, we have to approach it in movement. There is no “independent organ” or even what we call “the individual”, only endless versions nourishing a body that lives through many generations distant in time but at once.

Just as there cannot be, for the scholar of myth, a substance of myth but only a machine that produces mythologies and generates the tenacious illusion of hiding myth within its own opaque walls, neither is there for the anthropologist a “universal man” who is true and real in and for himself—beyond or before the “I” of others, peers, or strangers—who would find in the festival his privileged epiphany, where “at its maximum concentration, humanness paradoxically coincides with the peak of otherness.”

G. Agamben *On the Impossibility of Saying “I”*: Epistemological paradigms and poetic paradigms in the work of Furio Jesi, p. 2

The problem, then, is how to show or recognize “that other body” which belongs to another horizon and which can only be seen as it moves through time? From the perspective of the single subject, the collective is formed by a series of different bodies or individuals, each one with a different time and space, and consequently with a different consciousness and agenda. But from a dimension where there is no space/time difference, “they” are not separated but stand for a single sequence and indication or evidence of a body beyond ourselves. Individual bodies would act as “inner bodies” or fragments of a larger entity (exo-body?) that we cannot fully and properly describe.

It is paradoxical that when the individual believes that s/he is acting in the most personal way, it is the moment when the social, the “exo” body, is in complete control of the actions and motives (having offspring by example). Everyone believes that his or her life is coded by particular symbols and meanings, when in fact those events are signs and values that reassure each one to the essence of the collectivity. We are

components who forgot that our limited perception in time and space, our scale, is not the measure to follow. Epiphany and revelation are always related to the emptiness of the I.

According to Jesi-Kerényi, every self-portrait that “consists in saying ‘I’” runs the risk—unless the speaker is a seer—of losing the fluidity and plasticity of the “I” that it would seek to grasp, its “figure.” It is precisely because it is no longer possible for us to gain immediate access to mythogenesis that “the exercise of the science of mythology... appears to Kerényi as his only way toward a self-portrait: the single way to put himself in relation, without *saying it*, to a fluid, plastic, living ‘I’-figure in which he can recognize himself.”

G. Agamben *On the Impossibility of Saying “I”*: Epistemological paradigms and poetic paradigms in the work of Furio Jesi, p. 2

The *Bildwanderung* or migration of the images is an anthropological pilgrimage to acquire the collective body. A body is the version of another one projected in time. Warburg saw through the *Pathosformel* the same processes and the same empathic roots struggling for the apparition of the body politic.

The mythological machine can be understood as a model to visualize the collective body using the attraction and desire unleashed by the myth.

Our body experiences the two domains as two different times: a historical time – where individual images are gathered and rearranged in sequences – and a mythical time – where a collective body appears in suspension of time.

The I therefore knows life and death, permanence and self-destruction, historical time and mythical time together. It is the common element, the point of intersection, between two universes—of life and historical time; of death and mythical time. [...] In the moment that it gains access to myth, the I that is subject to historical time while nevertheless participating in mythical time, ‘pours forth like a spring’; it destroys itself in a dynamic process that involves its historical duration. In other words, the I really participates in the flow of history when it succeeds in identifying history with the course of its own destruction and therefore with its access to myth.

F. Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, (London: Seagull Books, 2014)

On the one hand, the body which is subject to the conditions and transformations of space and time, is desperately trying to prove the existence of will and consciousness. The individual trying to make a case of himself.

On the other, a collective body that only takes place in movement anchored in another dimension – and from time to time we are able to perceive as fragments or broken images within ideological structures.

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June 2020

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Beltran, E. 2020. The Mythological Machine & The Collective Body. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 4(1): 10, pp. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.79>

Published: 04 November 2020

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