

New Guidebooks for an Expanding Labyrinth of Knowledge: the World's Memory Palace of Paul Otlet

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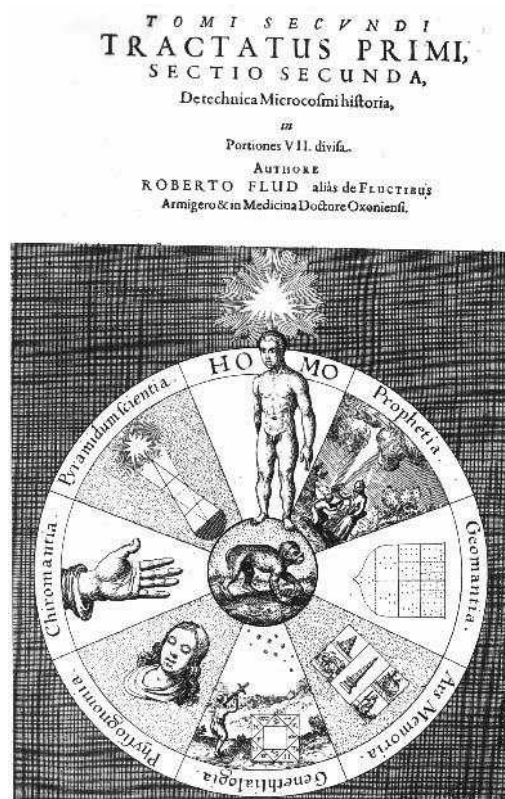
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ABSTRACT

In his Mundaneum in Brussels, the Belgian encyclopaedist and internationalist Paul Otlet (1868-1944) undertook the utopian project of mapping the world of knowledge, not just in the sense of cataloguing all what had been published on index cards according to the UDC system he had developed with his colleague Henri La Fontaine, but also more literally in the sense of drawing together the world of knowledge into a visual synthesis, which took the shape of an encyclopaedic museum – the International Museum or *Palais Mondial* in Brussels. In parallel to the development of the World Palace, accommodated between 1910 and the Second World War in the prestigious Palais du Cinquantenaire, Otlet worked on an *Atlas of Civilisation* – a ‘museum’ of ideas condensed into the format of a visual textbook. Just like Leibniz’s concept of the *Atlas Universalis* (1678), it was to be a collection of iconographic documents forming together an educational set of maps covering the entire the world of knowledge. One of the most interesting but hermetic parts of the atlas is the experimental yet very detailed, and unexplored, *Atlas Monde*, consisting of a dozen of large drawings that synthesize the content of his cosmological treaty *Monde* (1935).

This paper aims to analyse, both philosophically and historically, the visual similarities between the organizational structures and figures in the plates of the *Atlas Monde* and a selection of drawings from a number of seventeenth century atlases, notably by Robert Fludd and Athanasius Kircher. It seeks to explore through a visual interpretation of traditional figurative metaphors such as wheels, labyrinths, pyramids, and trees, to what extent their respective epistemological presumptions and positions were similar and dissimilar.

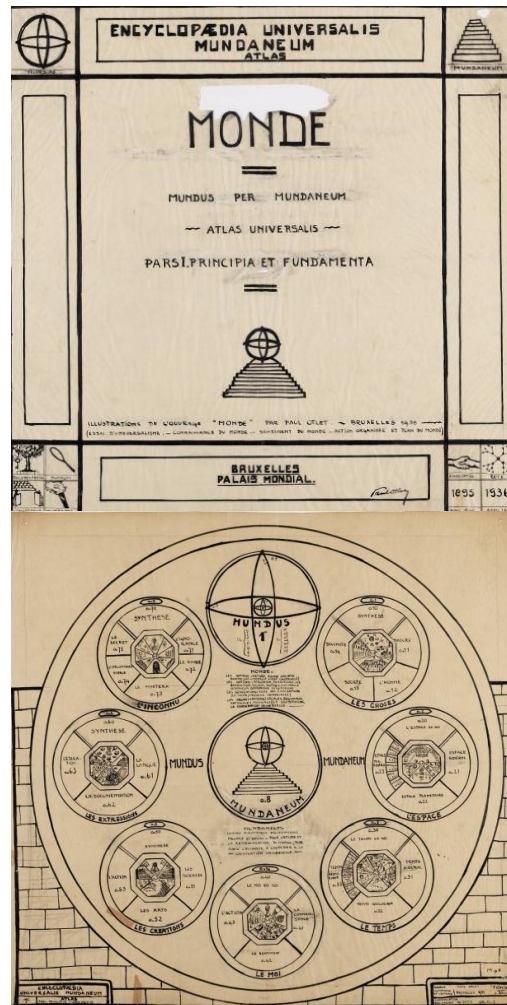
This examination of the respective philosophies of encyclopaedism and cosmology of the aforementioned encyclopaedists will be confronted with the historical shift during the early twentieth century in the philosophy of science from



positivism to logical positivism; a shift that took place at the moment when Otlet was producing his atlas, and when he collaborated with the urban sociologist and

philosopher of science Otto Neurath on graphic and scenographic projects of visual education. Among the issues they discussed was the question of the mobility of knowledge – the portable library – an issue that Leibiniz had already described as ‘Photian work’. Despite the amateurish, experimental nature of the graphics of Otlet’s atlases and his museum, he was well aware of the more professional visualizations that were being produced during his time, for example by Neurath, but also by architects, for example in the context of the third CIAM congress (1930) on architecture and urban planning, which he attended.

In this historical context, how should Otlet’s return to hermetic, cosmological visualizations of towers, globes and labyrinths be interpreted after his extensive practical work in the field of bibliography and documentation? If memory in the Renaissance was conceived to be a room in which knowledge could be recorded, stored and retrieved, then the memory theatres he had commissioned modernist architects such as Le Corbusier and Maurice Heymans to produce, pose the question of the mediation between signs (codes or ‘characteristica’) and space. In an expanding labyrinth of information and documentation, visualizations seemed to offer great



promise, as they do now, to unlock new, personalized and more powerful memory devices.

Short biography

Wouter Van Acker is senior researcher and chair of architectural theory at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) since 2016. He is coordinator of the research group on architectural history, theory and criticism, Hortence, at the Faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta at the ULB. Before he was lecturer in architectural history and theory at Griffith University (2013-2015) and postdoctoral researcher at Ghent University (2011-2012). His research focus is the history of epistemology and aesthetics in architecture in the twentieth century, and in particular the relation between changing epistemological models and aesthetic shifts in modernism and post-modernism. His PhD dissertation (Ghent University, 2011) explored these issues in the work of Paul Otlet (1868-1944), Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) and Otto Neurath (1882-1945).