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## BOOK REVIEW

**Paul Colilli, *Agamben and the Signature of Astrology. Spheres of Potentiality* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), i-xx, 214 pp. hardcover, \$85.00 (US) ISBN: 978-1-4985-0595-6**

In his latest book, Paul Colilli provides an Agambenian archeological study of astrology in Western culture. With great erudition, the author offers a commentary on classical Greco-Roman works (e.g., by Aristotle and Ptolemy), discusses some of the defining moments of Christianity (iconology, Patristics, Aquinas) and authors from the Renaissance (Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno). Colilli demonstrates exceptional expertise in Agamben's oeuvre as well as the latter's own references, including Benjamin, Foucault, and Aby Warburg. The thought-provoking journey Colilli offers to his readers sheds light on the tumultuous history of astrology. The book reminds us how, for the most part, the traditional role of astrology is forgotten in today's disenchanting world, where popular horoscopy presents only a pale version of what astrology used to be with regard to helping comprehend our distant origin and relationship with the cosmos. Astrology, writes the author, has been relegated to "cultural debris;" it has become a "specter." Colilli follows the method and certain paths initiated by Agamben in order to make sense of the vestiges of astrology and reveal its specific signature. The book is interested in both explicit astrological aspects and the implicit astrological traces present in Agamben's work. It matches these pieces like a puzzle and brings other authors and topics into the discussion in order to provide consistency to the historical complexity of astrology. Colilli pioneers a systematic and comprehensive study of the importance of astrology in Agamben's work, and by doing so he contributes to the revealing of a lesser-known aspect of Agamben's intellectual endeavor. The book is additionally valuable in that Colilli, a professor of Italian studies, comments on some of Agamben's untranslated texts, including recent books and older interviews, which have remained unknown for most of the English readers.

*Agamben and the Signature of Astrology* is divided into five chapters which explore astrology from a historico-conceptual, archeological, hermeneutical, and ontological perspective respectively, followed by the account of a new way of experiencing astrology. Chapter one, "Constellation of Unwritten Life," discusses some of Agamben's core concepts, which are unfolded further in the book, namely the notions of potentiality, signature, archeology, biopolitics, and bare life. Following Agamben's transhistorical notion of biopolitics, astrology is originally linked to an attempt at producing biopolitical bodies, which involves a certain degree of violence as it asks human life to

conform to an astral destiny. On the other side of the historical spectrum, Agamben's astrological aim consists in opening human life to its astral potentialities. The *Scholium* to the first chapter offers further details about the complex history of astrology, pointing out two of its main opponents. First, Christian theology banned "pagan" astrology in order to grant God and Christ cosmic power to control human life. Second, anti-astrological literature (exemplified by modern science and Adorno) reduced astrology to mere irrationalism. In an act of resistance, as it were, Agamben, Benjamin, and Warburg inherit a certain viewpoint from the Renaissance whereby they try to deactivate the biopower of astrology in order to reactivate the presence of celestial potentialities in human life.

In the second chapter, "Interstellar Archeology," Colilli discusses "the rational/irrational bipolarity implicit in astrology" (p. 63). There is a tension in astrology between the rational observation of the celestial bodies and a poetic art of their interpretation. In that sense, astrology speaks about the human condition, which comprises resemblances that take place in a semi-organized universe. Astrology does not merely delineate a simple causality between the celestial movements and human life, but is rather understood by Agamben and others (including Benjamin's "rational astrology") as consisting in making people aware of possible parallels between humans and the heavens. The awareness of this network of potentialities weakens the biopower of astrology as well as anti-astrological views, and might contribute to paving the way for new forms-of-life.

The succeeding chapter, "A Theory of Unwritten Texts," adds certain hermeneutical aspects to the study. The astrologist deciphers sidereal configurations to acquire the ever-unique meaning of the text of life. In order to read and write a never-read and written text, the astrologist needs not only astronomical knowledge, but also a significant dose of tact and imagination. Colilli borrows here from Agamben's theory of communication and critique of semiotics. "Agamben's philosophical program, Colilli recalls, is based on the will to deactivate specific cognito-epistemological structures" (p. 93). Astrology takes a non-Cartesian stance in favor of a symbolic way of thinking. It is an "anexact science" (to borrow the Husserlian notion), for it does not aim at grasping certainties about signifiers, but rather aims at experiencing humans' interstellar life intuitively through conjectural networks of possibilities.

In chapter four, "Spheres of Potentiality," Colilli brings Agamben's theory of potentiality a step further by linking astrology to ontology and power. More precisely, to the "dispositor" (a term Agamben borrows from the astrological tradition and uses to translate Foucault's *dispositif*), which refers to a connection between the governing planets and a power of control over the life of individuals. The more ontologically necessary this connection is, the stronger the astro-biopower becomes. The scientific age and the Renaissance found ways to "neutralize the biopowers of the constellations [and] to remove the idea of the totalizing effect of the star's influence, which appeared to the prescientific eyes in the guise of a *monstrum*" (p. 149). The introduction of the individual power of free will in the Renaissance played a key role in the neutralization of the dictatorship of astro-biopower as it made of the celestial spheres not a necessary power of control over human destiny, but the expression of potentialities between human actions, astral movements, and being itself. It also paved the way for a new cosmological understanding wherein elements

are homogeneously dispersed in the universe and where speculations over the existence of other possible worlds or planetary systems came into play.

The last chapter of the book, "Warburg's Gesture," is concerned mainly with Aby Warburg (a source of inspiration for Agamben) and Giordano Bruno. It is not surprising that Warburg and Bruno are brought together, considering that the former developed a thesis about the liberation from the astral-power in the Renaissance and the latter is a prominent actor of this liberation. *Studia humanitatis* in the Renaissance moved away from the astral tyranny in favor of the exploration of resemblances between the terrestrial and celestial worlds, which both share similar potentialities. What Warburg saw in Renaissance iconography Bruno exposed in his doctrine of the plurality of worlds, which implies a destruction of the hierarchical structure of the universe that leaves room for a continuum between the human, the animal, and the divine. Bruno does not belong to Agamben's "personal pantheon of thinkers;" nevertheless, Colilli considers Bruno an implicit inspiration in *The Open. Man and Animal* (p. 177), where Agamben suggests a new alliance between humanity and animality living in a reconciled community. Animals are not demonic and the animal configurations of the constellations are not despotic; rather, there is a continuum between the realms of the living as well as between the terrestrial and celestial worlds.

One of the central arguments of Colilli's study is that the anti-astrologist views, and the depotentiation of the stars and planets that comes with them, need to be reassessed. This *reassessment* is necessary not only because anti-astrologist views enable professionals such as medical scientists, actuaries, and economic forecasters to prognosticate (p. 197), but also because they break with one of astrology's core functions, i.e., connecting both worlds through imaginative interpretations. The disappearance of astrology would contribute to decreasing capacities to use our imagination and to narrate stories. Agamben is presented as one of the few contemporary thinkers who remain sensitive to the salutary aspects of astrology, while paying a special tribute to the deactivation of the bio-astrological power by Renaissance man.

On a critical note, the study of the relationship between modern science and astrology, which constitutes an important piece in the argumentation, might require some clarification or further analysis. On the one hand, modern science and astrology are presented as incompatible (pp. 22, 152), and on the other Warburg sees how they could merge, as modern science and mathematical calculation were helpful in redefining the practice of astrology free from astral despotism (pp. 167-168). We understand the relevance of referring to Warburg, who was both interested in astrology and one of Agamben's intellectual acolytes, but aren't there other proponents of the connection between modern science and astrology? What is there to say about genuine interest in astrology by modern scientists' such as Kepler (briefly discussed in the book) or Newton, and how does it differ from Warburg's reading of astrology?

Other authors could also have been added to the discussion: Epicurus and Lucretius, re-discovered by Bruno through his hypothesis of the plurality of worlds (chap. 5), Nicholas of Cusa and his revolutionary cosmological views exposed in *De Docta Ignorantia* (the notion of "ignorance" appears on pages 104, 181, and 186), Derrida's hauntology (pp. 124-125) and critique of Saussure (chap. 3), or even Foucault's reading of the Renaissance in *History of Madness* and, per-

haps more importantly, Deleuze, who not only shares with Agamben a deep concern for cosmological questions<sup>1</sup> but is also an important source for Agamben's discussion of Melville's *Bartleby* (p. 88), the future anterior (pp. 113-119), the event (p. 96), and possibly the notion of "potentiality," considering Deleuze's extensive treatment of *potentia*. The way Deleuze appropriates the thought of certain philosophers by making their concepts unrecognizable or even scandalous for them, is similar to Agamben's counterintuitive reference to thinkers like Foucault. It might also be worth noting that the book could be seen as being part of a series of recent studies on the relevance of the Renaissance for contemporary thinkers such as Deleuze<sup>2</sup> and Foucault<sup>3</sup>. However, rather than a limitation, the absence of these links, authors, and topics could become a research program where possible extensions of Colilli's book would be explored.

Agamben has been engaged in a continuous discussion with the work of Foucault since the mid-1990s. Although Foucault provides a significant part of the book's conceptuality (biopower, dispositive, archeology) and theories (language, freedom, subject), readers should not expect a critical discussion of Agamben's appropriation of Foucault. Colilli, rather, chose to remain faithful to Agamben<sup>4</sup>.

*Agamben and the Signature of Astrology* is an inspiring archeological work which digs deeply into the tradition of falling back on astrology; it tries to understand the crucial role astrology used to play in human life, why it fell into oblivion, and how it could still be worth commemorating (as opposed to a mere reactualization) in today's world, which is emptied of its mystery and strangeness, and where the heavens are left in the hands of naive horoscopy, dogmatic religions, and secularized/materialistic astrophysics. Colilli points out to an alternative by suggesting an original interpretation of the work of Agamben, who is sensitive to the needs of a new immanent, and yet mystical, connection with the world. "As dead as we can claim astrology to be, writes Colilli, it does continue to speak to us." (p. 125)

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<sup>1</sup> See especially: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987) and *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and Spiritual Ordeal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> <<https://ahmuf.hypotheses.org/286>>

<sup>4</sup> There is an abundant literature on the Agamben/Foucault connection. See, for instance: *Foucault Studies*, No. 10 (November 2010).