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The Art of Vision and the Ethics of the Gaze

On the Debate on Georges Didi-Huberman’s Book Images In Spite of All

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It is a tightrope walk that French art historian Georges-Didi Huberman performs in his book *Images malgré tout*[1] that appeared in 2003, moving between the politics of testimony and the philosophy of the image. Between an appeal to emotion and an appeal to reason. Between the reanimation of historic photographs and calling upon himself to act as a witness. Between memory of the Auschwitz-Birkenau annihilation and concentration camp and present-day war journalism.

The debate over the book was unleashed by the photo-historical exhibition “Mémoire des camps“, which was shown in Paris in 2001 and by a text by Didi-Hubermann on four photographs made by members of the “Sonderkommando“ in Birkenau in August 1944 – a text that was published in the exhibition catalogue.[2] The photo historian Clément Chéroux who put together the exhibition was interested in presenting to a broader audience the

history of photographic documents from the period in which the camp was in operation, the hour of its liberation to the time following this (1945-1999), while at the same time directing attention to blind spots in historical research. In this context Didi-Huberman focused in on a systematic violation of taboos which is primarily related to the interdiction of images imposed by Claude Lanzmann. The first sentence in his text can also be seen as a summary of the book that appeared two years later in response to instense controversy: “To know something you must be able to picture it yourself.“

Both in the exhibition and Didi Huberman’s catalogue text the primary goal is for photographs to be taken seriously as pieces of material evidence and as a sort of “silent witnesses“ within their given historicity and singularity. Contrary to Lanzmann’s large project “Shoah“, in which oral testimonies evoke extremely intense imagery in the imagination of the individual onlookers which can in a certain sense only be read from the eyes of the witnesses who are given a chance to speak in the film, Didi-Huberman pursues the opposite path. He tries to get silent photographs to speak. The horror that surfaces in various ways is, however, the same – it is the horror of the camps of annihilation. Lanzmann does not show this in the image, he does not use any archival picture at all, even if he returns to the places of annihilation thirty years later. The stringent criticism of Didi-Huberman’s approach resulted mainly from the fact that the art historian opposed the invisible “aura of holy horror“ (Helmut Lethen) created by Lanzmann, digging out photographs from the archives that show precisely this allegedly undepictable horror. According to Didi-Huberman these four photographs do not just provide evidence of the horror of the Nazis; they were deliberately produced in an act of political resistance to make the world aware of the scale of annihilation in

Auschwitz-Birkenau while the camp was in full operation. That these photographs from the camp ended up in the hands of Polish resistance without being subsequently disseminated does indeed also prove that that Auschwitz was never bombed by the Allies.

Unfortunately Didi-Huberman does not investigate the reasons underlying the disappearance of the photographs from the political picture. His description focuses on the moment they were taken, the reconstruction of the conditions on site - at the crematorium V in August of 1944 when the corpses were burned outdoors since the crematoriums were "overloaded" because of the mass deportations of Hungarian Jews. He also gives an in-depth analysis of two of the four photographs remaining, in which a black door frrame can be seen which was often glossed over in the history of these photographs to direct attention to what could be seen through the door (piles of corpses). According to Didi-Huberman this door frame that reveals nothing, because it only depicts the black of a dark interior, shows the inside of a gas chamber where the photographer hid from the guards so as to be able to photograph.

I believe that it was primarily this "reanimation" of the photographs kept in the museum of Auschwitz that Gérard Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux, Didi-Huberman's most acerbic critics found so disturbing.[3] To be sure, the art historian is walking a dangerously thin line between emphatic visualization of terror (from the victims' perspective) and academic reconstruction of facts that subsequently constitute the necessary textual supplement to the photograph itself in the "caption of the image". This part of the debate is known in Germany and Austria in a different constellation from the "scandal" that accompanied the first Wehrmacht exhibition: the falsely or insufficiently researched assignment of image and text. Didi-Huberman reacted to the

critique – one of which the articles bore the cynical title “Photo reporter in Auschwitz“ with a differentiated theory of the image. On reading the book *Images In spite of All*, however, it becomes clear that the French debate does not just revolve around a dispute regarding the appropriate “labeling“ of archival Shoah imagery. The issue is, rather, the ethical question regarding the approach to written, oral and finally pictorial testimonies that forms the backdrop of this debate, which could, in provocatively blatant terms, be described as the very possibility of representing Shoah. As early as in the 1980s the philosopher Sarah Kofman noted the existence of a “duty to speak, to speak unceasingly for those who cannot speak because they want to keep the true word to the uttermost, without giving it away. Speaking to bear witness, but how? How can a testimony elude the idyllic law of narration? How can one speak of the ’inconceivable’ – which quickly became inconceivable even for those who experienced it – without seeking refuge in the imaginary. And if, as Robert Antelme say, only the literary artifice can prevail over the necessary incredulity, does this not devalue the testimony, if with fiction incentive and seduction are introduced where only ’truth’ alone should speak?“[4]

In my view, this question implies a double paradox which leads to an epistemological aporia. On the one hand, there is the “will to knowledge“ that is constitutive for human beings, which finds expression in Holocaust research and the individual disciplines that seek to “process“ the event of Shoah in a scholoarly way. On the other hand, art and commemorative culture seek to “deal“ in some way with pain, suffering and horror without succumbing to all of this themselves. These attempts also ally with a psychological approach that can have overlaps with scientific methods – e.g., in psychotraumatology. They can also extend to the realm of fiction, with it remaining undecided whether poetry does not often move

closer to the truth than factual description. In order to illustratie this first paradox a first attempt can be made to establish a scientific-apathic and an artistic-emphatic gaze.

The second paradox resides in the assumption that there is both an ethical duty and a political one vis-a-vis this historical "legacy. Why this distinction? Is the political based on the ethical? What constitutes the quality of this difference? I believe that an ethical obligation to commemorate the victims does not necessary have to result in a political attitude and action. Here I understand political as action - political within the context of a nation state multi-party democracy as exists, for instance, in France and Austria. Even if Lanzmann's film "Shoah" is certainly not an unpolitical film it is not the intention of the film to evoke political action of individuals in public. Rather, Lanzmann is appealing to the ethos of mankind. By contrast, Serge Klarsfeld sought a political approach and actually analyzed the resumption of legal proceedings against the responsible figures of the Nazi and Vichy regimes not just on a juridical level but also created a monument by means of meticulous study of the memories of the French deported Jews.

Didi-Huberman tries to go a "third path" – both in a scholarly and emphatic sense, both ethically and politically. As opposed to Lanzmann the picture is not understood as a means of inner contemplation but – with Sartre – as an act that must yet be accomplished. The picture is an act – and a decision. In the case of the four photographs of the members of the "Sonderkommandos" the picture is almost the only possible act of political resistance. To bear witness – be this in written form or by means of photographic technology – thus means to act politically. It would be futile to explain that a political act is based on ethics. Still there seems to be thi thin line between ethics and politics with regard to our present approach to the past and to our way of dealing with the past in the

future. For the moment this could perhaps be illustrated again by means of a contrast –that existing between passive and active, the suffering of pathos and the intervening one of action.

The image of this double paradox would be the myth of the Medusa. There is certainly no consensus regarding the metaphor of petrification at the sight of the Gorgon head. And this not just in the debate around Didi-Huberman. For Giorgio Agamben the only real "complete witness" of Auschwitz was the *Muselmann* who was no longer able to give a testimony – banned from the realm of the living since he saw the absolute horror face to face: "That at the 'bottom' of the human being there is nothing other than an impossibility of seeing – this is the Gorgon, whose vision transforms the human being into a non-human. (...= The Gorgon and he who has seen her and the *Muselmann* and he who bears witness to him are one gaze; they are a single impossibility of seeing."[5] Already Agamben's book had triggered intense opposition in French-Jewish intellectual circles, since his theory, too, was based on a paradox. While Didi-Huberman takes Agamben's arguments serious, he does not share their final consequence: "The point is just as little to 'view the Gorgon with the eyes of its victim as Giorgio Agamben suggests with regard to the 'Muselmann' of the camps: There is indeed nothing to learn from a paralyzed, petrified gaze, from the 'absolute image' as Agamben refers to it, which paralyzes us and subjects us to the 'impossibility of seeeing'."[6]

For Didi-Huberman the only thing to be gained from the Medusa myth is that it reveals Perseus' victorious cunning – he having succeeded with the help of Medusa's reflection in his shield in decapitating the monster. To survive and to bear witness it is ncessary to apply cunning. It is above all necessary to muster the "courage to gain insight" into a numbing and/or life-threatening

reality. Didi-Huberman criticizes his contrahent Wajcman, for whom Perseus' shield functions as a reflection of horror, the mere depiction of which has a calming effect, while the "reality that cannot be depicted" remains unseen and unrepresentable "by threat of death"[7]. In his text Didi-Huberman takes issue with this dogma of non-depictability and the simplifying definition of the picture as a deceptive simulacrum. He tries to confront the iconoclastic stance with both the ethic duty and political responsibility to face the existing representations – be they photographic or written evidence/testimonies: "In spite of everything Perseus opposes Gorgone, and this *notwithstanding* – this factual possibility in spite of the theoretical impossibility – bears the name picture: The reflection and the shield are not his only protection, they are also his weapon, his cunning, his tool for decapitating the monster. The initial impotence and fatality ('it is impossible to look at the Medusa') yields to an *ethical answer* ('well then, I will counter the Medusa by viewing it *differently*')."[8]

Not because there is nothing to see in the four photographs which we did not already know, as Wajcman and Pagnoux claim in their polemic, our view must change. Didi-Huberman is cited as saying for example: "*No imagess? Change your way of looking!*" or "Change your perpsective and you will see the gas chambers!"[9]. Only that Didi Huberman has tried to show how this debate does not just revolve around the evidential logic of the Holocaust deniers and that this polemic has occasionally played into the hands of the latter. Precisely the combination of scholarly argumentation, an emphatic "art of viewing" and a politically motivated "ethics of the gaze" account for Didi-Huberman's violation of taboos. His argumentative strategy, however, becomes dubious – and here the skepticism of Didi-Huberman's seemingly naive "belief in images"[10] is also appropriate -, even if we are not just dealing

with the photographic testimonies of the *victims*, whose actions can be regarded emphatically as an act of resistance. If it was the perpetrators who violated the Nazis' interdiction of images, the possibility of empathic identification becomes problematic. Didi-Huberman seems to have been at least conscious of this schizophrenia since he quotes a written testimony by Zalmen Gradowski, a member of the "Sonderkommando" in which both positions – that of the victims and that of the perpetrators – ultimately merge: "In order to be able to bear these images at least in imagination, Gradowski concludes, 'your heart must become stone [...] your eye a camera'."[11] The necessity of complete emotional detachment that is thus expressed so clearly contradicts the ethically motivate demand for empathy. It is paradox to bear witniss from beyond the boundary of human experience. With few exceptions (that we know mainly from Claude Lanzmann's film "Shoah") the eye witnesses did not survive the Auschwitz-Birkenau "Sonderkommando".

Nonetheless the statement remain correct that it required a certain cunning to be able to bear witness to the horror. The possibility of bearing withness "in spite of all", "under the most dangerous circumstances make several photographs of their infernal work [that of the 'Sonderkommandos'; note KF], that were supposed to provide evidence of the particular horror and scale of the massacre "[12] or to even bury written testimonies under the ashes in the area around the crematories in Birkenau[13] – these testimonies were only able to "survive" thanks to the human capacity for cunning and strategy. Just as Perseus was only able to confront Medusa by means of cunning, which the Goddess Athene had advised him to show, means had to be invented where there was no other way out. In Greek mythology this cunning intelligence had a name: *Metis*. In the mythological geneology of the Greeks Metis is

both mother of Athene and Poros who, in turn, is the father of Eros.[14] In her book *Comment s'en sortir?* Sarah Kofman takes up Vernant's and Detienne's analysis of this Greek term[15] so as to describe the central meaning of cunning that is always at once a tool, a means and a strategy for finding a way out of an aporetic situation:

"It is indeed Metis, the cunning intelligence in Greek mythology that allows one to clear a *poros*, one's way, a path through obstacles, an expedient (*poros*) enabling one to find a way out (*poros*) of a hopeless, aporetic situation. Wherever uncertainty (*apeiras*) rules. The lack of a boundary and a direction, where darkness prevails, wherever one is captive, enriculed, a captive of inextricable networks it is, according to Detienne and Vernant, Metis that intervenes by devising a strategy, a means, a rescuing idea, applying a trick, cunning, machinations, *mechane* and *technai*, in order to pass from lacking boundaries to certainty, from darkness to light. [...] In this infernal, chaotic confusion *poros* designates the way out, the rescue of seafarers and navigators, the strategy pointing the way out of a cul de sac, out of *aporia* and of fear, its companion."[16]

One of these technical means that is associated with the hope of being able to escape from the infernal chaos of Auschwitz is in the situation of summer 1944 the camera. The "makeshift" used to inform the world of what happened was perhaps able to mitigate the inmates' unimaginable fear for at least a short time. Unfortunately, it was not, however, able to change anything about their hopeless situation since "the world" of the allies was not capable of seeing and hearing.

The bottom line of the French debate is that both sides did not succeed in understanding – or at least analyzing - the other side's

motives, perhaps even ulterior motives. Wajcman provides unsolicited defense of all those for whom the mere look of photographs or films that depict unimaginable atrocities is so shocking that they almost have a paralyzing effect. Even this "secondary experience" of the image is ambivalent as Susan Sontag described in 1977:

"One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the protoypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cult me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed it seems plausible to divide my life into two parts: before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I fully understood what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs – of a nevent I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying. To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them."[17]

In a short paragraph Sontag is able to articulate the structural ambivalence of photography – something for which Didi-Huberman needs more than 200 pages.

There is no guarantee for an event like the Shoah never happening again. Not as repetition but precisely in ist invisible difference that can only be perceived a posteriori. In terms of the necessary

vigilance, Didi-Huberman's intention "in spite of all "should be defended because he assumes the "enlightened" position to bear witness "in spite of all", to take a closer look without becoming unfeeling//totally insensitive. To take the singularities seriously, yet to put them into perspective. The montage of images, texts, memories, material pieces of evidence, oral history and photographic documents alone are able to trigger a process of reflection which may have the chance to remain in flux and to not closes ist eyes to the next, unpredictable event in the future and to keep the categories of perception flexible so as to make the event tangible and so that it cannot just be tackled but also changed and made avoidable.

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[1] English translation of French original *(Images malgré tout)* forthcoming. *Images in Spite of All,* University of Chicago Press, 2008.

[2] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, S. 219–242, in: Clément Chéroux (ed.), *Mémoire des camps. Photographie des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis (1933–1999)*, catalogue of the Patrimoine photographique exhibition, Paris: Marval 2001.

[3] Gérard Wajcman, „»De la croyance photographique », in: *Les Temps Modernes* (hg. v. Claude Lanzmann), N° 613, mars-mai 2001, pp. 47–83; Élisabeth Pagnoux, »Reporter photographe à Auschwitz», ibid., pp. 84–108.

[4] Sarah Kofman, *Erstickte Worte*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag 2005, p. 49. (English Translation, *Smothered Words*, forthcoming.)

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive,* transl. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books 1999, p. 5. See also the criticism of P. Mesnard and C. Kahan, *Giorgio Agamben à l'épreuve d'Auschwitz*, Paris: Kimé 2001.

[6] Didi-Huberman, op. cit., pp. 251.

[7] Wajcman, op. cit., pp. 68.

[8] Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 252.

[9] Wajcman, op. cit., pp. 49.

[10] In reference to Wajcman's title „ De la croyance photographique", op. cit., p. 47.

[11] Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 55, cited from B. Mark, *Des voix dans la nuit. La résistance juive à Auschwitz-Birkenau* [1965], French translation E. u. J. Friedman and L. Princet, Paris: Plon 1982, p. 194.

[12] Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 20.

[13] I am referring her to the "rolls of Auschwitz", manuscripts written mainly in Yiddish that were dug near the crematoriums by the "Sonderkommandos" and found after the war (cf. Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 54 and pp. 158.)

[14] Cf. Plato, The Banquet, transl. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1908)

[15] Marcel Detienne / Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La Mètis des Grecs*, Paris: Flammarion 1993.

[16] Sarah Kofman, *Comment s'en sortir?*, Paris: Galilée 1983, pp. 16 and 20 (translated by CRN).

[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books 1979, pp. 19-20.