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The Urgency of History: Symptoms, Theories and Issues

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- Judith Butler, *Rassemblement : pluralité, performativité et politique*, Paris : Fayard, 2016, (Histoire de la pensée ; série à venir)
- Dork Zabunyan, *L'Insistance des luttes : images soulèvements contre-révolutions*, Paris : De l'Incidence, 2016
- L'Art contemporain et le temps : visions de l'histoire et formes de l'expérience*, Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016, (Arts contemporains). Sous la dir. de Christophe Viart
- Le Temps suspendu*, Lyon : Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2016. Sous la dir. de Giovanni Careri, Bernhard Rüdiger
- Les Potentiels du temps : art & politique*, Paris : Manuella, 2016
- Soulèvements*, Paris : Ed. du Jeu de Paume : Gallimard, 2016. Sous la dir. de Georges Didi-Huberman

- 1 In the last few years, two major positions regarding history have started to materialise more and more clearly. The spectre of “the end of history” has come back to haunt us. This time, it no longer rejoices at having buried communism and helped the world enter the “satisfaction” of parliamentary democracy and free trade. Transposed on a geological scale, the “end of history” has become dismal and inorganic, like the people and landscapes depicted in some of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novels. Considered by many theoreticians and artists through the prism of algorithms and the Anthropocene, humans seem sucked up by the past, their Luciferian creations have taken control of their bodies, their time and their houses.¹The other attitude towards history started taking form after the “Arab Springs”, the occupation of public squares in Turkey and Ukraine and, of course, the financial crisis that has been affecting the world since 2008: not only has

humanity not entered the impassibility of Kojevian “satisfaction”, the conflicts and actions which make up the very matter of history have intensified and propagated at lighting speed. Women and men are no longer ejected by their own fetishes, on the contrary: they are collectively and anonymously taking possession of public space, confiscated either by authoritarian power, formal democracy or financial devices. These two positions, of course, are not separate but often intersect, sharing many intellectual references and critical tools.

- 2 In all the books discussed in this article, history is ongoing and more open than ever to temporal problems. In his groundbreaking study of the historicity of modernity, Reinhart Koselleck highlighted the fact that couching history in time was one of its distinguishing features, describing it as a dispossession of experience.² Things are different for these books, however: the temporal subjectification of history gives it a complexity and a plasticity that are indispensable for theorising and reactivating the distant and recent past. But this subjectification can also take on questionable forms, for instance when it reduces the very concept of history, or at any rate a specific historical period, to a linear and punctual narrative that our emancipated times could not possibly tolerate. The melancholia of the end of history becomes thus a triumphalist mania. But between these two poles, there is still a wide expanse.
- 3 Judith Butler’s analysis in *Rassemblement* (published in English under the title *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*) is meticulous, gradual and slow. Starting with the political upheavals of recent history, she attempts to apprehend the “political” in close dialogue with Hannah Arendt, particularly on the matter of the “space of appearance”.³ However, although she adheres to Arendt’s idea that freedom is not the substantial property of an autonomous subject but can only happen *between* equal persons, Butler contests, in the wake of others, two points of Arendt’s logic. Firstly, her aristocratic contempt for anything that has to do with matter or work; secondly — and both are directly connected — the privilege she grants the spoken and written word as means of political action, to the detriment of the performativity of bodies. Hannah Arendt relegated the needs and desires of the body to the private sphere (as if the ancient city was an unsurpassable example). But Judith Butler demonstrates that all ethical demands have to do, above everything else, with the body: gender, work and non-work, illness and strength; all these situations are at once corporeal and ethical, because humans are members of society. This co-relativity between body and ethics, as well as between private and public, is the foundation from which injustice is at once exercised and fought.
- 4 So it is no surprise that Judith Butler is one of the authors Georges Didi-Huberman asked to contribute to the catalogue of his exhibition, *Soulèvements*. One of their shared theories is their interest in the ways in which bodies *perform* the political. In the wake of his research on the *pathos* of forms and the ways in which they affect history (past, present and future), Georges Didi-Huberman examines all the gestures that *perform* “uprising”. The exhibition reveals a narrativization that brings together often fascinating and infinitely varied pictures. This narrativization is also used in the catalogue. It is simple and succinct, as if to evoke an “ideal-typical” revolt, or rather, in compliance with Didi-Huberman’s Warburgian preference, a “pathos formula”. “Uprising” is developed here along human and natural lines. Imagination and desire operate in human societies in the same way the natural laws stir up storms in nature. But the analogy between history and nature also involves one of the main methods of narrativization, a continual shift – from affect to gesture, from gesture to word, and from word to upheaval in public space, where

the exalted and painful division between victors and vanquished takes place. As Georges Didi-Huberman is one of those who contributed the most to reviving Walter Benjamin's theory on the "vanquished" of history, his narrative is potentially repeated ad infinitum, as long as there are people to remember and rise up. In this narrative, anything is likely to be turned into a metaphor: bodies, objects and natural formations. These associations transform each object into a stitch in the huge fabric that lies over reality. In this case, the allegorising gaze does not see skulls in nature, as in Walter Benjamin's theory of the baroque tragic drama; but revolts. It is a totalisation that has become uncontrollable, like a natural force that cannot dwell on the singularity of every object. All hands that rise to throw stones are dealt with in the same way. But are all uprisings "just"? And what are the distinctive features of the diversity of history in pictures? Is this generalised equivalency not in fact a naturalisation of these objects, threatening to remove them from history? As Jacques Rancière suggests in the only dissenting essay: "The old case of passivity versus activity cannot be settled so easily. One needs to know who must rise up and to what ends." (p. 64) The inherent immediacy contained in the "pathetic formula", that goes from affect to gesture and back again, is shattered in artworks like *Battleship Potemkin*, where, Rancière remarks, the people do not move from tears to weapons, but "become a dressed-up crowd of onlookers, welcoming the battleship on the steps."⁴

- 5 Dork Zabunyan produced an outstanding analysis of the intervals within and between images. His book, *L'Insistance des luttes* could be described as a study of the "intra-thin" of human history. Like Georges Didi-Huberman, he firmly believes in the performativity of images and its persistence in history. Dork Zabunyan undertakes a semiotic, formal, ethical and political mapping of uprisings, based on the fact that never before have some many revolts been recorded. A number of questions arise, on the way in which animated images have been produced and broadcasted by the instigators of political revolts; on the differences between these vernacular images and movies by very different filmmakers, like Brian de Palma's work for Hollywood and the independent filmmaker Stefano Savona; on the equivalence – or absence thereof – between documentary and fiction in relation to these events; on the broadcasting rights of images of the Syrian disaster, a question at the heart of works by the Syrian collective Abounaddara; lastly, on what the difference is between the filming and broadcasting of revolts and of the horrors committed by Isis, a horror that is not exhausted by the few films that the Western media recycle, but also by those that represent images of daily life. *L'Insistance des luttes* is at once fragmented and coherent, engaged and cold, and very enlightening when it comes to the change of regime for political images, thus helping the reader conceptualise the political situation of the times. The book questions the "rebel details" ("*détails rebelles*", p.14) of some images, the only ones that are able to rescue gestures from fetishisation and events from derealisation. By understanding the infinite diversity of history, it cancels its limited nature. This is not the first time in modern history that resources for the future are sought for in a non-reified past. The past's "potential" found favour with many artists and philosophers who were fighting historicism and formal automatisms between the 1910s and the 1940s. From Ernst Bloch to Picasso, from Gustav Landauer to Expressionists of all persuasions, all opposed the dismal accumulation of time, defending the idea that the past needed to be carried out, not copied. In the meanwhile, however, modernist literature has obliterated this complex and multi-layered temporal experiment. Starting with Clement Greenberg and Theodor W. Adorno in the 1940s, a new image of the Avant-gardes, who were now the past, was being shaped, where only autonomy, *tabula rasa*, straight lines and ends – the end of painting and of art itself – were remembered. This

manipulated reading of the past was also connected to necessities in the present. By adapting it in their book *Les Potentiels du temps : art et politique*, Camille de Toledo, Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quirós can differentiate the gesture that “rereads” [*relit*] and “connects” [*relie*] from the Avant-garde gesture that “cuts” [*coupe*] (as if “cutting” was a primary gesture, that had no history either). But they need to find more evidence to explain how our times must reclaim hope. This book is dedicated to the noble cause of fighting the *presentist* melancholia (a Dadaist Avant-garde expression!), by trying to conceptualise a time that is open to all directions and all realms. Anonymous people, ghosts, and the vanquished are proclaimed the subjects of the history to come, but the three authors refuse to speak in their name, taking up the humble role of “translators”. As such, de Toledo sees melting ice caps as an “utterance”: “A story, a narrative, a language through which glaciers can access articulation in order to assert themselves as a distressed community” (p. 29). And indeed, the relationship between humankind and nature is, to a great extent, transmitted through metaphor: this is necessary precisely because they are dissimilar. As demonstrated by Hans Blumenberg, metaphorization is a way of knowing the world. But problems start to arise when the metaphor emancipates itself and fills in the gaps of thought and reality. Can one maintain that “there are no failures in the potential regime, no disillusion”? Or that there is only “reiterated assertions of possibilities from which one can redefine hope not only as expectation, but also as a permanent hypothesis” (p. 46)? The only ghosts that exist are those of *truly* dead human beings, and of people who are anonymous only because history has erased their name. The translator’s “potential” may well emancipate itself from the original text, condemning it to a deafening silence.

- 6 The two last books that make up this collection bring several authors together and are both connected to the relationship between art and time. The essays in *L'Art contemporain et le temps* display very different points of view all aiming for a common goal: forcing time to “come unhinged” (Jacques Derrida). A few of the themes addressed in these texts are long durations in their convergence with contemporaneity; George Kubler’s prime objects and series, which haunted minimalism; iconic transhistoricity as mediating finitude. But these variations on the temporalization of history reach their limits in the essay by Jean-Pierre Cometti, who declares the “divorce between art and history”. It is not avant-garde alone which is fossilised in this process, it is (art) history as a whole. Declaring history as synonymous with teleology and autonomy, he celebrates its end and its replacement by “experience”, that some avant-gardes that he regards as heretical, such as Dada and Duchamp, could have made possible for posterity. In contrast to this history, Cometti defends the idea of an “experience” – still understood as art – which is diffuse, random, horizontal, oral, ephemeral and related to every-day life. This interpretation is highly questionable, and not only for an art *historian*: the antinomy it draws between history and experience does not acknowledge the infinite number of perfectly contradictory and truly unclassifiable cases (Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, Kasimir Malevitch, etc) who, for this very reason, could fertilise the “experiences” of the future. Another one of the formal processes of the avant-gardes, montage, was chosen by the group of researchers that co-wrote *Le temps suspendu*. In *Héritage de ce temps* [*Legacy of the Times*, 1935], Ernst Bloch precisely chose montage as one of the objects that his day was passing down to the future and that would be able to turn fascist fictions inside out, against themselves. In some ways, the authors of *Le Temps suspendu* reclaim this legacy. Their vivacious and thorough interpretation of images, from Gerhard Richter to Malevitch, from Gustave Courbet to Max Ernst, integrate them into totalities that “make them work”. Their position does not

claim to offer a definitive or an exclusive choice of confronting images, rather they show theoretical systems that are able to say something about history and the way in which art thinks of history. There was a time when one had to fight for images to be accepted, along with texts, as historical documents and as theoretical constructions, just like theory itself. Those times shaped many reflexes, including the phrase “images think”. Nowadays, when the battle of images is, to a large extent, won, or even turned on its head at the detriment of text, it is perhaps no longer necessary to give images a soul. Rather, one should accept the theory according to which we are the ones to edit them, and that our edited montages are infinitely variable, not definitive.

NOTES

1. The most striking example is the ex-Subaltern Studies historian Dipesh Chakrabarty: « The Climate of History. Four Theses », *Critical Inquiry*, n° 35, Winter 2009, p. 197-222 ; « Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change », *New Literary History*, vol. 43, n° 1, Winter 2012, p. 1-18 ; « Humanities in the Anthropocene : the Crisis of an Enduring Kantian Fable », *New Literary History*, vol. 47, n° 2 & 3, Spring/Summer 2016, p. 377-397. See also the global success of Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Harvill Secker, 2014 ; Id., *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Harvill Secker, 2016.
2. Koselleck, Reinhart. *Le Futur passé: contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques*, trad. Jochen Hoock, Marie-Claire Hoock, Paris : Ed. de l'EHESS, 1990
3. Arendt, Hannah. *Condition de l'homme moderne*, Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1961 ; Id., *La Crise de la Culture*, Paris : Gallimard, 1972
4. Rancière, Jacques. « Un Soulèvement peut en cacher un autre », *Soulèvements*, Paris : Editions du Jeu de Paume : Gallimard, 2016, p. 65 (ed. by Georges Didi-Huberman)