Looking at Things: a Primer

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REFERENCES

Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Quand les images prennent position : l'œil de l'histoire, 1*, Paris : Ed. de Minuit, 2009, (Paradoxe)

- 1 Georges Didi-Huberman here questions the role of montage in the poetics of Bertolt Brecht, and thus reasserts Walter Benjamin's influence on his works. Montage is at once a central issue in Benjamin and the foundation of Brecht's epic theatre—Benjamin enjoyed a Marxism-inspired literary and political friendship with Brecht. Didi-Huberman elects to focus on one of Brecht's late works: *L'ABC de la guerre (Kriegsfiebel)*, published in part in 1955, and *in toto* in 1985. In it, on a black background, Brecht arranges an epigram and a picture cut out of newspapers of the day—during the Second World War and the writer's exile in northern Europe—, Quatrain, whose prosody never strays below the ten-line poem, and where the length of the phrasing makes it possible to make use of “the funereal awareness of political evil” (p. 50). Once again, the book is outstandingly written. We might say, like Sigmund Freud elsewhere, that it reads like a novel. It also includes sound archival work: Didi-Huberman documents the ABC with the help of the *Journal de travail* to question the reason for being epistemo-critical of this project.
- 2 In a 1997 essay, the German writer W.G. Sebald, an assiduous reader of Benjamin, noted that books trying to offer concrete evidence of the actual experience of the war have often suffered from major publishing delays¹. Among these works we can include the *Kriegsfiebel*, the temporary ban on which might be the symptom of a collective repression. Result: no mourning, no handing on of experience, and a history that can only be a “history of sufferings”. Otherwise put, “anyone who wants to forget the past will not be able to dodge it”. This idea, for which we are indebted to the photographer Ruth Berlau who would participate in the illustrative research for Brecht's ABC, sums

up the challenges of compiling photo-epigrams. This latter might also be the opening gambit for Benjamin's "The Angel of History". To get over the trauma and sidestep the ideologies formulated on the basis of a reconstruction of memory, we must approach this latter in the raw state, and have recourse to the traces. On this point, Benjamin's statement about Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, in 1930, is a choice argument: "Real montage starts from the document". This assertion actually seems to have acted as a late-in-life guide, as if by way of an apt return of inspiration with his tragically deceased friend, for Brecht's task of composing the *Kriegsfiabel*.

- 3 The document makes traces, the document is vocal. Montage exercises a collective arrangement of statements: "The literary machine thus takes up the slack of a revolutionary machine in the making, not at all for ideological reasons, but because it alone is determined to fulfil the conditions of a collective statement which are missing everywhere else: *Literature is the business of the people.*"² Faced with total destruction, there is a greater need than ever for a "politics of literature"³, which is not, strictly speaking, a committed literature but an art of writing: because only the work which also functions literarily can function politically. This is what Benjamin says about the montage method in Brecht, emphasizing the principle of "sequence interruption" which makes it possible to suspend the action and produce an effect of distancing whose "educational function" consists in immobilizing the action under way: and "thereby obliging the person listening to *take up a position* in relation to the process."⁴
- 4 If, in certain moments in Brecht's *œuvre*, ideology holds sway over education, this is not so in *L'ABC*. As is shown by the distinction developed by Didi-Huberman between *taking sides* and *taking a position*, Brecht finds here the concerns of a philosophy of history dear to Benjamin, adopting a critical stance towards Marxism: "By what path is it possible to associate an increased visibility with the application of the Marxist method? The first step on this path will consist in borrowing from history the principle of montage. Otherwise put, building great constructions from very small elements put together with precision and clarity. It will even consist in discovering the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the special little moment."⁵ Ernst Bloch was the first to recognize in Benjamin and Brecht this montage method, and hail the effective way it gives visibility to "the conflicts, paradoxes and mutual shocks of which all history is made" (p. 129). In his eyes, montage is a paradigm of modernity, a point with which Didi-Huberman agrees to differ, observing that this term describes "any philosophical way of restaging history", not chronologically but by association of anachronies and heterochronies (p. 130). We shall however not forget that montage is also a metaphor which is apt for modernity.
- 5 So here we are in the eye of a history-hurricane, history of wars, and destruction, in a place of relative stability from which an exercise in representation is, *in spite of everything*, possible. We work at "a politics of the imagination that is anything but an illustrated politics or a decision using images to better communicate the buzzwords of its doctrine" (p. 255). So the role of images in a memory of disaster proceeds by way of an apprenticeship in seeing.

NOTES

1. Sebald, W.G. *De la destruction comme élément de l'histoire naturelle* (1999), Arles : Actes Sud, 2007
2. Deleuze, Gilles. *Kafka : pour une littérature mineure*, Paris : Minuit, 1975, pp. 32-34
3. Rancière, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature*, Paris : Galilée, 2007, pp. 11-12
4. Benjamin, Walter. *Essais sur Brecht*, Paris : La Fabrique, 2003, p. 123
5. Benjamin, Walter. *Paris : capitale du XIXe siècle*, Paris : Cerf, 2000, p. 488-489