

## Reading Georges Didi-Huberman's *Devant Le Temps*: History, Memory and Montage

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### Abstract

*This article focuses on the critical and explanatory analysis of Georges Didi-Huberman's *Devant le Temps* (2000), here considered as a pivotal work of his extensive oeuvre. *Devant le Temps* extends some of the most important aspects explored a decade earlier, in *Devant L'Image* (1990), establishing numerous contact points with some of Didi-Huberman's later works, namely those dedicated to Aby Warburg and the subject of the atlas in the history of art. Through the interweaving of these different moments, we seek to analyse some of the concepts governing the theory of art history and of aesthetics developed by Didi-Huberman, stressing some key concepts such as image, time, memory, anachronism and symptom. That way, we will also communicate with several important authors who directly, or indirectly, influenced the practice of the history of art advanced by Georges Didi-Huberman.*

**Keywords:** Georges Didi-Huberman, Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg, Carl Einstein, art history, time, image.

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### Grasping the image of historical time

To confront the image implies the confrontation with time. Because it is in the image that time unfolds itself, comprising different intensities, rhythms and durations. The image acquires, more exactly, the density of a complex and condensed temporal tissue, susceptible to link the present and different levels of the past. But what kind of time is this, involving malleability, fractures, rhythms and counter-rhythms? Didi-Huberman begins by addressing the intensity of gaze's experience, which goes along with the experience of desire, surprise, endurance and thought, associated to the reception of the work of art. An experience in which the present does not cease to reconfigure itself, as the present is only thinkable, in the image, through the operation of memory. But to stop in front of the image and to make ourselves available to its figural mystery and temporal complexity, also implies rethinking the historicity of the work; that is, implies to rethink the historical layers that are likely to resurface, for example, through the attention given to a detail that went previously unnoticed.

This question is essentially epistemological, being related (in a clear approach to Michel Foucault's methodology) with the requirement of a critical archaeology of art history that rejects

the positivist and iconological models of the discipline. From Winckelmann and Hegel to Panofsky, these are the models by which the objects would be offered to the historian in an exact focal point, enabling the perfect analysis of the epochal past, as well as the correct understanding of historically pure categories, conventionally regarded as *proper* to the study of a certain period.

In Didi-Huberman, the model of critical archaeology proves to be definitely incompatible with the ideal of an art history that rests on the stability of positivism and on the agreement of the chronological time. And this is due to the fact that the «image of time» is a historically complex and impure tissue of durations and genealogies, in sum, «un extraordinaire montage de temps hétérogènes formant anachronisms».<sup>1</sup> We must replace, therefore, the horizontal nature of the evolutionary history by the vertical nature of time, paradigmatically associated with the processes of memory.

It is this montage of different times, this thoughtless and this damn part of history, founded in the anachronism, that will compete to over-determining the work of art; over-

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<sup>1</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Devant le Temps : Histoire de L'Art et Anachronisme des Images*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000, pp. 16.

determination in the sense that the work of art is inserted into a network of mnemonic relationships, causing a particular visual form, a concept, or a thought, to be resumed centuries ahead, thus acquiring the configuration of survival and transformation. It is this aspect that, moreover, provides a framework to the last chapter of the book, in which Didi-Huberman, focusing on the case study of Barnett Newman's abstract painting, analyses how the American artist reclaims an ensemble of apparently archaic categories, related to the features of ecstasy, desire and terror of the aesthetic experience, to express the core of his artistic practice.

Nevertheless, the fecundity of the anachronism is, at the outset, put into practice by the French author through a fairly direct formula, in a case of pseudomorphism (intentionally used as a mineralogical metaphor) already evidenced by Didi-Huberman in previous texts, namely in *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (1990). In Fra Angelico's *Holy Conversation (Madonna of the Shadows)*, performed about 1438-50, the fresco's intersecting surfaces –surprisingly speckled by a kind of firework of small patches and erratic strokes–, trigger a kind of displaced similarity with the drippings of Pollock's abstract expressionism. The paroxysm of the anachronism refers, precisely, to the apprehension of a heterogeneous time necessary to understand the condition of a past that, however, could not be fixed in the past: it is a *more-than-past*. Furthermore, to access the multiplicity of a stratified time, made of survivals and durations that are more-than-past, it is also necessary that the present can emerge as a *more-than-present*, inscribing an act of shock and reminiscence. Thus, the past has to do with a mechanism that is inscribed within memory itself, involving an impure and discontinuous assembly of differential elements. According to Didi-Huberman :

Ce temps qui n'est pas *exactement le passé* a un nom : c'est la *mémoire*. C'est elle qui décante le passé de son exactitude. C'est elle qui humanise et configure le temps, entrelace ses fibres, assume ses transmissions, le vouant à une essentielle impureté. C'est la mémoire que l'historien

convoque et interroge, non *exactement le passé*.<sup>2</sup>

The methodological issue is, henceforth, related with a differential time composed by dissimilar levels and durations. It is this heuristic feature of the anachronism that allows that portion of Fra Angelico's fresco to be discovered *via* Pollock; such as, in Barnett Newman, it becomes possible to reinvent and reconceptualise the phenomenological experience of the work of art. Both encompass a kind of rhythmic heartbeat of time itself, varying between the present and the past, between the emphatic proximity and the critical setback. In sum, it is this operation that, according to Didi-Huberman, forms the act of historical thinking.

It is not by chance that Didi-Huberman, in the introductory notes of *Devant le Temps*, pays a special tribute to Gilles Deleuze's concept of the time-image, developed in the second volume of his notable work on the philosophy of cinema, *Cinéma 2: L'Image Temps*. According to Deleuze, in the work of some modern directors, the cinematographic image reveals the capacity of making time visible, being experienced not as a figuration of the real, but rather as a Figure concerning what is not visible and, ultimately, what could only be grasped through the creative act of thought. Contrary to the category of the movement-image, in which the previous take is horizontally combined with the next take, the time-image concerns the discontinuous montage of takes, intentionally stressing the gaps and the intervals that are materialized in the screen, but in such a way that its phenomenological limits are radically surpassed. That is why, at a certain point, Georges Didi-Huberman compares the act of historical knowledge to the abnormal projection of a discontinuous film in which we could identify each of its frames and interstitial zones.

What is at stake in Didi-Huberman's account on Deleuze's theory of the cinematographic image is the refuse of historicism and the claim of a vertical historiography that goes towards the act of thought. A creative act of thought susceptible to collapse the evolutionary model of historicity, henceforth replaced by the affirmation of the tensions between the past and the future. In order for real historical knowledge to be produced, the empathic and affective engagement with the image implies what

<sup>2</sup>Ibidem, pp. 37.

Hayden White, following Michel De Certeau's considerations, named as the «domain of possible or imaginable».<sup>3</sup> White notes that, according to De Certeau, the other of history is fiction, a real that can only be symbolized and never represented. Negating it, history refuses the possible as that which falls out the constraints of what can be classified and compartmentalised, it refuses to think the past as being both real and imagined, virtual and actual, latent and manifest.

This is how the concept of symptom, later examined in its philosophical and psychological implications, acquires, in Georges Didi-Huberman, a particular interest, since it denotes a specific type of appearance that disrupts the normal course of things, escaping the trivial and rational observation. According to Didi-Huberman, it is necessary to understand that in the same historical object several times interact through collisions, tensions and multiple forks. The symptom will refer, fundamentally, to the conjunction of two heterogeneous durations: on the one hand, one must consider the *appearance*, or the sudden opening of the work; and, on the other hand, the latency, or the inscription of time itself, as duration, and survival. Moreover, if the image, considered in this temporal complexity, suspends representation, forcing us to think an unconscious of the representational process, in the same way, the symptom, - which corresponds to the sudden emergence of an anomalous detail that causes the disruption of a homogeneous tissue, - will suspend the chronological course of history, forcing us to conceive of the existence of a historical unconscious. This is a notion that Didi-Huberman preserves in its psychoanalytical implications, since, as noted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *L'Image Survivante*, the psychic symptom refers to the idea of an ancient and fossilized energy that bursts at a given moment of the present, by disconnecting itself from its original location and crossing the energetic trace of the past with the expressive gesture in which it is imprinted,<sup>4</sup> thus involving a reciprocity between consciousness and the unconscious, iconographic gesture and emotional charge.

Nevertheless, if these reflections are partially found in previous works, such as in *Devant L'Image* (1990), the fact is that the demands regarding anachronism and time assemblages could not, as noted by the author, be limited neither to the Freudian formulations, nor to the analysis of an isolated case study.

This is why Didi-Huberman examines, in *Devant le Temps*, three crucial authors, for whom art history emerges as a category decisively animated by the symptomatic image and the anachronism: Aby Warburg, founder of a historical anthropology of the image; Walter Benjamin and the dialectics of the image; Carl Einstein and the formulation of new historical objects and the role of creative processes of writing. We are facing three German authors of the first three decades of the twentieth century. All of them anachronistic thinkers who loomed the image as a vital, new and highly complex issue, and whose theories, without forming a movement consciously initiated, do communicate, however, with the various disciplines that, in common, pose problems concerning image, time and history. Not by chance, the bottom line in Didi-Huberman's overall work concerns this broader relationship between history, time and image, in an attempt to find out the consequences of that relation in the way of thinking and doing art history.

### Memory and the montage of history

A critical history of art is, as argued by Didi-Huberman, a history of art attentive to its multiple *origins*, bearing in mind the fractures of aesthetic doctrines and the cracks of both representational and temporal tissues.

In this sense, the author is already drawing a first lesson from the epistemic-critical view of history of Walter Benjamin, concerning the fact that the concept of origin does not refer to a *source* from which we could draw a precise and unambiguous genesis of the event. The origin is not given to knowledge as a factual and univocal existence, rather manifesting itself in a *whirlwind* that comprises, on the one hand, the recognition of restitution, or restoration of the past; and, on the other hand, the existence of something that, in itself, is always unfinished, therefore requiring a critical and future construction:

Une histoire de l'art capable d'inventer - au double sens du verbe, imaginatif et archéologique - de nouveaux objets

<sup>3</sup>WHITE, Hayden, "Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality", in *Rethinking History*, Vol.9, No2/3, 2005, pp.147.

<sup>4</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Idem*, pp.79-80.

originaires sera donc une histoire de l'art capable de créer des tourbillons, des fractures, des déchirures dans le savoir même qu'elles se donne pour tâche de produire. Nommons cela une capacité à créer de nouveaux seuils théoriques dans la discipline.<sup>5</sup>

From this point of view, if the image is placed, in authors such as Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg, in the centre of the historical life, it is because the image is the only instance capable of inscribing a double temporality, a temporality à *double face*, which, on the side of Warburg, is captured through the concept of *polarity*, as in Benjamin is mainly considered through the concept of *dialectical image*. Hence, one of the most important aspects, involving the connection made by Didi-Huberman between these two thinkers, concerns the establishment of a true *anthropology of images* able to address modalities that overflow the very art object, demanding, for such, the opening of art history to new forms of temporality.

It is here, we believe, that Didi-Huberman advances towards an original image theory, as these new forms of temporality are based on the assumption that an image is something very complex, something likely to register (*empreinte*) not only forms and contents, but, essentially, an historical and mnesic substrate: a substrate that is not lost, and that, on the contrary, will intensify and transform itself over time, comprising different levels of actualization that take place in the image. The image thus acquires a genealogical and even archaeological condition. And if, as in Warburg, the image inscribes a topology of conflict, regarding a trans-historical polarization of elements that are essential to comprehend the history of Western civilizations (the obscure and the rational, the profane and the sacred, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, etc.), it will be through the immediateness and the astonishing presentness of the image that the past erupts, acquiring the potentiality of its prophetic accomplishment.<sup>6</sup>

But what is the mechanism that, after all, is able to give account of this dialectical present, a present related with non-chronological forms of temporality, as indicated by Didi-Huberman? What model of time is able to get out of the

positivist model of evolution as progress? Again, the available response is only one: this model of time is memory itself. Memory links to the immediateness of the images, which, simultaneously, can be captured from multiple sources and contexts, obeying to metonymical and metaphorical processes, as may be seen in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* and in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.<sup>7</sup>

As Didi-Huberman detected, the Copernican revolution in art history, claimed by Walter Benjamin as a requirement, consists, precisely, in the passage that leads us from a conception of the past as an *objective fact*, to a conception that takes the past as a *fact of memory*. More exactly, as an event that is both psychic and material, being endowed with constant motion and susceptible to be built, assembled, and, to some extent, *fictionalized* by the ensemble of the historian's knowledge and skills.

In sum, it is this dynamic principle of memory – of which the historian is the interpreter and the dreamer – that inscribes (and following the tradition of authors such as Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson) an *unconscious of time*. Nonetheless, this unconscious is not immaterial; it rather comes to us through the materiality of traces, pointing to the residual nature of history, as well as to a certain idea of micrology that reverses the historical idealism. History, therefore, moves towards the impurity of debris, claiming the importance of the details and the minuteness that is brought up through the perforation of the representative surface.

For this reason, the Benjaminian demand translates, according to Didi-Huberman, the existence of an archaeological knowledge of two types. A material archaeology, in which the historian is a collector of useless and unnoticed objects, concerning, as in *Le Livre des Passages (The Arcades Project)*, the activity of the chronicler whose narrations go across different territories, from the most banal and insignificant *faits divers*, to the most worthy and major events; and, secondly, a psychic archaeology, directly related to the processes of memory. Material objects are not stable anchors of memory though. Objects do not remain constant each time we approach them, rather comprising sensorial and evocative aspects linked to

<sup>5</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Idem* pp. 83.

<sup>6</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *L'Image Survivante : Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002.

<sup>7</sup>JOHNSON, Christopher D, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012, pp. 4.

interpretation and subjective responses. In Didi-Huberman, memory is therefore regarded as a deflagration of buried forces, ghosts, dreams and symptoms - intensities that, nevertheless, are also engaged in the vital exercise of things, ultimately considered in their sensorial and sensual threads. The objects and materials that cross the time do not belong to a vanished past: they are actualised through inexhaustible receptacles of memories and survivals, being repeated in their own interiorized difference.

It is here that, in due course, Didi-Huberman locates the effectiveness of the past in Walter Benjamin's perspective on history. As stated by Walter Benjamin, at the level of historical knowledge, it is not a question of the past being illuminated by the present, or otherwise, but to perceive the tension between differential times, formed in a constellation of multiple sources and durations.

As a matter of fact, the hieroglyphic dimension of Aby Warburg's project, *Atlas Mnemosyne*, developed from 1924 to 1929, almost seems to be a visual realization of Benjamin's theoretical formulation. By articulating heterogeneous reproductions of objects belonging to the art history and the Western culture, Warburg disrupts, - as analysed by Didi-Huberman in the books devoted to the subject, especially in *L'Image Survivante* - the idea of a one-way influence between the present and the past, in favour of multidirectional and unstable trajectories between images, artefacts and ideas. Each panel of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, thus, acquires the sense of a properly cinematic composition, here understood as a process involving the continuous collision and merging of perceptions, ideas and sensations, therefore susceptible to visually reveal the discontinuity of time.<sup>8</sup>

In the thesis of Aby Warburg, the fundamental movements of life and desire are embodied and preserved by means of primitive formulas existing in the images of Antiquity, encompassing the ability to influence the movement of the present itself. This is how Didi-Huberman could consider that, in Aby Warburg, everything that happens in the body and in the morphology of the images depends on "a certain

assembly of time".<sup>9</sup> It is a relationship driven by the heterogeneous assembly of coexisting times, being this aspect that, according to Didi-Huberman, constitutes the ultimate ambition of the Warburgian's concept of *Nachleben*, or afterlife. The *Nachleben* is therefore inseparable from a genealogical principle by which the uniqueness of each event occurs on a backdrop of permanence, related to experiences of mankind that endure and are reactivated in a differential time, since it necessarily involves the reciprocity between an earlier time and a later time. It is precisely this temporal and cognitive complexity that differentiates the notion of atlas from the archive, as explored in detail by Didi-Huberman in his essay *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back*.

The concept of survival, or *Nachleben* (afterlife), first developed by Aby Warburg, also acquires for Walter Benjamin the status of the *foundation* of history, offering clues about the life and the after-life of the artistic object. According to Walter Benjamin:

La compréhension historique doit être conçue fondamentalement comme une survie de ce qui est compris, et il faut considérer, par conséquent, ce qui est apparu dans l'analyse de la survie des oeuvres (...) comme le fondement de l'histoire en général.<sup>10</sup>

If, in Aby Warburg, the *Nachleben* points to the processes involving historical renaissances, fundamentally regarded as an erratic memory of images, in Walter Benjamin, the *Nachleben* is related both to the materiality of the past (its traces and vestiges) and the opening of time itself, encompassing the object in an extensive and *auratic* constellation:

Le fait, pour une chose, d'être passé ne signifie pas seulement qu'elle est loin de nous dans le temps. Elle demeure lointaine, certes, mais son éloignement même peut surgir au plus près de nous - c'est, selon Benjamin, le phénomène auratique par

<sup>8</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *L'Image Survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002, p.474; DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back* [exh.cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofia, 2010, pp. 23-25.

<sup>9</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *L'Image Survivante : Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002, pp. 224.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Benjamin in DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Devant le Temps : Histoire de L'Art et Anachronisme des Images*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000, pp. 477.

excellence, - tel un fantôme non rachète, tel un revenant.<sup>11</sup>

The psychic archaeology, - which Didi-Huberman already encountered in Aby Warburg, - therefore implies the consideration of a cryptic and unconscious memory, consubstantiating, as in the Freudian principle of excavation of the unconscious, a dialectical conception of memory itself. As Didi-Huberman argues, it was already a matter of conceiving of, in Benjamin's theory, a phenomenology concerning memory as a process: a memory that surpasses the subjective capacity of recollecting data, rather including the discontinuities, the lapses and the failures that constitute the very process of remembering. Memory therefore escapes the control by the rational subject, moving towards the uncertainty and potentiality of the oblivion. We must consider, therefore, a dialectic movement between the conscious and the unconscious, between dream and rationality, remembrance and oblivion.

It is precisely this kind of tension that, according to Didi-Huberman, informs Walter Benjamin's definition of what an *image* is. The authentic image is a dialectical instance, that is, an effulgent visual instance characterized by a double temporality, comprising the immediate actuality of the present and the simultaneous opening of time in multiple directions. The image is not imitation nor limitation, but rather the *interval* made visible between heterogeneous spaces and times: that is why, according to Aby Warburg, the only interesting iconology is the iconology of the interval.

Reassembling history itself implies that we move towards the intervals, the bifurcations and the discontinuities of memory as an operation of thought and imagination. The process of assembly, or montage, implies, therefore, the prior dismantling of what is built, and the structural and mnesic reassemble of elements, stressing uncertainty (the *not knowing*) as the heuristic object par excellence of the historical act. Here, we encounter not only the Benjaminian conception concerning the destructive force of history, capable of apprehending senses that are outside the institutionalized narratives of power, but also the Foucauldian conception of a genealogical history that summons up history as a radical and

transgressive act of thought, producing discontinuities and multiplications: we remember that, for Foucault, «knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting».<sup>12</sup> Foucault articulated a notion of *counter-memory* and *counter-history* in order to criticize the disciplinary power of historiography, referring alternatively to memories and historical narrations that challenge dominant discourses. In sum, historical and memorial practices can emerge as places of contestation that question the univocal and institutionalized versions of the past. Consequently, these aspects contribute to the reversal of the disciplined speech of the historian, giving rise to an inventive language that tends to the affirmation of an increasingly *poetic* and *political* dimension of historical knowledge.

### Writing history

Not coincidentally, Didi-Huberman would find in Carl Einstein's work one of the greatest examples of a type of historical writing that is marked by the inventiveness of a truly poetic and dazzling style. But Einstein's inventive form of writing is also marked by its strangeness, especially when compared to the positivist effectiveness of the Anglo-Saxon model, so as to be considered an *oeuvre* that, even today, is difficult to read. As defined by Didi-Huberman, Einstein's thought is governed by the principle of *inactuality*, since it remains, like at the moment of its appearance, in 1912, advanced in relation to its time.

This is, of course, a description carried out by Didi-Huberman in overtly Nietzschean terms. In Nietzsche, history should engage with a capacity to feel *a-historically*. It must connect to a force that teaches oblivion, creating a horizon indispensable to action. Through action, the individual is mobilized by the desire to achieve the fair and the new. In this sense, Nietzsche's considerations are pervaded by a principle of inactuality. Nietzsche would not know how to make sense of thinking and practice in his actual time, since the latter was dominated by the excess of knowledge and erudition, inhibiting the vital force of the creative being. The historical knowledge must be engendered against time, that is, against the norms and the

<sup>11</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Devant le Temps : Histoire de L'Art et Anachronisme des Images*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000, pp. 109.

<sup>12</sup>FOUCAULT, Michel, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in *Language, Counter-Memory. Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* by M. Foucault, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 154.

institutionalized knowledge that guarantees the monolithic order of discourse, projecting itself in a time to come.<sup>13</sup>

Carl Einstein brings this conception to the field of art history, recovering some of the most important features that already influenced the theory of authors such as Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin, both directly affected by Nietzsche considerations on history. Einstein grasped the idea that the passion provoked by the image is irreducible to the narrowness of historical erudition and chronology, demanding a multifocal and creative vision that interweaves multiple areas of knowledge, sensibilities and affections. Art history should therefore consider the tensions and contradictions that fissure any unitary and *aestheticizing* conception of the work of art.

Against the institutionalized and disciplinary view, Einstein will oppose the requirement of an historical practice that seeks to discover what concerns a fundamental and vital knowledge. This requirement comprises a kind of creative knowledge capable of integrating the magic and the unconscious dimensions that inform the work of art. These notions are approached as anthropological and ethnological elements that expose the complexity of the real (against the notion of reality, thus comprising the realm of possible and imagination) and the density of its temporal relations, both encompassing a certain idea of the ungraspable and the inexplicable of the image.

The overcoming of time in nonlinear terms thus corresponds to situate history at a genealogical level. It combines, in a dialectic fashion, the issue of the origin and of the new, but in such a way that, from then on, neither the origin is a fixed and stabilized source of the future, nor the new refers to a mere conclusion of evolutive developments that were initiated in the past.

It should be noted that Einstein's work touchstone is the confrontational relation between African sculpture and the modernity of Cubism. In his work on African sculpture, *Negerplastik* (1914), Einstein brings about a thesis that, as stated by Didi-Huberman, by itself suggests the paradox and the violence of the dialectical movement: African sculpture is not an

object of knowledge because it does not exist as such. And if it does *not exist*, it is because the prejudgment of positivist and colonialist ethnography immediately expropriates African art not only from its history - naming it as *primitive* - but also from its artistic dimension, by reducing it to a strictly instrumentalist and functionalist mode of production.

The impossibility of making history on African art will only be upraised if we reject, on the one hand, the epistemological model engendering the institutionalized history (identification of the masterpieces and their authors, explanation of the social context, evolution of styles in geographical terms, etc.), and, on the other hand, if we surpass the aesthetic and erudite model of art history, based on concepts related to the ideal and the beauty. Carl Einstein's accounts on African art cannot be subtracted, as quoted by Didi-Huberman, «aux expériences faites par l'art contemporain, d'autant que ce qui prend de l'importance historique est toujours fonction du présent immédiat».<sup>14</sup>

Only apparently this contradicts the principle of Nietzschean inactuality. What is stressed is the idea that the history of African art as *origin* is decisively (and dialectically) fissured by the Cubist perspective. Furthermore, and according to Didi-Huberman, in making the cubism the *Now* of African art, Einstein released the latter from the Western prejudgments. This is why this attitude brings as well the possibility for European art to rethink its own history; but never in terms of a discovery concerning a primitive origin, much less in terms of deceitful modernities or camouflaged exoticisms. Therefore, to say that cubism *encounters* African art corresponds, in fact, to state the violence of a shock able to disengage epistemological obstacles, opening up history to new research objects, as well as to new models of temporality.

In Benjaminian terms, corresponds to affirm the abruptness and the sudden emergence of a *Now* (*Maintenant*), which clashes with the *Once* (*L'Autrefois*) of the past, forming a scintillation, a space constituted by interconnections that remained unseen. The same principle was at stake in Barnett Newman's work, in which the present is addressed as the singular experience

<sup>13</sup>NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980, pp. 61-65.

<sup>14</sup>Carl Eisenstein in DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Devant le Temps : Histoire de L'Art et Anachronisme des Images*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000, pp. 109.

of an *actual* that enters in conflict with a past that is not merely recovered, but deeply shaken and reinvented. This brings into play, in Didi-Huberman terms, the experience of a radical modernity that runs parallel to the redefinition of the Benjaminian *aura*, which appears, fundamentally, as a game of distances and proximities created by the experience of the work of art.

This phenomenological aspect of the aesthetic experience is also pursued by Didi-Huberman in his analysis on Carl Einstein theoretical practice, whose work entails an original perspective on the act of seeing produced in the arc between Impressionism and Cubism. In short, Einstein will consider the collapse of the notion of beauty, conceptualising the visual object that breaks out from this ruin as a symptom. The experience of the artistic object is a *symptom*, that is, a breakdown that goes towards a violent impact on the viewer and upon thought in general.

The understanding of the symptomatic aesthetic experience in Einstein indicates a dialectics of decomposition of the human form, something that takes us away from the simplistic notion of formalism in art. It concerns, more exactly, a deformation in which the role of the anamorphic, for example (much used, it should be recalled, in the photographic work of Georges Bataille and Man Ray), goes far beyond the mere optical relation, rather concerning a kind of reinvention of the conventional anthropocentric space (hence the admiration of Carl Einstein for the work of Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, such as Alessandro Magnasco and Hercules Seghers). What Einstein saw as extremely irreparable and painful in the paintings of Seghers arises, according to Didi-Huberman, as an isolated symptom that extends itself to a general symptom in the modernity brought by cubism. With Picasso, Braque, and Gris, the threshold of representation (*réveil*) not only imagines reality, but, what is more, *creates* the real itself:

Cette redéfinition est dialectique dans la mesure où l'anthropomorphisme n'en est pas exclu, mais très exactement décomposé, comme chez Juan Gris où Einstein décèle une tectonique - un refus

de l'anthropocentrisme - qui n'est pourtant fait que d'éléments humaines.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of cubism in Carl Einstein is decisively explained by this attraction for a dialectics that includes that which decomposes, the anthropomorphism, associating it to the operative aspect of a *field of forms*, susceptible to shatter the continuous space of classical representation. Thus, the realism in Einstein is related not with the security of a certain realistic style of representation, but rather with the opening up of vision to a new form of real:

[...] ouvrir le voir, cela signifie prêter attention - une attention qui ne va pas de soi, qui exige travail de la pensée, remise en question perpétuelles, problématisation toujours renouvelée - aux processus anticipateurs de l'image.<sup>16</sup>

In Einstein, the space is grasped as an unstable intersection between mankind and the universe. The act of seeing only acquires a truly human dimension when includes a divinatory process that instates the invisible and the possible. If the history of art is contaminated by the revolutionary forms of knowledge and sensibility (we must not forget the changes brought about by physics and psychoanalysis in the beginning of the twentieth century), then the very form of writing will also necessarily comprise a brutal *effondrement* that drags subjectivity itself. In this sense, to open the vision to time and thought is to open up art history to the complexity of its destabilizing images.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article I intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of Georges Didi-Huberman's thought. The article tried to evidence multiple theoretical connections that contribute to critically examine the role of art history in the way we perceive and understand the past. Didi-Huberman engages with a form of art history that interiorizes the dichotomies proper to the instances of time, memory and image, instances that, although composing the intimate core of historical writing and thought, are usually disregarded by the disciplinary and orthodox models of art history. Following the

<sup>15</sup>DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges, *Devant le Temps : Histoire de L'Art et Anachronisme des Images*. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000, pp. 196.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 220.



examples of authors such as Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg and Carl Einstein, Didi-Huberman stands against the canonical art history, rather affirming the connections established between art history and heterogeneous areas like philosophy, anthropology, or psychoanalysis. In Didi-Huberman, in order for real historical knowledge to be produced, the intellectual engagement with the image must be coupled with a broader affective experience of the work of art, considered in its multiple perceptual unfoldings and temporal relations. More than being stable anchors of memory, images are dynamic and heterogeneous elements that do not remain constant, transforming memory itself

and entering in relations with other images and objects, therefore comprising the possibility of reassignment of meanings. For Didi-Huberman, through art history the spectator is not simply presented to a past heritage; he is forced to engage with history as a process, a mode of creative thinking. That way, making the past meaningful in the present involves a mnemotechnical labour through which the traces from the past are interpreted, combined and reevaluated, accepting invention as a conceptual and methodological locus that transforms significantly our perspective about the possibilities of art history.

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