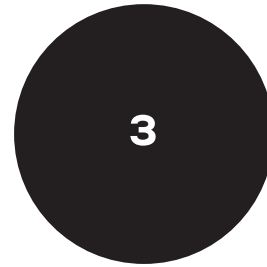




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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Régis Durand

## **Ghost Stories for Adults: The Question of (Double) Exposition**<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Katarzyna Bojarska

One day, some years ago, I went to Winterthur, which many claim is one of the most important places in Europe for people interested in photography. The aim of my visit was to attend the opening of a show and to discuss the possibility of a collaborative project with the Fotomuseum. The next morning, before leaving for Zurich, I decided to visit Am Römerholz, the beautiful residence of the rich collector Oskar Reinhart, whose collection is accessible to the public. I have already told this story on several occasions—this time I shall sketch it in brief. I have a feeling that it sheds some light onto the matters we are concerned with today.<sup>2</sup> In the residence, I was standing before a painting once attributed to Goya and now credited to one of his late imitators from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was the portrait of a young man. Because of an irritating reflection, I had to move to the left in order to get a proper view of it. Seen from awry, the figure seemed to be slightly detached from the background and thus appeared as its own negative. Its own negative, another figure, similarly to some photographic prints where the inversion of values is not completed, so they remain at the threshold between negative and positive.

I repeated the experience, the painted figure again slid towards an ambiguous, spectral image. Surely, this is a matter of afterimage, or optical illusion, caused by the play of reflections on the glass, the varnish, and the layers of paint. This, however, does not diminish the problem. It seems as if the painting is inhabited by a spectral image of a photographic nature (which seems to be suggested by the silver grayness that might be its material, and which seems to be matter rather than color—such as the silvering that provides the background for most mirrors, for example, or the thin layer of silver salt that gives film stock its incredible sensitivity).

A little later, in the same place, I experienced a similar dissociation. This time it was before a Monet painting from 1881, *The Break-up of Ice on the Seine*—here the effect seemed to be intended by the painter (this is at least probable). As a result, perspective becomes irrelevant: as if it were smashed and transposed onto

another, vertical surface. The crushing ice is represented by more or less rectangular white brush strokes. The strokes appear as if they were about to detach themselves from the canvas and levitate delicately—this impression is strengthened by the perspectival lean, but even more so by the chromatic tension between the whiteness of the ice (the strokes) and the grayness of the water in the background. The painting vibrates, and it is precisely this vibration that is the real theme: not as a way of representing the flow of the river, but as a rendition of movement which one would be inclined to call, after Robert Smithson, “cinematic.” In the case of Goya’s imitation, the painting functions more like a photograph—it emerges and disappears according to the point of view. Monet’s painting seems to be “animated,” or “cinematic” —as if it shared some traits with the filmic image (invented in the same era).

Without a doubt it could be said that we're speaking here of a kind of double hallucination. But this does not diminish the power of the revelation, which sheds light on how an image (a painting in this particular case) can be haunted by specters and afterimages. Such an experience radically threatens the uniqueness and the specificity of any form of image.

One surely does not need this semi-hallucinatory experience to draw such conclusions. It seems, however, that we have not yet exhausted all possible theoretical conclusions especially if one takes into consideration the interpretation of complex states where various types of images, various temporal levels and various kinds of representation mingle—as is the case with what I will go on to discuss here.

Certainly, the spectral images of Georges Didi-Huberman, these “returning” images, are not merely the outcome of some optical aberration. They originate from themes and issues which then allow (first in Warburg, then in Didi-Huberman) for the marking of an immense thematic field: from ancient cult objects to contemporary cinema. Unlike Warburg, who at times did not offer any final conclusions, relying instead on the very composition of the image, Didi-Huberman does not cease attempts to formulate and explain their effects in his numerous works. With *Mnemosyne Atlas*, he writes “Warburg genuinely found the apparatus that his research seems to have been waiting for: a method capable of manipulating the

images as interpretative objects, which first of all constituted objects to interpret.”<sup>3</sup> And, he adds “Mnemosyne is indeed this strange apparatus—ghostly in its own way—that demands more than it possesses.”<sup>4</sup> Mnemosyne has already been treated as a “visual installation.” What we are looking at today in Le Fresnoy can be interpreted in two ways: as a new version of a different exhibition, now recalled, or as an installation (literally) referring to lamentation, where, as Didi-Huberman himself put it, “what cannot be given a deterministic explanation must be shown, presented through montages thanks to which *Übersicht* or a ‘surveying gaze,’ could ‘surmount these (univocal) propositions,’ so that we can ‘see the world correctly.’”<sup>5</sup>

This is achieved by the tools deployed (the composition and arrangement of the projection), which function in different ways. For example, the plates of Warburg’s Atlas were vertical and could be looked at from various distances, like the pages of a book or exhibition walls. Accordingly, with his new method, in which distance plays such a crucial role, Didi-Huberman plays with a horizontal position. The projections are placed on the ground, and one looks at them above, from the height of the first floor. It seems worthwhile to highlight the fact that this method differs from that of Leo Steinberg, who analyzed the works of artists working with the imposition of images and the flatbed technique. In the case of Steinberg, we are dealing with an incorporation, citation or appropriation, rather than with an analysis of the movement between and inside images.

Here, filmic images search for a horizontal plane, thus opening onto the third (and fourth) dimension. This brings to mind Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, however, in this case the montage of images is generally rigorously limited by an accompanying commentary, be it written or oral. In Didi-Huberman’s exhibition, what connects the images, and at the same time “guides” us through the space, is theme. We are also subject to a kind of test, which refers to our memory and the optical unconscious—it consists in capturing the visual associations within the flux of rapidly changing details and cinematic fragments, so that one extracts, if not descriptions and interpretations, at least questions and hypothesis. Moreover there is the problem of the cinematic sound, which in the exhibition at Le Fresnoy is almost entirely absent—doubtless in order to avoid a cacophony. This however introduces a disturbing silence, in which the images dwell, leading to their

muteness.

Horizontality is also crucial in the portion of the exhibition located in the corridors of Le Fresnoy. This part was created by a photographer, Arno Gisinger. It consists of two complementary parts—a projection at the bottom of a large nave and a strip of photographs along the corridor—which should be considered separately. In the case of the installation in the corridor, the point of departure was the aforementioned exhibition curated by Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, Como llevar el mundo auestas? / Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?* Arno Gisinger's photographic project provides a kind of visual commentary (but not its direct documentation). Where one might expect an attempt to introduce an explanatory and descriptive discourse, one finds another kind of statement, directed not so much towards the past exhibition as to the present one, exhibited in the same space, downstairs. Here is an evident turn: the projections introduce a completely new element to the exhibition in Madrid, while Gisinger's photographs provide its new reading, a kind of awkward double /repetition.

Both parts of the exhibition at Le Fresnoy play on the possibility of doubling, eternal repetition. However, what do these photographs actually show us? We see works of art in the state of "latency," surely a moment before they are about to be mounted on the walls: placed on the ground, not fully unwrapped, still bearing the trace of transportation and preservation (bubble wrap, conservator's notes, crates, etc.), and not ready—that is, not prepared to be looked at. They remain isolated, in a way. The relations between them are accidental—juxtapositions, reflections, layerings. Their dialectic and semiotic value depends exclusively on our reading. Transportation reduces the works of art to "fragile" objects, filled with an obscure - "cult" - power, partially hidden owing to their insufficient visibility (before they are at the curator's disposal).

And so we pass by these photographs, which are placed along the wall, thus forming a kind of ring embracing the projections. These photographs, all of identical size, bring to mind an accelerated cinematic narration which forces our gaze to slide from one image to the other restlessly, without the possibility to return, without a moment that forces critical reflection. The film creates a time before or a time between. Both the speed and links specific to this arrangement remain in

tension with the time and movement of the installation downstairs, which also requires a ceaseless activity—moving, returning, associating, the work of memory, and, last but not least, “[a] reading of the movement of time from the visual configurations,” to quote Walter Benjamin in Didi-Huberman.

I am thus interested in the following: what meanings does this juxtaposition produce? Both installations form an exceptional working space thanks to which, as the author of the exhibitions puts it, what cannot be given a deterministic explanation must be shown, presented through montages that make possible an *Übersicht* or “surveying gaze” that could surmount these (univocal) propositions, so that we can “see the world correctly.” The outcome of these operations is one of the spaces that Michel Foucault called heterotopias – “spaces of crisis and deviance, concrete arrangements of incompatible places and heterogenous times ... concrete machines of imagination.”<sup>6</sup>

In this context, Le Fresnoy itself could be treated as a kind of “utopia-heterotopia.” This arrangement echoes a heterotopia insofar as it allows for the existence of spaces that in themselves remain incompatible—museum, library, atlas. This doubled arrangement, besides its radicalness, seems to demand something more than what we usually expect from an “average” viewer. What I have in mind is the interesting observation that opens Walter Benjamin’s well-known essay, “The Task of the Translator:”

In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an “ideal” receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin’s elaboration of this notion in a dialectical way does not exclude the presence of the receiver but is rather the critique of the very idea of communication—to render visible that which seems untranslatable or impossible to directly

transmit.

The task of the translator would thus be to touch the untouchable: "pure language," which exists solely as it is grasped in the work. In a way, confronting the image we are all translators: the task is to relieve that "pure language" from the "heavy and alien" meaning which weighs it down. What cannot be said, should be shown—this is the lesson of Aby Warburg, and Didi-Huberman after him. However, the question remains—can we see it? Is it not so; that seeing that which could be pure liberated language assumes some kind of trust towards commentary? Towards the ceaseless disassembling and assembling anew that Didi-Huberman performs in every one of his books? And so we follow the word, and not the muteness, in order to "see the world correctly."

## Footnotes

1 Régis Durand's presentation from November 2012, delivered during "journée d'étude" organised in Le Fresnoy, Studio national des arts contemporains, on the occasion of Georges Didi-Huberman's and Arno Gisinger's exhibition *Histoires de fantômes pour grandes personnes* (October– December 2012).

2 See Régis Durand, "Rendre le langage de l'art à l'ordre des choses: notes sur peinture et photographie", in *L'Excès et le reste: essais sur l'expérience photographique 3*, (Editions de la Différence: 2006).

3 Georges Didi-Huberman, "Atlas or the Anxious Gay Science", in *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?* (Madrid: 2011), 167.

4 Ibid., 169

5 Ibid., 175.

6 After Didi-Huberman, 52.

7 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator. An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's 'Tableaux Parisiens,'" *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 69