

## Images of the People

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**Representations of “the people” tend to be highly policed: they smother its inherent diversity and particularity, and typically distort it. Such is the conclusion reached, each in his own way, by Georges Didi-Huberman and Jacques Rancière. This is also the reason why, they argue, one must pay attention to images which demonstrate the people’s singularity and power.**

Reviewed: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L’œil de l’histoire*, [Exposed Peoples, Peoples as Extras. The Eye of History], vol. 4, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2012, 266 p., 23€; Jacques Rancière, *Figures de l’histoire*, [Figures of History] Paris, PUF, 2012, 87 p., 10€.

Beginning with the premise that the contemporary representation of the “common people” exposes them to a death that is aesthetic as it is political and even physical, Georges Didi-Huberman revisits and reconsiders the questions of thinkers who, from Walter Benjamin to Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière, have interrogated the space that aesthetics and politics share, as well as the ways in which those with no stake or identity in the existing order make themselves visible, over and against the commonplaces through which they are effaced. Though Didi-Huberman and Rancière have previously examined (the former in *Images in Spite of All* [2003] and the latter in two essays in particular, “Senses and Figures of History” [1996] and “The Unforgettable” [1997], which have been conveniently republished in a volume entitled *Figures of History*) ways of representing humanity’s inhuman fate, Didi-Huberman, in his latest book, seeks, to the contrary, to render the human tangible, by rejecting, just as forcefully as Rancière, though in a different way, those approaches that would reify the “people as class” or reduce it to an abstraction, thus minimizing its plurality, rich fragments, and the interplay between speaking and acting bodies. He wants us, in short, to grasp the people as a plural form.

### Editing

While embracing the legacy of Aby Warburg, yet recalling, in fact, Rancière’s *The Nights of Labor*, Didi-Huberman’s book in no way follows a linear historical narrative. Instead, he offers a *mélange* and montage of heterogeneous elements—not only because it is primarily a collection of essays, some of which have been published separately, but also because he has chosen to convey meaning through structure rather than narration. He seeks “precisely to renounce those stereotypes that would oppose the poet’s joyful extravagance to the historian’s fastidious rigor” (p. 160). These heterogeneous elements themselves consist of a dynamic montage of opposites: the group and the portrait, proximity and distance, style and document, past and present.

The people's humanity is often threatened by the "image police," which subsumes the group under a rule and transforms it into a throng, thus erasing individual faces and replacing them with "types." Didi-Huberman, to the contrary, locates the people's humanity at the intersection of a group ethos, constituted through serial arrangement and substitutability, and the sliver of humanity, the fragile uniqueness of the face, which individual portraits allow us to see. Humanity is thus located in the tension between singularity and species. It exists in what Giorgio Agamben has called the "whatever" face, which is unique, yet opens up onto the community of its fellows. In his analysis of the photograph of "The Insurgents Killed during the Commune's *Semaine Sanglante* [Bloody Week]," Didi-Huberman probes the way in which community manifests itself as a point of contact: as proximity, as individuals are seen together, and as distance, through the singularity of death. He further explores community by studying Philippe Bazin's serial portraits, Ernst Friedrich's photographic analyses in *Krieg dem Kriege!*, and the role of the "extra" (*figurant*). Extras, he tells us, are to cinema what the people are to history: those who are denied the right to be a narrative's driving force, just as the proletariat is denied "any unique capacity to make history" (Rancière, p. 35). Through an analysis of the films of Pasolini and Eisenstein, Didi-Huberman demonstrates the ethical, aesthetic, and political importance of their presence as a community—as a force that emerges when fragile individualities come together—rather than as a mass.

The second set of inseparable opposites is a trio: mimesis, *figura*, and *passio*. It can be found in the ways in which, notably in Eisenstein and Pasolini, yet following a tradition that goes back to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, poetry and truth, style and document, passion and realism, and poetics and politics are intertwined in "poetic realism" and "mimesis *maudit*." Here, realism does not copy the real—unless it succumbs to stereotypes—but portrays the problematic, disturbing, conflictual, and dialectical manner in which reality unfolds. Understanding that the other is like oneself requires a documentary impulse; yet it is particular faces and bodies, the vehicles of passion, which transform the real into emblems and mythologies. The pathos of the singular body provides access to the rigor of forms which evoke reality. Here we find a first possible overlap with Rancière, who similarly maintains that realism cannot mean "the return to the triviality of real things" (p. 70). Rancière distinguishes between three historical artistic regimes: what he calls an ethical regime of images, in which art is not individualized as such, but is subordinated to its subject and destination; a representative regime, in which mimesis primarily constructs an analogical relationship with social hierarchies; and, in opposition to the latter, an aesthetic regime belonging to what he calls the historical age, an era of revolution and democracy, which frees itself from earlier hierarchies as well as from representation. Within this final regime, Rancière identifies three major poetics: abstract symbolism, expressionistic symbolism, and (sur)realism. The latter, which destroys any relationship between the form and the subject, seems to overlap with Didi-Huberman's descriptions: "it is always possible to integrate Constantinople into the representation of Yvetot and the infinite emptiness of an eastern desert into the damp and narrow room of a Normand farm" (p.70).

Finally, Didi-Huberman reflects on the orchestration of time and the ways in which the past erupts into the body's present. When considering the exterminations to which peoples have been subject in modern history, he analyzes various quests for evidence of their resistance and survival: thus the people are, as Deleuze has argued, "that which is missing, which is not there" (p. 228). They are a memory which opens onto the future. Didi-Huberman dwells on

Mnemosyne, the atlas of images which Aby Warburg juxtaposes in all their diversity, divergence, and anachronism. He also analyzes the force of this construct in Pasolini's "figurative flashes"—bursts of art history which puncture the cinematographic narrative—and in his "anthropology of survival," which, inspired in part by De Martino's ethnographic work, rediscovers in gestures and dialects a long, stratified memory. Refraining from ontological claims, Didi-Huberman shares, in this way, Rancière's concern with extracting subjects from what might seem to be their "own" time: the people must be thought of as a set of qualities inherent in bodies, but in a movement that exists beyond time, in a perpetual process through which one is pulled out of the present by invoking the past and the future.

Yet in "Epilogue for a Man with No Name," with which the book concludes, Didi-Huberman describes Wang Bing's eponymous film—slowly, steadily, in a style that carefully conveys the measured images of a one-and-a-half-hour film in which not a single word is uttered, but in which the soundtrack brings to life the places and the things which are the focus of the minimal and meticulous activity of a peasant who lives off of and farms a tiny plot of land with almost nothing. One is reminded (as Didi-Huberman no doubt is as well) of Rancière's anxieties about the Romantic poetics of the "monument," which speaks without uttering a word, or of the camera, which stifles speech by dwelling on bodies and places, wresting from their subjects the right to be anything other than that which their location, bodies, and condition has assigned them. Drawing on the work of Lanzmann, Straub and Huillet, and Arnaud des Pallières, Rancière explores, for his part, the dissociation between words and images. The latter "show the absence of what words say," which makes it possible to see the invisible, "the presence of an absence" (p. 48), the heterogeneity of time. Thus while Didi-Huberman and Rancière both reject the idea of the unrepresentable and the unsayable and believe that knowledge and understanding require the imagination, and while they share Warburg's and Benjamin's certainty that anachronisms are meaningful, a difference of opinion on this point nonetheless emerges. Perhaps this is the result of Didi-Huberman's more phenomenological approach and his hope that exposing "powerlessness itself" can also and by the same token expose a "power, against all odds, to silently transform the world." Just as the Sonderkommandos' photographs, by their very existence, attest to a determination to fight any effort to make the victims disappear without a trace, to keep resisting, and to bear witness to their humanity, similarly, Didi-Huberman seeks evidence of resistance and the people's survival, together or alone.

## **Framing**

Didi-Huberman works on dominated peoples—whether individual or collective—while Rancière is interested primarily in the forms of collective destiny that the historical age makes possible. The first emphasizes resistance, the second on that which, invariably and despite everything, we share in common.

That said, both are fully conscious of the power of framing—namely, of the way in which the eye (or eye-machine) cuts up reality and defines our approach to otherness. Didi-Huberman forcefully demonstrates how, in the work of Philippe Bazin, humanity's resistance can be read in photographs of old people or newborns arranged in a square format: the institutional spaces of asylums or hospitals are simultaneously present somewhere beyond the picture, to which our imagination, with each image, brings us, and is "ruptured through the gesture of a bodily

approach in which, henceforth, the skin of the face completely dominates our field of vision” (p. 82). Framed in this way, faces testify to their marginalization by institutions while, at the same time, imposing their presence. Thus they are spared any hint of political disenchantment, just as they refuse to be reduced to a mystique of the face (of the kind found in Levinas’ philosophy). Rancière, for his part, is interested in what cinematography tells us about the “equality beneath the lights” (p. 20), which exists despite social and political inequality. He analyzes the introduction into our experiential field of a form of visibility which modifies the regime of the visible. In doing so, he calls attention to wide frames, such as the archival image that Chris Marker used for *The Last Bolshevik*, in which the same image brings together the imperial family and the masses gathered around it—the common and the great. In this instance, social and political exclusion does not lie beyond the image; it is revealed at the very same moment as an essential equality before the camera. In this way, exclusion is, as it were, undermined from within by this very assertion of equality. Equality ceases to be past resistance or a blocked future, but the affirmation of a present possibility. Didi-Huberman analyzes two worlds which exclude one another, while Rancière considers two exclusive principles which nonetheless meet.

Whether they are resisting or (already) asserting their equality, the people, in Didi-Huberman as with Rancière, always lie somewhere in the balance between existence and effacement. Didi-Huberman would no doubt endorse Rancière’s remark that to reflect on the people is “to take measure of being and non-being.” For Rancière, this means “interrogating the visible with regard to their division” (p. 39): to see, here and now, the people’s capacity to make history, which “realists” conceal and which utopians project into an ever more distant future—to see, even in times of powerlessness, the power of equality affirmed. Didi-Huberman seems to want images that can convey these “out of time” moments: for him, community, lest it be reduced to a mass or to an ontology of social class or fusion, must be conceived as occurring at the very moment it is exposed, when “power and powerlessness are intertwined.” This implies both the appearance of a division and an exposure that risks becoming a disappearance, just as Bazin’s subjects are empowered in relation to the viewer by the fact that they occupy the entire frame, even as they are weakened, as the very texture of their flesh reveals, by their liminal situations, located on the threshold of life as much as the threshold of death. In this way, Rancière and Didi-Huberman seem to share an understanding of the present as essentially non-contemporaneous with itself, even as it always projects itself towards testimonials from the past and towards a horizon that is always already present. For both of them, this non-contemporaneousness can be found precisely in images, “which always belong to the past” (Rancière, p. 13) and which, by this very token, are charged with the radical function of bearing witness to “what was.” And, consequently, that time was—and will continue to be.

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