Glimpses of an Interview

Having found out that the renowned art historian and philosopher, Georges Didi-Huberman, was coming to Tel Aviv University to give a keynote lecture, we asked Michal Sapir, the translator of his recently published book in Hebrew, to invite him to give an interview for Tohu Magazine.

Conversation / Michal Sapir January 6, 2016

“Never trust what writers say about their own writing”, Walter Benjamin wrote in one of the convolutes of his unfinished Arcades Project. Georges Didi-Huberman came to Tel Aviv University to give a keynote lecture at the International Walter Benjamin Society Conference on Spaces, Places, Cities and Spatiality. I was supposed to meet him to do an interview for Tohu to mark the publication of my translation of the first of his books to appear in Hebrew – Survivance des lucioles [Survival of the Fireflies]. I came prepared with a list of questions and a tape recorder. But we never did the interview

Georges Didi-Huberman *is a French art historian and philosopher. Already in his first book, Invention of Hysteria (Invention de l'hystérie, 1982), an influential study of the relations between psychiatry and photography in the 19th century, Didi-Huberman described the image as a destabilizing, powerful and creative junction of memory and desire. The book challenged the traditional iconographic approach in art history and laid the foundations for thinking about representation as a mobile and symptomal process, a thinking that Didi-Huberman went on to develop in his book Confronting Images(Devant l'image) from 1990. Since then he has continued to examine the complex relations between the image and the experience of the subject within bodily and psychic existence – that is, in the textures of life, and especially confronting time, as in the title of his 2000 book, Devant le temps. Over the years Didi-Huberman’s thinking about the essence of the image and the ways it operates has been accompanied by a historiographical investigation which drew on thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg to outline a different approach to seeing and a different understanding of historical time. This understanding was extensively explored in the book The Surviving Image (L'image survivante, 2002), which was dedicated to Warburg. The discussion of questions of representation and embodiment in our image-saturated modern world took on a poignant edge in the book Images In Spite of All (Images malgré tout, 2004), which dealt with the possibility of representing, bearing testimony and resisting in the context of the Shoah. Since the appearance in 2009 of Survival of the Fireflies (Survivance des lucioles) and the first volume of the tetralogy The Eye of History (L'Œil de l'histoire), this investigation has increasingly acquired a political dimension, examining the conceptual and critical work that the image is able to perform against systems of power, and pointing to the spaces of resistance that it may be able to open up in these systems.*
Michal Sapir's translation of Georges Didi-Huberman's book, Survivance des lucioles (Survival of the Fireflies) was released in October of 2015, by Hakibutz Hameuhad Publishing. The book will be launched on January 26, 2016, at the Migdalor (Lighthouse) bookstore in Tel Aviv, Israel.

- 1. **MS:** Since 2009 or so, there seems to be a growing emphasis in your work on the political. In your recent studies of the history and philosophy of the image, you seem to focus more than before on asking how images operate in the political arena. How did this development come about?

Paris, Passage des Panoramas-1.JPG



[1]Georges Didi-Huberman. Paris, Passage des Panoramas

GDH: I see my writing as political, but not in a direct or explicit way. I'm not one of those philosophers who appear as dogmaticians in the service of eternity or as producers of immediate opinions for the present – about the latest attacks in Paris or the recent regional elections. For me, all ways of imagining are ways of making politics. As Benjamin said, in the image, remnants of the past meet our present in a blast that liberates rich constellations of the future. These are the fireflies whose survival my book attempts to trace – glimmers of resistance to hegemonic power.

- 2. **MS:** Scholars like Susan Buck-Morss, Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler, and Alain Badiou have chosen to boycott the Israeli Benjamin conference and participate instead in the one in Ramallah. Since you say that resistance to any form of totalitarianism can come through producing firefly-images in the interstices or porous membranes of power and its institutions, it is perhaps not surprising that your initial position regarding the boycott is negative.
  GDH: Boycotting just means putting up more walls. It's a gesture of desperation, rather than of hope. If there is no passage, no encounter, how are the fireflies going to diffuse their light? It is our responsibility to create and transmit these alternative images. Do you remember the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics? That couldn't have happened if the athletes had boycotted the games.
  MS: In the case of the BDS, however, you are not asked not to come to Israel; you are asked not to collaborate with events and institutions that are funded by the state, and are thus part of its propaganda and whitewashing campaign. Your participation is construed in Israel as a seal of approval.
  GDH: You assume that the power of the institution is total. But isn't it possible that a work of art, or a lecture, is more powerful than the institution that allows it to appear?

MS: But it's not a question of judging the work's power, or lack thereof . It's a question of a specific tactic. We've tried the black fists and they haven't worked. It's time for a new strategy, and this is the action asked of us by the oppressed. Their claim is that in the current situation, talking about Benjamin at the university does not "blast" the dialectical image "out of the continuum of historical process", but merely helps to choke the light of the fireflies in the dazzling whiteness of normalization.

Paris, Passage des Panoramas-4.JPG **[2]**



[3]Georges Didi-Huberman. Paris, Passage des Panoramas

GDH: I see that all the street signs here are in three languages. Who speaks Arabic here?
MS: Well, there are Arabs in Jaffa…
GDH: No, I mean who speaks Arabic here.
MS: Mainly people who work for the IDF intelligence.
GDH: I interviewed you well! I talk to people who support the BDS in Europe and their thinking is very brutal, very black-and-white. Can you give me a list of texts that I can read that would give me a radical but more nuanced view? I want to leave with something.

- 3. **MS:** In recent years your projects seem to have grown more large-scale and complex, Atlas-like, involving thick tomes and sprawling series. Why do you think that is?
  GDH: The rule of any survival is: the accursed parts of history always emerge from the

bottom. In the Arcades, as elsewhere, the tourists and art lovers can be identified by the fact that they are almost always looking up. I have the impression that, to dissolve myself into a place, to better see it and inhabit it, it's worthwhile to look equally, and equally intensely, down. What I write in art history has been at first the direct consequence of a movement to displace my gaze: from the "figure" to the "background", from the top to the bottom. This last trait was possibly connected to an acceptance of my own myopia and my short height... To follow Benjamin, who transposes this movement of displacement to the political plane, in order to write a history of art that is renewed, re-problematized, one needs to displace one's gaze from the grand figures to the figurants, the extras, the little people in the image. Those through whom the work itself, the work of the image, speaks.

- 4. **MS:** There is not much reference in your work to new media. You seem to stress the material and indexical aspects of the image.
  GDH: I'm very bad with anything digital. I don't trust the Internet. What if Google gets taken over by a right wing organization? What will happen to all the information? I want to have the book, the CD, in my own hands.
- 5. **MS:** Your writing seems embedded in a European intellectual and artistic tradition. You seem indebted not only to French thought and culture, but also to German, Italian, Russian... What does the idea of Europe mean to you, in relation to your work?
  GDH: On September 6th, 1997, I took the train to London. I was going to spend several weeks at the Aby Warburg archives. Arriving at Waterloo station with my heavy luggage, I realized that there were no underground, no taxis, no traffic of any kind. It was the day of the funeral of Princess Diana, who had died in a road accident in Paris a few days earlier. I found myself dragging my large suitcase across London through a dense crowd of mourners. On February 1st, 1927, in the very last lines of his Moscow Diary, Walter Benjamin describes leaving the city and the woman he loves: "At first she seemed to turn around as she walked away, then I lost sight of her. Holding my large suitcase on my knees, I rode through the twilit streets to the station in tears." It's the constellation of motifs that seems to me to spell out a certain empathy, a visual shimmering: a heavy history being dragged along, the threshold of twilight times, the intense exchange of tearful eyes. Diasporic identity is absolutely important to me. I'm very interested in the history of the Bund. Have the complete writings of Rosa Luxemburg been published in Hebrew? Do you feel at home here?
  MS: Well, my band is called Afor Gashum, which is Hebrew for Rainy Grey. It started with a kind of a statement – we're not from here.
  GDH: I actually feel good in the sun. I'm part Sephardic. The Didi part is from Djerba, in Tunisia. The Huberman part is Ashkenazi. I feel most at home in Southern Europe, especially in Andalucía. I play Flamenco guitar, though not that often these days, maybe once every two years. It's impossible to travel with a guitar now. But I love improvising and inventing. It's difficult – the rhythm in Flamenco is very difficult. Do you know Theo Angelopoulos? He made a grey Greece, with clouds and mist and fog.
  MS: He must be a cousin of Angelusnovus...
  GDH: I think that Ernest Bloch says something similar when he describes the montage as a machine for making dust in space and wind in time.
- 6. **MS:** What are you working on now?
  GDH: I'm organizing a series of exhibitions about uprising. They're going to be in Paris, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, and other places
- 7. **MS:** In your work you often juxtapose the discussion of historical artworks with works of contemporary art – why is that important to you?

Paris, Passage des Panoramas-3.JPG **[4]**



[5]Georges Didi-Huberman. Paris, Passage des Panoramas

GDH: Between 2008 and 2011 the Polish photographer Łukasz Baksik photographed details of everyday architecture – a grindstone, paving stones for courtyards and passageways, elements for patching crumbling walls in need of reinforcement – all carrying the traces of engraved Hebrew letters. These were fragments of matzevot – Jewish gravestones – that had been ransacked and reused as raw materials. Looking at these photos, how can we not go back, yet again, to that dialectic thought of Benjamin, which has so often guided me in front of the combined phenomena of culture and barbarity? "For to organize pessimism means to discover, in the space of political action, image space. The long-sought image space is a world of universal and integral actuality." When I look at the situation here, for example, I cannot say that I know what can be done; but I'm certain, absolutely certain, that it has do with the transmission of memory, with bringing back destroyed and forgotten ideas from the past and connecting them with the present.

- 8. **MS:** You seem drawn to outsider, non-academic figures – people like Warburg, Benjamin, Bataille. How do you see yourself in relation to the institution? How and why did you develop your unique writing style – very literary, poetic, imagistic?
  GDH: In the university where I teach there is hostility towards phenomenology, psychoanalysis and thinkers like Foucault and Deleuze, whom I'm influenced by. It is interesting because what I like in Deleuze is precisely the distinction he makes between pouvoir and puissance. One is outright power; the other is the power to be affected. Take for example the talk I gave today at the conference – a kind of photographic journal of experiences. It was neither a philological reading nor a philosophical one. It was more literary, less rigorous probably, but freer. In the past I would never have dared to do something like that. But as Benjamin says, every photographer must know how to write a

caption, and every writer must know how to make a photograph. Nowadays it's easy, but even before smartphones I used to take many photographs, all the time.
MS: You ended your talk by saying: "If you want to discuss, I am open". It seems very typical of your manner both as a person and a writer.
GDH: Writing the history of art is first and foremost writing. Writing means solitude. But it shouldn't make one's self, or its fictive surrogate, the hero of one's writing. On the contrary, it is through the character's gaze that the entire world – and not the I of the author – opens up before us and becomes more profound, stranger, more complex. Furthermore, writing means having read. It means having taken notes, it means remembering words, sentences, turns of phrase and styles that have come from elsewhere. When I was young, it happened that I copied entire books; I couldn't bring myself to summarize, to break the coherence of the text. I far prefer texts that invite me to step out of the character, the author, the book, finally. Benjamin was so generous in that respect that he wrote an entire book, and a major one – The Arcades Project – that was made entirely of footnotes and citations. He wrote: "The method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say."

- 9. I have made up this interview based on my intended questions, unrecorded conversations that Georges Didi-Huberman and I had during the Benjamin conference, Didi-Huberman's keynote lecture "Aperçus en sens multiples" [Glimpses in a Multiple-Ways Street], and quotes from his previous writings.

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