

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
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Between *Crisis* and *Critique*: A Consideration About Montage Starting from Walter Benjamin

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Abstract Considering the etymological bond that links *Crisis* and *Critique* and reflecting on some important fragments of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the paper intends to propose a consideration about montage, conceived both as an epistemic principle and as an hermeneutic method aimed at the implementation of a cognitive practice to be understood in experimental terms, based on the heuristic quality of images and on the mobilization of heterogeneous times and iconic materials.

Keywords Montage. History. Anachronism. Dialectical image. Legibility. Figurability.

Summary 1 Polychronic. – 2 Montage. – 3 Figurable. – 4 Imagination. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Polychronic

Crisis and *Critique*, respectively derived from the Greek words *Krisis* and *Kritiké*, share the same etymon – from the verb *Krino*, ‘to separate’, ‘to choose’, ‘to decide’ – which implies a separation, a transformation and, consequently, the need for a choice, a judgment.

We know how every *seeing* calls into question and puts into play all *knowing*. The appearance of an image, regardless of its ‘power’ and its effectiveness, ‘overcomes’ us and undresses us, it silences and suspends language. Thought and knowledge then intervene so that this questioning can be transformed into the possibility of an act of critique, so that in the face of the complex in-constancy of images, our language and our thought are renewed and enriched with new combinations and new

categories. Being in front of an image then means, at the same time, calling knowledge into question and putting it back into play.

In the famous fragment in which he conceptualizes the “dialectical image”, Walter Benjamin distinguishes “images” from the “essences” of Phenomenology because of their “historical index”, since not only “they belong to a particular time”, but above all “they attain to legibility only at a particular time” (Benjamin [1940] 2002, 462). And since “every present day - he writes - is determined by the images that are synchronic with it” and “each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability” (463), “the image that is read - which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability - bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded” (463). This moment of *legibility* “constitutes a specific critical point” in the movement of thinking. It imposes that necessary standstill, that moment of arrest, of crisis of thought, “in a constellation saturated with tensions”, but it also opens a breach in the historical continuum, from which emerges the counter-rhythm of the act of critique, where “the dialectical image appears” (475).

In 1999, reflecting precisely that same fragment from *The Arcades Project*, Georges Didi-Huberman defined images as “originary phenomena of the exhibition”, that delimit “their own space” (*Bildraum*), where a “power of collision”, through which different objects and times collide (Benjamin [1940] 2003, 471 writes “télescopés”) and are put into crisis, and a “power of lightning”, as if an electrocution produced by such collision made the impure historicity of things visible, take place: the image “appears”, “makes visible” and, at the same time, “dismantles” (*démonte*), “disperses” and again, reconstructs and “crystallizes in works and effects of knowledge” (Didi-Huberman 2000, 117-18; Author’s transl.).

Now, *conflict* is precisely the force that is set in motion by what Sergej M. Ejzenštejn first defined as the “principle of montage”,¹ “principle of dismemberment and recomposition” ([1937] 1991, 167) which generates a qualitative leap that imposes an epistemology of imagination. The same principle that, in another fragment of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin ([1940] 2002, 461) suggests “to adopt in History”, to reorganize a multiplicity of heterogeneous singularities into constellations saturated with tensions, dialectizing time as a function of anachronism. A principle that, once recognized as a cognitive tool, enables for the construction of morphological knowledge, in a game made of accumulations, comparisons, correlations and stratifications, which do not mean indistinct assimilations, simplifications, but proliferations of differences: something capable of accounting for a structural complexity: just think about Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.

¹ See Ejzenštejn [1929] 1987, 135.

2 Montage

As early as 1929, in the notes with which he intended to integrate his Stuttgart essay *Dramaturgy of the Cinematographic Form*, Ejzenštejn highlights the possibility of transforming montage into a cognitive and displaying tool to be applied well beyond cinema: montage is then presented as a “comparative activity” that proceeds precisely like that “correlative-comparative activity” which is “mental activity” (Ejzenštejn [1929] 1986, 37). A mode of thought based on the ability to relate what is distant and apparently heterogeneous, according to an idea that, once again, brings the Russian director closer to Benjamin, who in two short essays dated 1933 elaborates the concepts of ‘Mimetic Faculty’ and ‘nonsensuous [or ‘immaterial’] similarity’ to account for this anthropological phenomenon:

Nature produces similarities. The very greatest capacity for producing similarities, however, belongs to human beings. [...] The similarities perceived consciously - for instance, in faces - are, compared to the countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all, like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg in comparison to the small tip one sees rising out of the water. These natural correspondences assume decisive importance, however, only in light of the consideration that they are all, fundamentally, stimulants and awakers of the *mimetic faculty* which answers them in man. [...] It is not enough to think, for example, of what we understand today by the concept of similarity. [...] The reference to astrology may already suffice to make comprehensible the concept of a *nonsensuous similarity*. [...] Since this nonsensuous similarity, however, exerts its effects in all reading, at this deep level access opens to a peculiar ambiguity of the word ‘reading’ in both its profane and magical senses. The schoolboy reads [*lessen* in the original] his ABC book, and the astrologer read [*herauslesen* in the original, which literally means ‘to extract by reading’, which is to say ‘understanding through reading’] the future in the stars. (Benjamin [1933] 1999a, 694-5)²

However, Ejzenštejn’s strictest formulation of the ‘principle’ emerges around 1937 in *Towards a Theory of Montage*: here, montage is conceived as an operation aimed at composing different iconic materials, which he calls ‘representations’ (*izobrazenie*), produced by a ‘cut’ (*obrez*) in a whole that is greater than the sum of its individual components, an ‘image’ (*obraz*) that, however fragile, temporary and full of tension, is at the same time both ‘synthetic’, as it is capable

² See also Benjamin [1933] 1999b.

of giving a general meaning to the elements of which it is composed, and 'effective', agentive as we would say today, or capable of acting on the spectator, pushing him to retrace and, inevitably, to reproduce that same hermeneutical-creative process, and to continue that same process.³

Finally, during the last years of his life, at the height of a long reflection on the temporality of images, Ejzenštejn reworks the paradigm developed within the German *Naturalphilosophie* of the late eighteenth century - according to which the development of the individual (ontogenesis) recapitulates in a shorter time that of the entire species (phylogenesis) - to describe whether the creative act from which the single picture is generated or the entire history of pictures in which it is placed.⁴ Through this process, the director maps out his own original formulation of something that is very close to Benjamin's concept "dialectical image": suddenly, the present meets the past, giving life to an 'image' (*obraz*) that emerges as a 'flash' or a 'spark' (in English in the original Russian text) from this collision through which, to use now Benjamin's words,

every dialectically represented historical fact polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. (Benjamin [1940] 2002, 470)

In this way it is transformed by the present. The epistemic force, the cognitive 'dynamization' produced by the principle of montage, draws its strength from the continuous 'temporal conflicts', from continuous anachronistic juxtapositions that spark those instantaneous images by which the forms of history become legible. Montage becomes in all respects a morphological device for thinking, comparing and figuring time through the forms *of* and *in* history. An image, whether understood as an 'obraz' or as a single montage cell, is not *unitary*, static and *whole* but *multiple* and *moved* within itself. In front of the images, the gaze learns that these are themselves constituted by an intrinsic relationship between many different images and temporalities, by a heterogeneous and polychronic montage:

³ Cf. Ejzenštejn [1938] 1991, 309: "The strength of montage lies in the fact that it involves the spectator's emotions and reason. The spectator is forced to follow the same creative path that the author followed when creating the image. The spectator does not only see the depicted elements of the work; he also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and formation of the image in the same way that the author experienced it. This is obviously as close as it is possible to get to conveying visually the fullness of the author's thought and intention, to conveying them 'with the same force of physical perception' with which they faced the author in his moments of creative vision".

⁴ See Somaini 2011, 389.

The “Unique”: this, in fact, is what the image must now be freed from. This is what we must give up: that the image is ‘One’, or that it is ‘All’. Rather, let us recognize the strength of the image as what destines it to never be the “unique-image” [l’“*une-image*”], the “all-image” [l’“*image-toute*”]. As what destines it to multiplicities, to gaps. To differences, to connections, to relations, to bifurcations, to alterations, to constellations, to metamorphoses. To montages, to put it bluntly. To montages that know how to punctuate for us the apparitions and deformations: that know how to show us in images how the world appears and how it is deformed. It is in this taking of position in each montage that the images that compose it – by decomposing its chronology – can teach us something about our history. I mean something else. (Didi-Huberman 2009, 256; Author’s transl.)

On this point, starting from Ejzenštejn, Didi-Huberman meets one of his masters, Hubert Damisch, who concluded his essay *Montage du désastre* by stating that

through the detour of montage, a new notion of the ‘image’ emerges which is equivalent to thinking of it not so much as a prerequisite available to montage as its product, its result. (2005, 78; Author’s transl.)

This same assumption allows Didi-Huberman to comment elsewhere: “If I refer to a ‘knowledge through montage’, it is because cultural and historical objects are constituted as a montage” (Eco, Augé, Didi-Huberman 2015, 64; Author’s transl.). Montage transforms an image, a crisis, into a field of investigation, a forces field and, at the same time, a forms field, from which the possibility of an act of critique is generated.

3 **Figurable**

Within the discipline of Art History, Hubert Damisch has sketched the guidelines for an *Iconologie analytique*, based on an original reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud’s concept of ‘figurability’ (*Darstellbarkeit*), as a project aimed to grasp this phenomenon. Started in the early 1990s from the need to overcome both Panofsky’s iconological paradigm and structuralist Semiology, this project of a theory, a science, “a discourse of images” (Damisch 1992, 272-3) that, far from being reduced to an ‘applied psychoanalysis’, derives from the latter the concepts that are necessary for this overcoming, and proposes a research aimed at investigating not the origin, but the History of which pictures become part of as a function of the dialectical relationship they establish with the observer in the present. An History of survivals, effects, traces, associations; History without

direction or end; a timeless History because it is played out in that 'out of time' space that is the unconscious, whose only fixed term is the participation of the spectator. Because of this, the Alsatian art historian later comes to the formulation of a 'second type' figurability, compared to the one he first elaborated in an earlier phase of his research, from 1992, when he published *Le jugement de Paris*, to 1997, the year of *Un souvenir d'enfance par Piero della Francesca*.

This second type figurability, which emerges from his study on Luca Signorelli's frescoes in San Brizio's chapel (*La Machine d'Orvieta*),⁵ proceeds, firstly, from Damisch's interest in the mnemonic trace and, secondly, from a shift in the reference model from the "dream work", described by Freud's 1899 *Traumdeutung* (fundamental in the first phase of his reflection), to the "analytical work" of the "construction" (Freud 1937, 461) which "takes place on two separate scenarios", in which analyst and analyzed are respectively called to take their place (see Damisch 1997, 171-3). This movement shifts the focus of the discourse onto the work that the spectator does *with* the picture, and not *on* the picture; picture that are recognized as having the capacity to "operate" (Damisch 2010, 34) in the relationship that they establish with the spectator's gaze, a gaze "inhabited by desire" (Marin 1990, 54), capable of composing form and time, of assembling, of imagining constellations.

Keeping in mind Warburg's *Nachleben* and reasoning on the concepts of 'reproduction' - with which Freud indicated the process of 'remembering' (*Erinnerung*) of proper nouns or sequences of words - and of "technical [or *mechanical*] reproducibility" (*technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*) - introduced by Benjamin in his famous 1936 essay - Damisch finally theorizes the concept of "mnemonic reproducibility" (Damisch 2002, 216), by which a picture becomes both the object and the agent, the origin and a link, of and in the chain of associations (a "*tresse*" of images) functional to the construction of the gazing subject.

The 'clash' (*chiasme*) of gazes that sparks within the active relationship with the picture constitutes the necessary condition for the appearance of the image(s) *within* the picture, which becomes, in this case, the field of emergence of figurability. Whereas the chain of associations, the "*tresse*" (Damisch 2002, 212) of images that a picture, acting as an agent of figurability, will be able to produce in the mind of the observer, constitutes the possibility for the latter to find and constitute himself as a subject within a dialectical work of construction.

Conceptualized as an instance that works representation from within to let a 'figurable latency' (*latence figurable*) emerge,

⁵ See Damisch 2003. See also Coletta 2021a; 2021b.

figurability produces a shift from the paradigm of the picture as *forme-cadre*, understood both as a device of individuation (modeled after the single vanishing point perspective model) and as an aestheticizing product that describes the projective surface of a mimetic-narrative representation, to the paradigm of the picture as *function-cadre*: a function of catalyzing and disseminating images that form themselves *from* the picture, or rather, images that *fait images* within the picture (see Damisch 1995).

Imagining themselves, looking at me, exercising their agency over me, pictures reach to the observer at the same time in which they elude direct vision and disseminates themselves in visual in-presence, in a 'formation' (in terms of the formation of the unconscious, of the symptom, of the dream) which is always fragmentary and condensed, assembled and, nevertheless, continually displaced. In this sense, as Louis Marin wrote, "the power of the image establishes it as an author in the strongest sense of the term, through production outside its own bosom" (1995, 18; Author's transl.).

In this regard, let us recall how, in his writings of the 1930s, Benjamin had come to formulate the concept of "aura", understood as "a singular interweaving of space and time" [*ein Gespinst von Raum und Zeit*] (Benjamin [1931] 1999, 518), defining a visual paradigm that intertwines the 'power of the distance', as a dialectical 'space-time form', and the 'power of the gaze', according to the equally dialectical ambivalence of the 'looking' and the 'looked at'. In this distance of a gaze operated by time, Benjamin identifies a "power of memory":

it is *auratic* the object whose appearance unfolds, beyond its own visibility, what we must call its images, its images in constellations or clouds, which impose themselves on us as associated figures, sources, which approach and move away to poeticize, operate, open up its form and meaning together, to make it a work of the unconscious. (Didi-Huberman 1992, 105; Author's transl.)

4 Imagination

Finally, figurability calls for 'Imagination', a word whose meaning is stretched between Aristotle, who defines it as a form of movement that occurs in beings endowed with sensation, capable of composing images both in relation to objects present to the senses and freely constructing them without immediate reference to the objects themselves (Aristotele 2018, 209), and Baudelaire (as Didi-Huberman reminded us), who recognizes it as the faculty of "guessing the intimate and secret relationships between things, correspondences and analogies" (Baudelaire [1859] 1976, 621-2; Author's transl.). For the French poet, imagination is "analysis" and, at the same time, "synthesis":

imagination “breaks down all creation, and, with the materials collected and arranged, creates a new world” (621-2; Author’s transl.).

Around the same time Ejzenštejn wrote his last works, Henri Focillon wrote that form “suggests other forms”:

It expands, it spreads in the imagination, or rather we are moved to consider it as some sort of crack, through which we can enter an uncertain realm, which is neither the extended nor the thought, a crowd of images that aspire to be born. (1934, 4; Author’s transl.)

In this sense, the value of knowledge cannot be intrinsic to a single image and an image without imagination is simply an image on which not enough time has been spent working on and with. Because imagination is work:

it is *that time of work of images* that act ceaselessly one upon the other by collision or by fusion, by fracture or by metamorphosis ... all acting on our knowing and thinking. (Didi-Huberman 2003, 151; Author’s transl.)

To know, one must therefore truly imagine: “the speculative work table [*table de travail*] is always accompanied by an imaginative montage table [*table de montage imaginative*]” (Didi-Huberman 2003, 149; Author’s transl.).

Overall, paraphrasing Bloch, we can say that History, conceived as an imaginal phenomenon, exists only as a ‘decantation’ (Bloch 1952), dismembered and recomposed in the dialectical relationship that the past maintains with the gaze of/in the present. Images are necessary impurities capable of opening time to the unseen. The moment we observe them, a process of reactivation is implicit which undermines temporal continuity and requires an hermeneutical act.

To tackle History “against the grain” (as Benjamin [1940] 2003 suggested) means betting on knowledge through montage, which makes the original, swirling, discontinuous, dialectical images the object and the heuristic moment of its own construction. As Jean-Luc Godard wrote, “montage shows” (1980, 415; Author’s transl.), it shows all this in a “form that thinks” (1998, 55; Author’s transl.), and showing means giving time to look, to think.

5 Conclusion

So far, we've tried to briefly outline some of the main theoretical implications of a form of knowledge that can occur through the application of the principle of montage, the study of which is at the core of my PhD research project, with the aim of creating a model of exploration and exposition that is both theoretical and pragmatic. For this purpose, the critical study of the works of Walter Benjamin, Sergej M. Ejzenštejn, Hubert Damisch and Georges Didi-Huberman are and have been a constant inspiration. Like stars within the same constellation, together with others, they have contributed to the development of those conceptual tools that make concrete the possibility of a transversal (Didi-Huberman 2011, 11) and experimental knowledge, based on the recognition of the heuristic power of images and the implementation of their use value.

Conceived both as an epistemic principle and as a hermeneutic method aimed at the construction of a "gai savoir visuel" (Didi-Huberman 2011, 6), montage shapes a form capable of opening memory to the in-thought and pictures to the in-seen. A form that embodies the possibility of a morphological knowledge based on the mobilization of heterogeneous times and iconic multiplicities, following the modal rhythm of a paradoxical dialectic, always open and tentative, which does not contemplate synthesis, which does not reabsorb conflicts and contradictions, and whose states of quiet are always provisional, always threatened by an immanent push towards insurrection.

In conclusion, we believe that the principle of montage can constitute an important tool for the enactment of that *Kulturwissenschaft* already proposed by Aby Warburg, which conceives the form as formation, as a product of a metamorphosis, of which the historian-anthropologist-iconologist finds himself having to study the dynamic relations, the phenomena of attraction, the contradictions and the repulsions in-image. Finally, like images, we will (re)find ourselves continually moved. Wanting to quote, as a reminder, some lines from a 1969 essay by Michel Foucault, we could end by repeating:

The time has come to wander, but not like Oedipus, poor king without a scepter, blind with an inner light. To wander, to err in the dark feast of crowned anarchy. The time has come to think about difference and repetition: no longer to represent them, but to make them and set them in motion. Thought itself, at the height of its intensity, will be difference and repetition; it will make different what representation had tried to make similar; it will activate the indefinite repetition whose origin metaphysics has stubbornly sought. (Foucault 1969, 36; Author's transl.)

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