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Thinking Things: Images of Thought and Thoughtful Images

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Soviet director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein famously asserted the possibilities of montage could theoretically extend well beyond film to encompass all art forms (36). French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has taken Eisenstein's claim seriously, enigmatically proposing "[m]ontage is the art of producing this form that thinks" (*Images* 138). Didi-Huberman's comments were in relation to a series of World War II archival photographs, but have evolved over the past decade to form an important cornerstone in his ongoing investigation into images. What, then, does it mean for an inanimate thing, *an image*, to think? My hypothesis here is that Didi-Huberman is entering into direct dialogue with Gilles Deleuze's critique of the philosophical assumptions of what thinking is. This article will proceed in two sections. The first will examine Didi-Huberman's claims in relation to recent shifts across the humanities that have sought to restore agency to images. The second section will examine Didi-Huberman's response, arguing that he turns to some of the great experimental projects of the early twentieth century, such as Walter Benjamin's literary montage *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940) and Aby Warburg's photographic collection *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1925–1929). The governing principles of montage, such as juxtaposition, the assemblage of heterogeneous parts, and emphasis on the spectator's participation are well known. Perhaps, however, there is another way to speak of montage, when it is employed as a mode of knowledge. Didi-Huberman identifies the epistemological capacity of montage as a mechanism to free the image from the dogma of art-historical discourse. What is at stake here is a model of representation that is no longer imitative, but capable of generating its own theoretical and intellectual undertaking. By emphasising montage's capacity to create new meaning and generate new lines of thought, the image becomes a theoretical object, a thing that "thinks."

The notion that images are endowed with a life of their own has enjoyed increasing currency amongst art historians and visual theorists in recent years. Loosely assembled under the rubric of object-orientated ontology, theories as diverse as Bill Brown's "thing theory," W.J.T. Mitchell's "pictorial turn," and Gottfried Boehm's "iconic turn" have sought to restore agency to the image. Keith Moxey has extended this line of thought, arguing images are endowed with presence. Fatigued with the "linguistic turn," and the idea that images are a language that can be "read," Moxey observes that images are "more appropriately encountered than interpreted" (132). In France, Didi-Huberman is one theorist who has maintained an ongoing commitment to describing the power of images. Emerging from the general critique of representation that was underway during the 1980s and 1990s, Didi-Huberman has sought to articulate alternative frameworks for understanding images beyond the idealist legacies bequeathed by traditional art history.

One of the lines of thought unifying this cross-disciplinary impulse is a reconsideration of the subject-object relationship. The subject is bracketed and the object becomes the focus of enquiry. As Bill Brown observes: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an

object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). The reconfigurement of the subject-object relationship enjoys a long history in French philosophical, literary and psychoanalytical traditions. Recall Jacques Lacan's anecdote concerning the glimmering sardine can he saw floating on the water as a young man. In his theorisation of the gaze in *Seminar XI*, Lacan reversed dominant theories of vision, arguing that "[t]hings look at me" (109). The subject, no longer the originating point of vision, is ensnared in the gaze of the object. Alternatively, consider the tactile power assigned to objects in Sartre's 1937 novel, *Nausea*. The main protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, suffered from acute bouts of nausea as a response to the sudden awareness of being touched by objects. Roquentin describes his horror:

> Objects ought not to *touch*, since they are not alive. You use them, you put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it's unbearable. I am afraid of entering in contact with them, just as if they were living animals. (22)

The simple act of holding a pebble on the beach is acknowledged by Roquentin as "sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was!" (22).

If Lacan's sardine can has the capacity to "look at me," and objects are responsible for generating nausea, we are not far away from Didi-Huberman's proposition that images can think. As Hanneke Grootenboer and Matthew Ancell have recently demonstrated, the notion of thinking images occupies a privileged position in French thought, stretching from theorists, artists and art historians historically and theoretically diverse as Nicholas Poussin, Roland Barthes, Hubert Damisch and Jacques Derrida. Didi-Huberman's claim that montage is a thinking form simultaneously contributes to this lineage, as well as breathing new life into old debates between members of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s concerning the efficacy of representation. Georg Lukács famously condemned montage, relegating it to little more than a "one-dimensional technique," rapidly acceding to monotony. Lukács writes: "The details may be dazzlingly colourful in their diversity, but the whole will never be more than an unrelieved grey on grey. After all, a puddle can never be more than dirty water, even though it may contain rainbow tints" (43). How, then, can montage be anything more than a nostalgic revival of the goals and ambitions of the historical avant-garde? To push the question even further, how is it possible to imagine a contemporary relevancy for montage practices?

Against Lukács' condemnation, montage as a tool for revising art's historiography has drawn increasing attention by French scholars. Philippe Alain-Michaud has traced the theme of movement in his reconsideration of German art historian Aby Warburg's project. For Michaud, Warburg's work is best understood in cinematic terms, culminating in his great unfinished montage experiment, *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Michaud argues that Warburg's interest in movement motifs in the Renaissance was influenced by the growth and influence of the nascent film technology in the 1920s and 1930s. Reaching back further in art's history, Giovanni Careri draws from Sergei Eisenstein's "montage of attractions" to re-examine the work of seventeenth-century sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Traditional Bernini scholarship has emphasised the holistic unity of sculpture, painting and architecture of Bernini's Roman chapels. Careri departs from this, instead working in an explicitly Einsteinian register, underscoring the juxtaposition between Bernini's forms, with the spectator left to reconstruct the heterogeneous components.

A somewhat different treatment of montage has been advanced by Didi-Huberman, who has elected not to restrict his discussion to Soviet avant-garde cinema. Instead, Didi-Huberman retrieves the general principles of the procedure itself, emphasising the shock or juxtaposition between individual parts to generate new lines of thought. Out of the collision, something new is created. At no point does Didi-Huberman get drawn into a detailed discussion of montage, preferring instead to distil its salient features as general operating principles. As a result he places himself at risk of oversimplifying the concept, ignoring the form's individual nuances, complexities and mutations as it was taken up in other geographies. The strategy, however,

affords Didi-Huberman an enormous degree of freedom. He looks and finds montage practices where we least expect: the collision created in the layout of text and print in Georges Bataille's journal *Documents* (1929–1930) (*La Ressemblance Informe*); Bertolt Brecht's press images in *Kriegsfibel* (1955) (*Quand les images*) and André Malraux's *Le Musée imaginaire* (1952–1954) (*L'album*).

Against a purely aesthetic understanding of montage, Didi-Huberman is instead drawing close to Deleuze's famous conclusion at the end of *The Time-Image*: "Cinema's concepts are not given in cinema. And yet they are cinema's concepts, not theories about cinema" (269). Cinema does not illustrate philosophy, but produces its own philosophical project. Cinema is understood by Deleuze here less as a spectacle, but as a form of thought. Cinema thinks in images, but these images are not imitative or derivative. Instead, they are generative, initiating their own thinking forms.

The origins of Deleuze's claims may be located in his 1968 *Difference and Repetition*. For Deleuze, the task assigned to philosophy was to overcome the image preceding thought, or thought based on resemblance, recognition and identity. Before we even begin thinking, our thought is already predetermined by a series of pre-existing postulates, or assumptions. This is Deleuze's "image of thought" and formulated in the following terms: "We live with a particular image of thought, that is to say, before we begin to think, we have a vague idea of what it means to think, its means and its ends" (*Desert Islands* 139). Deleuze argues that lying at the origin of all thought is a pre-existing image serving as the fundamental ground for thought. He adds his voice here to a long strain in continental philosophy: the moment we begin to think, we have already made an assumption of what we call thinking. The Cartesian method of doubt, for instance, was designed to ensure there were no presuppositions left. Descartes's cogito, "I think," is preceded by assumptions of "I," "think" and "am" or self, subjectivity and being. These assumptions are predicated on the notion that the human subject is universal (everybody knows what it means to think), stable and centred. Deleuze's point is that whilst philosophy has taken care to eliminate preceding suppositions, it has never been entirely successful in escaping them completely. The "I" of the humanist subject can no longer be identified as the foundational source for all knowledge.

Deleuze's attack on the subject as the origin of knowledge points to a decentering of subjectivity that corresponds with his contemporaries. In a similar vein, Michel Foucault recognised that the Cartesian "I think" no longer equates to the "I am." Foucault argued that the "modern *cogito*" would not necessarily be human:

> In this form, the *cogito* will not therefore be the sudden and illuminating discovery that all thought is thought, but the constantly renewed interrogation as to how thought can reside elsewhere than here, and yet so very close to itself; how it can *be* in the forms of non-thinking. (324)

Foucault's "death of man" thesis points to a shift or reorientation from the subject to the object. This has important consequences for later scholars like Didi-Huberman, who are working through the wake of Deleuze and Foucault's respective legacies. Didi-Huberman recognised that traditional art history, practiced in the humanist tradition, was no longer viable. Art history could no longer lay claim to a rational, all-knowing mode of subjectivity and dominance over the image could no longer be comfortably maintained.

Returning now to *Difference and Repetition*, it is an image that resides at the heart of philosophy's residual subjectivity, an "[i]mage in general which constitutes the subjective presupposition of philosophy as a whole" (131). The image is understood by Deleuze in representational terms. To overcome the image of thought, therefore, the image must be destroyed. This is Deleuze's iconoclasm and the task he assigns to philosophy: to displace the idea of what thinking looks like. Deleuze continues:

> [c]onceptual philosophical thought has as its implicit presupposition a pre-philosophical and natural Image of thought, borrowed from the pure element of common sense. According to this image, thought has an affinity with the true; it formally possesses the true and materially wants the true. It is in terms of this image that everybody knows and is presumed to know what it means to think. (131)

The image of thought relies on a series of pre-existing "postulates" that exist prior to thinking. Therefore philosophy must generate "[a] new image of thought – or rather, a liberation of thought from those images which imprison it" (Deleuze xvi–xvii). How, then, to free thought from what Deleuze designates as the "dogmatic" and "orthodox" image that occurs prior to thinking (131)? Deleuze gives us an important clue, drawing an analogy with modernist painting's passage towards abstraction: "The theory of thought is like painting: it needs that revolution which took art from representation to abstraction. This is the aim of a theory of thought without image" (276). In painting's withdrawal from the demands of mimesis, it was gradually freed from the strictures of imitation. For Deleuze, this shift encapsulated philosophy's task of thinking prior to the image, language and representation.

Deleuze's arguments hold enormous implications for Didi-Huberman. If art history is organised via a series of pre-existing conventions, these conventions predetermine outcomes. In an interview with Robert Maggiori, Didi-Huberman described this circularity:

> *Grosso modo*, I am interested in the image in that it moves the foundations of representation, that is to say our *idea* of representation... What often fascinates me is the way an image is capable of inventing... configurations that, literally, defy thought. This is why I less have the impression of projecting a 'philosophical gaze' onto images, than returning the power to the image – if it is strong – to upset, thus literally *recommencing with thought* itself, on all levels.

There are two crucial points to recognise in this passage. The first is Didi-Huberman's desire to displace pre-existing ideas of what representation can possibly be. From his earliest writings in the 1980s, Didi-Huberman has sought to pursue a concept of representation departing from classic understandings of mimesis. For art history, this has been the idealism underwriting the discipline since Vasari and codified by Erwin Panofsky via Kant (*Confronting Images*). Idealism is a notoriously overdetermined term in the history of philosophy. In its broadest sense, idealism privileges the notion that ideas are primary, while non-ideas, such as physical and material things, are secondary. We can easily recognise this line of thought descending from Plato who derided images as secondary and derivative as opposed to higher Forms. The second point in the conversation with Maggiori reminds us that Didi-Huberman is not simply trying to import a pre-existing "philosophical gaze" and apply it to images. Instead, he is attempting to recommence with thought itself, what it means to think free from disciplinary conventions that predetermine outcomes. To reframe this in Deleuzian terms: disciplinary conventions blind the art historian to an actual image. It is therefore necessary to free the image from the discourse preceding it.

This is not a matter of simply opposing words and images, a long tradition that has been explored in various ways by art historians and theorists. W.J.T. Mitchell famously mapped the tension between words and images, arguing "The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a "nature" to which only it has access" (43). Mitchell did not attempt to neutralise or resolve the relationship, instead elected to historicise the conflict, charting the historical struggle for dominance between word and image. Alternatively, Svetlana Alpers approached the issue in Foucauldian terms of knowledge and power: "For as scholars, art historians all too often see themselves as being in pursuit of knowledge without recognizing how they themselves are the makers of that knowledge" (6). Alpers recognised the unequal distribution of power exerted by the language-based discipline over images. It would be a mistake, however, to position Didi-Huberman's work in terms of this intellectual lineage. Nor

may it be measured as a deconstructionist gesture aimed at recovering the image from its subordination to text. Instead, Didi-Huberman tries to approach the image free from the conventions that determine the discourse of art history. For Didi-Huberman, montage's potential lies in reimagining the discipline, beyond its linguistic and logocentric biases. As he puts it: "Beyond the model of the graphic or cinematographic process as such, we ought to conceive of montage as doing for the field of images what signifying difference did for the field of language in the post-Saussurian conception" (*Images* 121). To be clear, what is at stake here for Didi-Huberman is an epistemological shift on par with structuralism's impact on the life sciences in the 1950s and 1960s.

How, then, does a deeply visual tradition like art history rethink its dependence on mimetic representation? If idealism implicitly determines art history's methodological approach, how may the image be perceived prior to its theorisation? How to overcome the image of thought? Deleuze's answer is the encounter. He writes "[s]omething in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but a fundamental *encounter*" (*Difference* 139). What is this encounter Deleuze speaks of? A genuine encounter is a shock or jolt, forcing a rupture and breaking with convention. As opposed to the representation which reinforces the same, conventional habits of thought, the affective force of the encounter forces us to think otherwise, and develop a new image of thought. The conjunction between the shock of the encounter and montage is made clear in Deleuze's *Cinema* books. Deleuze writes "Montage is in thought the 'intellectual process' itself, or that which, under the shock, thinks the shock" (*Time Image* 153). Here, Deleuze was able to crystallise this new non-representational image of thought in terms of cinema. Deleuze's anti-representationalism is given full expression in the image's capacity to generate new lines of thought through the shock of montage. Deleuze describes two moments here. The first is the shock of montage's juxtaposition that jolts the spectator: "The complete circuit thus includes the sensory shock which raises us from the images to conscious thought, then the thinking in figures which takes us back to the images and gives us an affective shock again" (156). The second moment moves in the opposite direction, back to the image itself, "from the concept to the affect, or which returns from thought to the image" (154). Deleuze relocates the origin of thought from the spectator to image. Images no longer passively "represent" or "imitate" philosophical thought, but are capable of generating their own theoretical project. We might say cinema consists of images, but images are not simply passive reflections. Images are what cinema thinks with.

Deleuze's critique of the image of thought holds important implications for what philosophy can be. Philosophy now demands a new approach that is non-dogmatic and non-systematic. For Didi-Huberman, montage is an exemplary form of intervention. Firstly, it is anti-mimetic, therefore aligned with his critique of idealist formulations of representation. Secondly, montage is discontinuous. It can jolt, shock, reconfigure and reassemble. Montage cuts through existing knowledge structures, refusing to allow anything to settle. This extends to mental images, with Didi-Huberman identifying a montage impulse in Charles Baudelaire's description of the imagination. Writing with regard to Edgar Poe, Baudelaire observed:

> Imagination is not fantasy, nor is it sensibility, difficult though it would be to conceive of an imaginative man who was not sensitive. Imagination is a virtually divine faculty that apprehends immediately, by means lying outside philosophical methods, the intimate and secret relations of things, the correspondences and analogies. (199)

The behaviour of Baudelaire's "intimate and secret relations", "correspondences" and "analogies" is akin to montage. Montage produces, not simply reproduces, an existing idea. Montage allows for the recommencement of thought.

It is the montage practices of Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg where Didi-Huberman detects a style of thought deliberately eschewing recognition through representation. During the 1930s,

Benjamin took up the theme of montage in respect to his discussions on Marcel Proust and his friend Bertolt Brecht. [1] His commitment to montage is given its most complete expression in his monumental *Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project).* Constructed in the late nineteenth-century out of iron and glass, the Parisian arcades were a visible representation of the industrial revolution and considered the pinnacle of luxury and leisure culture. Despite this, the arcades had long been in physical decline. By the time of Benjamin's permanent relocation and exile to Paris in 1933, the arcades had become fusty relics, symbols of the aspirations of a tired modernity. Consisting of more than 900 pages, *Arcades Project* is a literary montage, a collage of incomplete aphorisms, historical quotations and Benjamin's own commentary. Benjamin's sources are many and varied as he assembles a dizzying array of diverse fragments ranging from nineteenth-century tourist guides, extracts of Baudelaire's poetry and architect Haussmann's memoires. As a literary montage, the reader is provided with an inexhaustible series of combinations and opportunities for potential assembly. As a result, the act of reading the text is a restless, fragmentary experience of competing voices and sources of material.

One of Benjamin's most important operative concepts for Didi-Huberman is the "dialectical image." Didi-Huberman pulls the dialectical image in the direction of Deleuze, animating a nexus between the two that privileges the shock of an encounter. The dialectical image is not understood by Didi-Huberman in representational terms, as a traditional "image", or "picture". Instead it is imagined as a "dazzling shock" (*Devant le temps* 241). Didi-Huberman is building on Benjamin's own comments that present the dialectical image as participating in a certain "caesura in the movement of thought" (475). Benjamin repeatedly emphasises the disruption performed by the dialectical image: "Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears" (475). Returning to Deleuze's challenge issued in *Difference and Repetition*, Benjamin's dialectical image does not depend on memory or recognition, but is the result of a "fundamental encounter" (139). This encounter is formulated as a jolt or disturbance.

Benjamin demands an active participant – at no point is the reader permitted to settle into a passive or complacent state. This is, of course, entirely Benjamin's point. The montage was designed to jolt the reader from their anaesthetisation. By rejecting the form of traditional chronological narrative, Walter Benjamin demonstrates the power of montage to reconfigure and reassemble material anew. This strategy suggests a clear shift from spectator to text. As Benjamin describes it: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show" (460). No longer imitative, Benjamin's quotations collide, producing new associations and lines of thought for the reader.

Contemporaneous with Benjamin's project, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* was a famous collection of images that Aby Warburg was working on in the final years of his life (Fig. 1). In Warburg's experiments with montage, Didi-Huberman detects an anti-idealist sensibility eschewing recognition through imitation.The *Mnemosyne Atlas* was conceived by Warburg in 1925 and remained unfinished at his death in 1929. It consisted of about one thousand images pinned over seventy nine panels covered in black fabric. Dismantled with the Warburg library's shift from Hamburg to London, it exists today only as a series of photographs. By mapping out his ideas in arrangements of images, *Mnemosyne Atlas* allowed Warburg the flexibility to pursue his ideas visually with a freedom not afforded by the written text. *Mnemosyne* gives visual form to Warburg's notion of *Pathosformel* (pathos formulas) and the idea that certain motifs and gestures survive through the history of images. By drawing together constellations of images, Warburg was able to trace the recurrence and return of gestures, drawing new connections and relations between them.

Fig. 1 Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1925-1929. Panel 79. (Copyright: Reproduced with permission from The Warburg Institute, University of London.)

Didi-Huberman is quick to differentiate the atlas from its cousins, the encyclopaedia and the archive. The atlas does not behave systematically like the encyclopaedia or exhaustively like the archive. The atlas "chooses." From the 25,000 photographic reproductions available in Warburg's personal image library, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* consisted only of 1,000 carefully selected images. An atlas refuses to be "read" in the sense one would read a novel or an essay from first page to last. Its point of entry is random, and the pathway through not linear or predetermined. Rejecting a strict chronological structure, the image configurations could be continually changed around, altered, photographed and dismembered, only for another series of images to be repositioned, explored, documented and dismantled.

Warburg's *Mnemosyne* serves as a springboard for how new ideas are created through montage and juxtaposition. The form of montage in *Mnemosyne* is more than the result of an artistic process, but "a visual form of knowledge" (*Atlas* 14). Didi-Huberman resists the temptation to construct an image by image reconstruction, instead accentuating the non-axiomatic openness of

the images and their ability to be constantly rearranged. In its capacity to conjure unforseen relations and give form to previously unnoticed affinities, Didi-Huberman argues montage is a "procedure capable of putting into movement new 'thought spaces'" (182). The montage effect does not illustrate pre-existing ideas and concepts, but generates new relationships between the constellations of images. Akin to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, *Mnemosyne* ensures there are no predictable or stable outcomes. Instead, it asks the spectator to proceed heuristically, eschewing pre-determined rules.

The montage process is not imitative, but productive and generative. No longer dependent on the idealism of mimetic forms, montage brings Didi-Huberman's work directly into dialogue with Deleuze's claim that cinema generates its own ideas. *Mnemosyne* no longer "represents" or "imitates" pre-existing ideas, but allows new relations and unforseen connections to flourish. The images do not simply reproduce, but rearrange and reorganise in ways that render them new. By generating new relations between images, *Mnemosyne* posits a shift in the origin of knowledge and disrupts the traditional subject, object relations. The spectator is no longer the privileged source of meaning. Instead, it is through the juxtapositions and collisions of the montage process that fresh lines of thought are generated by the images themselves.

We can recognise here Didi-Huberman's commitment to Deleuze's call to overcoming the image of thought:

> Warburg expresses in his atlas a fundamental *complexity* – of an anthropological order – that was neither to be synthesised (through a unifying concept) nor described exhaustibly (in an integral archive), nor classed from A to Z (in a dictionary). Warburg's atlas does not perform according to an pre-axiomatic structure. It is not predictable in its outcome. (19)

The atlas is dynamic. It is through the montage and collision of images that previously unanticipated dialogues and relationships are produced. In this way, the atlas intersects with Deleuze's claim that cinema generates its own concepts. This results in a shift or displacement in the source or origin of knowledge. No longer located in the subject, the atlas itself is a visual form of knowledge. The atlas "thinks," performing its own philosophical and epistemological project.

Firmly eschewing the notion of the image as a passive reflection, or illustration of pre-existing philosophical concepts, Gilles Deleuze privileges the cinematic image as a preferred mode for overcoming the image preceding thought. No longer understood in mimetic or imitative terms, the image is capable of generating its own thought processes. This essay has traced the trajectory of Didi-Huberman's invocation of montage as a general disruption to mimetic understandings of representation, extending to the discipline of art history itself. By way of two case studies, *The Arcades Project* and the *Mnemosyne Atlas,* Didi-Huberman responds to Deleuze's challenge, identifying the epistemological capability of montage as a mechanism to free thought from the image that precedes it. Benjamin and Warburg's montage practices produce cinematic modes of thinking. Performing their own philosophical and epistemological projects, these great experimental montage projects eschew the idealism that has implicitly informed the discipline of art history. The process signals a radical displacement from the spectator to the image as the source of knowledge.

Dr Chari Larsson has recently completed her PhD examining the work of French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. Her research focuses on theories of images and representation, specifically in the areas of art historiography.

Endnotes

1. See, in particular, Benjamin's discussion of Proust's *mémoire involontaire* (*Image of Proust*). Benjamin underscores the disruptive nature of the involuntary experience, akin to the shock of montage, writing: "The true reader of Proust is constantly jarred by small shocks" (208). On the montage impulse in Brechtian theatre, see Benjamin's 1934 essay "The Author as Producer" where Benjamin aligns epic theatre with what he argues are the most advanced modernist techniques, such as John Heartfield's photomontages and Soviet film and radio.

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