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EYES WIDE OPEN

Robert Harvey

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Tell them that if your heart should turn to [stone], your brain become a cold thinking machine and your eyes transform into a camera, you will not come back to them again.

*Zalmen Gradowski, Rouleaux d'Auschwitz, I (1944)*¹

Yes. One must imagine.

*Filip Müller in Shoah, dir. Claude Lanzmann*²

Nearby, with us, sometimes eerily far from us – the world that would survive *all this* will have had to be able to see and not escape what so many have done to others. See it, fathom it, be unable to elude it – not to writhe ludicrously in guilt, but to stop it from ever happening again. Here, there, anywhere.

What exactly is meant by “the eye of history”? Even before his “L’Œil de l’histoire” series of varied and substantial volumes that Éditions de Minuit has published now for more than a decade got underway, Georges Didi-Huberman provided us with not only an unforgettable example but one meant never to be forgotten. “*Dans l’Œil même de l’histoire*” – “In the Very Eye of History” – is the title Didi-Huberman lent to the third movement of his crucial and indispensable *Images malgré tout* (published in English as *Images in Spite of All*) in which the testimony of *Sonderkommando* survivors like David Olère and Filip Müller compel all of us to consider words and pictures describing what happened in the eye of the worst man-made disasters as perfectly adequate to their testimony. To consider words and pictures in the manner implicitly prescribed by such survivors requires our use of the

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what the eye of history compels us to do

imagination in face of the claim that anything unimaginable exists.

What does the eye of history enjoin us to do? While we possess the organs named eyes that enable us to see, to perceive visible phenomena, we might say, as Didi-Huberman has been doing, that history, like some hurricane, contains a metaphorical eye within which the devastation wrought by the species that makes history is and has been at its nadir. Further, to the eyes with which we actually take in and interpret the visible world, also corresponds, within us (so we say), an eye (another metaphor) associated with what we call our imagination. It is at the nexus of these three senses of “eye” – our organs of

vision, our mind's eye, and the eye of history – that Georges Didi-Huberman argues explicitly and implicitly with arguments, examples and images that an ethical injunction issues out to each of us to take responsibility for the future based on what we see.

Let us consider, for a moment, the last paragraph of *Images in Spite of All*: the question of images is at the heart of the great darkness of our time, our “cultural discontent.”³ We must know how to gaze into images to see that of which they are the survivors, so that history, freed from the pure past (that absolute, that abstraction) might help us to open the present of time (*Images malgré tout* 226; *Images in Spite of All* 182; trans. modified).

Seeing both clearly and effectively into the eye of history requires far more participation than just that of the direct witnesses: their testimony – discursive, pictorial – must reach the core of those who were not there, in order for them – us, that is – to become *activist witnesses by proxy*. It can do so only by virtue of images in the broadest sense of the term “read” through the lens of the imagination. This may seem obvious enough given the close relationship between the terms, but it is yet to be the accepted method for improving on our past behavior as a species. If we open our eyes, in other words, upon images that are at the eye of history we may yet have a chance to survive a bit longer.

I began writing this series of reflections on the day of the seventy-second anniversary of the US A-bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Only the month before had I, for the very first time, visited that city magnificently spread across the several islands formed by the majestic Ota delta. I naturally visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum after having entered the park via the corner where the Genbaku Dome looms. That brief visit kindled in me more than one recollection: first of *Écorces*, Georges Didi-Huberman's precious evocation of his first visit to the ruins of the extermination camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, of *Images in Spite of All* (2003) on the four furtively snapped shots made in Birkenau's Crematorium V by a Greek *Häftling* named Alex⁴ and of all of Didi-Huberman's work in the intervening years

and beyond. Witness this Beckettian beginning to “L'Œil de l'histoire” no. 5, entitled *Passés cités par JLG* (2015):

Whenever the past doesn't go down well [...] it gets stuck in our throats and sews up our eyelids. A poorly digested past, a past ill-seen becomes the piteous condition of our blindness to the present [...] A past ill-said is the best way to remain in a state of muteness as to the future. (11)⁵

As my reader may guess, I am not yet through with Godard and certainly not with Beckett.

Near the end of my Hiroshima museum visit, on the ground floor, my attention was arrested particularly by the blowup of a photograph made of atomic bomb survivors. The eye is drawn to the center where a hirsute figure, captured moving in mid-stride toward a group of people huddled to the right around an invisible center of attention, appears to have tattered clothing and also, perhaps, tattered flesh. The darker gray of the sidewalk beneath this group dotted with footprints in the same tone a few feet beyond suggests some liquid being distributed and spilt. Between this group and the girl, another figure leans down either to pick up what looks like a rag, or to touch his left foot with his right hand. To the left of the image, seated along what is likely a bridge, is another group of survivors. Any further details about what we are looking at and how long after the snapshot the people photographed survived, if they did, is all left to our imagination fueled by our general knowledge of the horror wrought by nuclear weapons.

Equaling this photograph in pathos, but of course differently, is the transcription of statements presumably uttered by the unnamed photographer and displayed next to the blowup. I had never seen a reproduction of this photograph previously and knew nothing of the photographer. The legend – at least its English translation – gave no indication of the photographer/speaker's identity. Item 32 on the audio guide perhaps provides this information – I don't know: I rarely follow audio tours. But as the remarks that I will make in the remainder of this article on what the eye of history compels us to do will hopefully



Fig. 1. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, 11 July 2017. Author's personal photograph.

make clear, I think it was crucially useful for me – as spectator of this spectacle – not to have known the identity of the person explaining his feelings as he photographed the spectacle reproduced before me that afternoon in Hiroshima. In ignorance of it, I was able to let myself more easily imagine *myself* right inside the moral dilemma that caused the photographer to reflect on what he did in this particular way. The blowup of the furtively made photograph catapulted me into the space of utter disaster, while the anonymous words drew me into the photographer's ethical "space."

Yoshito Matsushige (1913–2005) was a photo-journalist who made the only known images *inside* Hiroshima on the morning of 6 August 1945. Dwelling 2.7 kilometers south of Ground Zero, Matsushige was among those who were not killed instantaneously by the blast. After the initial shock, although his house was demolished and he was injured by

broken glass, he found some clothes, picked up his camera and decided to make his way to the center of the city. He got as far as the Miyuki Bridge where utter horror and pity for the people dead and barely living inhibited him, for at least twenty minutes, from snapping the shutter. Finally, he took one shot then, moving closer, a second. "Even today, I clearly remember how the view finder was clouded over with my tears."⁶ That first shot is the one I saw enlarged in the museum in July. Matsushige took these photographs less than four hours after the bomb had been detonated 580 meters above the Shima Surgical Clinic in the center of Hiroshima. The survivors depicted had just survived, but most would not survive long. The liquid darkening the sidewalk was cooking oil with which the still living victims in agony desperately doused themselves. Matsushige would take only three more pictures that morning: one of a policeman seated with his

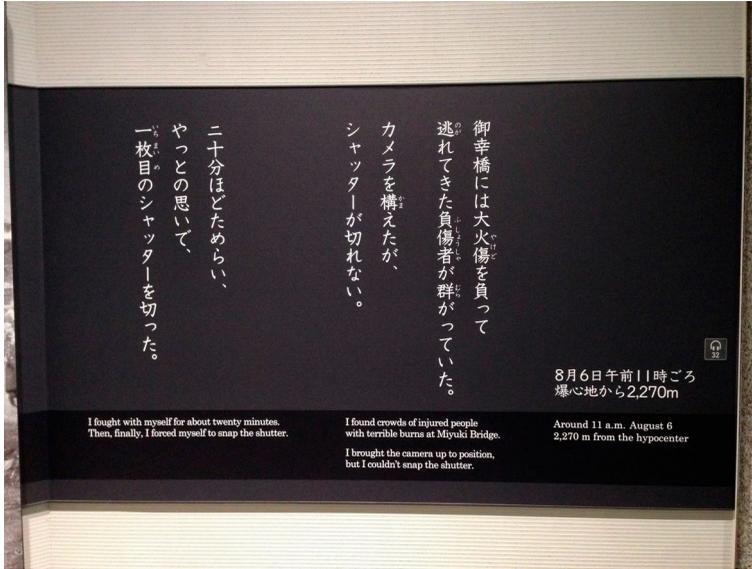


Fig. 2. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, 11 July 2017. Author's personal photograph.

head bandaged distributing some sort of certificate to citizens and two back at his home attesting to the damage incurred there. As his death-date attests, unlike most of those he photographed that day, Yoshito Matsushige would go on to become a *hibakusha* – an atomic bomb survivor.

Both the moral conundrum into which Yoshito Matsushige was thrust when feeling compelled and bound to somehow, in spite of all, photograph the horror coupled with that conundrum's *transfer to us* as we gaze at the result of his work are, I believe, at the core of the problematic that Georges Didi-Huberman deploys across the entirety of the “Eye of History” project. In addition to the statements inscribed next to the blowup of his picture taken on Miyuki Bridge, Matsushige was interviewed extensively by Canadian photographer Robert Del Tredici for his 1987 volume entitled *In the Field of the Bomb*. Bryan C. Taylor reproduces and commentates portions of Del Tredici's interview with Matsushige:

[...] when he confronted the crowds of dead and suffering victims, [Yoshito Matsushige's] professionalism posed a terrible dilemma. “When I saw them I realized I had to take a

picture, and I tried to push the shutter, but I couldn't. It was so terrible. The people were pathetic. I had to wait” (188). When asked why he took only five photographs that day, Matsushige explains, “Before I became a professional cameraman, I had been just an ordinary person” (187). He was able to overcome his revulsion at the scene only by asserting, “I am a professional cameraman, so I have to take pictures.” Despite this rationalization, he found that he was unable to “push the shutter a second time without crying,” and so turned away first from the bodies of students from a girls' high school and then later from victims boiled in a swimming pool and a busload of charred bodies. All of these scenes were “too terrible to take a picture of.” (578)⁷

As though anticipating some of the ethical fallout from Didi-Huberman's analyses of texts and images by Brecht⁸ and Godard,⁹ by Fuller and Centelles,¹⁰ by Goya and Pasolini,¹¹ Taylor further observes that

Photography becomes an additional violation of the dead and dying, stripping whatever dignity remains to define and own their suffering. Matsushige's account confirms that photographic realism can be overwhelmed

by excessive images of nuclear death that expose its affective contingencies and repressions. (578)

Vicariousness, as I have had occasion to call it elsewhere,¹² is the great ethical lesson that I see recurring with insistence in Georges Didi-Huberman's work – especially in the “*Œil de l'histoire*” cycle: our vicarious nature, denigrated and repressed in so many different ways by the forces of culture, of “civilization,” of socialization, of governmentality, our vicariousness which we, thus, need to cultivate privately against many forces, if we are to... Georges Didi-Huberman teaches us relentlessly that works are meant to place us *where witnesses have been*: in the eye of history. As Greg Mitchell puts it, when we are before the blowup of Matsushige's photograph on Miyuki Bridge, “We are on that road to Hiroshima, three hours after the bomb fell, staring into the whirlwind” (24).¹³ Our eyes need to focus on that locus: that eye of the storms created over and over again by our species.

The ethical struggle into which the exhibitor of a photographic image is thrust is the subject at the core of *Images malgré tout*. The reserved, attenuated gesture which is nonetheless certain of the conviction it carries belies the ethical struggle. Exhibiting the image, placing it in the potential field of vision of countless others, is the gesture by which the exhibitor puts his responsibility on the line. When the viewer learns *what it took* for the exhibitor. “What it took” was a struggle of existential magnitude equal, I'll dare say, to the force of hope that allows for survival.

Numerous researchers have carried out detailed analyses of the machinery of *disimagination* that made it possible for an SS officer to say:

There will perhaps be suspicion, discussion, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed. (Levi 11)

The “Final Solution” as we know, was kept in absolute secrecy-silence and smothered information. But as the details of the extermination began to filter through, “almost from the beginning of the massacres,” silence needed a reciprocal discourse. It involved rhetoric, lying, an entire strategy of words that Hannah Arendt defined in 1942 as the “eloquence of the devil.”

The four photographs snatched from Auschwitz by members of the *Sonderkommando* were also, therefore, four *refutations* snatched from a world that the Nazis wanted to obfuscate, to leave wordless and imageless. Analyses of the concentration camp have long converged on the fact that the camps were laboratories, experimental machines for a *general obliteration* (Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All* 20).

Time after time the “Eye of History” series offers what I consider an ethical extension of Kant's description of the “experience of the sublime” and the part it plays in the development of empathy in consciousness. Two of Georges Didi-Huberman's examples will help to illustrate my claim that empathy blossoms from *shared experiences* of the sublime. One is an examination of a young Samuel Fuller's film footage shot while the Flossenbürg concentration camp at Falkenau was being opened; the other is his meditation on photographs taken inside Bram concentration camp by Catalanian inmate Agustí Centelles. Oddly, but convincingly if we allow images to argue as discourse conventionally does, Marguerite Duras provides theoretical grounding for the method we must use in exploring passageways to vicariousness.

In one of the aphoristic pieces that Duras included in *Les Yeux verts* [*Green Eyes*], whose title poetically suggests eyes that are wide open (*les yeux ouverts*),¹⁴ Duras initiates speculative thinking on the basis of the following question about certain photographs by Édouard Boubat: “If eyes saw the way Boubat's photography sees, could they stand it?” She might mean something like this: if someone were to shut her eyes at an awful sight would she yet be overcome by what she continued to see behind her eyelids? Duras begins to explain: “I'm thinking of certain photographs of children. Of children who on



Fig. 3. “Lella” by Édouard Boubat, as reproduced in *Les Yeux verts* (*Cahiers du cinéma* 312–13, June 1980).

suddenly realizing that they’re being photographed are torn [*partagés*] between fear, wonder, the fundamental surprise that means ‘Why us and not someone else?’ or ‘us rather than something else’” (736).

Figure 3 is a portrait of Lella made by Édouard Boubat in 1948. Duras inserted it strategically, as she did dozens of other photographs, in *Green Eyes*. In an apparently unrelated but adjacent text, Duras gives voice to her extreme doubts about humanity’s chances for establishing abiding peace.

“Opening the Camps, Closing Eyes” [*Ouvrir les camps, fermer les yeux*], or perhaps, to convey *both* of the meanings brought out in what unfolds beneath it, “... Closing (One’s) Eyes,” is the title of the first of the two principal

essays making up Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Remontages du temps subi*, yet to be officially translated into English as, perhaps again, *Going Back Over Time Undergone*.¹⁵ The fifty-six-page meditation turns on dignity and indignation: the dignity of the men in the US Army’s 1st Infantry Division, to which Samuel Fuller belonged as the Second World War came to an end, making the citizens living in the vicinity of Falkenau treat the bodies of the dead with a modicum of respect; the indignation – those infantrymen’s indignation, Fuller’s indignation – at those “respected citizens” of Falkenau having closed their eyes to what had been happening right under their noses.

On the other hand, there was the soldiers’ indignation at the Nazis’ unworthiness

(*indignité*) and, nearly as much, their indignation at the indignity of the neighboring town's population – half of whom denounced each other, while the other half pretended that they knew nothing, even though the camp was only a few short meters from certain of the town's houses and, especially, since the intolerable smell of death reigned throughout the surrounding space (*Remontages* 36).¹⁶

Our vicariously felt indignation too, Didi-Huberman no doubt hopes, for even if we haven't seen Emil Weiss's montage of Fuller's footage, Didi-Huberman attempts, through his written meditation, to open the eyes of our imagination upon that space where the inconceivable (yet altogether imaginable) happened.

Although Flossenbürg concentration camp was located in a *place* called Falkenau, now named Sokolov and in the Czech Republic and although Bram concentration camp was located in a *place* still called Bram in the Languedoc region of France, those places *become* for our gaze *today* at Samuel Fuller's film and Agustí Centelles' photographs perhaps – a gaze amplified by Didi-Huberman's meditations – *spaces* that our imagination penetrates to come to the rescue of reason shocked by what we see. Under the heading of “the mathematically sublime,” Kant explains that, confronted with a space of inestimable magnitude, imagination stands in for reason: “The measurement of a space is at the same time a description of it, and thus an objective movement in the act of imagination and a progress” (97). In a statement that could only have encouraged Hannah Arendt in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1982), Kant goes on to assert that this very same substitution of imagination allows reason to grasp that “the manifold in the unity annihilates the condition of time [. . .] and makes *coexistence* intuitable” (97–98). In order for us to achieve an estimation of the empathy that Fuller came to have in relation to the fellow humans for whom it was too late by the time the US Army's 1st Infantry Division liberated the Flossenbürg camp, in order for us to begin to fathom the empathy that Centelles had to have in relation to his fellow humiliated brothers for most of whom it was not quite yet too late, we

spectators – distanced as we are by space and “distanced” by time – must nevertheless, in spite of all, be able to imagine ourselves *now* in that space *then*. Our eyes must be wide open to heed the appeal of the eye of history.

Just as Stevens and Kellogg's film, made from Fuller's footage, served to “bear witness” at Nüremberg and thus *open the eyes* of perpetrators upon their crime, so Didi-Huberman calls upon us, now (and here), to do the same. After commenting on Freud's famous dream upon the death of his father, whose core is the almost imperceptible – but determinant – slippage between *die Augen zudrücken* and *ein Auge zudrücken*, Didi-Huberman writes that the historian and, by implication, we the readers, all of us, imaginatively and, yes, *vicariously* must “in one and the same stroke, close the eyes of the dead (a particularly ethical gesture on opening a camp) and keep our eyes open upon their death (a particularly necessary act of knowledge and vigilance sixty years later)” (66). (I note, in passing, that it is Didi-Huberman who slips in the possessive *our* eyes.) “At one stroke” – “*dans le même geste*” is Didi-Huberman's expression – if not simultaneously, at least in a sequence with no pause whatsoever, even if the two parts of the gesture are separated by the sixty-odd years since the actual events.

Inviting us, once again, to open our eyes, read images and, thereby, bring a space of horror from the past into the present horizon of our place as potential ethical actors is what Georges Didi-Huberman does in Appendix I of the same book. The photographic archive of life at the death-dealing limits of life made by Catalán artist Agustí Centelles (himself a prisoner) in Bram concentration camp provides a lens through which we may see what it is like when “one humiliated gazes at the humiliated.” “*Quand l'humilié regarde l'humilié*” is the title of Appendix I. The subject that Didi-Huberman calls “*l'humilié*” and that I have translated as “one humiliated,” is “not only man floored [*à terre*], it is man pinned to a ground that is no longer his but one imposed by another man's boot. Humiliation is forced immobility. It makes thought crazy and causes one to go

mute. It cuts off all ties. It makes a mortal enemy of one's fellow man. It deals a mortal blow to time itself, since in the depths of humiliation perspectives and projects alike lay in ruins" (198). In sum (for these are all symptoms of the same phenomenon), one who is humiliated is as the subject in the first tetanizing moment of the experience of the sublime, as Kant described it in the famous "Analytic," except that the threat to life is not at the requisite safe distance but right *here* in the form of the jackboot on the humiliated man's neck.

If being forced into a state of humiliation is akin to the first phase of the experience of the sublime, it is nevertheless complicated by two elements: it is complicated firstly by the relationship of the humiliated one with a camera – Yoshito Matsushige arrested before what he witnessed at Miyuki Bridge, for example – with other humiliated ones who occupy the same space otherwise is not altogether reciprocal; it is complicated, secondly, by the relationship of the archive that a photographer creates of the humiliated one who remains, in spite of all, for *the readers that we will have been of that archive*. Regarding the first element of complexification, it is true, as Didi-Huberman writes, "that someone humiliated [...] shares with another [...] humiliated one exactly the same experience, the same dereliction" (*Remontages* 200). Nevertheless, as Primo Levi reminded us emphatically when commenting on Vercors's *Silence de la mer*, "one is never situated in another's place" by which we must take Primo Levi to mean that we may never *substitute* ourselves for another no matter how *identical* to his experience ours may appear. This is the axiom that underpins Levi's relationship to those who died at Auschwitz. And Didi-Huberman also knows very well what the nature of this slight, but absolutely crucial, caveat to equivalence through vicariousness is: it lies in the term – enunciated twice: once as verb conjugated, then again as adjective – that I elided where the ellipses appear above. The term is *to look* and it points emphatically at the second element of complexification. But before speaking to that element, in order for us to *see* it on

the page, here is the term restored to Didi-Huberman's sentence: "L'humilié qui regarde partage avec l'humilié regardé la même expérience, la même déréliction" (*Remontages* 200). This look, extended out to his brother in humiliation by the subject of the photographic gesture, makes the fellow into an object – not, of course, an object of the dereliction that they both endure, but of that gesture of objectification that looking and recording the look is – however much empathy undergirds those gestures. This was Matsushige's paralyzing dilemma on 6 August 1945 in Hiroshima. So that while the humiliated one is, like his humiliated brother, in that state of terrorized awe that Kant said characterizes the first moment of the sublime, he is nevertheless, simultaneously, at that "proper distance"¹⁷ that precludes and allows for the resolution of the crisis phase of the experience. The photographer-humiliated-one is simultaneously both himself and himself-in-the-other.¹⁸

On the basis of Kant's richly evocative description of the experience of the sublime, these two examples from the second volume of the "Eye of History" cycle thus illustrate the construction of empathic ecosystems in which suffering breaks with the impasse of wallowing in self-pity to become a cautionary and shared force across space and time through the medium of the image. And Yoshito Matsushige is yet another photographer-humiliated-one forming a bridge to us, appealing to our responsibility, with an image between what he saw with his own eyes wide open and our mind's eye always ready to be opened (but not always taking the cue). Combined with the words he used to describe his wrenching moral dilemma after surviving the atomic blast that August morning in 1945, Matsushige's photographs create, with our spectators' imagination on full alert, just such an ecosystem. This apparatus for a viable, conceivable and realizable ethics was foregrounded in *Images in Spite of All*.

Before the only set of photographs known to have been captured *within* Auschwitz *during* the Shoah, Georges Didi-Huberman employs his skills of observation to enter as far as any survivor can into the concentrationary universe.

Didi-Huberman's observation skills are bolstered, of course, as anyone else's can be, by training in art history and by knowledge of the history of Auschwitz (where "Auschwitz" serves metonymically to designate the Shoah). He also espouses a belief in the epistemological and ethical power of the image. But above all, by Didi-Huberman's own naming, it is the faculty of *imagination* that opens the other – be he dead, obliterated, smoke, oblivion – to my visitation, to my understanding.¹⁹

Through *Images in Spite of All*, I think Didi-Huberman asks us the following questions: what if those who recount near-death experience all actually died? (This, after all, is what Auschwitz was designed to do. This is why even the ranks of the *Sonderkommando*, of which Filip Müller was a survivor, were radically replaced at regular intervals.) What if all that was left were their memoirs, their testimonials, their remnants? (This is what "Holocaust studies" ultimately tries to prepare us for.) What kind of witnesses might *readers of the witnessing* that those women and men bore become, in their turn, through their reading? (This is what the question *what species of witness are we?* means.) Dare those readers remaining through the vicarious power of reading and contemplating images call themselves, in turn, witnesses? Dare we, if we count ourselves among those readers or spectators, call ourselves witnesses? The question is not so much that of knowing *of what* you and I may be a witness in this sort of second-hand witnessing. The question has always been: how do I (and how may I) become a witness at all if I was only *there* (i.e., at the event, *in the event*) by the proxy of the text or an image? Even Filip Müller, as "witness of all the last moments" (*Images in Spite of All* 4), was still only a hair's breadth from his own death.

The afterwit of history's great eyewitnesses has been observed time and time again. Afterwit's celerity may precipitate quasi-immediate action that more than compensates for the dumb paralysis at the moment of numbing trauma. Here, for example, is how Georges Didi-Huberman characterizes it in the cases of Filip Müller and David Olère, both of whom

had recourse to images – discursive and graphic in these cases – to carry out their witness-work:

One may no doubt speak of these images in terms of *afterwit*, but on condition that one stipulate that afterwit may form immediately, that it may be an integral part of the image's very moment of emergence. In an instant it transforms the *temporal monad* of the event into a complex *temporal montage*. (*Images in Spite of All* 45–46)

Theodor Adorno once wrote that "Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching" (81). As for us, even in the best of cases, it takes a very long time for the afterwit of our condition as witness to dawn on us.

Wit is the minimal resource of he who goes on, to use a famous Beckettian formulation. Wit does the best it can in the worst of circumstances. "Mustn't we make do and struggle with the impurities and lacunae of the image as one does with silences in speech?" queries Didi-Huberman (*Images malgré tout* 155).²⁰ The makeshift struggle to which he refers and to be performed, imperatively, by the vicarious image reader is of the precise order of the "organizing" to which Auschwitz *Häftlinge* were reduced: getting by in spite of all, in spite of being reduced to one's wit's end. Living by one's wits is how the survivor ensures that the eye of history doesn't kill him and his image survives with him.

To do something rational and life-enhancing when reason has vanished is to put one's will to work in order, as Didi-Huberman puts it,

to wrest an external thinking from thought in general, something imaginable in place of that for which none before foresaw the possibility [...] What is most troubling is that such a desire to wrest an image should occur at the most indescribable moment [...] when there was no longer any room for thought or imagination for those dazed and dumbfounded ones who witnessed this. (*Images in Spite of All* 7; trans. modified)

Such witless behavior is "in spite of all" the pinnacle of ethical action.

We were not *there*, we will never have been in the space otherwise where our shared capacity to see, to bear witness turns to what Primo Levi called “complete witnessing.” We cannot imagine our death and die simultaneously. We can only imagine this as if we were another. We might be here, for example, with a reproduced photograph by Yoshito Matsushige or a book by Filip Müller in our hand: we can only feel or know *as if* we had been at ground zero or in the gas chamber. We can witness by proxy, by means of our imagination. This susceptibility to the image, this use of imagination to mount the vigil of the future and its eventuality is what I have called witnessess. What enables a mind to hold hands with complete witnessess so that there might never be complete witnessess again? What enables a mind to care as much as a body can? It is our potential to witness the eye of history putting consciousness at the ready for going one step beyond.

Taking inspiration from Jean-Luc Godard’s life devoted to showing us that “editing” is incremental rather than subtractive and proving to us that *montage* alone is capable of showing a feeling, Didi-Huberman argues that *witness work* is essentially the same procedure. Collisions between images, their fusions or breaks between them, transformations and so on act, “in turn, upon our own activities of thinking and knowing. To know, one must imagine [*s’imaginer*]: the speculative *work-bench* is always there, in tandem, with the *editing table* of the imagination” (*Images malgré tout* 149; *Images in Spite of All* 119). Short of exercising the skill to go where the experience of the other once brought him, the filmmaker can create no montage. Without that nearly mad courage, there is no humanity in the being we say we are.

The individual who captures a crime from within that crime creates a suspension of time necessary for him to have become a witness not only at that instant but for all time, even if he dies before he can speak or show what was eye-witnessed. When an Auschwitz *Häftling* named Alex or a Yoshito Matsushige pressed their shutter button they preserved a time and a place thought by so many to have

been impossible, unimaginable. They created an image of *that*. “The image was possible because an ever so relative zone of calm had been contrived for this deed of looking” (Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All* 40). They also *made room* for the later imagining by others, the survivors by proxy.

Notwithstanding the wrenching misgivings that Yoshito Matsushige experienced before the scene of unspeakable suffering he witnessed on that 6 August morning on Miyuki Bridge, he snapped his shutter twice. In doing so *at the eye of history*, in a couple of blinks of his camera’s eye, he responded simultaneously to all three of Kant’s famous questions: he *knew* he had *to do* this, in spite of all, because in doing so he could *hope* that the future spectators of his images might hope to ensure – through their deep meditation upon those images – that this historical act would never be repeated. In doing so he proved not only, and as Kant predicted, that he was a *Mensch* but – even more importantly – a *mensch* as well. This must be our hope today. But hope takes work and it is to this witness work that the eye of history compels us.



disclosure statement

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notes

Portions of this essay are adaptations from the following books by the author: *Witnessess: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010) and *Sharing Common Ground: A Space for Ethics* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Many thanks to Haaris Naqvi for kind permission to do this.

1 Quoted in Didi-Huberman’s *Images in Spite of All* 32.

2 Before Claude Lanzmann’s camera, in very nearly halting phrases, the otherwise almost effusive Filip Müller manages just barely to give halting voice to what is so often left blank on

Beckett's pages: "One never got used to that. It was impossible." Impossible yet lived (or survived) by the likes of Müller and imaginable by us who enter those words. "Yes. One must imagine," adds Müller before Georges Didi-Huberman returns, after quoting him, to effect a convergence with the categorical imperative of *Images in Spite of All* 39 (cf. Harvey, *Witnessness* 121).

3 Didi-Huberman writes "*malaise dans la culture*" in a direct reference to Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, mistranslated in the nevertheless famous French and English editions as *Malaise dans la civilisation* and *Civilization and its Discontents*.

4 Editors' note: in note 4, page 11 of Didi-Huberman's *Sortir du noir* (2015), it is explained that since the publication of *Images malgré tout*, the photographer of the four images called "Alex" has been, in all probability, identified as Alberto Errera. The note contains more information about Errera.

5 (Editors' note: when there are no existing English translations, the translation is made by the author.) My translation is both truncated and, admittedly, a bit loose. I hope Georges doesn't mind.

Chaque fois qu'il a du mal à passer – dans notre langage comme dans nos images, dans notre histoire comme dans nos mémoires, dans notre idée de la politique comme dans nos pratiques poétiques –, il se coince dans nos gorges et suture nos paupières. Le *passé mal passé*, le *passé mal vu*, devient alors la condition désolante de notre *cécité* quant au présent, cet état toujours problématique où nous nous débattons entre l'énigme des tenants et le mystère des aboutissants. Le *passé mal dit* offre aussi la meilleure façon de se tenir dans un état de mutisme ou de *cécité* quant à notre futur: *cécité* quant à nos désirs mêmes.

6 From a transcription of oral testimony given by Yoshito Matsushige in 1986 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20050811004933/http://www.inicom.com/hibakusha/yoshito.html>) (accessed 9 Sept. 2017).

7 The page numbers in this quotation are Taylor's references to Del Tredici.

8 See Didi-Huberman's *Quand les images prennent position*.

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9 See Didi-Huberman's *Images malgré tout* and *Passés cités par JLG*.

10 See Didi-Huberman's *Remontages du temps subi*.

11 See Didi-Huberman's *Écorces* and *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*.

12 See my book *Witnessness*, particularly 30–34 but also 39, 44, 50, 68–69, 84, 96, 115, 131, 133, 135.

13 Greg Mitchell is co-author of one of the foundational books on what Henry A. Giroux, after Georges Didi-Huberman, calls "America's disimagination machine." Cf. Lifton and Mitchell; Giroux, *Violence of Organized Forgetting*; idem, *America's Addiction to Terrorism*.

14 Duras did something similar with *L'Amante anglaise*, the title of a novel of 1967. Literally, "The English Lover," but suggesting, by homophony, both "English mint" (*la menthe anglaise*) and "the lover in clay" (*l'amante en glaise*), it is entirely understandable that Barbara Bray left the title untranslated in her 1968 translation of the text.

15 Yet other titles suggest themselves: *Redoing the Montage of Times Suffered* etc. (*Remontages* 11–67).

16 In the documentary that a thirty-three-year-old Sam Fuller narrates while strolling through the ruins of Falkenau, he recalls the "stench," which he immediately degrades further to a "stink" of all that rots. Everyone who has been to whatever remains of certain SS camps and taken the time to inspect the perimeter cannot but be struck by this proximity and the criminal heights to which human hypocrisy can rise.

17 Almost seeming to concatenate the action of the soldiers in the US Army's 1st Infantry Division with the action of deportee photographer Centelles, it is Didi-Huberman who invokes this "proper distance" when he writes:

When a camp is opened, the issue is how to stand to look and how to extend one's look [*savoir supporter et porter le regard*] [...] Afterwards, it will be an issue of something altogether different: determining the point of view, finding the proper distance. (*Remontages* 58)

In "proper," here, we can read both *topographically appropriate* and *ethically adjusted*.

18 These last few paragraphs are adapted from my book *Sharing Common Ground* (73–79).

19 This and the following seven paragraphs are adapted from my book *Witnessness* (11, 32–33, 49, 55, 99, 103, 113–14).

20 Here, I have radically altered the translation offered in *Images in Spite of All*. It is very tough to translate, given the author's paratactic language; here is the original: "Ne faut-il pas faire avec les impuretés, les lacunes de l'image, ce qu'il faut faire avec les silences de la parole?" (155). And here is Lillis's attempt: "Should we not treat the impurities, the lacunae of the image, as we have to treat the silences of speech, which is to unravel them, struggle with them?" (124).

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Robert Harvey
Department of Philosophy
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, NY 11794-3750
USA
E-mail: robert.harvey@stonybrook.edu