

**“In Spite of All (Malgré tout)” – entry in *The Didi-Huberman Dictionary* ed. Magdalena Zolkos (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).**

IN SPITE OF ALL (*MALGRÉ TOUT*)

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The locution *malgré tout*, ‘in spite of all’ or ‘despite everything’, is first and foremost associated with the vexed debate stirred by the exhibition *Mémoire des camps*, which was organized in Paris in 2001, and the violent reactions provoked by Didi-Huberman’s catalogue essay, “l’images malgré tout,” subsequently expanded into the eponymously titled book in response to the fierce criticisms. Didi-Huberman’s conception of the four photographs taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando*, the ‘special units’ of Jewish prisoners whose task it was to dispose of the corpses at Birkenau in August 1944, as acts of resistance, as visual testimonies, and as “survivors” (*ISA*, p.46), was first attacked by **Claude Lanzmann**, in an interview in *Le Monde* (2001), and soon followed by Gérard Wajcman in *Les temps modernes* (2001; see also Pagnoux, 2001). In his article, Wajcman accused Didi-Huberman not only of corroborating the logic of Holocaust deniers, who demand that the event is yet to be proved, but, primarily, of Christianizing the Shoah by means of images.

Didi-Huberman’s conversation with Lanzmann goes further back, though, beginning with a brief essay on *Shoah* titled “Le lieu malgré tout,” the *site* in spite of all, written in 1995, which predates his book-length retort in *L’images malgré tout, images in spite of all*, by almost a decade. Ten years after the *Mémoire des camps* dispute, the site and the image come together in Didi-Huberman’s photo-essay *Bark*, written after a visit to the state museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 2011. In the birch forest surrounding the camp, he collected a few pieces of bark that had curled off the trees and dropped to the ground. While these flaky shards convey a loss of context and continuity, they nonetheless maintain a relation to the living surroundings from which they have been torn. It was precisely the edges of the cut, the aimless and accidental framings, which Didi-Huberman called attention to in his close reading of the *Sonderkommando photos*. In common with these “stolen shreds” and “tiny extractions” clandestinely “snatched from a vast hell” (*ISA*, pp.33, 38, 47), the frayed edges of the bark show the marks of the tearing. Mute and unresponsive, the pieces of bark are, to borrow a phrase from Marc Bloch, “witnesses in spite of themselves” (1992 [1954], p.51). Hence, their **survival**, their potential to “start an afterlife which sustains our memory” (OC, p.116), depends on the historical subject who is willing to pay them attention. *Malgré tout* denotes here a latent

possibility that resides as much in the salvaged fragments as in the subject who is prepared to engage with them. It is in their very inconspicuousness that they implore us to get involved. Signifying at once dearth and defiance, the preposition *malgré*—despite, albeit, notwithstanding—thus accords equal emphasis to the modesty of these vestiges and to the acts of resistance or revolt that they may induce.

While the word *tout* generally denotes an overwhelming and oppressive adversary in Didi-Huberman's writings, such as amnesia, neglect, ignorance or death, or the dire record of history as such, it attains a more specific meaning in the aforementioned context. Lanzmann has described *Shoah* as “an arid and pure film,” which “tells the truth” and “teaches everything” (*ISA*, p.127). Torn away from the proverbial “all,” the modest tokens scrutinized by Didi-Huberman point us in the opposite direction, as when he refers to the pieces of bark as “the impurity that comes from the things themselves” (*B*, p.118). Against the “all image” (*ISA*, p.59), which claims to encompass the historical event in its entirety, granting complete knowledge and total recall, he mounts a defense for the historically “useless images” (*ISA*, p.47). Never ceasing to caution the reader that memory, in whatever form, is always flawed and frayed, and that knowledge is attainable for us only in the meager threads of what remains to be sensed, Didi-Huberman responds by making his own photographic inventory of the former campgrounds in *Bark*, including the lichen-covered cement floor of the demolished crematorium. Here, the ‘in spite of’ forms a dialectical bond with its antonym, ‘because of’, whereby witnessing is framed as a relation of resistance and opposition, rather than a relation of consequence or as a corollary result. It is precisely because of its lack of evidentiary value and its resistance to yield information within the curated discursive space of the open-air museum that the cracked floor deserves, and demands, our attention. *Malgré tout* thus implies an ethical imperative to engage and respond, “and to become involved, in spite of all” (*AA*, p.118).

The genealogy of this signature phrase, however, antecedes Didi-Huberman's engagement with the **Holocaust and** permeates his oeuvre in its entirety. It has been key to his phenomenology of ‘minor’ images and gestures, which, despite and because of their shortcomings, oblige the viewer to continue to gaze, interact and imagine. Congruous with his commentary on the pious artists of the early Renaissance, whose task it was to summon God in spite of his silent withdrawal from the world, in *Fra Angelico* and *Confronting Images*, the *Bilderatlas* created by **Aby Warburg** demonstrates that the deities of pagan antiquity “survive in spite of all” (*AA*, p.86), albeit disguised and displaced. While Didi-Huberman in *The Surviving Image* discusses *Nachleben* as a persistence of cultural forms in spite of the passing

and vanishment of their originary “stage” (*SI*, p.32), *Survival of the Fireflies* elaborates on this phenomenon in regard to the intermittent yet indestructible glimmers of clandestine experiences, marginalized communities and suppressed thoughts that continue to emit a faint glow, and the ethical demand that these flickering lights exert upon us to become sensitized to “that which has not completely disappeared and, above all, that which *appears in spite of all*” (*SF*, p. 32).

Encapsulating Didi-Huberman’s lifelong interest in the involuntary or accidental form, the idiom *malgré tout* was initially coined in the context of his study of the revered and contested relics of The Veil of Veronica and the Holy Shroud of Turin. Like the pieces of bark, “[w]hat strikes one immediately is the triviality, the extreme humility, of the objects themselves, which have nothing to show but the tatters of their material” (*CI*, p.188). First featured in the 1984 essay “The Index of the Absent Wound,” *malgré tout* is invoked in relation to the hermeneutic tradition of interpreting the stains on the linen serge in Turin on which “almost nothing was visible” (*IA*, p.63). Didi- Huberman explains that to the devote beholder it is the very absence of figuration that verifies that “*contact* has taken place” (*IA*, p.67-8). Wajcman’s critique of Didi-Huberman’s contribution to *Mémoire des camps* is thus accurate when he proposes that the Holy Shroud is the secret cipher for the art historian’s reading of the four photographs from Auschwitz (2001, p.83). Bruno Chaouat has similarly criticized Didi-Huberman for interpreting these photographs within the discourse of the Christian art of the Italian Renaissance, based on the template of his 1990 study of **Fra Angelico**: “the art historian and the Christian artist yearn for the image *In Spite of Everything*, be it for the invisible image of God as arch-Image or for Auschwitz as the limit of human imagination” (2006, p.93). Importantly, however, Didi-Huberman does not posit Auschwitz as a unique event that demarcates such a limit. Imagination is always limited, or rather, it is the limit that any historical investigation has to expand. Memory work therefore always means to work with the liminal. Consequently, no sign, whether verbal or visual, can lay claim to the purity and singularity that Lanzmann insists on, as each sign at once illuminates and obscures that to which it refers. Didi-Huberman urges his readers that this is not an incentive to abandon signs, but to relentlessly work on them, in spite of all.

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