

**“Montage” – entry in *The Didi-Huberman Dictionary* ed. Magdalena Zolkos
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MONTAGE

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“How can we see time?” (*EH*, p.xv). This question is raised in the opening sentence of Didi-Huberman’s book-length study of **Bertolt Brecht**’s 1955 photobook *Kriegsfibel* (*War Primer* in English translation (2017)), pieced together with scissors and glue from press clippings and self-penned epigrams. Three years later, in the concluding sentence of his second volume devoted to the unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas*, created by the cultural historian **Aby Warburg** in the late 1920s, Didi-Huberman declares that the tenacious construction of montage constitutes “the difficult—and dialectical—work of anyone who attempts to see time” (*AA*, p.255).

Four interconnected theses informing Didi-Huberman’s poetics of montage can be gleaned from these formulations. First, the montages assembled by Brecht and Warburg constitute a belated response to the devastation of industrialized warfare. The demand to make montages, to break apart (*de-montage*) and piece together (*re-montage*), is thus integral to a modern experience of chock and chaos. Second, Didi-Huberman’s insistence on montage as dialectical work, or as “the art of *making the image dialectical*” (*ISA*, p.138; see **Dialectic**). However, contrary to the Hegelian tradition, Didi-Huberman understands dialectic antonymously to synthesis and suture. Emphasizing rather effacing gaps and tensions, the juxtaposition of diverse imaginal elements accords equal significance to the latent connection as to the disorienting rupture. Third, there is the emphasis on the difficulty that the labor of montage entails, precisely due to its resistance to closure, containment and completion. The interminability of the process is highlighted by Didi-Huberman’s ubiquitous use of the prefix re-: to make a montage is to ‘reedit,’ to ‘reframe,’ to ‘reread,’ to ‘rearrange,’ and “to retie the memory threads” (*AA*, p.219). Fourth and foremost, montage is conceived as the construction of a particular kind of optics calibrated “to see time.” It enacts a form of visual “archaeology or ‘cultural geology’ that would aim to make the historical immanence of images sensible” (*AA*, p.153).

The problem of ‘how to see time’ is also the eminently archaeological question posed by **Michel Foucault** in his critique of historical hermeneutics. In common with Foucault’s archaeologies of the human sciences and the discursive production of knowledge, montage offers “a way of *visually unfolding the discontinuities of time*” (*SI*, p.311). As such, it is

premised on the notion that the contemporary is hidden from us, and that its layers need to be unfolded in order to bring together what chronology has separated. Here Didi-Huberman takes his cue both from Warburg's cartographic model of a memory **atlas** and its concomitant terminology of **image migration (*Bilderwanderung*) and disciplinary border guards (*Grenzwächter*)**, and from what Foucault referred to as his "spatial obsessions" (1980 [1976], p.69), perambulating the boundaries of discursive formations through the inquisitive lens of regional phenomena and territorial struggles. Polemically positioned as a reaction against "the *territorialization* of the study of images" (*SI*, p.18), montage constitutes a form of spatial intelligence that opens up new terrains of knowledge by transposing temporal relations into spatial configurations. The archaeological method that Didi-Huberman inherits from Warburg and Foucault proffers an alternative to the orthodox dramaturgy of history, plotted and propelled by individual agents, elicited through lineages of influence and intentionality, and kept in check by what Foucault refers to as the "pre-existing forms of continuity" that undergird the historian's effort "to master time" (1977 [1969], p.25;22). These pre-existing forms will shatter, however, if attention is paid to the "dispersions themselves" (p.37). The formal principle that impels Warburg's final project is succinctly paraphrased by Foucault in his brief but influential proposal for a heterotopic approach to history, conceived as a shift from a linear succession of causally driven events to a spatial collocation and confrontation "of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (1986 [1967], p.22). Apprehended as a spatial, or space enabling, enterprise, montage proceeds through "interstitial zones of exploration, heuristic intervals" (*AA*, p.5) that "makes it possible to spatialize this 'deterritorialization' of the objects of knowledge" (*SI*, p. 317).

The startling jump-cuts across time and territory forged in Warburg's "heterotopia of art history" (*AA*, p.55) demonstrate two key functions of montage according to Didi-Huberman: to map and to mine. The metaphor of mining is elucidated in a meditation on montage focalized through the lens of **Pier Paolo Pasolini's** compilation film *The Anger (*La rabbia*, 1963)*, where montage is understood as a method for rendering sensible the invisible yet imminent threat of odorless and colorless mine gas (2014a). The toxic and inflammable gases in the mine further invoke the gas chamber, reminding the reader of Didi-Huberman's most fervent defense of the montage form, launched in the polemical debate concerning the four photographs taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz (see **In spite of all; Sonderkommando photos**). Montage is not only an attempt to 'see time', then, but also to 'see danger.' Adhering to **Walter Benjamin's** model of the dialectical image that appears in a flash and "flits by" never to be seen again (1968 [1940], p.255), for Didi-Huberman the goal is not to bridge the

past and the present, but to ignite their mutual tension that allows to glimpse them together, if only for a fleeting instant. It is not the past that flits by, but a sudden actualization or flash-like cognition in the present. Echoing Foucault, Didi-Huberman argues that to make a montage “is, first off all, to dismantle order, the spatial and temporal order of things” (*EH*, p. 87). Facilitating an encounter between the present and past, the near and the distant, the here and the elsewhere, “it creates an entirely new epistemic configuration: a *knowledge obtained by means of montage*” (*SI*, p. 318).

But what kind of knowledge is obtainable by montage? This question seems imperative in light of Didi-Huberman’s sustained critique of the erudite gaze of the art historian, biased toward a preconceived interpretation. “Knowledge through montage” is a form of knowledge that ensues from a critique of knowledge (*ISA*, p.140). Or even, it is knowledge as a form of *non-knowledge*, a perpetual deferral and “a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions” (*CI*, p.16), which purposefully disrupts any predetermined path toward an expected meaning and unsettles the position of the viewer as a subject of knowledge. Always a malleable and provisional arrangement susceptible to revision, montage inaugurates “a new zone of knowledge” that neither assumes “a definitive form” nor yields a totalizing image or complete overview (*AA*, p.3). In their place, what montage has to offer are partial glimpses, which Benjamin described as the sudden epiphanic flashes of legibility (*Lesbarkeit*) or visibility (*Sichtbarkeit*) discharged at a precis moment of danger.

With Benjamin, Foucault and Warburg acting as his prime interlocutors, Didi-Huberman develops a general theory of montage, which is hence potentially reductive in relation to questions pertaining to medium specificity, authorship and the integrity of the resuscitated archival material. Didi-Huberman considers within the philosophic and aesthetic rubric of montage a highly diverse set of practices, including the dazzling configurations of **Jean-Luc Godard**’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98), the understated and open-ended approach of **Harun Farocki**’s soft montage, and the volatile clashes of **Sergei Eisenstein**’s montage of attractions, **George Bataille**’s Dadaist journal *Documents*, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, and the epic theatre of Brecht. The merits of this vast scope of engagement, however, is that it allows the reader to consider montage beyond any particular artform, archive or author. By virtue of the sheer multiplicity of viewpoints that it affords, montage is able to move beyond the discursive constraints of art, origin and authorship. For Didi-Huberman, this anonymizing and heuristic force is part and parcel of the capacity of montage to make us “open our eyes” (*HT*, p.50) and “*imagine for ourselves*” (*ISA*, p.3), if only for a brief moment.

Works Cited:

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