

Georges Didi-Huberman

Glimpses. Between Appearance and Disappearance

2016

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18641>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Didi-Huberman, Georges: Glimpses. Between Appearance and Disappearance. In: *ZMK Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*. Verschwinden, Jg. 7 (2016), Nr. 1, S. 109–124. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18641>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 3.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - Share Alike 3.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Glimpses. Between Appearance and Disappearance¹

Georges Didi-Huberman

APERÇUES («GLIMPSES»), FEMININE, PLURAL NOUN

(24. 10. 2012)

I have developed the habit of calling the snippets of things or events that appear before my eyes »glimpses« (*aperçues*). They never last very long. Snippets, splinters of the world, flotsam and jetsam that comes, that goes. They appear, but on their way to disappearing. Not everything that is visible around me is a »glimpse«, for all that. Out of personal custom – rather than out of any desire to give a categorical, definite or definitive meaning to this word – I use the term »glimpse« when the thing that appears leaves, before it disappears, something like the trail of a question, memory or desire. This is something that lasts a little longer than the apparition itself – an afterimage, an association – and is thus worth, still in terms of my own improvised writing habits or practice, some work time, or play time, a sentence or two, a paragraph or two, or more. From being an experience lived in the time of pure passing, the glimpse thus becomes an intermittent writing practice, my »minor« literary genre – quick-scattered, mercurial and undirected – marginal to or cutting across my »major« stubborn-patient research projects.

Glimpses (*aperçues*), from the verb to glimpse (*apercevoir*). It is seeing a little less well, not as well as when the thing to be seen has become an object of observation, immobilised or positioned on some examination table, like the cadaver under the eye of the anatomist or the butterfly pinned under glass. To glimpse is to see only in passing: whether something or someone moves fleetingly through my field of vision (I am at a table in a café, a remarkable being passes in front of me and disappears just as quickly into the crowd), or my field of vision itself passes too quickly to linger on something or someone (I am in the metro, a remarkable being is standing on the platform, but it is me who will soon be swallowed up by the tunnel). To glimpse, then, is to see the being to be seen just before it disappears – a being barely seen, half seen, already lost. Already lost but already loved, or bearing questions, which is to say a sort of call. The literary genre of »glimpses« would be a possible form for expressing this sort of fleeting vision in writing.

¹ Fragments of a collection in progress, called *Aperçues*.

Glimpses, in the plural, obviously. Multiple singularities, if it is true that singularities and multiplicities represent the most crucial elements of literary exploration (since Proust) or philosophical exploration (since Bergson). I have no desire however to organise these multiple singularities into a system that would plot the contours of my personal sensibility, or to write a novel around the character that my visual experiences would end up drawing. I am happy to catch in mid-air and immediately release my prey (which is thus not prey), without deciding the importance of that particular bird which was passing at that particular moment. Let the moment be, write it down as I go. Sketch. Don't re-read for a long time. One day, put it all together like the rushes of a thousand and one short films, and see the unconscious motifs formed from glance to glance take shape, the persistent concerns, the inducements to think.

Aperçues, in the feminine, necessarily. I don't like the fact that »*aperçu*« is masculine, it then suggests something like an overview, a table of contents, a programme. An »*aperçue*« – in the feminine – is stranger and more beautiful. It evokes the feminine for me in so far as it passes by and abandons me, in so far as I call to it and it comes back to me. Charles Baudelaire is no doubt the great master of the glimpse in this sense since he is both the poet of the passer-by – in the feminine, *la passante* – who is lost from sight forever and of the desire to create a lasting image of her:

»Around me roared the nearly deafening street.
Tall, slim, in mourning, in majestic grief,
A woman passed me, with a splendid hand
Lifting and swinging her festoon and hem; [...]
One lightning flash ... then night! Fleeting beauty
Whose glance has made me suddenly reborn [...]«

»I burn to paint a certain woman who has appeared to me so rarely and so swiftly fled away, like some beautiful, regrettable thing the traveller must leave behind him in the night [and who] makes one wish to die slowly beneath her steady gaze.«

Another motif corresponds to this moving nymph, that of the *thought that brushes* the hem of her train. Writing down a few sentences, a few paragraphs, a few »in-sights« (*aperçues*), is thus simply to cherish the traces of tiny but decisive events, which is to say open onto fields of infinite possibilities. Events that each, in principle, deserve much more, as though each sentence, each paragraph, was the key to an always new search of lost time.

(Charles Baudelaire, »À une passante« [1860] and »Le désir de peindre« [1863], *Œuvres complètes*, I, ed. C. Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 92–93 and 340. English translations: »To

a Woman Passing by» by James McGowan, *The Flowers of Evil*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 189, slightly modified; »The Desire to Paint« by James Huneker, trans., *The poems and prose poems of Charles Baudelaire*, New York: Brentano's, 1919, p. 119–120.)

HE (OR SHE) WHO GLIMPSES DESIRES, IS WOUNDED

(02. 11. 2012)

Working hypotheses. *To see* would be to use our eyes to know something real. *To look at* would be to involve our seeing in the economy of desire. *To glimpse* would be to catch mid-flight, within the real, something that has encountered – suddenly affirmed or suddenly contradicted – our desire. In reality, of course, everything is a lot less straightforward. In the first place because of this: we have two eyes and not just one (as a child I spent hours looking at my immediate environment, conducting experiments, by opening and closing my eyes, on the perceptual gulfs that separate, in certain conditions, binocular vision and seeing with a single eye; the whole perspective changes and even collapses, making space seem more unreal than ever). But just as we have two eyes, each visual event, however simple, is composed of least two things, two events (hence the phenomenological and psychological aptness of the Lucretian theories that each piece of the world is the result of the collision of at least two bodies or corpuscles). Just as, similarly, each desire seems complicated, in each instance, by an irreducible conflict. What does this stem from? It stems from time, of course, from the fact that we do not see anything or desire anything in the ideal element of the pure present. Everything we look at, everything we desire is complicated by time, is implicated in the complications – conflicts, erasures, traces, etc. – of time.

At the beginning of *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss thus tells us, with his usual observational honesty, that his own gaze as an exotic traveller is always complicated by a conflict: between a feeling of loss directed towards the past (everything he knows he will not see because it has *already* disappeared) and the inevitable loss inherent in the present itself (everything he knows he will not see because he does *not yet* know how to look at it). His conclusion is as true as it is tragic, since it connects the *glimpse* to the double movement of a *wound* and a *desire*: »In short, I have only two possibilities: either I can be like some traveller of the olden days, who was faced with a stupendous spectacle, all, or almost all, of which eluded him, or worse still, filled him with scorn and disgust; or I can be a modern traveller, chasing after the vestiges of a vanished reality. I lose on both counts, and more seriously than may at first appear, for, while I complain of being able to glimpse no more than the shadow of the past, I may be insensitive to reality as it is taking shape at this very moment, since I have not reached the stage of development at which I would be capable of perceiving it. A few hundred years

hence, in this same place, another traveller, as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I might have seen, but failed to see. I am subject to a double infirmity: all that I perceive wounds me, and I constantly reproach myself for not seeing as much as I should.«

(Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1955 [ed. 1984], p. 43. English translation by John and Doreen Weightman, New York, Atheneum, 1973, slightly modified.)

NON-KNOWLEDGE OF THE PASSER-BY

(04.06.2009)

Since Plato, images have been accused of bearing or producing error and illusion. Let us simply admit that images are very often the vehicles of something like a *non-knowledge*. But non-knowledge is not to knowledge what total *darkness* would be to full *light*. Non-knowledge is imagined, thought and written. It thus becomes something other than the »nothing« of simple ignorance or obscurity: it becomes the night that moves, where faint *glimmers* pass and fill us with wonder in the dark, and make us want to see them again. Like fireflies when they make a summer night flicker, for example.

We must hypothesise, therefore, that the relationship of non-knowledge to knowledge – like disappearance to appearance – is something other than one of simple privation: it is rather a relationship of point of view. We can thus hypothesise that non-knowledge is to knowledge what the firefly is to the light or what a small image is to the wide horizon. We see entirely different things, in effect, depending on whether we expand our vision to take in the *horizon* that stretches, immense and immobile, beyond us; or direct our attention towards the *image* that passes, tiny and mobile, close by us in the night. The image is indeed like a firefly, a little glimmer, the *luciola* of transient, sporadic events. Somewhere between Dante's Beatrice and Baudelaire's »fleeting beauty«: the paradigmatic *passer-by*.

THE GALLOPING IMAGE

(23.03.2015)

Seeing an image. Trying to put it in writing (this image, this seeing of the image). My whole body is involved. My body faced with the body of the image, or even my body called by this other (past, vanished) body, the sensation of which is summoned by the image, or which the image makes me summon. Even if the image is hung on a wall, even if its marble holds it firmly on the ground, writing it down means dancing, running with it. Dance as the psychological movement of our real and imagined bodies, joined end to end, everything that the image gives to me.

I have just found a certain expression of this generosity of the image in a politically oriented book. Cornelius Castoriadis, in his *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*], says of the image – or the »representation« in his terminology – that it »has no borders, and the pertinence of any division introduced into it can never be guaranteed – or rather, it will always be guaranteed to be non-pertinent in some crucial respect. What exists there refers to what does not exist there, or calls for it; not according to a determinate rule that could be formulated, in the way that a theorem calls for its consequences, even if these are infinite, or a number its successors, a cause its effects, even if these are countless. [...] What is not in a representation can nevertheless be found there, and no limit can be assigned to this ...«.

This means that my psychical dance with an image has itself no boundaries, no limits. Writing would be located precisely on a dizzying limit, on the tightrope of the risk to be taken: to write in order to contain something, drawing limits on what has no limits, taming the limitless? Or else to write in order to let something go, drawing the very absence – or porosity – of any limit? It is no accident that, a few lines later, Castoriadis returns to the fact that an image calls, summons, *arouses language*: »Of course«, he writes, »we are *talking* about representation. How could we not talk about it? – and what we say about it is not entirely empty. We do it by using fragments that we set in place, which serve as points of orientation, on which we hang linguistic terms, in such a way that we can still more or less know »what we are talking about« ...«

But what counts, faced with an image, is not »what we are talking about«. What counts is the dance itself – of my gaze and my sentences – with the image. It is a question of rhythm. It is no accident that, at that moment, despite the generally dry and severe tone of his philosophical prose, Castoriadis can't help but give way, in the middle of his text, to the rhythmic and soon romantic image of a *gallop*: »We use these terms [of orientation and language] like a galloping horse uses stretches of ground; it is not the ground, it is the gallop that counts. The ground and the tracks are the condition and consequence of the horse's run; but it is the run itself we want to grasp. From the tracks of the hooves, we can potentially reconstruct the direction the horse went, perhaps get an idea of its speed and the weight of the rider; but we cannot not know who this rider was, what he had in his head, and whether he was racing towards his lover or his death.« Nevertheless: *the galloping image* (a psychoanalyst friend tells me, as it happens, that she is outlining a piece on the notion of a »psychical gallop«) puts the whole of writing and the whole of thought on notice to follow its example, as Castoriadis says in another text: »to transform masses and energies into qualities [...], bring forth a flood of representations, and in the midst of this flood, straddle ravines, ruptures, discontinuities, make unnatural leaps and multiply unnecessary entities.«

(Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* [*The imaginary institution of society*], Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1975 [2014 edition], p. 404–407. *Id.*, »Imagination, imaginaire, reflexion« [»Imagination, imaginary, reflection«] [1991]; *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, 5, [*Done and to be done. The intersections of the labyrinth 5*] Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1997 [2008 edition], p. 315.)

MISERABLE IMAGE, MIRACLE IMAGE

(04. 07. 2012)

To describe, just to describe. Already for this one has to have worked through all the great decisions of thought and writing. To have found the style, the right style, by which I mean the one that achieves the tiny miracle of *touching the image*. In this respect, the writing of Henri Michaux is unrivalled: this written language seems to be *in direct contact with the image*, whether in the lightest or deepest of things. Michaux more than anyone understood that images are a matter of movement and time: »Time is immense. The fantastic acceleration of images and ideas has made it so.« Even when it is just some white that appears, Michaux's description gives us the impression – a miraculous one – that everything is said with the utmost precision but that at the same time the description could continue indefinitely and never stop being gripping: »And ›White‹ appears. Absolute white. White whiter than all whiteness. White of the advent of white. White without compromise, by exclusion, the total eradication of non-white. White, mad, exasperated, shrieking with whiteness. Fanatical, furious, riddling the eyeball. White, atrociously electric, implacable, murderous. White in blasts of white. God of ›white‹. No, not a god, a howler monkey. (If only my cells don't burst!) Cessation of white. I feel that for me white will have something immoderate about it for a long time to come.« And, in the margin: »So white exists. Only live in scintillation from now on.«

The title of this text already resonates for me as *what an image could be* at the height of what it can be: a »miserable miracle«.

(Henri Michaux, *Misérable miracle* [1956], *Œuvres complètes*, II, éd. R. Bellour et Y. Tran, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, p. 624–625 et 678. English: *Miserable Miracle: Mescaline*, trans. Louise Varèse, New York Review Books, 2002, p. 11, translation of margin note modified.)

DOES A BODY THAT IS NOT SEEN DISAPPEAR?

(24. 11. 2011)

The glimpses (or insights) of a female Japanese poet in the streets of Hamburg: »What struck me is that a European body is always seeking out a gaze. Not just the face, but also the fingers and even the back demand to be looked at. This is why

everyone must constantly glance over other people's bodies. And that's not all: the eyes are also obliged to show a reaction. A negative reaction is acceptable, no reaction is not. On the train or on the bus, I often had to close my eyes, so wearying did I find this task. In the street, I sometimes heard aggressive comments, simply because I had not directed a glance at a man. I do not want to perceive the whole world visually, much less have to form an opinion on each person, because this will lead to the reverse phenomenon: my body will in turn become something that has to be continually reconstituted through the gaze of others. The body who wants to be and must be seen is a European body. This is not even a question of narcissism, necessarily. This need is much more about the fear that what is not seen can disappear at any moment.«

(Yoko Tawada, *Narrateurs sans âmes* [*Narrators without souls*] [1991–1998], trans. B. Banoun, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2001, p. 26–27.)

THE IMAGE IS A CHILD AT PLAY

(22.06.2012)

A street in Valencia, 1933. There is a large wall of flaking paintwork, in front of which a child is playing, we don't know what. Someone has imagined, for example, a ball thrown up in the air, out of shot: this would explain why the child's head is thrown back so strangely, eyes squinting towards the sky. I notice instead his left hand in contact with the wall, and it reminds me of a game I used to play as a child, which consisted in walking with my eyes closed for as long as possible, so I could invent a thousand adventurous thrills in the forest or the night. Looking at the intense relationship between such a dramatic wall and such an open gesture, I imagine Orpheus as a child already playing at passing through the gates of Hell. Henri Cartier-Bresson, for his part, no doubt did not have the time to ask himself such questions or even imagine anything at all. He just took the time to make this image.

An admirable image, no doubt. Some suggest it is a masterpiece. Does this mean there are masterpieces that are the product of a single glance, a single press of the end of an index finger, a single mechanical aperture of a few hundredths of a second? Would Cartier-Bresson himself, who thought of himself as a maker of images »on the fly«, have accepted to see this as a masterpiece? Did he simply take the time to make, twenty years later, this large and beautiful print held by France's Bibliothèque Nationale? I fear not. The notion of a masterpiece spontaneously conjures up ideas of *longevity* (long periods of time spent on making an image, then the eternity of heritage status) or *uniqueness* (there is nothing that resembles the masterpiece, nothing that can equal it in terms of aesthetic value). If this image is now

a permanent part of our cultural heritage; if this print from the nineteen fifties is exceptional in its rarity and quality, so much the better. But this is not where the problem of the image – in the eyes of its inventor as well as its spectator – lies, precisely. It is located rather in the *fragility* of the meaning and the *complexity* of the time this image deploys before our eyes.

We need to see much more in the ancient expression that time is a child at play than the famous idea of the »opportune moment« captured by the photographer, here in a street in Valencia, one day in 1933. There is not just the *kairos* which Henri Cartier-Bresson's practice can so easily, in the end, be reduced, as an art of the »right moment« captured in passing. There is also *chronos*, which is to say everything that the photographer has seen fit to »aim at« and frame during his time spent in Valencia in 1933 (I am thinking, in particular, of the photos he took in the arenas, where the boundary fence plays an important formal role). Finally there is *aion* or »implicit time« (*temps impliqué*, also known as the »time of the event«), which is to say duration, the »long time«, the destiny of the images. This brings out, like a sovereign *motif* – not simply an iconographic theme but an internal necessity of Cartier-Bresson's gaze – all those children who play in front of walls, go down laneways, emerge from all the pores or accidents of the city (Granada, Madrid or Seville in 1933, Paris or Salerno in 1953, Liverpool in 1962, Berlin in 1963, Montreal in 1964, Rome in 1965, etc.).

So this image does not only represent a child playing. It *is* a child's game dispersed into at least three times. And shared by at least three children: the first one, in the street, sends out a gesture that the second one catches in mid-flight thanks to his optical-mechanical toy; the third child is me, free to participate or not in this game of the thrown gesture. A gesture that would thus be the true ball of this game, which is in the first place the game of time, or rather of the multiple times implicit in each hand that brushes against a wall, each loosening of the shoulders, each head thrown back towards the sky, and each gaze able to find in these all the intensity of a human becoming.

(Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Valenza* [sic], 1933. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.)

POTENT(IAL)LY RED

(12. 09. 2013)

The appearance of a colour can't just be reduced to what we »actually« perceive, chromatically, of a thing or its surface. There are some very intense reds that exist in a »potential« state, as a latent power or potency, reds that I have only been able to perceive in black and white, and yet they were *so* »potently« red! There was nothing, when I saw it, more red than the devil's costume worn by Buster Keaton in

Go West, because a whole herd of cattle ran after this living *muleta*. The grey of the clothing I perceived on the screen of the black and white film was so »potently« red, in terms of the sensation I had of it, that it would have made me double up in laughter for a long time. Similarly, nothing could have been more red to my eyes than the blood of the bull whose throat is slit in close up in Eisenstein's *Strike*, because I knew, at that moment, that the image was not lying to me about the death of the animal. And that grey, on the cinema screen, was so »potently« red it clenched my heart.

 RED IS A BODY, AN ACTIVITY

(24. 11. 2011)

»In German, adjectives are parasites of nouns. When a noun is feminine and wants to appear in the dative case, the adjective must also put on woman's make-up and yield its body to the dative. The Japanese adjective, on the other hand, does not adapt, it can even determine the tense of the sentence all by itself: *akakatta* (was red). Because it carries the verb to be in its very body. Being red is thus not an additional piece of information about a flower, it is an activity.«

(Yoko Tawada, *Narrateurs sans âmes* [*Narrators without souls*] [1991–1998], trans. B. Banoun, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2001, p. 60.)

 TO SEE COMING

(29. 03. 2015)

This man suffered a great bereavement as a child. Nothing had been more unexpected, more impossible to imagine. The loss had been all the greater for the fact that he had *not seen anything coming*. He often asked himself afterwards how it was possible that he had »not seen anything coming«. When it was so obvious! All the symptoms of the catastrophe were there, in front of his eyes, for months, years even, and yet he had not been able to – how to put it? – read them, decipher them, understand them, interpret them ... As a result, his whole life had been shaped by the desire to see and above all to *see coming*; to forge for himself, for this purpose, an art of clairvoyance or foresight. But does such an art exist? Or, rather, what price is paid for such an art?

Scanning, looking out for warning signs demands a great deal of knowledge and, like an asymptotic curve, infinitely approaches a perpetual state of paranoid anxiety. It gives the impression – the illusion – of mastering time as well as the visible. But what had in fact happened was this: this man *grieved everything in advance*. He always »saw coming« the end, loss, separation, depletion or disappearance

of beings and things. So he armed himself in advance against it and, in the face of life itself, shut himself up in a solitude identical to the one he had had to forge for himself earlier in the face of death. He had thus not developed any genuine science or wisdom. This man is perhaps the one I am often on the verge of being.

THE MYSTERY RIGHT IN FRONT OF US

(25. 09. 2013)

Something wonderful I read this morning: Georg Simmel, in his *Journal posthume* [*Posthumous journal*], performs a useful reversal of the Platonic perspective on the evidence of the senses – the evidence before our eyes that has nothing secret about it and yet is supposed to deceive us about its truth content – and intelligible knowledge, the one whose elusive mysteries and secret laws, *beyond the images we know* offered by the world, it is the job of the philosopher to probe: »What is beyond knowledge is not what lies *behind* the image of things – the obscure, the in-itself, the elusive – but, on the contrary, the immediate, the wholly sensible image, the surface of things turned towards us. Knowledge does not stop beyond science, but before it. The fact that we do not express in concepts the things we precisely see, touch and live, the fact that we cannot accommodate them *tale quale* («as is») within the conventions of science – we explain this in a completely wrong way, as though these forms concealed something mysterious and unknowable.«

(Georg Simmel, *Journal posthume* [*Posthumous Journal*] [1918], trans. S. Muller, Strasbourg, Éditions Circé, 2013, p. 12–13.)

REMNANT OF THE FEMININE

(07. 10. 2013)

»The mortal woman with a divine gaze triumphs over the sightless goddesses. It is the first expression of the eternal feminine«. This is what André Malraux declared – or declaimed – in 1963 in front of the *Mona Lisa* in Washington, during a memorable evening where, they say, he only had eyes for Jackie Kennedy. But what does this mean, the »eternal feminine«? I don't really understand. The feminine is human – half of humanity – is it not? How then would it be eternal? Is not the feminine mortal, and thus transient, like everything that is human? This truth is no doubt disheartening: what child can accept that its mother will die, what lover can bear that his beloved will pass away? To say that the feminine is eternal is to admit that it is only an idea. But that makes it a very, very meagre thing compared to what »the feminine« offers us in life each day and each night. The feminine is not eternal, it is alive. Or, sometimes, it survives as a remnant in

certain circumstances or things that bear its trace. If memory is part of human life, then a remnant certainly counts as a living thing. But whereas eternity reassures us with its impression of imperishable solidity, a remnant cannot reassure us because it emerges against the backdrop of the fragility and perishability of all human things.

Today I took several photographs – perhaps just as an excuse to look at it for a long time – of an ancient sculpture that reproduces, following a Greek model attributed to Kallimachos, the iconography of fertile femininity, the so-called *Venus Genetrix*. As is often the case, the nakedness of Aphrodite is both covered and emphasised by delicate drapery. But at the same time, what a wreck! The work is not in the deluxe catalogue sold in the Metropolitan Museum bookshop: this is obviously because it is so damaged they would have a hard time extolling its eternal femininity or the classical charm of Olympian goddesses. This is a devastated Venus I am gazing upon. The sculpture seems to have been beaten to death. The marble is completely yellowed, eroded, injured all over. It looks like whole slabs have come off in many places on its surface. The body seems to have been tortured, carted back and forth, riddled with knocks, scratches, pockmarks. It suddenly reminds me of certain walls in Athens made from the same material and still showing the traces of the civil war. Poor Aphrodite: she no longer has the head whose grace was once admired by the spectator; she no longer has the arm that she once stretched towards the spectator to offer an apple.

So I look at this body, these shoulders, these breasts, this *mons veneris* abused by time. And yet I have the sensation of seeing – no, glimpsing – their touching delicacy: this means that something, perhaps, survives in this piece of devastated marble. There is a very specific and deeply affecting ›something‹ in this ruin of a female body: the drapery of the folds that run between her thighs – thus in her most intimate recesses – which has survived the process of erosion relatively unscathed. So from vulva to heel, all this sensuality appears, mingling an almost intact work of drapery with an imagined opening of her labia, the *minora* and *majora*, suddenly obvious and – through the displacement caused by the fantasy – deliciously exaggerated.

(André Malraux, »La ›Joconde‹ à Washington« [»The ›Mona Lisa‹ in Washington«] [1963], *Écrits sur l'art, II, Écrits sur l'art, II [Œuvres complètes, V]*, edited by H. Godard, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 1177. Anonymous (Roman), *Statue of Aphrodite*, marble from the imperial period after a bronze from the fifth century B.C. attributed to Kallimachos, New York, Metropolitan Museum.)

It is an everyday paradox. Its literary paradigm is Edgar Allan Poe's famous *Purloined Letter*. It is the paradox of not seeing, most of the time, what is right there, right in front of us, under our nose. And not seeing it precisely because it is under our nose: too close, too obvious to be questioned or even simply looked at (is looking at something, then, simply posing a new question to the world through the medium of visible objects?). It is the paradox of things that *everyone sees and no one notices*. And we find cases of this – but how do we find what »everyone sees and no one notices«, except by making a constant effort to *displace* our gaze, our questions? – everywhere in the history of painting. To those who have visited the Prado: do you remember for example that in Titian's famous *Bacchanal of the Andrians* there is, right in front of you, a little boy pissing? Do you remember that he is pissing straight onto the body of the magnificent unclothed nymph, the nymph in the foreground, lasciviously lying back (sleeping or dreaming, perhaps even having an orgasm), who you cannot have failed to see?

Look: he is lifting up his shirt (today we would say his pyjama top) and pissing without any shame. Behind him two adults are dancing, a man and a woman riveted to each other by a clearly sexual gaze. Right beside him, strewn on the ground, are up-ended cups and some sheet music for a drinking song. A little further away, on the hill, a naked old man, legs apart, sleeps off his wine. Titian's bacchanal is thus a sort of smutty picnic, apparently given over to the obscene unruliness of wine, women and song. There are lots of naked people. It is in a way much bolder than Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Philipp Fehl, who was quite an original art critic – he was a Viennese emigrant to the United States in 1940, one of the interrogators of the Nazis at the Nuremberg trial and developed an art practice alongside his scholarly research into the art of Antiquity and Renaissance humanism – suggested a clever way of understanding Titian's image through the embedded paradoxes of the *seen* and the *unnoticed*. What he essentially says is that the modern figures in this painting (those dressed in sixteenth-century clothing) *do not actually see* the ancient figures (mainly unclothed), even though they are enjoying themselves with them as part of the same group. The ancient figures are only allegories; thus, the nymph we find so beautiful in the Prado is only *seen* by the other characters in the painting as the object she is an allegory of, namely a spring or river. According to this interpretation then, the child who we *see* pissing on the nymph (if we do indeed see him) *would only see*, for his part, a little stream perfect for him to relieve himself in. Whether inside or outside the image, then, no one seems to see the same thing in front of the same things. A lesson in using (and averting) one's eyes?

(Titian, *The Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1523–1525. Madrid, Museo del Prado. Philipp Fehl, »The Hidden Genre: A Study of the *Concert Champêtre* in the Louvre«, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XVI, 1957, no. 2, p. 153–168.)

MELTING AND CLEAVING SPACE

(22. 12. 2014)

Ask a Western painter to represent something very simple like spring: the whole space will soon be filled up. Spring is fertile, therefore spring is prolific, the reasoning goes. Someone has counted in Botticelli's great *Primavera* painting no less than ninety species of plants, including thirty-eight that are clearly identifiable and which, theoretically, were all flowering in Tuscany between the months of March and May during the Quattrocento. And we mustn't forget the nine allegorical figures chasing after her or dancing together, all heavily laden with their many symbols. As a result, as Aby Warburg rightly noted, Botticelli's *Primavera* looks much more like a heavy indoor tapestry than any natural landscape. In the nineteenth century, Arnold Böcklin paints another *Spring*: it is less crowded, certainly, but still has its woody undergrowth, abundant flowers and two mythological characters, a young satyr playing the flute and a languid nymph, resting naked under the cluster of trees after making love. It is a matter, in short, of showing as many things as possible.

Maruyama Ōkyo has done the complete opposite. And yet he is known for his incorporation, towards the end of the eighteenth century, of Western practices of perspective and the single vanishing point into traditional Japanese pictorial styles. He is even said to have used, like Vermeer, the *camera obscura*, and this is how he is supposed to have integrated perspectival space into the art of the Far East, the first in history to have done so, with his own particular way of constructing depth and optical distance. This did not prevent him, when he was asked to represent spring, from approaching the subject in a very different way to Botticelli before him or Böcklin after him.

He does not fill the space: he completely empties it. His spring – a long screen with two panels, painted around 1780 – is presented as a pure whitish atmosphere. A sort of large halo occupies the middle of the image, unless this impression is an effect of the emptiness itself (to be honest, I only have a distant memory of seeing the work at the British Museum and I find myself today in front of a rather mediocre reproduction). There is no horizon: Maruyama Ōkyo *empties* the space and *melts* it into a sort of generalised haze. All this, and then he suddenly *cleaves* it: there, there, there and there, no more than around forty brush strokes, fewer, then, than there are flowers in Botticelli's painting. Simple lines – but »simple« is misleading, because each one has its own build, arched like a bow – draw their cracks

in space. This is what spring is for Maruyama Ōkyo: ice cracking on a lake that has been frozen since winter.

And it is one of the most powerful images there is. The cracks in the ice move further away, melting into the haze and the distance. The painter thus achieves the miracle of *melting* space, by creating an atmosphere that has no visible limits, and then of *cleaving* it, just as miraculously, by creating these fault lines that are immediately felt, in their very beauty, as dangerous. This is where – on or rather in this spot, a frozen lake being both surface and depth – the careless, the mad, the arrogant, will *fall*. Just like those whole armies, later on, who *sank* into the broken ice, the white apocalypses recounted by Balzac in *Adieu* or Eisenstein in *Alexander Nevsky*.

(Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, c. 1482–1485. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Arnold Böcklin, *Spring*, 1862. Basel, Kunstmuseum. Maruyama Ōkyo, *Cracked ice*, c. 1780. London, British Museum. Honoré de Balzac, *Adieu* [1830], *La Comédie humaine*, X. *Études philosophiques*, ed. P.-G. Castex, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, p. 973–1014. Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Alexander Nevsky*, 1938.)

UNCLE RUDI

(03.02.2011)

You can't choose your family. Gerhard Richter had a Nazi uncle, who he made the subject of a famous – and rightly so, because it is admirable – painting. In the context of a colloquium that she organised herself with her friend Antonia von Schöning and Andreas Beyer, Angela Mengoni spoke to us about this painting. She drew our attention to the wall Uncle Rudi is standing in front of, and rightly emphasised its importance in plastic terms: it almost looks like the wall »runs through« Uncle Rudi's body, even though it is placed behind him. Angela spoke I think of a »plastic interweaving«. There are creases in the coat that continue, in such a strange, and visually effective, way, the marks on this wall. Even Uncle Rudi's smile, in the movement given to it by the pictorial texture, visually follows and supports the horizontal line of the parapet.

How I love these paradoxes that painting can make appear suddenly before our eyes! Sometimes, for example, a figure is not simply »in a place«; the relationship between figure and place is much more ambiguous than good representational sense would suggest (the whole spatiality of the Annunciation, in Christian iconography, is supposed to have been developed to take this ambiguity to the level of the mystery, and hence the paradoxes, of the Incarnation). In Richter's painting, it seems both as if the *body is disintegrating* and the *place is coalescing*. It is not clear in which direction these two symmetrical processes are supposed to be going. The

body disintegrates to the extent that its claim to form the defined centre of this painting – this portrait – collapses quite quickly, or rather crumbles: Uncle Rudi seems to have been *riddled* from the side by his portraitist. Or else, within the economy of the painting, shot by the wall itself, which throws out all these lines that then seem to run through the body from all over. Uncle Rudi is certainly still standing, but it is as if the parallel lines on the wall had already, virtually, pulled him to pieces. The material and the place – lead grey paint – show us an Uncle Rudi who seems to be dismantled by what we could call *strokes of memory*. As if history, presented frontally here (the wall, the smile, the Nazi uniform), was succumbing to something like a ravaging lateral memory.

We can view things from another direction: we could imagine the place itself in the process of coalescing. Look, everything is grey: the whole space, the whole atmosphere, all those Lucretian atoms that seem to move across the frame. And then, all of a sudden – the shock of atoms colliding – a form takes shape, and it is Uncle Rudi who emerges from all this dust, like a hologram or an optical illusion, a diaphanous image from some sort of magic lantern (a process that Richter uses for that matter to project slides onto his canvas). But whether we see things from one direction or another, either way it is a ghost smiling at us from the depths of a shameful history. A »ghost for grown-ups« as Warburg said about images as vehicles of memory. But it is no longer a simple family memory, no longer a picture taken out of the album and simply redone in grey paint. It is an impersonal and implacable spectre that has taken the form of Uncle Rudi shot with paint by his nephew.

(Gerhard Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965. Prague, National Museum [Lidice Collection]. Angela Mengoni, »Re-monter l'archive«, in *Interpositions. Montage des images et production du sens*, edited by A. Beyer, A. Mengoni and A. von Schöning, Paris, Institut national d'Histoire de l'Art-Eikones Bildkritik-Centre allemand d'Histoire de l'Art, 1–3 February 2011.)

FOLLOWING WITH THE EYES

(25. 12. 2011)

Two of the memories evoked by Anne-Lise Stern in her great work *Le Savoir-déporté [Deported knowledge]*: »One day, I was walking in the neighbourhood of the hotel and all of a sudden something red caught my eyes, there was a tomato rolling along the gutter and I started following it. It picked up speed and so did I, because the street went downhill. At some point we came to a bridge, the gutter stopped, the tomato disappeared, I looked to see where it had gone. It was floating, it was a rotten tomato floating on its way down the stream, under the bridge. I was not hungry anymore, I was very comfortably fed, but even so, I would have followed

a tomato running off on its own to the ends of the earth.« This is the memory that closes the book.

But earlier, in Birkenau: »The other memory: also on the way back from work, an uncovered truck crosses our path, filled with more or less naked men, already reduced to nothing. The eyes of one of these men met mine. We were still fresh, our convoy had not quite all been shaved. He still had a fine look in his eyes. The look of a man who knew that he was looking at a woman for the last time in his life. We stayed looking into each other's eyes for as long as possible, holding each other's gaze. Then the truck disappeared into the birch wood, in the direction of the crematorium.«

(Anne-Lise Stern, *Le Savoir-déporté. Camps, histoire, psychoanalyse* [*Deported knowledge: camps, history, psychoanalysis*], Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2004, p. 231 and 308.)

Translated by Melissa McMahon