

The Politics of Images

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Georges Didi-Huberman: *Quand les images prennent position. L'Œil de l'histoire, I* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), 271 pp.

Judith Butler: *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 194 pp.

The last ten to fifteen years have seen the publication of numerous books and articles considering the relation between images and politics. The reasons for this development are obvious: footage of the World Trade Center attacks and photos from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo (to give just a few examples) have clearly demonstrated that images not only respond to political events, but also play an important part in shaping them. Images have therefore been blamed for their complicity in these events (in ways that literature and music, for instance, have not), and these accusations have prompted artists, philosophers and theoreticians to investigate how images can also be used to think critically about political events. This article examines two quite different, though not opposed, explorations of this last question: Georges Didi-Huberman's 2009 *Quand les images prennent position* (When images take a stance)—the first volume in a book series entitled *L'Œil de l'histoire* (The eye of history)—and Judith Butler's 2009 *Frames of War*.¹ In addition to these, a number of Jacques Rancière's recent writings will be included in the discussion.

I. French Brecht

Reflections on the politics of images obviously cannot be limited to the debates that followed 9/11. *Quand les images prennent position* is a book about Bertolt Brecht, which might come as a surprise. Didi-Huberman's diverse work can be associated with many different

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artistic and intellectual figures and movements — Aby Warburg and Georges Bataille, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the Renaissance paintings of Fra Angelico and the light installations of James Turrell — but few of these naturally allow him to build bridges to Brecht. One name, however, does allow us to reduce the distance: Walter Benjamin. Benjamin is a privileged interlocutor of Brecht, a recurrent figure throughout Didi-Huberman's many texts and, logically, the key reference in this book on Bertolt Brecht.

It is also logical that Didi-Huberman's study should focus on Brecht's work with images. This takes us to the *Kriegsfibel* and the *Arbeitsjournal*, two texts that were conceived (and largely composed) during Brecht's exile in northern Europe and the U.S. from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s. As its name indicates, the *Arbeitsjournal* is a diaristic workbook, not originally intended for publication. In this book Brecht often confronts the historical events via montages, combining texts and images from national and international newspapers and magazines. Didi-Huberman suggests that the word *Arbeit* can also be taken in a psychoanalytic sense: the book is the place where Brecht attempts a 'working through' of the contemporary political situation. The *Kriegsfibel*, created with Ruth Berlau, is a very different text, clearly composed with a view to publication. Brecht builds single-page 'plates', most of which combine a photograph (often including the original newspaper or magazine caption) with a small epigrammatic text. The epigrams are rhymed quatrains, and the order of the 'photoepigrams' (as Brecht called the genre) occasionally suggests that the *Kriegsfibel* should be considered as a suite of images. In her small presentation of the book, Ruth Berlau explains that 'this book will teach the art of reading images'.²

Didi-Huberman describes the two works as a *table critique* or a *table de montage*: an editing room. Brecht responds to the world historical events (and to everyday life) in the manner of a filmmaker in his editing room.³ He combines images and texts in order to create conflicts and tensions, to produce visual puns or to shock. He thus expresses himself in a wide variety of registers including the empathetic, the denunciatory, the lyrical and the satirical. Overall, this approach allows him to give up on 'the discursive, deductive or representational value of what is being shown (. . .) and more freely develop its iconic, tabular and presentational value' (*QI*, 25).

It is important to stress that Brecht is not trying to depict or to document historical events; this is what newspapers and magazines do. Rather, he is trying to explore the political situation by creating

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interruptions in the material at hand. This is what it means to think in montages: ‘to disarticulate our usual perception of the relations between things or situations’ (*QI*, 69). Like the *Verfremdungseffekte* (about which Didi-Huberman also writes), the montage aims to produce a new relation to reality that brings about its reinvention.⁴ The montage, as we shall see, offers a sensorial and political re-education of the spectator.

A montage can be many things. We may think of Max Ernst’s montages, Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectical montages, Dziga Vertov’s montages, and the debates between Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács on realism, expressionism and the status of the montage (debates in which Brecht also joined). Didi-Huberman mentions these contexts, and considers, in particular, the relation between montages and dialectics. Brecht’s method *is* dialectic, both in the Greek (and etymological) sense of ‘introducing a difference into the discourse’ and in the Hegelian sense of a ‘positioning of truth in its becoming’. In Brecht’s case—as Althusser has written—this becoming goes hand in hand with a form of suspense. The moment of the return to self-consciousness is postponed, and instead of syntheses we have the revelation of interruptions.⁵ This is what Didi-Huberman calls the ‘dialectic of the montage-maker’ (*QI*, 94): a dialectic without resolution, instituting a more syncopic rhythm. Brecht intervenes in ‘reality’ in order to ‘refram[e], interrup[t], create breaks and delays’ (*QI*, 95). And the written quatrains in *Kriegsfibel* only serve to guarantee this interruption, to sustain and enhance the destabilization, not to anchor the images.

An example of Brecht’s image-thinking can be found in the *Arbeitsjournal*, on 15 June 1944.⁶ This day Brecht glued three newspaper clippings (photographs and captions) to the same page. Towards the upper right hand corner of the page, he placed a photo of Erwin Rommel and his generals, all in their uniforms. They are seen in front of what appears to be the model of a landscape, and Rommel is using a pointer to designate an area on this model. On the left side of the page, we find an image of Pope Pius XII in his papal gown (his uniform), holding up his hands in a gesture of benediction. In the lower right corner appears a photo of a ‘Nazi Abattoir in Russia’ (as the caption explains). In the foreground of this third photo, Russian women have discovered the bodies of some of 200 prisoners killed by the Nazis. In the background, fifteen to twenty people are looking into this mass grave at the grieving women. Most (possibly all) of the figures appear to be women or children; the bodies, we might speculate, could

be those of their husbands and fathers. Underneath this photo the text tells us that in the Katyn Forest ‘similar pits held 12,000 bodies’.

What unites these images? According to Didi-Huberman at least two things: time and gestures. The images are all contemporary, a fact which Brecht makes palpable simply by bringing them together. The Pope is holding up his hands *while* Rommel is strategizing with his generals *and* mass graves are being discovered. The montage also invites us to think about the meaning of certain gestures in times of war: Rommel’s precise designation of a place, the raised hands of the Pope, the Russian women kneeling at the bodies, lifting some of them partly from the ground, creating figures I see as versions of the Pietà (did Brecht also see this link between the images?). As Didi-Huberman notes, the combination of images and texts does not provide the viewer with any absolute certitude about the meaning of the montage. A form of overdetermination is at play; for instance, it is impossible to finish a sentence that begins: ‘Because the Pope. . .’. Instead there is a corporeal dimension in the reading of the montage as we are invited to re-enact the gestures and establish the relations between them.

To what extent, and in what sense, are these montages political? In order to give Didi-Huberman’s answer to this question it is necessary to introduce the important conceptual distinction in his text between ‘taking a stance’ (*prendre position*) and ‘taking a side’ (*prendre parti*). The *Kriegsfiibel* and the *Arbeitsjournal* are works that ‘take a stance’. They intervene into a political-historical situation dominated by war and barbarism, and aim to make us think about the war, to mobilize our bodies, and deliver a critique of the war. They do not, however, deliver arguments, nor do they testify to a party allegiance. The form of thinking the montages perform and invite when bringing Rommel, the Pope and the mass graves together is more unruly, less teleological. The result is an intervention that does not solve, or aim to solve, the problems it is taking up. Instead of a political argument, we find a destabilization of the political discourse; Brecht’s montages are not about rendering reality, getting it right (*rendre le réel*) but about problematizing reality (*rendre le réel problématique*) (109).

Having presented an almost anarchistic Brecht, Didi-Huberman adds that the relation between ‘taking a side’ and ‘destabilizing the political discourse’ by ‘taking a stance’ is a source of constant instability in Brecht’s work. To a large extent Brecht does take a side. For him, ‘to take a stance’ is generally seen as a first step towards ‘taking a side’. In order to negotiate the relation between these two forms of political intervention, Didi-Huberman’s text proceeds in the following

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way: first, it emphasizes the ‘stance’, the unruly dimension of the montages. Drawing on Benjamin’s texts about Brecht, Didi-Huberman goes far in this direction. The dialogue with Benjamin inspires Brecht to talk about how irregular rhythms can create a politically progressive form of poetic hypnosis (*QI*, 180). In places Didi-Huberman goes so far with Benjamin (combining, for instance, the auratic and *Verfremdung*) that the reader comes to doubt whether Didi-Huberman is writing about Brecht or Benjamin. However, this move toward Benjamin will be followed by a moment of (partial) retreat. Didi-Huberman reminds the reader of how important the ‘taking a side’ is for Brecht, mentions the disagreements between Benjamin and Brecht (on Franz Kafka, for instance), and pulls Brecht towards a more classic Marxist position. Yet this moment of retreat does not eliminate the remarks about the unruly politics of the montage. Didi-Huberman’s Brecht remains Benjaminian; the *Kriegsfibel* and the *Arbeitsjournal* cannot be reduced to ‘taking a side’. The oscillation between ‘taking a stance’ and ‘taking a side’, Didi-Huberman thereby argues, is a constitutive feature of Brecht’s work: ‘Every *montage* has the effect, intentionally or not, of bringing about a crisis in the *meaning* it is supposed to convey’ (*QI*, 152, emphasis in the original). Note that ‘bringing about a crisis’ (*mettre en crise*) obviously differs from undermining or subverting; the message will still be there—it appears in the singular (the message)—but it will vacillate, and therefore destabilize the political discourse. *Quand les images prennent position* is an exercise in negotiating this balance between meaning and crisis, between the singular and the dispersed.

To further understand this engagement with Brecht’s montages, it is worth considering how Didi-Huberman’s argument relates to some of Jacques Rancière’s recent texts on aesthetics and politics. The two thinkers share a number of interests and this overlap has resulted in various forms of dialogue.⁷ With regard to Brecht, however, they seem to have little in common. Rancière uses the name of Brecht, and the idea of the ‘Brechtian paradigm’ (*paradigme brechtien*), to characterize a position that resembles the linear discourse that Didi-Huberman associated with ‘taking a side’.⁸

The title essay in Rancière’s *Le spectateur émancipé* takes ‘Brecht’ as the name of a form of political theatre that aims to transmit a meaning directly to the spectator. Provocatively, Rancière juxtaposes Brecht’s ambitions with those of Antonin Artaud, a figure often seen as Brecht’s diametrical opposite. Where Artaud wants to overwhelm the

spectator with a form of immersive and ultra-cathartic theatre, Brecht wants to engage the intelligence and the critical awareness of the spectator by preventing emotional identification with the characters on stage. But this dichotomy between immersion and distance is so pure that it necessarily rests upon a common ground: both aim for an ‘active spectator’ and share the belief that ‘simply’ looking (as in more traditional dramatic art) is a form of passivity that must be rejected. Rancière takes issue with this shared belief. Why is ‘looking’ associated with passivity? Why should we need to break down a barrier between stage and audience, between writer, actors and public? What is more, Rancière believes that the attempt to eliminate these distinctions only serves to establish the differences, thereby forever maintaining the public in the subordinate position of having to recover (via an intellectual or bodily effort) the intentions the writer puts into the play. Both of these forms of theatre, therefore, are obtrusive in their appeal to the spectator; they reduce the spectator’s ability to work freely with the material presented. In order to liberate the spectator, they begin by stealing her freedom.⁹

This critique of Brecht can be found again in Rancière’s more recent *Les écarts du cinéma* (2011). Here the Brechtian paradigm becomes the name of the position from which contemporary political art must seek to depart. And the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, although strongly influenced by Brecht, are credited with suggesting a way out of the paradigm. Rancière’s first example of ‘post-Brechtian’ (*EC*, 112) cinema is taken from Straub and Huillet’s *De la nuée à la résistance* (1979), a film based on the writings of Cesare Pavese and partly set in Roman times. A key scene stages a dialogue between father and son on the usefulness of sacrifices. This is a political discussion opposing two different views on justice and injustice, oppression and emancipation; the film is very much on Brechtian territory. But Straub and Huillet interrupt the political debate: they do not let the father have the last word (as Pavese does); instead they offer (what Rancière describes as) an interruption — and a resolution — of the dialectic exchange through a close-up on the son’s hand as it slides down his tunic: ‘multiple gesture, the possible meanings of which the spectator has to work to synthesise’ (*EC*, 120). The directors hereby set the spectator free to use her imagination and establish the links between the elements on the screen.¹⁰ Rather than instructing us (in a way that will never escape hierarchies), the film is there for us to compose with, inviting us to share the richness of the sensuous experience.

The brief comparison with Rancière can be used to conclude that he presents a very different Brecht from the one we find in Didi-Huberman's book.¹¹ However, we might also note the very strong *similarity* between the position Rancière is advocating (against the Brechtian paradigm) and the one explored by Didi-Huberman (on the basis of Brecht's montages). These similarities go all the way down to the focus on gestures, and the agreement on art as a sensuous education that becomes possible in the breaks and disjunctions of the 'stances taken' (*prises de position*). The comparison therefore allows us to pull Didi-Huberman towards Rancière's position and propose that *Quand les images prennent position* describes Brechtian montage as a form of emancipatory pedagogy. When we think with images and texts in the montage, we combine, we play, and we engage our bodies in the work. The montages allow an aesthetic education of man.

With this argument about the emancipatory play, we can return to Didi-Huberman's reading of Brecht. It is important to emphasize that the *Kriegsfibel* is a 'Fibel'. A *Fibel* is an introductory manual or a primer, and the word can refer more specifically to the sort of manual that children use to learn the alphabet (the French translation of the *Kriegsfibel* is the *Abécédaire de la guerre*). Alphabet books of the *Fibel*-kind very often show letters, acted out by bodies (Didi-Huberman's book contains beautiful examples of this). Brecht thus encourages his adult reader to occupy the position of children when learning. Again, Didi-Huberman acknowledges that Brecht does not go quite as far as Benjamin in his belief in the potential of the 'mimetic faculty' and the child's way of 'living in images' (as Benjamin writes), but he nevertheless does pull Brecht towards the idea of enactive learning.

In this sense Brecht's work with images is also the images' work with Brecht—and with the spectator of his montages. That work is not without risks, which are addressed in the final pages of Didi-Huberman's text. Here Maurice Blanchot's text on 'The Effect of Strangeness' takes us far from the most widespread ideas about Brecht. Blanchot proposes that we must distinguish between two different forms of strangeness in Brecht's work. There is a 'good strangeness' that frees us from the object, and thereby makes it accessible to us. This strangeness, guaranteed by the *Verfremdungs-effekte*, allows for changing the order of things. But there is also (something that Brecht would consider) a 'bad strangeness', that Blanchot believes no art can avoid. This strangeness makes the distance to the artistic object unbridgeable. Here things escape us, and we are left to confront an absence; through this confrontation, we escape ourselves. Blanchot writes about an

experience of neutrality in which we constantly oscillate between ‘I, He and no one’ (*IC*, 366). These two forms of strangeness can never be fully separated.

Drawing on Blanchot’s text, Didi-Huberman explains that the strangeness of images invites their reader (or spectator) onto a tightrope:

[The image] exposes us to something that is in excess of knowledge, it can be either a (visionary) revelation or a (maddening) obfuscation. To manipulate images is to accept the risk of walking along this high wire, at every moment in danger of falling. (*QI*, 251)

‘Fascination’ with images pulls us towards the excess of consciousness. This fascination is neither a form of identification (because the I is no longer the centre) nor a form of empathy (because the excess of the image is an encounter with what Blanchot describes as the neutral). According to Didi-Huberman, it is a fascination that one must traverse in order to gain new consciousness. Kafka, Benjamin and Bataille accepted the risks of this (child-like) position, the communists (and Brecht) criticized Kafka for doing this, and Brecht resisted the risks throughout his work — except in the *Arbeitsjournal*, the *Kriegsfibel* and some of his poetry.

This Blanchot-inspired ending to the book (almost) suggests that an inherent ‘duplicity of images’ necessarily ties them to ‘taking a stance’ rather than ‘taking a side’. Indeed, at the end of *Quand les images prennent position* it is difficult to imagine how any serious form of image-thinking — how any true experience of the image — could be reduced to ‘taking a side’. However, such a reading is misleading. Didi-Huberman carefully avoids normative vocabulary (‘serious’ and ‘true’) as well as any other generalizing statements about the nature of the image. Even if he comes close to suggesting that images by definition are unruly, it is also true that throughout the first 250 pages he focuses specifically on Brecht’s montages as an unruly way of thinking history. The montages, as we have seen, offer an alternative to ‘the discursive, deductive or representational value of what is being shown’, they invite an enactive reading, and thereby work both on the actual political situation and on the contemporary reader.

Some readers will undoubtedly find this reflection on how images ‘take a stand’ disappointing because it does not sufficiently give directions for political action. They will feel that Didi-Huberman’s book comes down on the wrong side of the opposition between ‘taking a stance’ and ‘taking a side’, and they will find it difficult to

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accept that ‘taking a stance’ represents a form of politics. In fact, Didi-Huberman’s essay allows us to think that (in the majority of his texts) Brecht himself would be among these readers. Without trying to satisfy these readers, I will now turn to a recent essay by Judith Butler, written in the wake of the attacks on World Trade Center and the revelation of the Abu Ghraib photos. It is my contention that this text can allow us to situate Brecht’s interventions more precisely.

II. *Framing/Unframing*

Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* (2009) offers a very different take on the complex relations between images and politics, photographs and war. Like Didi-Huberman (and Rancière) she is interested in the political and ethical potential of images, but the way in which she approaches images takes us towards a socio-political investigation in the Foucauldian tradition. This does not mean that Butler stands in a contradictory relation to Didi-Huberman (who explicitly aspires to a Foucauldian ‘archeology of visual knowledge’); rather, it means her text can be viewed as complementary to that of Didi-Huberman.¹²

‘Torture and the Ethics of Photography’ is the most relevant essay for our purposes. Butler here develops a critical discussion of Susan Sontag’s ideas about photography, particularly those presented in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).¹³ In Sontag, Butler finds traces of a well-known critique of reportage photography: photographs do not interpret, they only generate affect. Photographs do not help us to understand what they depict; what is more, they tend to lock their spectators into (what Blanchot would call) fascination, and therefore do not pave the way for political action. If we want to understand a situation, if we want more than just to get high on affect, it is crucial to create a narrative: ‘Harrowing photographs (...) are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us’ (*RP*, 80).

This dichotomy between photos and prose did not dominate Brecht’s engagement with photographs, nor did it structure Didi-Huberman’s book about this engagement. More precisely: Brecht’s *Kriegsfibel* is a work with text and image — and both Brecht and Didi-Huberman pay careful attention to this relation (much more than I have been able to do here). It is clear that there is no hierarchy in Didi-Huberman’s description of this relation as neither of the two languages can be said to anchor the other. Rather, the relation

between them serves to keep the work open. Butler pulls in the same direction: she does not ignore the differences between language and image, but she refuses Sontag's view of photographs as affective and non-interpretative. Moreover, she criticizes Sontag's attempt at maintaining a strong distinction between affect and thought. We could say that Butler is closer than Sontag to Benjamin's 'mimetic faculty' and to Didi-Huberman's passages about children and enactive learning (although, as Butler notes, Sontag's last chapter in *Regarding the Pain of Others* does take a step in this direction).

But the most important point in Butler's essay is that photographs *do* interpret:

In my view, interpretation is not to be conceived restrictively in terms of a subjective act. Rather, interpretation takes place by virtue of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect—and so sometimes takes place against one's will or, indeed, in spite of oneself. (...) It would not be quite right to reverse the formulation completely and say that the photographs interpret us (...) yet, photographs do act on us. (*FW*, 67–8)

Photographs act upon us, not least by playing a role in determining the limits of our reality—they *frame* our reality. Sontag, of course, does not ignore the fact that photographs are selective ('to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude' (*RP*, 41)), but according to Butler, Sontag does not push her remarks on 'framing' to the point where she produces a systematic reflection on how representability is being constituted. This is what Butler aims to do. For Butler, it is essential to think about 'the staging apparatus': the structures that determine *what* and *how* things fall into the field of the visual.

Among these structures Butler—who is writing about the post-9/11 images—mentions the Bush administration. Donald Rumsfeld clearly believed that images interpret. He was eager to control images and, through them, the understanding of the Iraq war. This eagerness manifested itself as an attempt at managing the framing of images; for instance, with the institution of a system of 'embedded reporting'. Embedded reporting is not a new phenomenon—Sontag traces it back to the British war on the Falklands in 1982—but there is little doubt that the two wars on Iraq perfected the system. Reporters now had to accept almost unconditionally the regulations of various state departments if they wanted the chance to produce images at all. This desire to control the framing not only regulated reports from the front, but led also, for instance, to the ban on showing American coffins returning from Iraq.¹⁴

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Butler's essay does two things: on the one hand, it outlines an analysis of the procedures and implications of framing; on the other, it (briefly) advances a more normative programme for contemporary visual culture. The analysis revolves around the tripartite distinction between *norms* (in the Hegelian sense of *Sitten*), *frames* that govern the perceptible, and a level Butler describes as that of individual suffering: *grievability*. Butler links the first of these two by saying that social norms are enacted through visual (and narrative) frames. The way we see, what we see, is regulated by social norms. This, in turn, determines which lives are deemed *grievable*. In the current media-landscape some lives do not count as much as others, some fall outside the discursive frames that determine the recognizable. It is thus not simply a question of whether or not to *recognize* someone's rights, it is also a question of whether or not we have the 'norms of recognizability' that allow us to consider the question of recognition.¹⁵

This very linear description of a movement from norms to frame obviously simplifies a much more complex set of relations. First we should add a reverse movement from framings to norms: the repetition of particular forms of framing helps to consolidate and/or produce the norms that govern criteria of grievability. Next, it is important to clarify that *Frames of War* considers norms of visibility, but also the relation between such norms and the formation of subjectivities. From the beginning, Butler explains that 'the "frames" (...) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject' (*FW*, 3). In words that bring us closer to Rancière and Didi-Huberman, she argues that framing implies a 'disposition of the senses' (165) and therefore also the production of certain forms of bodily experience. Obviously, there is no simple relation between (visible and discursive) 'framing' and 'the ontologies of the subject', but it is precisely here that the question of the politics of images becomes critical.

This analysis leads to the more normative dimension of the essay. Towards the end of her argument, Butler suggests that one of the key roles for contemporary visual culture must be 'to learn to see the frame that blinds us, to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the de-humanizing norm' (*FW*, 100). How can this be done? One of Butler's answers lies in a series of prefixes. Butler is interested in the question of how to un-frame, how to de-frame (Butler uses both these terms), and how a 'meta-framing' ('frame the frame' (8)) can lead us to reflect critically upon the politics of recognizability. Regardless of the prefix, the point is that visual culture must try to expose how framing is done.

This is a vocabulary we also meet in Didi-Huberman's book, when he insists on the montage's capacity to re-frame (*recadrer*) and un-frame (*décadrer*). Although the idea of a 'décadrage' is not conceptualized in the Brecht book, to think in montages, as Brecht does in the *Arbeitsjournal* and when creating a suite of photoepigrams in the *Kriegsfibel*, is precisely a way in which to unframe. When Brecht brings Rommel, the Pope and a scene of lamentation at a mass grave in Russia together he is unframing. Occasionally, this practice might result in satire, but in other cases we find a more restrained *mise en crise* that resists the oppositional logic of the satire.¹⁶

What Butler adds to Didi-Huberman's analysis of Brecht's montages is an attention to the socio-political practices and norms that determine which images make it onto the Brechtian 'editing table'. Furthermore, Butler's text allows us to specify the politics of the 'taking a stance' (*prise de position*) that we find in the montages. When we associate the 'taking a stance' with unframing (as I have done here), we can localize the place where Brecht intervenes. Brecht's montages operate in the field where norms are being translated into visibility, where bodies and subjectivities are being constituted. Combining the newspaper clippings, he is reworking the relation between *Sitten* and representability. On the other hand, we can also say that Didi-Huberman's 270-page commentary on visual material allows him to give Butler's argument about the hinge between norms, frames and grievability a density that her much shorter socio-philosophical essay does not possess. Didi-Huberman's text gives us a detailed analysis of the operations of unframing.

Butler does not give any examples of images that she believes can challenge the forcible frames. She analyses the Abu Ghraib photos of Lyndie England and her victims, and in this analysis draws attention to the multiple ways in which these images have been instrumentalized in an attempt to further different political causes. It is likely that what Butler has in mind when writing about the task of 'contemporary visual culture' is aimed at critics working in the field, rather than practitioners. However, it is also possible she would agree that when it comes to 'themat[izing] the forcible frames' a strong distinction between academics and practitioners is unnecessary. So even if it is speculative to suggest that certain artists 'fit' her ideas about thematizing the frame, it seems appropriate to conclude by mentioning the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar.

One of Jaar's most famous pieces, 'Untitled (*Newsweek*)' (1995), consists of seventeen successive cover images from *Newsweek* magazine.

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These have all been framed (literally), and are presented in chronological order.¹⁷ The first cover is from 11 April 1994, five days after a plane transporting the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi was shot down above Kigali. That week *Newsweek* ran a cover story on ‘How to survive in a scary [financial] market’. Underneath this cover, still within the frame, a small text by Jaar briefly recounts the events in Rwanda, also highlighting that during this week the Rwandan Patriotic Front started their offensive. Hereafter, we find another fifteen covers on topics such as ‘why do people kill themselves?’ (image of Kurt Cobain), the fiftieth anniversary of the D-Day invasion, the O. J. Simpson case, Nelson Mandela, the U.S. hosting the World Cup in football, etc. Each week a small text by Jaar describes the escalation of violence in Rwanda and (occasionally) the political quarrels in the U.N. Security Council. The text accompanying the sixteenth cover (a story on space travel to Mars) informs us that now one million people have died, two million have fled the country, and a further two million have been driven out their homes. The next week, 1 August 1994, *Newsweek* runs a cover story on Rwanda: ‘Hell on Earth’.

Alfredo Jaar’s piece is simple in its thematization of the ‘forcible frame’. It does not show us *what* the magazine neglected to show (the horrors of the genocide, the suffering of Rwandan people), instead it shows us *that* *Newsweek* was not showing. It is a piece of art concerned precisely with (what Butler described as) making the spectator ‘learn to see the frame that blinds us, to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm’. It is a work investigating how norms, framings and grievability are interlinked in contemporary society.

To my knowledge Butler has not written about Jaar, but both Rancière and Didi-Huberman have. In his contribution to the Jaar catalogue, *La politique des images* (2008), Rancière distances himself from the widespread idea that there are too many images in the contemporary world, and that this image overflow desensitizes us. Rather, the problem is that images are removed from us because they all receive the same framing. Jaar’s art protests against this removal, and advocates another *mise en scène*: ‘[Jaar] reminds us that the image is not a simple piece of what is visible, that it is a staging of the visible, a tying-in of the visible and what it says, but also of the spoken words and what it lets us see’. This is why the work of Jaar is involved in what Rancière here describes as a ‘redrawing of the map’ (*redistribution des comptes*).¹⁸

Despite their differences it is clear that Rancière, Butler and Didi-Huberman's Brecht share a number of important characteristics. They all believe the political work of images begins at the level of what Butler calls the frame and Rancière 'the forms of visibility' (*le dispositif de visibilité*, *SE*, 111). They are less concerned than many contemporary critics with questions of referentiality and simulacra — 'The problem with the contemporary critique of images lies with its desire to speak of an ontology of the image'¹⁹ — and more with the problem of how images can help to create what Rancière calls 'other communities of words and things, of shapes and meanings' (*SE*, 112). In these texts, the image is a verb not a noun, an activity (sometimes a bodily activity) not a concept. Far from the widespread iconoclasm of many post-9/11 commentators, Rancière, Butler and Didi-Huberman emphasize that images, when used critically and imaginatively, can help to think through the essential questions of our time. This is why Didi-Huberman can describe Brecht's engagement with images as a 'politics of the imagination' (*QI*, 254) and, ultimately, this is also why the texts can all be read as a call for creative inventions.

NOTES

- 1 Georges Didi-Huberman: *Quand les images prennent position. L'Œil de l'histoire, I* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009); Judith Butler: *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009). Translations from *Quand les images* (hereafter *QI*) are my own; references to this and to *Frames of War* (hereafter *FW*) will be included in the main text.
- 2 Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfibel* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel, 1994), nonpaginated, my translation.
- 3 Didi-Huberman mentions Harun Farocki's *Bilden der Welt und Inscrit des Kriegen* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Historire(s) du cinéma*. The term *table critique* is Godard's way of describing his editing desk. These two directors are also discussed in 'Restituons' in *Penser l'image*, edited by E. Alloa (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2011), while a more detailed discussion of Farocki can be found in Didi-Huberman, *Remontages du temps subi* (Paris: Minuit, 2010), the second volume of *L'Œil de l'histoire*.
- 4 One of the recurrent references in Didi-Huberman's book is Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot writes in his article on Brecht: 'Able to produce the effect of strangeness, the image therefore effects a kind of experiment by showing us that things are perhaps not what they are, that it falls to us to see them otherwise and, by this opening, render them first imaginarily other, then really and entirely other' (Maurice Blanchot, 'The Effect of Strangeness', in

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The Infinite Conversation, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 360–7 (364); hereafter *IC*.

- 5 Althusser argues that Brechtian dialectics works *laterally*, that he writes about ‘the dialectic-in-the-wings structure. In Brecht’s plays the centre is ‘always to one side’ [*toujours à côté*]; if the characters return to self-consciousness they fall into ideology. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1977), 142, 145.
- 6 This particular montage is discussed in *Quand les images prennent position* (78–9) and in the debate around Didi-Huberman’s book that took place at the Centre Pompidou in May 2009 (<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv>). In the following, I draw on both these presentations. In the German edition of the *Arbeitsjournal*, the montage is placed between the 20 and 25 June 1944.
- 7 Didi-Huberman and Rancière have interacted on several occasions in recent years (for instance, for the Farocki exhibition at Jeu de Paume in 2009). See also Didi-Huberman, *Remontages du temps subi* (128–31), Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La fabrique, 2008), 98–104 (hereafter *SE*), and *Penser l’image*, edited by Alloa.
- 8 The expression ‘paradigme brechtien’ appears in Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, 14, and in Rancière, *Les écarts du cinéma* (Paris: La fabrique, 2008), 112 (hereafter *EC*).
- 9 As readers familiar with Rancière’s *Le maître ignorant* (1987) can see, the name of Brecht is here being associated with what Rancière describes as the traditional pedagogical method of stultification *abrutissement*. This method aims to explicate to the students what they need to know. It sets out with the ambition ‘I will set you free’, but that gesture presupposes the more foundational assumption ‘you are not free’.
- 10 This is the moment of what Rancière, in *La Fable cinématographique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), calls the ‘fable contrariée’, an interruption of narrativity that he finds too, for example, in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (*SE*, 132) and Bresson’s *Mouchette* (*EC*, 68–74).
- 11 Rancière’s writings on Brecht are more complex than these remarks suggest. The quite negative presentation of Brecht, not least in *Le spectateur émancipé*, should be read alongside the more detailed and complex portrait of Brecht in the 1979 article, ‘Le gai savoir de Bertolt Brecht’ in Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Gallilée, 2007).
- 12 It should be noted that Butler’s essay considers a very heterogenous group of materials — not all of this material is artistic, not all of it is visual.
- 13 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003); hereafter *RP*.
- 14 It is important to stress that Butler’s text is not a conspiracy theory. The staging apparatus cannot simply be attributed to an individual (or a group) — despite the fact that many try to take possession of it. On the contrary, what

these attempts at framing very often demonstrate is the difficulty of taking control.

- 15 'If recognition characterizes an act or a practice or even a scene between subjects, then "recognizability" characterizes the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition' (*FW*, 5).
- 16 By 'restrained' I understand an unframing that does not immediately allow itself to become part of a logic of negation. This does not mean that the existing framing should not be opposed, but rather that Butler is aiming for a reconsideration of the norms that made the existing framing possible. On this point, I believe Butler's work can be differentiated from the idea of *reframing* that George Lakoff presents (for instance in *Don't Think of an Elephant!* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004)). Lakoff is keen to offer an alternative framing to the one that structures neo-conservative discourse. Butler would no doubt be sympathetic to this, but first she wants to make sure that an opposition does not simply serve to consolidate a binary framework that helps the neo-conservatives.
- 17 Jaar's piece was originally a performance piece, where the artist read the captions while holding up the cover images.
- 18 Jacques Rancière, 'Le théâtre des images' in *Alfredo Jaar: La politique des images*, edited by Nicole Schweizer (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2008), 74, 75.
- 19 Didi-Huberman in Marc Augé, Georges Didi-Huberman and Umberto Eco, *L'expérience des images* (Paris: INA Editions, 2011), 103.