

REVIEW ARTICLE

Putting Gestures to Work: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings*

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Georges Didi-Huberman, *Uprisings* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), 232 pp, ISBN 9782072697296

Georges Didi-Huberman's *Uprisings* is at once heavy and light. It weaves complex (and sometimes burdensome) political traditions and histories of thought concerned with uprising, rebellion and revolution, with bursts of poetry which, it seems, are meant to take flight off the page like the butterfly tracts that Didi-Huberman so admires. It is also vast in its scale and depth, tracing histories of uprising and rebellion from Atlas, Prometheus and Eve, through to future uprisings which are as yet unknown and, as the author reminds us, endless: 'the uprising is a gesture without end' (p. 17).

Writing in the wake of this scale and depth is a difficult task, and it would be possible to focus this review article on any one of the three parts of this publication, which traverses the disciplines of history, visual history, philosophy, aesthetic theory and politics with ease. The first part comprises a foreword by Marta Gili of the Jeu de Paume, a Centre for Images in Paris where Didi-Huberman led an exhibition on the theme of uprisings in 2016; an introductory offering from the author himself; and contributions by Judith Butler, Antonio Negri, Marie-Jose Mondzain, Jacques Rancière and Nicole Brenez – whose thoughts on uprisings are not always in synchronicity, particularly in the case of Rancière, with Didi-Huberman's. The second part might simply be described as an exhibition catalogue or portfolio which traces a visual history of uprisings through over 100 images comprised of photographs of uprisings and protest, as well as revolutionary posters, journals, artworks and other materials. The third and final part comes in the form of a monologue in which Didi-Huberman explores central themes and questions surrounding the character, histories and potentiality of future uprisings.

Throughout, *Uprising's* approach calls for a fusing together of 'new images, new thoughts, or new possibilities of action' (p. 345) so that the world might continue to rise up in the face of what Didi-Huberman – following Bertolt Brecht, Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin – calls these 'dark times' (p. 14). In other words, *Uprisings* is meant as an aesthetic and political gesture which works against 'nihilistic

submission' and hopes to offer a means through which to keep open our 'horizon of expectation,' to imagine alternatives to the violent worlds in which we live, and to put the gestures and desires of past uprisings to work today (p. 15).

In keeping with this approach, which calls for an opening rather than a closing down of thought, discourse and action, it seems counter-productive and even insincere to attempt a conclusive or extensive summary of the book's arguments. Instead, what I offer are a number of interconnected routes through which we might approach *Uprisings*, in order to put it to work today, and, more importantly, to put it to work in the global South.

Histories of Uprising: An 'Atlas of Conflicts'

To use Didi-Huberman's own words, *Uprisings* might firstly be read as an 'atlas of conflicts' (p. 292) and a meditation on the historical (and future) necessity of uprisings, rebellion and revolt. In other words, it is a text that attempts to trace the contours, desires and gestures of past struggles so that an 'I', a 'we', 'a people', might continue to resist in the face of racism, fascism and state violence. In this sense, *Uprisings* is fundamentally for and with the other, those whom Herbert Marcuse described in *One-Dimensional Man* as the 'substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and the persecuted of other races and colors, the unemployed and the unemployable'.¹

This is why Didi-Huberman's first question is 'what fate awaits people when we start to confuse the foreigner with the enemy?' (p. 13). Or, in a different time and space, what happens when Zimbabweans, Mozambiquans or Somalians, for example, are confused as enemies of the South African people? This is also why Didi-Huberman begins *Uprisings* with 13,000 refugees in Idomeni, Greece, who in 2016 were (and still are) fleeing conflicts in the Middle East and on the African continent. Tracing their struggle for 'minimum hospitality' in Europe today to the struggles of Cuban students in 1956 against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, the Black Panthers in the US (1960s), the rebelling sailors of Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and the allegorical struggles of Atlas, Prometheus and Eve, Didi-Huberman suggests that the whole world is and always has been rising up, and that this rising – interpreted by the author as an expression of our desire for freedom – is intrinsic to human behaviour. As he puts it, following Albert Camus, 'I rebel – therefore we exist' (p. 319).

But what, Didi-Huberman asks, makes a people rise up? And what are an uprising's rhythms? To begin to answer these questions, Didi-Huberman turns to mourning, suggesting that 'loss, which overwhelms us initially, can also, thanks to a game, a gesture, a thought, or a desire, make the world rise up entirely; and this is the principle force of uprisings' (p. 290). The key reference for Didi-Huberman here is Sigmund Freud's text on mourning and melancholia,² which makes a distinction

1 H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 342.

2 S. Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Riviere (trans.) (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 2004), 15–100.

between mourning, as a necessary process through which we let go of the lost object of our desires, and melancholia, which Freud, in this early paper, saw as ‘a hallucinatory wish-psychosis’ (p. 295). However, ‘Freud did not yet imagine, in this text, that the “struggle” when faced with loss might *create* a new reality corresponding to desire rather than *undergoing* a vain hallucinatory satisfaction of this same desire’ (p. 295, emphasis in the original). In short, as I read it, Didi-Huberman suggests that far from ‘letting go’, ‘moving on’ and reconciling with the past, loss itself puts the world into motion. We do not necessarily have to let go of the lost object before we can ‘move forward’. Or, in Didi-Huberman’s own words, ‘[w]e cannot bring back someone’s dead mother. But we can, perhaps, rebel against some of the constraints of the world that killed her’ (p. 295).

This reading of Freud’s seminal text is not primarily concerned with the individual who suffers loss. For Didi-Huberman, it is a deeply political question that enables him to engage with the processes through which a people collectively rise up in the face of loss, and, it seems, more importantly, how they put their desires for the lost object (freedom, democracy, etc.) to work today. But what of the violent uprising? In the face of ‘Western bourgeois societies’ that ‘seem to speak...with one voice to “condemn all violence”’, except the type carried out in the name of nation-states, is it possible to argue for a ‘human violence that could be said to be “just” in the ethical sense, rather than “legitimate” in the legal sense?’ (p. 365). Following Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and to a lesser extent Frantz Fanon, Didi-Huberman answers this last question in the affirmative, and in the process argues that uprisings are not only desirable and necessary, they are also inevitable. As Mondzain puts it in her contribution to the publication: ‘The insurrectional uprising is a revolutionary energy without which there could be no order other than bureaucratic dictatorship’ (p. 56).

Didi-Huberman further argues that ‘[t]here is no single scale for uprisings: they can go from the tiniest gestures of retreat, to the most gigantic gesture of protest’ (p. 16). They can also take multiple forms, and are perceivable in an artwork, a word, a scream, a discourse, an ethics, or a single gesture made by an unknown individual. The point for Didi-Huberman, though, is not scale but intent. For example, ‘[i]t often happens that the crowds dance in a unanimous movement under the baton of a dictator. But it happens too...that an uprising of the masses could be at the same time fully liberating and innocent’ (p. 325). It is, then, important to be able to distinguish between movements of a people that coalesce around certain institutions and nodes of power, and the uprisings of a people that struggle against those same institutions. By insisting on this distinction, Didi-Huberman offers a means through which to undermine normative understandings of protest and revolt today, and to differentiate between the type of violence employed by the state (a manifestation of state *power*) and the violence which often accompanies protest and revolt (the rising of a people’s *potency*).

Having said this, it is important to stress that *Uprisings* is not a utopian text. It is as much a pragmatic warning about the processes through which a people’s potency becomes a struggle for power, as it is a political thesis that calls forth the uprising and the ‘great refusal’. To quote Mondzain once more, uprisings for Didi-Huberman

represent both ‘the best and worst of things’ (p. 56), on the one hand, because they are corporeal manifestations of a people’s desire for freedom, and, on the other, to quote Michel Foucault, because they ‘will always risk falling back into the rut’ (p. 331) and betraying the revolutionary potential of a people. This attentiveness to the ‘unavoidable tragedy of human culture’ (p. 307) is what animates Didi-Huberman’s work, and is what, for the author of this review, makes it both a burdensome and uplifting text: burdensome because Didi-Huberman actively inherits and passes on a debt, an ethics and a (non-utopian) politics of struggle, and uplifting because he offers gestures of resistance and hope so that an ‘I’, a ‘we’, a people might continue to struggle in the face of these dark times.

A Politics and Ethics at Work: Images in Spite of All

Secondly, I read *Uprisings* as a poetic and political call to continue to work, to imagine, to think and to act in spite of all. As Didi-Huberman puts it, ‘[o]ur cries come in thousands of different forms. One form is the book’ (p. 345). Another is the artist Didi Michaux’s ‘clamors of India ink, uprisings of forms, riots of graphic signs, public demonstrations of beings that we would hitherto not have noticed...’ (pp. 310–11). Yet more examples are provided, such as Georges Bataille’s meditation on ‘the most profound revolution’ being ‘an experience in which time itself becomes “unhinged”’ (p. 318) or Maurice Blanchot’s joy in observing that the May 1968 uprising in France ‘allowed everyone, without distinction of class, age, gender, or culture, to befriend the first person that they saw, as though with a loved one, precisely because he was an unknown familiar’ (p. 357). The point, for Didi-Huberman, it seems, is that the historian’s or poet’s duty is something similar to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual: to be with ‘the people’, to give expression to or mediate their desires, and to articulate their gestures toward freedom.

This call is repeated by Didi-Huberman in *Images in Spite of All*,³ which focuses on a series of photographs that were smuggled out of Auschwitz by members of the Sonderkommando (Jewish prisoners who were responsible for operating Auschwitz’s machinery of mass destruction). In this book, Didi-Huberman forcefully argues that the historian is indebted to those who died during the Holocaust, and ‘to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real of their experience.’⁴ And this indebtedness means that ‘[w]e are obliged to that oppressive imaginable.’⁵ Didi-Huberman, in other words, urges the historian not to shy away from the Real of Auschwitz, both so that the Holocaust and all victims of mass violence are not forgotten and so that we are attentive to the reality that the Holocaust was and still is possible.

Didi-Huberman goes on to argue that these particular photographs, taken in haste and thus only showing a hint or a blur of what was happening at Auschwitz,

3 G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Our Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

4 *Ibid.*, 3.

5 *Ibid.*

nevertheless have the ability ‘to curb the fiercest will to obliterate.’⁶ They work against the Final Solution’s attempt to eradicate all Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and political opponents, and to eradicate our memory of the Holocaust itself. In *Uprisings*, Didi-Huberman suggests that such images, like memory, glow or burn in spite of all. They survive and transmit our gestures, which in turn have the ‘capacity to make tangible the very dynamics of real or imagined uprisings’, such as those carried out by the Sonderkommando in the face of certain death (p. 307).

Yet photography, the author demonstrates, also functions as a medium through which to blur as well as to reveal. Didi-Huberman, then, is attentive to the ways in which photography can have both an illuminating effect and an obscuring one. For him, photography is a medium of overexposure and underexposure. As he puts it in *Images in Spite of All*:

[W]e often ask too much or too little of the image. Ask too much of it – ‘the whole truth’ for example – and we will quickly be disappointed... Or else we ask too little of the images: by immediately relegating them to the sphere of simulacrum... we exclude them from the historical field as such.⁷

This tension between the overexposure and underexposure of images is central to the author’s dialectical method and is perhaps best highlighted by his discussion in *Uprisings* of Aby Warburg’s *Pathosformeln*. According to Didi-Huberman, ‘Warburg forged the notion of *Pathosformeln* – or pathos formula – to account for the survival of gestures throughout the duration of human culture.’ Gestures, he continues, ‘are inscribed in history’ and in images: ‘they make up the traces... of the unconscious at work in the infinite dance of our expressive movements’ (p. 302). Furthermore, ‘[t]o make the world rise up we need gestures, desires, and depths’ (p. 299), and Warburg’s cartographies of human experience point toward the ways in which ‘gestures have a remarkable ability to reverse or overturn’ (p. 305). Put another way, like photography’s remarkable ability to reveal the unseen, to question established truths, and to invert meaning through the blur and the cut, gestures have the ability to move the world and ‘a people’ in new, potentially liberatory ways, and to forge new modes of thought which had previously been ‘lost’ to history.

This method of historical and visual production is reproduced in the second part of *Uprisings*, which offers a visual atlas of conflicts, and a kaleidoscopic vision of the whole world rising up and in motion. Alone, each image (or gesture) might be read as a particular example of revolutionary art, or of specific political movements and revolutionary events. However, together they produce a vision of an endless, collective scream, a gesture toward freedom, which is meant, it seems, to both trace the histories, gestures and often tragic character of uprisings, and to put the world as we know it into motion. Indeed, rather than a static catalogue of individual images as

6 Ibid., 23.

7 Ibid., 3.

I previously intimated, this second part of the publication is, much like Warburg's *Pathosformeln*, meant to *move* the viewer, and as Styn de Cauwer puts it in his review of Didi-Huberman's work, to 'transmit desires by means of gestures'.⁸

There is a lot more to say about *Uprisings*' visual atlas of conflicts and the gesture, to which I will return below. But perhaps the last word in this part of the review should go to one of Didi-Huberman's main interlocutors, Walter Benjamin, whose thought and work frequently punctuate the pages of *Uprisings*. Like Bataille, Benjamin was acutely aware of the ways in which an uprising (and the image) could produce fissures through time and space and illuminate a sense of history and futurity as an open horizon, endless and full of possibility (both violent and potentially liberatory). And this, it seems, is the principle force that propels *Uprisings* and Didi-Huberman's understanding of history, aesthetics and political struggle, one that is best described through Benjamin's notion of the destructive character:

The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong...The destructive character sees nothing permanent...But for this reason he sees ways everywhere...Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at the crossroads. (p. 309)

Future Uprisings: The Gestures and Debt that We Carry

Finally, *Uprisings* is a text that finds hope and solidarity in and with future struggles yet to come. In this sense, it is as much a gesture toward future uprisings as it is a historical account of past ones. As Didi-Huberman insists, 'the uprising is a gesture without end' (p. 17), one that is repeated and 'finished,' endlessly, by successive generations.

At this point I want to turn briefly to Chris Marker's *Le fond de l'air est rouge*, which forms much of the ground for Didi-Huberman's meditation on the gesture. In this film, Marker creates a timeless global uprising through the juxtaposition of footage from different times and spaces. By splicing scenes from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (a 1925 film about the 1905 uprising in Odessa) with footage of twentieth-century uprisings in the US, Europe and elsewhere, the opening scenes of *Le fond de l'air est rouge* work to scatter 'struggles to every point of the globe, and to every moment of history, as though to give the multiple image of a *whole world rising up*' (p. 292, emphasis in the original).

According to Didi-Huberman, this montage effect produces 'a profound solidarity that links the subjects with their mourning and their desires; but which also joins the times themselves with their interposed images' (p. 290). Importantly, this cinematic interposing of the times and images best elaborates the author's thinking

8 S. de Cauwer, 'Searching for Fireflies: Pathos and Imagination in the Theories of Georges Didi-Huberman', *Angelaki*, 23, 4, 2018, 134, doi: 10.1080/0969725X.2018.1497285.

on the gesture, which situates gestures – traced through the history of images and cinema – as fundamentally political. Put another way, far from being concerned with the iconographic, the symbolic and the purely aesthetic, Didi-Huberman is interested in the political and historical dimension of our gestures toward freedom and justice, our ‘fundamental pathos’ as Patricia Hayes puts it.⁹ Didi-Huberman’s concern with images, then, is to work against the idea of images as static representations of a frozen moment in time, to reinvigorate them with a sense of dynamic historicity – to see them, like a film, as ‘movement-images’ in Deleuzian terms – and to trace this fundamental pathos through the history of our collective gestures toward freedom and justice. For Didi-Huberman, the importance of Marker’s *Le fond de l’air est rouge* is found in its ability to illuminate the dynamic and historical aspect of our desires. As Giorgio Agamben puts it in ‘Notes on Gesture’: ‘Cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture... The duty of the director is to introduce into this dream the element of awakening.’¹⁰

And this brings us to the global South, which is largely absent from *Uprisings*, but nevertheless marks its pages with its own gestures and histories of struggle. If, as Didi-Huberman argues about *Le fond de l’air est rouge*, ‘a gesture filmed in 1925 [for *Battleship Potemkin*] could “finish the gesture of the woman of Charone” in 1962’ (p. 290), then it could also be seen as ‘finishing’ the gesture of Mgcineni Noki, who was among 34 miners killed by the South African police force at Marikana on 16 August 2012. Conversely, Noki’s raised fist, which along with the green blanket that he wore during the Marikana uprising has become a sign of defiance in South Africa today, could be seen as finishing the gesture of the Black Panthers in 1960, the Black Lives Matter Movement today, and of the first fist raised in defiance against colonialism and the apartheid regime. Using Didi-Huberman’s reading of the gesture, Noki’s raised fist is not merely a symbol of defiance. Rather, it links subjects with their objects of desire and ‘finishes’ again and again the gestures of past and future uprisings.

What I am proposing, finally, is to read *Uprisings* as a gesture of radical solidarity for the global South (for us to use) rather than a text about it. I say this because Didi-Huberman is not interested in representing or speaking for the global South and warns against the institutions and disciplines that attempt to do so. He is, instead, concerned with putting the gestures of ‘a people’, or of the past, to work today. Through this gesture of radical solidarity, then, *Uprisings* might serve as a means through which to both understand the continent’s histories of uprising, rebellion and revolt, and provide a conceptual toolkit through which to anticipate future ones which are inevitably (and necessarily, according to Didi-Huberman) on the horizon.

As the contributions to this edition of *Kronos* demonstrate, the African continent has its own political, historical and aesthetic gestures. Perhaps the most recent is that carried out by an ‘art collective of queer black and coloured activists from the

9 P. Hayes, ‘Photographic Publics and Photographic Desires in 1980s South Africa’, *Photographies*, 10, 3, 2017, 319, doi: 10.1080/17540763.2017.1340736.

10 G. Agamben, ‘Notes on Gesture’, in *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, V. Binetti and C. Casarino (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 55.

working and middle class¹¹ who occupied a house in September 2020 in one of the most exclusive neighbourhoods in Cape Town, Camps Bay. In their own words: 'Our goal is highlighting the historical imperative of this land...There is the legacy of colonialism, apartheid, and even now, where people are still being displaced from the land...We are not attacking private ownership. We are not saying that people can't own private property. What we are calling into question is what this private ownership looks like. Who it excludes, who it oppresses, and who it doesn't.'¹² This 'occupation in solidarity with landless people and economic inequality made worse by the coronavirus and subsequent lockdown'¹³ is the type of political gesture or refusal that Didi-Huberman begins to trace in the final pages of *Uprisings*. In short, a gesture toward radical democracy: an attempt to 'reinvent, on the basis of an assumption of disobedience, the very conditions of which democracy should want to speak' (p. 361).

With this in mind, it seems important to end this review in the same way that Didi-Huberman ends *Uprisings*: with the butterfly tracts that Cuban students threw into the air during their revolt against Batista in 1956. In this final offering, titled 'The Message of the Butterflies', Didi-Huberman argues that in order to circulate and engender a sense of radical democracy 'it is critical...that the disobedience...be transmitted to others in the public space...It is to take it...in order to throw it into the air, so that it spreads over the space in which we breathe' (p. 373). And this is the final message of the butterflies, a gesture of struggle without guarantees, but one full of hope and imagination:

Better than anyone, the poet knows the meaning of the butterfly. It flies away, but often clumsily. It passes very close to you, beating its wings and surprising you with its beauty. And that can change your life. It can very easily fall into the nets of predators or police. It does not seem to know where to go, yet it manages to cross all the frontiers and to find recipients. (p. 373)

11 L. Kivit, 'The Young and the Rentless: Inside Camp's Bay's "Hijacked" Mansion', *Mail and Guardian*, 23 September 2020, <https://mg.co.za/news/2020-09-23-the-young-and-the-rentless-inside-camps-bays-hijacked-mansion/>.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.