

# Seeing time, fragment

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**H**ow do we see time? How does time become sensitive? These are questions that we could never stop asking, as each time, each answer is called into question in the specific duration and condition of visibility of each new experience. It would be too easy to address this question at a metaphysical level, where time would be elevated to some all-too-ideal “transcendental condition” and where seeing it would be reduced to some excessively concrete and down-to-earth experience, that of a simple immanent, even illusory condition of sensitivity. Let us not create artificial ontological hierarchies too quickly: this is the trap into which generalist philosophers or hurried theoreticians often fall. We grasp time only through our experience of the psyche, the body and the space around us; we only identify ourselves in the visible through a certain perception of duration, memory, desire, before and after—a certain “tremor of time”. Separating the visible from time might make certain words clearer and less ambiguous; but in reality that would make things—and especially relationships—incomprehensible and disembodied. We would therefore have to understand how *seeing* and *being in time* are inseparable and even mutually *understand each other*.

Seeing time—an experience that particularly engages all the necessary contribution of images to the knowledge of history, including political history—is really doubling one’s experience of time, if it is true that seeing already “takes time”. For *seeing is time*, whatever you do: time



1. The epistemological temptation to immobilise seeing and the object of seeing like a butterfly nailed to a cork board. Picture by allispossible.org.uk, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons

put in rhythm by the very reciprocal movements of the visible and the seer. These movements are complex and never end. The academic separation between the “arts of time” and the “arts of space” (from which pictorial, sculptural or photographic images proceed) is a very naïve simplification, if not a dangerous one. To see is first to see this, then suddenly that. Seeing perpetually changes the nature of what is seen as the constitution of the seer. It is to open the eyes, but also to close them (otherwise the eye will dry up and die), thereby producing the “jerky” rhythm of eyelids opening and closing. It is to get closer (because you can’t see anything too far away), but it is also to take a step back (because you can’t see anything that sticks too close). It is to stand in front, but also sideways and in all directions. Doesn’t our gaze continually shift here and there, in a head that keeps turning right and left, up and down, all led by a body that never stops moving in space? Isn’t seeing also sometimes seeing through tears and through emotions in general? Isn’t it, in the dark, for example, no longer being able to distinguish what appears to us, a phenomenon (external, objective) or a phosphene (internal, subjective)?

All the difficulty in this ever-changing experience of the visible and in what it can teach us consists in not reducing its complexity, in *not closing up* what we experience in the order of the sensitive, whether before an event in which we would be witnesses or before a visual document that would itself bear witness to such an event. On both the theoretical and practical levels, we would need to know how to *not immobilise* the images, meaning to not isolate them from their own capacity to make perceptible a certain moment, a certain duration, a certain memory, a certain desire... in short, a certain *human time* where the objective and subjective dimensions of time are combined in what we call history. Yet this effort—leaving their labilities, their movements and even their turbulences to the sensitive and to time—is by no means easy. There are so many obstacles.

For history experts, the temptation to immobilise images—a way of simplifying them and thereby simplifying the lives of historians themselves—has been expressed by their reduction to a simple functional status, that of “visual documents”. The image then serves as a pure and simple “iconographic index” in history books, as can be seen in what nevertheless remains one of the masterpieces of the *Annales* school. I am referring here to *The Royal Touch* by Marc Bloch. This is a way of reducing images to a *function* by reducing it to an *imitation* of factual reality, a *representation*—as so many approaches to the image as history and art theory were resolutely deconstructed by Wölfflin, Warburg or Riegl, not to mention Walter Benjamin or Carl Einstein. Of course, the heirs of the *Annales* school certainly paid ever-increasing attention to images as “monuments”, and not solely as documents, of history. Yet they have most often done so by continuing to employ a notion of representation that presupposes reducing images to the status of a convenient “mirror of mentalities”, without taking note of the fact that the mirror, in the images—and by the images—is very often broken.

For visual arts experts, the epistemological temptation to immobilise seeing and the object of seeing—like the entomologist who kills his favourite butterfly to pin it to a cork board and can thereafter stare at it, calmly, with a gaze as dead as the animal itself—is often no less so. We immobilise the object of seeing when we consider it above all as a text to be deciphered, an enigma to be solved. Didn't Erwin Panofsky envisage iconology as the discipline dedicated, before the images, to “solving the riddle of the sphinx”? But isn't it simplifying the image to suppose it as a “key” of interpretation that could open all its doors? However, the subject of seeing is immobilised when it is reduced to an assigned, irremovable “place of the spectator”, whether to confirm the rule of the perspectivist “point of view” of humanism, or else to establish a modernist system of vision according to which the visible object should be absolutely “specific” so that the act of seeing is extricated from all duration and all “psychology” (which, with regard to our concrete experience of images, will quickly appear as a pure and simple view of the mind, even a meaningless categorical imperative).



Images are something quite different from butterflies pinned to a cork board for the scholarly (but perverse and deadly) happiness of the entomologist. They are both movements and times, all unstoppable and all unpredictable. They migrate through space and survive in history, as Aby Warburg said. They transform, they change appearance, they fly here and there and they appear and disappear in turn. They have their own “lives”, and these very “lives” are what interest us and “look at” us, much more than the shedding of dead skin that they can leave entirely at our disposal. The best way to look at images would therefore be to know how to observe them without compromising their freedom of movement: therefore, looking at them would amount to *not keeping* them for oneself but, on the contrary, to letting them be, to *emancipating* them from our own fantasies of “seeing integrally”, of “universal classification” or of “absolute knowledge”. It is by proceeding in this way—and therefore by accepting the risk of a principle of perpetual incompleteness with regard to our will to know—that the subject of seeing will be able to *emancipate itself*, according to Jacques Rancière’s apt expression.

Through this vocabulary, we sense that an *epistemological* decision relating to images always carries an implication that, from the *aesthetic* register, passes very quickly to *ethical* questioning and to the *political* position of the problem. To respond to the request made of me here to evoke, even briefly, these passages from knowledge and the sensitive—or from *knowledge of the sensitive*, even from *sensitive knowledge*—to the political field as such, I must undoubtedly recall how the notion of *position* mobilises, so to speak, all the modalities that I have just listed. What had struck me in the photographs of hysterical women made as early as 1875 at the Salpêtrière by Charcot and his assistants was that, where we were supposed to have visual documents reflecting a pure clinical category, I actually discovered a host of *sensitive* aspects in each image that tore away, so to speak, its own *intelligible* alibi of epistemic representation.

These images certainly showed *poses*, such as typical gestures and “passionate attitudes”: in short, instances of stopped time and movement likely to be synthesised into “pictures” setting the stage for a “complete and regular” attack of hysteria, as the doctors said. Yet upon closer inspection of the images, we discovered something else: an occasionally exorbitant supplement that turned upside down any rule of meaning, as well as visibility. First of all, they were *pauses*: durations. One example is when a foot stretched out to the lens showed that it had stretched out and started moving because it was blurred, unlike another part of the body. The blurred area then gave thickness to the time of the take, just as it gave motility to the still image. Even more, she showed something of a fight, of a struggle with the desire of the photographer: a *counter-pose*, in brief. The foot thrown forward was also a kick aimed at the camera itself. With this gesture of defiance or this aggressive demonstration, the patient was saying—or even shouting— *no!* to the protocol supposed to provide visual knowledge of her suffering. In this sense, we can say that she was *taking a position* when she had simply been asked to *strike a pose*.

Against these medical photographs that attempted, under the cover of objective knowledge, to *take power* over her body in crisis—according to a typically fetishising and alienating visual device—the hysterical woman sometimes therefore made of her suffering the suffering of an ethically “mistreated” woman under the cover of being medically “treated”, a power of counter-effectuation. She would then happen to *take a position*, as if her symptom itself was equivalent, at such times, to something like an uprising. The “sharing of the sensitive” between the seen body and the seeing body having become asymmetrical, alienating and disagreeable, it swiftly turned to insurrectional confrontation. This made it clear—thanks, notably, to Michel Foucault’s studies on the combined history of madness and the clinic—that this first “field of images” was a political field through and through.

It then appeared that being *before the image* was nothing like a comfortable face-to-face, since the object of seeing never stopped moving in space and time—or, better, through multiple and heterogeneous times—just as the seeing subject itself never stopped experimenting with new postures or points of view. Even before the innocent frescoes of Fra Angelico, it was necessary to take a position and, in particular, to reverse or *go up* the conventional hierarchies of top and bottom, of iconography and “*décor*”, of resemblance and dissimilarity, of figure and place. In the three-term relationship that plays out between an image, its object (whose view is constructed there) and its subject (which constructs its vision there), we therefore find this structural need of position everywhere. The photographed hysterical woman is not content with striking a *pose*: she tries, in the best of cases, to snatch a *position* from her status as a “woman-object”. The image itself is not content to take its *place* in a vaster whole, the pages of a medical journal in the case of the Salpêtrière or the cells of the Dominican convent in the case of Fra Angelico: this place proceeds from a montage where each figure takes on meaning, in fact, to assume its *position* in relation to all the others.



2. “Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière” (Jean Martin Charcot, 1878).

Finally, the seeing subject cannot be satisfied unless it is purely passive, of having a certain *posture* before the image: it must therefore construct a position capable of affirming something in the image on the basis not of the immobility or univocity of the gaze, but of a regulated variation of it. It then appears that any position stems from a *dialectical movement*. Not from a dialectic conforming to school diagrams, where everything always ends well, like in Hollywood films, via a “synthesis” or a “reconciliation”, but on the contrary from an uneasy, infinite, incompletable or irreconcilable dialectic. It is this very movement, alternately *cheerful knowledge* and *restless knowledge*, that a whole generation of modern thinkers will have carried out, readers of Nietzsche as much as of Hegel, and for whom a non-standard dialectical imagination made it possible, precisely to develop positions that were both rigorous and inventive, observant and critical, close and distanced. Even before the Frankfurt School and the “negative dialectic” dear to Adorno—whose history Martin Jay was able to trace under the suggestive title *The Dialectical Imagination*—I think of this constellation formed in the early decades of the 20th century by Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Carl Einstein and Georges Bataille.



3. Aby Warburg in the United States of America, about 1895. Unknown photographer, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

It is probably not by chance that, of these four individuals—to which it would be possible to add a few others, of course (I am thinking in particular of Ernst Bloch and his magnificent political theory of “wishful images”)—two committed suicide out of political desperation. Both occurred in 1940: on 5 July by Carl Einstein and on 26 September Walter Benjamin. Both sought to escape the Nazi yoke after having fought all forms of fascist ideology in Europe for years. Aby Warburg had died in 1929, four years before Hitler came to power, but he had had plenty of time to sense the coming catastrophe, as evidenced in particular by the last plates of his *Mnemosyne* atlas of images, where the motives of theocracy converge with those of the fascist dictatorship against the backdrop of a long history of European anti-Semitism. As for Georges Bataille, he had feverishly sought a political path that was not one of fascism, bourgeois liberalism or Stalinism (a communist and libertarian path, quite close to what Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre called “revolutionary romanticism”), but rather one between Nietzsche and surrealism.



4. Walter Benjamin in a library. Picture by Helvetiafocca, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



5. Georges Bataille in 1943. Unknown author, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



6. Carl Einstein in Ibiza, 1923. Unknown author

What remains striking in this barely sketched picture is that all these thinkers made images the privileged operators (or crystals) of the historical and political dimension as such. They put time at the heart of the image and the image at the heart of time. Having all read Freud carefully, they understood that whether mental, literary or plastic, an image not only represents someone or signifies something, but *manifests a desire*. Yet this is a desire like all desire, meaning one *complicated by memory*. Thus, the images manifest: they lift themselves up and they also sometimes lift us up. They make it clear that politics is first and foremost a matter of subjectification and imagination, of desire and memory. That they do so acting as a symptom, as often happens, does not prevent them from being fundamentally political, for the very reason that, voluntarily or not, they *take a position* between one thousand and one possible things: reminiscence and forgetting, wish and refusal, a public place and a private space, reasoning and fantasy, a feeling of solidarity and a solitary gesture, knowledge and non-knowledge...



7 | 8. The participants of the second edition of the project Route to Exile visit the Memorial Passages to Walter Benjamin in Portbou (Alt Empordà). The monument is a work by Dani Karavan. Picture by the project Route to Exile, 2022.

