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Écorces. Georges Didi-Huberman. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011, 74 pages

After the publication of *Images, malgré tout* [1] in 2003, where the complex relation between experience and representation is clearly and thoroughly analyzed, George Didi-Huberman travels to Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first time in June 2011: “as other thousands of tourists, thousands of pilgrims or the few hundreds of survivors –some of them get confused with the others– I ‘visit’ this capital of evil, the evil that man knows how to inflict on man” (p. 29).

The writing work of *Écorces (Barks)*, the book we now present starts with the stripping off of barks in the birch forest (*Birkenwald*). Three pieces of bark that Didi-Huberman places over a paper once at home, and which contemplation helps him to start writing. Barks he values as shreds and strips (*lambeaux*), a recurrent word in his writings that sounds much better in French: time and memory shreds, experience shreds, but also “horror shreds” like those four photographs taken by the *Sonderkommando* members that occupy the whole book entitled *Images in Spite of All*. The gesture of stripping off bark that opens the book, leads me unconsciously to the Didi-Huberman of *Dancer of Solitudes*, the flamenco lover and scholar, because the actions –such as stripping off with the nails– as well as the words he uses in those actions, are introducing the *seguidilla* tone that is chasing me throughout the reading. A cante with substance, wide and intense, but voiced naturally, like Manuel Torre. A book-walk, an “archeological” expedition in Auschwitz-Birkenau, to look at the rests of what is left to see. And, of course, to be bold enough to let be stared by them.

Écorces (Barks) is presented in a thoroughly calculated format. Didi-Huberman divides it into 19 fragments and selects a single word title for each of them: shop, wire fences, walls, floors, path, steles, flowers... *Barks*, the word that provides this book its title, opens and closes this path which “one way” quality is only noticed in the final index because the fragments do not show their titles inside the book. In each one of these “stops”, the word has been replaced by a photograph. Without anchorage, a bit in the way as his dear W. G. Sebald uses to scatter them throughout the text. He took the pictures, blindly, as prompted by an impulse. Because he tells us that precise framing is forbidden in order to avoid transforming the place into a typical collection of landscapes. The book is a pure montage *après-coup*, where images, words and things are put to work together to “express” what most “impressed” him that sunny and quite morning of June.

Écorces (Barks) is also, and again in him, an epistemological metaphor to refer to the image, as the prior “veil with the tear” or the “butterfly image”. The images are now barks that tell us “something” about the tree, but not about its “essence”.

Apart from leading the phenomenological experience of the place (*lieu*) to a political legibility, I find very interesting his interpretation of the Auschwitz concentration camp transformed today into a commercial stand: his concern to understand which culture has turned that barbaric place into an exemplary *site*: “What can be said when Auschwitz must be forgotten, as a physical place, to become a fictitious place meant to remember Auschwitz?” (p. 25). In this sense, the climax of the book is reached when the author takes us to the clearing in the forest where the Crematory V was placed. There, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum conservators have placed three black steles with the enlargement of three of the four photographs taken clandestinely by members of the *Sonderkommando*. Remember there were four pictures. The fourth one, the photograph disdained as “memory place”, had the greater indicial value, the one that only depicted the sky, a moment of extreme danger when the camera shot without managing to focus anything. They had rejected just the picture –the failed and abstract one, the photograph out of focus that witnessed the danger, “the vital danger of seeing what was taking place in Birkenau” (p. 48). The photograph that showed that often *one must hide in order to see*, which is just what the author is pointing out, what “the memorial pedagogy wants, oddly enough here, make us forget” (p. 49). *Écorces* ends up being a book about the journeys of images, when the *poor images* are obliged to migrate to the pompous realms of the “visible”. And how a way of knowledge through montage manages to rescue them.

Footnotes

[1] *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Translated by Shane B. Lillis.

