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ABSTRACT

In the exhibition *Soulèvements*, curated by Georges Didi-Huberman, various manifestations of gestures indicating the desire to rise up were displayed. This exhibition triggered the criticism of decontextualising images. In a written exchange with Enzo Traverso, Didi-Huberman clarified his approach as an anthropology of bodily gestures attesting to the overlooked role of desire in uprisings. This focus, however, requires downplaying the historical and political context of the material shown, which creates a tension underlying the *Soulèvements* exhibition. Similarly, in *Désirer désobeir*, Didi-Huberman makes a distinction between 'revolt', as the manifestation of the desire to rise up, and 'revolution', as a more organised project which stifles the desire to revolt. In a second part of the article, the film *No Intenso Agora* (2017) by João Moreira Salles is presented as an alternative approach to the 'afterlife' of images of uprisings. Salles manages to derive from the footage he explores rich insights into the specific dynamics of the protests of 1968. Furthermore, in contrast with Didi-Huberman, Salles explores the problems with focusing on gestures and iconic images, as well as the blinding effects of intense emotions such as joy.

KEYWORDS

Georges Didi-Huberman; uprisings; João Moreira Salles; No Intenso Agora; images; Enzo Traverso

Introduction

Since 2016, the work of French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has taken a more explicitly political turn. In the exhibition *Soulèvements* (*Uprisings*), curated by Didi-Huberman and first shown at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2016,[1] he displayed diverse artefacts (photographs, film, pamphlets, art installations …) which were presented as manifestations of gestures indicating the desire to rise up against oppression. The theoretical underpinnings of the curatorial choices were elaborated in the catalogue of the exhibition and in the book series *Ce qui nous soulève* (Didi-Huberman 2016, 2019a, 2021). In response to the criticism of Enzo Traverso in his book *Revolution* and in the journal *Analyse Opinion Critique* (hereafter referred to as *AOC*), Didi-Huberman

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[1]The exhibition was shown at the Jeu de Paume from 18 October 2016 to 15 January 2017. Afterwards it was shown in slightly modified ways in Barcelona, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Mexico City and Montreal.

clarified that the exhibition was intended as an anthropology of bodily gestures, rather than political history (2022a, 2022b, 2022c). In his view, the role of desire, given form in gestures, is underexamined in political theory, though he avows that focusing on gestures will come at the cost of focussing less on the historical context (2022c). These writings give us a better picture of the reasons behind this turn towards the topic of 'uprisings' in Didi-Huberman's theories but they also attest to certain ambiguities and tensions that haunt his recent work. In this article, I will flesh out some of his theoretical positions concerning the role of gestures, as well as the ambiguities that surround these positions. Though Didi-Huberman emphasises that desire can never be separated from the political context in which it arises he nonetheless, in order to foreground bodily gestures, has to downplay what he calls the political 'projects' which form the context in which the gestures are manifested. Similarly, in *Désirer désobeir*, he distinguishes 'revolt', regarded as a spontaneous upsurge of desire, from 'revolutions', presented as the concrete political organisation of this desire which, in his view, stifles the desire to revolt (Didi-Huberman 2019a, 249–262). Didi-Huberman's work on images of uprisings will be confronted with the approach of Brazilian director João Moreira Salles in his film *No Intenso Agora* (2017). In this film, Salles explores what we can learn from looking closely at footage of revolts from 1968 in the present. In doing so, he pays attention to gender, class and racial inequalities, strategic failures and the blinding effects of the feeling of joy, as well as the commodification of the footage. Though similarities between both approaches can be noticed, the political nuances that Salles manages to explore show the limitations of Didi-Huberman's focus on gestures when looking at images of past uprisings.

Gestures and uprisings

Throughout his oeuvre, Didi-Huberman has advocated the importance of developing a critique of images *by means of* images. As he writes: 'There is no critical theory without a critique of images. But nor is there any such theory without a critique […] by *images themselves*' (2017, 260). As opposed to theorists who distrust images, Didi-Huberman argues that critical images are more than ever necessary. Images have to be brought into play with other images, juxtaposed to other images, documents and texts, to help us see what the image reveals. Under the influence of Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg, Didi-Huberman argues that a well-made montage or configuration of images can help us to see the historical traces an image contains. He is especially interested in diverse manifestations of the people's desire to resist oppression. Images can also give us valuable information about the context in which an image was made. They can help us to better discern the world, even when they reveal attempts to stifle or destroy them (Didi-Huberman 2017, 260–261). They can also help us to understand the dynamics of oppression, as well as the various ways in which people have developed resistance tactics.

In the English-speaking world, Didi-Huberman is best known for his book *Images in Spite of All*. In this book, he argues against the tendency to question the value of images for providing testimonies of the Holocaust, as Claude Lanzmann and others claimed. He develops an extensive analysis of the four photographs taken by members of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz and smuggled out of the camp. These photographs have

been dismissed as failed attempts to document the horrors of Auschwitz. Because the prisoners had to operate quickly and partly remain hidden not to be detected, the photographs are out of focus and poorly framed, with sections of the photos being plain black or grey. Attempts were made to make the photos more 'revealing' by cropping away sections and enlarging the parts in which bodies can be seen. Didi-Huberman critiques the implicit assumptions about visuality behind these attempts and emphasises the importance of imagination instead. Imagining the context of the images, however painful or controversial that may be, is an obligation we have. He argues that all parts of the photographs are important, including the black and unfocused parts of the images. The black tells us that the person who took the photo was hiding inside a building, testifying to the existence of this building used in the extermination process of prisoners. The problems with the focus and the framing tell us that the person had to operate very fast, fearing for his life. Furthermore, the four photographs form a sequence showing the rapid capturing of the photographs alternated with hiding. Finally, the mere fact that these photographs exist testifies to the life-defying efforts undertaken to document and contest the horrors inside the camp in near-impossible circumstances. Imagination is required, combined with a close attention to the images, to help us understand what the images reveal. The fact that such an understanding is always partial and limited does not diminish the importance of doing so (Didi-Huberman 2008).

These four photographs were also included in the exhibition that Didi-Huberman curated for the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2016, titled *Soulèvements* (*Uprisings*). In this exhibition, Didi-Huberman wants to explore the various ways in which the desire to rise up has taken form, whether by means of words or gestures captured in images. The exhibition displays many images of protestors raising their fists, throwing stones or using hand gestures to emphasise their passionate speech. Didi-Huberman regards this project as a continuation of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, with the difference that the exhibition is dedicated to images of uprisings, something which Warburg mostly omitted from his *Atlas* (though he did include images of antisemitism and fascism in his *Atlas*). In the catalogue of the exhibition, he develops a psychological argument for Warburg omitting images of political upheaval, namely that political turmoil was too unsettling for Warburg's recovering mental state (Didi-Huberman 2016, 304–307). Just like Warburg's *Pathosformeln*, the exhibition shows how certain gestures recur across geographical regions and throughout various historical time periods. Didi-Huberman considers the exhibition to be a cultural history or an anthropology of gestures. A gesture is the form of an intensity, which he compares to what Marcel Mauss called techniques of the body (2022c). Most importantly, these gestures exert a force in the present; they are, as it were, contagious and can help to stir up the desire to revolt in contemporary viewers. While seeing these images, the viewers could relate the gestures to their own story or situation and inherit, so to speak, the courage to rise up against situations that oppress them. Didi-Huberman regards gestures as more primary than conscious actions, which is an important distinction to understand certain tensions in his work. As he writes in the catalogue of the exhibition: 'Rising up is a gesture. Before we even attempt to carry out a voluntary and shared 'action', we rise up with a simple gesture that suddenly overturns the burden that submission has, until then, placed on us … ' (2016, 117)

Though much of the exhibition focuses on political uprisings, Didi-Huberman explicitly draws a parallel between the desire to rise up in a political sense with the more general psychic desire to overcome a certain situation. In the catalogue, a passage from psychoanalyst Pierre Fédida, an important influence on Didi-Huberman's theories, is described in which two children who had lost their mother enact their mourning by covering themselves with a sheet as if it were a shroud. After some time, however, they turn the sheet into a flag to be waved, turning the mourning as it were into play (Didi-Huberman 2016, 289–290). The same gestures of turning from mourning to the jubilant desire to resist this oppressive feeling can be seen in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, in which we see the dejected hand of an elderly lady turn into a clenched fist and then raised into the air expressing the wish to revolt. The scenes in the film with raised fists or drapes passionately waved in the air often trigger fellow citizens to repeat the same gesture. Though Didi-Huberman's views on desire are primarily influenced by Freud (one section of the exhibition is called 'with desires (indestructible)', which he attributes to Freud), they are also influenced by Fédida's writings on mourning and Gilles Deleuze's views on *puissance*, a potential that we can turn against more institutional forms of power (*pouvoir*) (Didi-Huberman 2016, 295–296, 313–314; Hagelstein 2023; Larsson 2023a, 2023b; Saint 2023).

Gestures and the politics of images

However interesting the exhibition and the material on display may have been, it also evoked criticism.[2] The most elaborate objections came from Enzo Traverso, who critiqued the exhibition in his book *Revolution* and in a series of texts published in *AOC*, which invited Didi-Huberman to clarify his intentions and views in greater detail (Didi-Huberman 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Traverso 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). This increasingly intense written exchange offers rich and fascinating reflections on how to approach images of revolts and pushed both Didi-Huberman and Traverso to specify their positions on the politics of images and the potential role of images in the memory of revolts. Traverso wrote in *Revolution* that the *Soulèvements* exhibition 'privileged the aesthetic aspects of uprisings to the point of blurring their political nature' (2021, 34). The focus was on the gestures in various situations, at the cost of the complexity of the context in which each gesture was deployed. The exhibition offered little to no information about the people in the images, their social position in society, why they were revolting and against what, which strategies they adopted or why, in the end, their revolt failed. This made Traverso conclude that the exhibition decontextualised and aestheticized the images on display and thus amounted to a 'depoliticized iconography' (2022a). In the catalogue of the exhibition, Didi-Huberman explicitly denies aestheticizing uprisings (2016, 18). He already anticipated that some might claim that the exhibition 'merely *aestheticizes* and, as a result, *anaesthetizes* the *practical* and political dimension inherent in any uprising' (18). This is precisely what Traverso will reproach him for. Didi-Huberman also emphasises not wanting to make a 'standard iconography of rebellions'. Instead, he wants to explore how images can 'give shape to our desires for emancipation'.

[2]For example, historian Philippe Artières strongly critiqued the exhibition in *Libération* for decontextualising social history (2017).

In his own work, Traverso deplores that terms such as 'revolutionary' or 'revolt' are used in such a widespread manner, even in the language of marketeers to hype up a new product, that they have lost any meaning (2022c). He felt similarly that the *Soulèvements* exhibition, displaying images of political uprisings next to photos by Jean-Martin Charcot of patients displaying 'hysterical' symptoms, art work showing a fist slamming on a table with a glass of milk[3] and a photograph of a plastic bag carried upwards by the wind,[4] blurred the meaning of the word 'uprising'. According to Traverso, Didi-Huberman's approach depletes the images of their political content and thus of the political context which gives sense to the gestures shown.

In his initial criticisms, Traverso found the photograph that was used for the poster of the exhibition and the cover of the catalogue to be particularly problematic. This image is a section of a photo taken by Gilles Caron in 1969 in Northern Ireland with the caption 'Manifestations anticatholiques à Londonderry' (Anti-Catholic Manifestations in Londonderry). The photo was taken during the riots known as the Battle of the Bogside: violent clashes between the residents of a Catholic neighbourhood of (London)Derry and the Northern-Irish police which marked the beginning of the period of the Troubles. Following the caption that Caron gave to the photograph, Traverso presumed, erroneously, that the youngsters in the photo belonged to the Unionists.[5] Was the striking stone-throwing pose the main reason for selecting the photograph and not the politics of the conflict shown?

Didi-Huberman retorted sharply that Traverso should look better instead of letting his judgment be misled by the caption of that photo, arguing that the youngsters are Catholic protestors, facing riot police remotely visible in the distance. Furthermore, this photo was part of a wider series of photos taken by Caron in various parts of the world, all 'context' of the photo which Traverso on his part ignored (Didi-Huberman 2022a). In spite of his error, the ambiguity surrounding the image is further proof for Traverso of the lack of concern for the political content of images throughout the entire exhibition, in favour of the striking aesthetic form of a gesture. This amounts in his view to lack of respect for the protestors depicted and a lack of consideration for the social, political and cultural historicity of the images (2022b). In a response to art historian Guillaume Blanc-Marianne about the same photograph by Caron, Traverso argues that images of uprisings should be shown to provide 'knowledge, stimulate reflection and help to understand'[6] (2022b). Preserving the traces of emancipatory struggles should go along with the 'memory of the oppression and the violence' that the struggles faced.

Though both of them consider their work to be a 'cultural history' of uprisings and revolutions respectively, Didi-Huberman and Traverso differ on what precisely such a cultural history should reveal. Traverso makes a distinction between revolts and revolutions. Revolts tend to be limited in scope and momentaneous, the result of outbursts of anger and despair. Revolutions, on the contrary, are supported by a proper ideology and a utopian vision of a better society, bringing forth a developed political project. Didi-Huberman writes that Traverso opposes 'the political project brought forth by any

[3] *A Glass of Milk* by Jack Goldstein (1972).
[4] *Patriot* by Dennis Adams, from the 'Airborne' series (2002).
[5] Though this interpretation of the photo was not correct, it caused Traverso to provocatively ask Didi-Huberman why not include images of fascist uprisings, such as images of book burnings? (Traverso 2022a).
[6] All the English translations of citations from texts from AOC are by the author.

authentic revolution to something which is "limited in vision" and that is only desire, the simple desire to disobey, characteristic for uprisings or revolts' (2022c). A hierarchy is thus created between revolutions proper and 'mere' revolts or uprisings. Didi-Huberman affirms that it was indeed his intention to make an anthropological study of human gestures of uprisings and not revolutionary actions properly speaking (2022c), taken from various time periods and locations. This comes at the cost, he avows, 'of not going into the intrinsic motivations of each struggle or every political tradition'. He goes on: 'What I lost in specific narratives, I tried to gain in gestures, in movements of the body' (2022c). Furthermore, Didi-Huberman refers to the connection that Freud made between desire and memory and in this way gestures giving form to the desire to rise up can provide a memory of uprisings. Such 'political gestures', however, 'manifest themselves more as *desire* than as a *project*'. Though Didi-Huberman will always emphasise that desire and political struggle can never be separated from each other, to foreground the importance of gestures as a manifestation of desire he nonetheless repeatedly distinguishes desire from political project. As opposed to political projects as the result of strategic calculations, which can be described in monographs, he aimed for an 'unthought, non-theorized genealogy' of *surging in bodies in movement*, manifesting themselves in unexpected, unforeseen ways (2022c).

Didi-Huberman clarifies that a 'political anthropology' of gestures differs from a political history which can be articulated (2022b). Just like images, gestures are always ambiguous. He argues that this anthropological dimension of embodied gestures is often neglected by political theorists as an epiphenomenon or, worse, as an infantile stage which should be transcended into a more mature revolutionary practice. Didi-Huberman finds this the 'blind spot' of many political theories, which is precisely why he wants to focus on it.

While Didi-Huberman critiques Traverso for establishing a hierarchy between revolutions as a developed project, with a vision and ideological foundations, and revolt as a temporary, spontaneous outburst, there are several passages in Didi-Huberman's writings where he seems to argue for the exact inverse. Though he would repeatedly emphasise that politics and desire cannot be separated he nonetheless, in order to highlight the gestures that are the focus of his anthropological project, needs to separate desire from a political project. When he agrees with Agamben that gestures are a form of 'pure mediality' or a 'means without end', he explains that gestures, as opposed to action, are not attached to any kind of finality (2022b). To show the gestures, he is obliged to do something methodologically and rhetorically which goes against his theoretical view that desire and politics are never totally separated and that is formulating a distinction between desire manifested in gestures and political projects involving forms of action with a certain finality and a history which can be narrated.

In his response to Traverso, Didi-Huberman refers to an explicit distinction he makes repeatedly in his writings between 'taking sides' and 'taking position' (2013, 76, 2018a, 110–111, 2022c). In works such as *The Eye of History: When Images Take Position* and *Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science*, Didi-Huberman extensively analyses the value of montage as a technique to visually explore historical dynamics (2018a, 2018b). Making a constellation of images which can be composed and recomposed is presented as 'taking position' (*prise de position*), ordering and re-ordering images to explore affinities and contrasts between images. This differs in Didi-Huberman's view from

explicitly 'taking sides' (*prise de parti*). Didi-Huberman regards montage as an explorative epistemological technique, not as a tool to express an obvious political opinion. Similarly, Didi-Huberman presents the *Soulèvements* exhibition as a 'anthropology of political desire attentive to *taking* gestural *positions*, rather than a historical or theoretical treatise on *positions taken* concerning actions that should be taken' (2022c).

However, his examples of montage as taking position vary widely, both in form as in artistic intent: from the picture atlases of Warburg and Gerhard Richter to works combing images with verse, such as Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer*, as well as the films of Pasolini and Eisenstein. While the artistic handling of images in these works is certainly more subtle and complex than just militantly taking sides, a clear political positioning can obviously not be excluded from them either. When Bertolt Brecht made his *War Primer*, when Warburg included Mussolini in his *Atlas* or when Pasolini made *La Rabbia*, they unambiguously 'took sides' against fascism and other forms of exploitation, as well as 'taking sides' with the victims. The political positioning, taking sides, cannot be bracketed when studying the way in which these works 'take position'. The methodological requirement to bracket the 'political project' to foreground gestures causes a tension with Didi-Huberman's theoretical view that desire and politics can never be separated and that various aspects of a struggle are always intertwined. This tension creates a paradox at the heart of his project which haunts the entire *Soulèvements* exhibition.

Revolt as the desire to disobey

The tension between desire and political projects can also be seen in Didi-Huberman's theoretical elaborations of his interest in uprisings. In some of the essays in *Désirer désobeir*, he affirms that politics and libidinal processes are always intertwined: '… one should never lose sight of the component of (social) struggle intrinsic to any desire, just as one should never overlook the element of (psychic) desire intrinsic to any social or political relationship' (Didi-Huberman 2019a, 256–257).[7] From quotes such as this, it seems that for Didi-Huberman social struggle and psychic desire are inseparable and always implicated in each other. In another essay, he writes: 'Every political gesture arises from a history and every history is impure. Why impure? Because it is made up of *singularities* mixed with *regularities* to form *processes*' (2019a, 117–118). These statements confirm the importance that Didi-Huberman adheres to the entanglement of desire, specific historical situations and social struggles: the singular aspects of an uprising are entangled with what he calls 'regularities'. In his response to Enzo Traverso, Didi-Huberman affirmed once again that nothing could separate politics from desire (2022c).

However, if we take a closer look at certain passages included in *Désirer Désobeir*, we can discern a line of argument which undercuts his views on the entanglement of desire and social struggle and which will pull them apart. In the essay 'Flux et reflux, ressacs dialectiques', he makes a distinction between spontaneous forms of 'revolt', as the result of the desire to resist oppression, and a more planned and organised 'revolution'. He describes Marx's disappointment with the fact that the revolution of 1848 in Paris

[7]English translation from 'Critical Image/Imaging Critique' (256–257). All further English translations of quotes from *Désirer désobeir* are by the author.

turned into a renewed dominance of the bourgeoisie in just a few weeks. The popular revolution only gave birth to a counter-revolution, which Didi-Huberman calls an 'infernal dialectics' (2019a, 250). Marx argued that uprisings will have to be 'realized' more completely or end up with the restoration of the old order. Didi-Huberman will, however, colour these attempts to solidify spontaneous revolt into a more realised revolution as negative, as stifling the spirit of revolt. The 'infernal dialectics' then is not only the crushing of the revolt by the powers that be, but also the stifling attempts to solidify and organise the spontaneity of the revolt.

In developing this argument, Didi-Huberman contrasts theorists, mostly from the anarchist tradition, to figures such as Lenin who argued for the necessity of a proper organisation of social struggle. He quotes Mikhail Bakunin, who compared the act of revolt with thinking; just as one never stops thinking, the revolt never ends (2019a, 253). If a revolt is 'realized' in a type of state, for example a communist one, this would amount to the negation of the revolt as a movement. The 'realization' would mean, according to Didi-Huberman, echoing the argument of Bakunin, that the potentiality (*puissance*) of the revolt is transformed into a form of established power (*pouvoir*) (2019a, 252).

Didi-Huberman then proceeds to quote a series of anarchist thinkers (Daniel Guérin, Max Stirner, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Errico Malatesta, Peter Kropotkin, Nestor Makhno, Volin, Alexander Berkman, and Emma Goldman) to develop his argument for the contrast between 'revolt' and 'revolution'. The specific wordings he chooses in his attempt to conceptually separate the spontaneity of a 'revolt' from the organisation of a 'revolution' are key to understand the ambiguities surrounding the political aspects of his work. He writes: 'The revolution arises from a project: it is aimed at institutions, some to destroy and others to invent. … The revolt, on the other hand, arises only from a desire' (2019a, 256). Further in the same essay, he opposes the views of Kropotkin to the aims of Lenin; whereas Kropotkin is interested in the question of how to revolt, he claims, Lenin is only interested in how to achieve a revolution (2019a, 259). He contrasts what he calls the 'psychological dialectics of the desire for emancipation, of a "consciousness that has risen up" and a passage to *action*' of Kropotkin with the 'military and governmental dialectics – a strategy thus – of *action* and its necessary *organization*' of Lenin (2019a, 259–260).

In his presentation of revolts and revolutions, he is displaying a similar tendency as in his views on gestures of uprisings. Both gestures and revolt are manifestations of the desire to rise up against oppression, a desire which acts as a form of potentiality, but in contrast with his view that desire and social struggle are always intertwined, he then proceeds to make a distinction between desire and a more organised political project, whereby the first is presented as more primary. In his writings on revolt, however, something is added which was avoided when discussing the *Soulèvements* exhibition. While in both cases Didi-Huberman ends up separating desire from political projects, in the writings on revolt, the revolutionary project is unambiguously presented as stifling the desire to revolt, part of an 'infernal dialectics'. The fact that Didi-Huberman illustrates his argument with examples from the Soviet Union has the rhetorical effect of colouring any political organisation or planning with all the repressive connotations of the Leninist regime crushing any revolt which deviates from the Bolshevik party line with its military form of organisation. The 'political project' here is not only different

from the desire to rise up, it is detrimental to the desire to rise up, which posits the two against each other in a much more explicit manner than in his reflections about the *Soulèvements* exhibition.

The tension that has been described here is a tension which cuts through more of Didi-Huberman's work. For example, on various occasions Didi-Huberman affirms Benjamin's view that any critical project has to do justice to the victims of history and that 'the subject of historical knowledge' is 'the struggling, oppressed class itself', as Benjamin famously wrote (2003, 394).[8] By trying to separate gestures from political projects, he nonetheless ends up not paying attention to the specific struggles of the oppressed, and he will study them as manifestations of an indestructible desire to rise up instead. The particular forms of struggle and oppression pertaining to class dynamics thus become illegible in the *Soulèvements* exhibition.

Furthermore, the approach to images in the *Soulèvements* exhibition differs quite strongly from Didi-Huberman's earlier approach in *Images in Spite of All*, even though the photographs discussed in the latter were also included in the exhibition of 2016. In his analyses of the four photographs taken in Auschwitz, the gesture is the fact that these photos were taken. Yes, those photos attest to the desire to oppose their horrific circumstances, to document the mass murder to the outside world with the hope of an intervention. But, however imperfect, the photos tell us a lot about the contextual circumstances in which these photos were taken: they reveal the fear of the photographer to be seen, the near-impossible organisation it must have required to smuggle a camera in and out of the camp, the fact that organised resistance existed even in such a seemingly hopeless situation, the circumstances of the killings and much more; these photos are not reduced to the mere desire to rise up. Didi-Huberman spends the entire book *Images in Spite of All* exploring their testimonial importance. In the *Soulèvements* exhibition, images were shown to reveal the diverse gestural manifestations of the desire to rise up, not to serve as testimonial documents that could, with the help of the imagination as Didi-Huberman would say, give us a better understanding of these specific historical social struggles.

Enzo Traverso finds it an error of Didi-Huberman to try to locate *the* memory of political uprisings in the bodily gestures that manifest the desire to rise up (2022c). An iconology of gestures might indeed lead to an 'anthropological memory', he avows, but it does not help us to comprehend how revolutions have managed to change the course of history. In the essays 'Multitudes, essaims, communautés' and 'Sans noms, sans nombres, en tous lieux', Didi-Huberman turns to the *operaismo* or workerism movement in Italy in the 1960s and '70s. He remarks that, for most people, the *operaismo* movement is now a thing of the past, long gone and forgotten. But then he writes: 'Nothing is obsolete, or forgotten, in the domain of language, of images, of desires, of human behaviour. Nothing is thus obsolete of the big political questions' (Didi-Huberman 2019a, 332). In his Warburgian project, Didi-Huberman believes that the survival (*Nachleben*, *survivance*) of past revolts can be traced by means of images. Here the question arises: what precisely 'survives' in the present from past revolts in Didi-Huberman's view? Is it enough that bodily gestures survive, attesting to the desire to rise up? What was at stake in the *operaismo*

[8]Didi-Huberman endorses this view in *Désirer désobeir* (328, 148).

movement was to rethink the strategies of the left with the aim of liberating workers from exploitation and gaining more autonomy in the context of the transformation from Fordist to post-Fordist labour. What makes this movement important are the specific political debates and interventions, the innovations in the protest strategies deployed, the theoretical analyses of the various facets of exploitation and the new concepts proposed to understand exploitation and resistance. But precisely this, and these are the 'big political questions', to use his expression, is lost if one reduces the survival of that movement to documents revealing *only* gestural manifestations of the desire to rise up.

The afterlife of 1968: *No Intenso Agora*

Now I will turn to a film which also explores the survival of footage from past protests, in this case protests that took place in and around the year 1968: this film is *No Intenso Agora*, directed by the Brazilian director João Moreira Salles. The film came out around the time of the 50th anniversary of the protests in 1968, which was the occasion for often rather clichéd and simplified narratives about May '68 as an iconic event.[9] Though affinities with the approach of Didi-Huberman can be seen, Salles manages to derive a surprisingly rich amount of information from the available footage, in a way that shows some of the limitations of Didi-Huberman's approach. Looking at the footage of the protests more carefully and dialectically, Salles manages to discern the continuation of class, gendered and racial inequalities, the downside of the elated feelings, the rapid commercial exploitation, the ongoing reduction to iconic images and slogans, as well as the various reasons for the rapid decline of the revolts. *No Intenso Agora* is entirely made of available footage, such as film reels, film stills, and photographs from protests in Paris, Prague, Rio de Janeiro, and elsewhere in 1968, interwoven with vernacular footage of a trip the director's mother made in 1966 to Maoist China. Salles is particularly attentive to the 'afterlife' (to use Didi-Huberman's Warburgian term which Salles does not adopt) of the footage, by showing how the tendency to focus on iconic images, including of protestors throwing stones, obscures the complexity and diversity of the events and reduces the protests to mere sensational iconography with commercial media value. But true to the legacy of politically informed montage, as valued by Didi-Huberman as a critical tool to explore historical dynamics, Salles also shows how much we can learn from simply looking closely at the images.

Furthermore, after a screening of the film in Leuven in 2018, the director told the audience that during the production of the film in 2013 members of the crew regularly left to join the popular protests which were erupting in Brazil against the rising cost of living. This made the question of the relevance of looking at footage from protests in 1968 in a new context of social unrest and protest all the more blatant. In an interview with Sylvia Debs, Salles remarks that audiences reacted differently in various countries depending on the political context in which the film was shown. Viewers immediately connected the film to the struggles going on in their country at that time (Salles and Debs 2018, 212). Wolfgang Bongers, who also notices parallels between *No Intenso Agora* and the *Soulèvements* exhibition, describes the film as a form of memory work that allows the

[9]For more on the relation between *No Intenso Agora* and May '68 as an event, see Bongers (2022); Migliorin (2018).

viewers to connect their own recollections and images to those included in the film (Bongers 2022, 155).

The film follows a chronological structure, beginning with the shipyard strike in Saint-Nazaire in 1967 and ending with the demise of the protests, from the return to order in France to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. This focus on the rise and decline of the protests with the melancholic voice-over[10] of Salles makes the film reminiscent of Chris Marker's *Le fond de l'air est rouge*. However, as opposed to Didi-Huberman, Salles is interested in revealing why the protests came to end, including aspects that were always part of the protests and that precipitated their downfall.

In the beginning of the film, we see amateur footage of a Brazilian family, teaching a young child how to walk. As the child approaches the camera, the accompanying nanny steps out of the frame. The voice-over tells that in this footage we can witness Brazil's class relations; the nanny knows that she is not part of the family. 'We do not always know what we are filming', states the voice-over (00:01:42-00:02:25). Scrutinising closely film footage to discern social inequalities is a key aspect of Salles' approach. One of the aims of the protest wave in France and elsewhere at the end of the '60s was to overcome deeply encrusted social hierarchies, whether in the work place or at the universities. In footage of the student protests, we see student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit pointing his finger at a professor towering on an elevated stage above him, challenging the hierarchical subordination which in this case is manifested visibly by the spatial subordination of Cohn-Bendit to the professor (01:13:33). A similar spatial distance echoing the social gap is revealed in the footage of students standing outside the Renault factory to show their solidarity with the striking workers standing on the roof. Their attempt at communication, made difficult by the spatial distance between them, is only met with suspicion by the workers. Salles reads the observations of one of the activists present, Alain Krivine, who claimed that the workers see in the students their future bosses (00:52:22-00:55:26). The class division is too large to be bridged in spite of the activists' attempts to unite the students and workers in a common struggle.

The contradiction between aiming to overcome social hierarchies and a pervasive blindness to class and other inequalities is one of the main themes of the film. Several observers noticed the difference between the protesters in the US and the clean-cut students in France. Their appearance mirrors their middle-class or privileged upbringings. But class is not the only factor of social division that runs through the protests. Salles points out that when we see people speaking in public in the footage from May '68, they are mostly men. He shows footage in which men are speaking and gesticulating, while women sit silently next to them, slightly out of focus or partially cut out of the frame (00:39:05-00:39:43). Similarly, Salles remarks that Paris 1968 was predominantly white. A montage of clips is shown in which black men can be seen hovering on the edge or at the back of a group of white protestors debating. As Salles remarks, they are silent and try not to stand out. They seem ill at ease when they notice that they are being filmed, trying to stay out of the frame (00:39:43-00:40:38). The protests of May '68 unwillingly perpetuated certain social inequalities in spite of aiming to

[10]Nina Longinovic notices the uncertainty in Salles' voice-over, which she regards as a 'disdain for the omniscient narrator' (2022, 983).

abolish them and Salles manages brilliantly to show visible traces of these dynamics in the footage of that time.[11]

Though the inclusion of the footage of his mother's trip two years before the events of 1968 may seem at first to be slightly out of place, this strikingly helps Salles to discuss class inequalities, as well as the blindness towards noticing such inequalities.[12] João Moreira Salles is part of an important Brazilian family of bankers and diplomats, one of the wealthiest families in Brazil, whose fortune is used fund the Instituto Moreira Salles, dedicated to the conservation and study of visual and literary culture in Brazil, among other activities which are of great importance for Brazilian cultural life. João Moreira Salles produces films and is the editor of the magazine *Piauí*. By including family footage in the film, Salles is also including and acknowledging his own social position as the maker of the film and the fact that his family was either oblivious or distrustful of the social unrest in 1968. When his mother visited Maoist China in 1966, a trip she would speak glowingly of ever after, she was part of an invited delegation. In the footage, the visitors are smiling and beaming with excitement, acting like tourists visiting an excitingly foreign country. They do not, however, seem to notice in any way aspects of the cultural revolution going on at the time, even though brutal slogans painted on the walls can be seen in the film footage. They seem to be as overjoyed by the novelty of the country as they are oblivious to the political events surrounding them.

When his mother is visible in the footage she is smiling and she would lighten up every time she spoke about her trip. Asked about the reasons for her happiness, she clarified: 'Beauty lay in surprise, in what could not be foreseen' (01:57:16). It was the new and unknown that sparked her joy. After China, she travelled to Japan, where the architecture, deemed to be too predictable and cerebral, disappointed her. Throughout the film, Salles focuses on the beaming faces of some of the protestors. He observes that they would never be as happy as during these moments. In the ship yard strike in Saint-Nazaire, a union leader declares that these months in 1967 will mark the lives of the workers, while 1965 or 1966 was just daily life. Before they were just consumers, but now, during the strike, they had regained their dignity (00:07:34-00:08:37). One of the most poignant features of *No Intenso Agora* is that Salles is highly distrustful of the intense joy that the protestors experience. He suggests that such joy arises from the novel and unexpected nature of the events, underlined by his mother's experience. The feeling of intense joy, however, is also blinding, fleeting and inevitably followed by a disappointing return to the normal state of affairs.

No Intenso Agora includes clips from the film *Mourir a trente ans*, documenting the wave of suicides that followed the end of the Spring of protest in France in 1968 (01:46:50-01:57:17). This film ends with a list of names of young former protestors who committed suicide. Salles traces the affinity between the powerful feeling of intense joy, sparked by surprise and novelty, and the specific strategies adopted by the Parisian protestors. In an exchange between Cohn-Bendit and Sartre published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the latter reproaches the protesting students for not having a clear project. Cohn-Bendit counters this by stating that the strength of the movement

[11]Sebastián Russo has argued that *No Intenso Agora* presents revolutions more as a process than the *Soulèvements* exhibition (2020, 207).

[12]For more about autobiographical elements in the films of Salles, see Veiga and Barbosa (2023).

lies in its incontrollable spontaneity. He replies that he is not interested in finding a formula and that programmes are paralysing. He regards the protests as an experiment in breaking with the regular order of society, showing glimpses of what is possible, however briefly (00:32:12-00:34:01). The words of Cohn Bendit could almost verbatim come out of the pen of Didi-Huberman decades later. Any programme or project is regarded as stifling. Spontaneity and unpredictability are valued over a durable organisation. Glimpses of utopian potentiality are more important than lasting effects. There is a close affinity between this politics of spontaneity and the feeling of intense joy; both the spontaneity and the joy are, however, inevitably fleeting, as certain as a rising wave will crash.

Salles is equally sceptical of the role of gestures and slogans, two cultural forms dear to Didi-Huberman. Over iconic footage of a Parisian student throwing a stone, Salles remarks that of the gestures of '68 this is the most famous. When his mother, however, saw a group of children performing a propaganda choreography, with the red book in their hands, she praised their graceful hand gestures. In her elation, his mother sees graceful exotic gestures while remaining blind to the more violent aspects of the cultural revolution (00:25:43).

Furthermore, iconic gestures and slogans played a big role in the commodification of the protests, which Salles also explores as one of the key aspects of their demise. During the protests, Cohn-Bendit became a cocky presence in the French media. While the protests were still going on, he was given money by Paris Match to accompany him on a trip to Berlin. The feature in their magazine was captioned 'preaching anarchy elsewhere in Europe'. He was also offered a book deal, later admitting to having written the book quickly for the money. Afterwards, Cohn-Bendit claimed that he didn't know how to go on and that he was tamed by glory. He had become a celebrity with mediatic value. Over these images, Salles wryly remarks that 'history has no archive of revolutions spread financed by middle-class magazines' and that 'even the experience of revolt can be bought and sold'. The revolt had become 'goods with market value' (00:40:47-00:43:25).

One of the most famous and enduring cultural products from this period are the slogans. During the May protests, liaison committees of students and writers, such as Marguerite Duras, scrutinised possible slogans and selected the best ones (00:43:25-00:44:33). Some of the people credited for having come up with a famous slogan would later become advertising professionals. One of them was Killian Fritsch. He was the boss of two young aspiring ad men who came up with the slogan 'sous les pavés, la plage'. This slogan is often associated with the removal of cobble stones to throw at the riot police, but the ad men explained that the slogan reminded them of the joy of childhood, of holiday. Sartre had already warned that the protests could end in the coming summer holiday. For Fritsch, the aftermath of the protests did not deliver on the promise of joy. He was one of the people who could not cope with the end of the utopia and he threw himself under a train at Gaité station. As Salles remarks, that *gaité* is French for 'joy' is bitterly ironic (01:51:33-01:54:42).

While Didi-Huberman is keen to display both gestures indicating the desire to rise up and gestures expressing the feeling of oppression,[13] the footage of the oppression of the revolts in *No Intenso Agora* is often more telling by what is left outside of the frame, by what is not shown. The way in which Salles closely observes for example film reels of the

Soviet invasion of Prague is reminiscent of Didi-Huberman's analyses of the photographs from Auschwitz in *Images in Spite of All*. An anonymous film shows the tanks entering the streets of Prague, filmed from inside the home of an unknown individual. A part of the frame is filled by the black of curtains, indicating that the person is afraid and trying not to be spotted, like the black in the Auschwitz photographs indicates that the photographer was hiding inside a building. The film footage in Prague is shaken, poorly framed, indicating the fear of the person filming. The person in Prague films his watch to show the time, as if recording the moment of a historical crime. Then he films his television, on which we can see the new Soviet Union-approved leaders of the country. After zooming in on the men standing behind the new leaders, as if to emphasise that the men at the front are mere puppets and the men standing behind them pulling the strings, he slowly moves the camera away from the television screen, ostentatiously turning away from the images that the new regime wants to impose on the citizens (01:19:53-01:23:43).

Concluding remarks

The responses to the critical observations by Traverso have made more explicitly apparent that in order to bring to the foreground gestures manifesting the desire to rise up, Didi-Huberman has to downplay the historical and political context in which the gestures are manifested. This methodological choice, necessary to explore gestures as an anthropological phenomenon, creates a tension with Didi-Huberman's theoretical claim that desire and politics can never be separated. To focus on the overlooked importance of desire in political uprisings, he nonetheless is obliged to distinguish gestures from the political projects that they belong to. In *Désirer désobeir*, revolutions, as organised political projects, are presented as the suppression of the desire to revolt, making the tension between the desire to rise up and political projects even more pronounced.

With *No Intenso Agora*, Salles has made a film which affirms the value of montage and looking closely at footage of past protests to provide a richer insight into the specific dynamics of the protests, including the continuation of class and other social inequalities, the downside of spontaneity and the feeling of intense joy, as well as the factors that led to the end of the protests. Furthermore, Salles explores the problems with focusing on gestures, iconic images, and slogans, along with blinding effects of intense emotions and striking iconography. Instead of contrasting desire and gestures to political projects and revolutionary organisation, Salles shows how images of gestures and the feeling of intense joy the protesters felt, played a part in the downfall and gradual commodification of the protests. Cohn-Bendit expressed that having a clear project would only have been stifling to the spontaneity and experimental unpredictability of the protests, but this, however, also made them fleeting and destined to fade away soon, with all the melancholy that would follow the joy. Whereas the *Soulèvements* exhibition omits the complexities of the political situations, *No Intenso Agora* manages to trace in the footage of 1968 detailed

[13]For example, in *Ninfa Dolorosa: Essai sur la mémoire d'un geste*, Didi-Huberman analyzes the photograph *Veillée funèbre au Kosovo autour du corps de Nasimi Elshani, tué lors d'une manifestation pour l'indépendance du Kosovo, 1990* by Georges Mérillon, nicknamed the 'Pieta of Kosovo', as well as an art work by Pascale Convert based on this photo (Didi-Huberman 2019b, 7–19).

dynamics of the protests including the various factors that led to their demise and that still cloud the present reception of images of the 1968 protests.

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