

Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture

EDITED BY CARLA TABAN

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
<hr/>	
INTRODUCTION	11
<hr/>	
Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture CARLA TABAN	11
1. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: RESHAPING APPROACHES TO IMAGE STUDY	41
<hr/>	
Works of Art as Meta-Images: On the Use of Photographs for the Study of Art History JORGELINA ORFILA	43
Picturing the Frame: An Aesthetic Approach to Film Studies Case Study of <i>The Age of Innocence</i> (Scorsese 1993) STELLA HOCKENHULL	61
Bill Viola's Synthetic Atlases MAGDALENA NOWAK	79
2. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: RETHINKING THE WAYS WE THINK ABOUT THE IMAGE	97
<hr/>	
The Image in Its Absence JOHANNA MALT	99
Configurations of Emptiness: Intericonic Blanks in Louise Lawler's <i>A Movie without the Picture</i> and Hiroshi Sugimoto's <i>Theaters</i> ELISABETH-CHRISTINE GAMER	115
The Image by Itself: Photography and Its Double VANGELIS ATHANASSOPOULOS	133

3. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: MAKING VISIBLE THE APPEARANCE INTO VIEW **149**

Mel Bochner's Perspective Photographs and the Modernist Conditions of Visibility 151
ANAËL LEJEUNE

Deleuzian Meta-Cinematic Images in Ilya Kabakov's "Total Installation" 169
SOTIRIOS BAHTSETZIS

Re-Inscriptions: Microscopy of Time and Motion 189
OLGA MOSKATOVA

4. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: REVEALING THE IDEOLOGICAL DENSITY OF IMAGES **207**

Images against Images: On Goshka Macuga's *The Nature of the Beast* 209
MAFALDA DÂMASO

Beyond Simulation: Inter-Textuality, Inter-Imaging and Pastiche in *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011) 227
FRAN PHEASANT-KELLY

5. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: VISUALISING THE INVISIBLE, CONCEALING THE VISIBLE **245**

Generating New Epistemological Coordinates: Roberto Matta's Open Cubes as Meta-Images 247
MAAHEEN AHMED

How Does a Snail See the World? Imagining Non-Human Animals' Visual *Umwelten* 263
CONCEPCIÓN CORTÉS ZULUETA

Mimesis, Coding, Programming: Considerations on the Meta-Image and the Microcontroller in Contemporary New Media Art 281
ABIGAIL SUSIK

6. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: HIGHLIGHTING THE PERMEABILITY OF MEDIUMS/A	299
<hr/>	
'Navigation' by the 'Vernacular Glance': Robert Rauschenberg's 'Maps' AMANDA GLUIBIZZI	301
<i>Everything Is Purged from This Painting but Art.</i> John Baldessari: Meta-Picture and Post-Mediality, 1966-1968 RAPHAËL PIRENNE	315
On Exactitude in Modeling: Mimesis and Meta-Image in <i>Dolorès</i> by Anne Baltus, François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters FABRICE LEROY	331
AUTHORS	349
<hr/>	

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present volume originates in the session “Meta- and Inter-Images in Art” that took place at The 9th International Conference on Word and Image in Montreal (Canada) in August 2011. However, only five of the twelve papers selected for that occasion were subsequently developed by their authors into full-fledged essays to be included here. To these, twelve further chapters were added following a refereed call for contributions.

While all the articles in the present collection were written specifically for it, they tackle issues of long-term interest to their authors. Both junior and seasoned scholars’ reflexions in the following pages are best understood in light of their past or on-going larger research projects. As is the case for all continuing preoccupations, different angles of approach, different aspects to focus on, different background contexts against which the matter to be understood projects more clearly are constantly tested. This is not to say that the essays in this volume cannot stand by themselves, for they perfectly can, but rather an invitation to discover all their breadth and depth by reading the authors’ other writings.

To use a descriptive metaphor, the seventeen participants in this project have arrived at the meeting point of *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture* starting from different places, travelling by different ways and in different manners. Whatever they have to say about the topic which represents their here and now not only offers a multiplicity of perspectives on it, but can be best grasped in relationship with the specific conditions informing each of these perspectives.

I would like to thank all contributors for their journey, for considering *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture* a worthy gathering point and for shedding their lights on it. At Leuven University Press I acknowledge with gratitude Veerle De Laet and Beatrice Van Eeghem for their editorial expertise and the two external reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

CARLA TABAN

Toronto, May 2013

IMAGES AGAINST IMAGES: ON GOSHKA MACUGA'S *THE NATURE OF THE BEAST*¹

MAFALDA DÂMASO

• Introduction

The Bloomberg Commission: The Nature of the Beast (2009-2010), an installation by the Polish artist Goshka Macuga, resulted from a commission by London's Whitechapel Gallery, which reopened in 2009 following its extensive refurbishment. Starting from the analysis of a particular moment in the history of the Whitechapel Gallery – the display in 1939 of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)² in support of the Spanish Resistance –, the installation resulted in a reflection on the recent history of *Guernica* itself, as well as on the conflicting roles that visual devices play as instruments of political rhetoric. Indeed, the installation also referred explicitly to the day in 2003 when the tapestry that reproduces the painting (and which is displayed in the corridor of the United Nations' Headquarters leading from the Security Council Chamber) was famously covered during the press conference that followed Colin Powell's presentation to the Council of the Bush administration's case against Iraq.

My aim in this contribution is to investigate the specific ways in which processes of inter-imaging are at work in this installation. More precisely, I will attempt to demonstrate that *The Nature of the Beast* clarifies the pertinence of the writing of two contemporary French philosophers, George Didi-Huberman and Marie-José Mondzain, with respect to inter-imaging – although neither makes reference to this particular terminology. Both thinkers argue that images address their viewers in ways that may potentially lead to the rethinking of one's roles as a spectator and a citizen. They both suggest, however, that this possibility is not located in individual images but, instead, in the relations between them. I will begin by tackling the role of images in Colin Powell's 2003 presentation to the United Nations, followed by a discussion of the figure of the witness. This will lead me to a close engagement with Macuga's piece, which I'll examine in light of the work of Didi-Huberman and Mondzain.

• Images in the Service of Politics

On 5th February 2003, Colin Powell, the then Secretary of State of the United States, made an 80-minute presentation to the United Nations' Security Council. His aim was to secure the support of the international community for an invasion of Iraq, by presenting some of the intelligence that had been gathered by the American Secret Information services. This

evidence, Powell argued, demonstrated that Iraq was infringing resolution 1441, which had been passed by the Security Council in 2002 and whose purpose was to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. A PowerPoint presentation accompanied Powell's speech. It was composed of several visual elements, such as diagrams pointing to the supposed links between al-Qaida terrorists and Iraq; aerial photographs with added captions (allegedly representing chemical laboratories and terrorist poison explosives factories, among others); sound, namely intercepted and recorded conversations accompanied by their transcription; and props, such as a test tube that Powell showed to the Security Council members during his speech. The test tube contained white powder and, according to Powell, represented the equivalent amount of Anthrax that, when discovered in an envelope in the US Senate in 2001, had killed two people and caused hundreds of others to go through emergency medical treatment. The presentation also included short videos of purported experiments carried out in Iraq with respect to the aerial dissemination of biological weapons. As is now well-known, none of the photographs referred to by Powell were manipulated, although his interpretation was subsequently dismissed as misleading.

Furthermore, one may understand Powell's presentation as also including his subsequent interviews to the international media, which always take place in this corridor that leads to and from the Security Council. In this case, there's a further visual element that is associated with Powell's presentation – the covering of a tapestry reproducing Picasso's *Guernica*, which Nelson Rockefeller commissioned in 1955 and that has been on loan to the UN since 1985 as a reminder of the atrocities of war. Since then, the tapestry has served as an iconic background to the media interviews following the Security Council's sessions. However, on the day of Powell's presentation, it was screened by a large blue curtain. There were contradictory claims as to whose request it had been to have the tapestry covered: television news crews, or, as suggested by anonymous diplomatic sources, the Bush administration (Cohen).

In his presentation (*Guardian*), Powell argued that the secret information that had been gathered until that moment allowed several 'facts' to be concluded, such as the continuing Iraqi production of biological weapons and its interest in producing nuclear weapons, as well as the ability to disperse those lethal biological agents in the water supply, for instance. As a consequence, the international community was under threat. Although this interpretation was subsequently dismissed as based on misleading testimony, the photographs included in Powell's address were not manipulated (*Telegraph*). However, they were difficult to construe, which justified the use of captions and Powell's constant reliance, for their elucidation, on information provided by both experts and anonymous witnesses.

An especially remarkable interpretative leap accompanied Powell's references to mobile lab trucks. Powell described the Iraqi mobile production programme of biological weapons as confirmed by several Iraqi sources, based on whose testimony the American experts created a

diagram of the mobile labs, including details of their components. He argued that Iraq had seven of these mobile labs, each of them composed of two to three trucks, easily concealed and impossible to identify either through satellite images or by the UN experts on the ground, whose work was to verify the Iraqi compliance with the agreed disarmament. There is an uncanny parallel between the elusiveness of the images used by Powell in his presentation, which were difficult to interpret by themselves, and the elusiveness of the dangerous enemy, which could not be clearly depicted or identified but only inferred and imagined.

• Images and the Figure of the Witness

In her recent book *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (2009), contemporary art theorist Jane Blocker argues that Powell's reliance on the specialist knowledge of technicians (mentioned constantly in his speech as providing an unquestionable interpretation of the unclear images), presented them as "invisible, omniscient and disembodied being[s]". Moreover, Blocker states that the suggestion "that the images contain hidden secrets to which only a privileged few have access" (xiv) is grounded on quasi-metaphysical claims to the experts' ability to interpret images objectively. To a degree this is certainly the case. However, I would also like to argue that Powell's rhetorical strategy was grounded on the legitimacy that his position as a Secretary of State and former general brought to his interpretation of those images, and not only on the ontology of witnessing or of representation – an argument that, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, can also be intuited in Macuga's installation. The instigation of fear in the viewers resulted from the fact that the alleged threat of Iraq to the international community was publicly affirmed by an internationally known political figure and retired general whose credibility would be seriously affected were such claims to be proved inaccurate. To this, the images that he showed played a central role by providing an effect of reality to the Iraqi danger that testimony or expertise do not possess.

Furthermore, Powell's self-positioning as providing a legitimate, unquestionable narrative may also be interpreted according to the Lacanian framework of the four structurally different kinds of discourse into which human communicative exchanges may be conceptualized: the Master, the University, the Hysteric and the Analyst (Lacan: 14-25, 90-103). From a Lacanian perspective, Powell's speech was characterized by a double position – it enacted the discourse of the University, in which the provision of objective knowledge grounds the legitimacy of the speaker, and the discourse of the Master, who holds absolute power to determine the life and death of her subjects. But there's a further interesting tension at play here, for Powell was speaking as a member of the American government, which is elected and subjected to multiple mechanisms of accountability, at the UN Security Council, which is a non-elected body in an organization whose ambassadors are only accountable to the heads of state that nominate

them. This fact becomes even more interesting if one considers it in retrospect. Following the widespread criticism of both scientists and UN experts, Powell himself had to concede in April 2004 that the intelligence he used in his 2003 UN Security Council address did not seem to be “solid” (CNN). However, this was also the time of the Bush administration’s ‘War on Terror’ and, at the domestic level, of the Homeland Security Act (2002), which civil liberties groups and independent media organisations strongly opposed. In this political climate, any criticism voiced against the Bush-led war in Iraq was at risk of being dismissed as originating from un-American extremism, that is, of being deemed ‘ideological’ and irrelevant.

Perhaps this explains why only recently artists have developed a sustained engagement with this event. Apart from *The Nature of the Beast*, which I shall discuss in detail below, I should briefly mention some other artworks that reference this moment. The billboard *Guernica “UN” covered* (2003), by the Making Art Work collective, was an immediate response to the *Guernica* incident. The piece was displayed in a billboard in Los Angeles and was composed of a photographic reproduction of *Guernica* during the day and, during the night, a UV light showing the UN logo.³ *Phantom Truck*, created four years later in 2007, by the Spanish-born American artist Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, consisted in a full-scale steel replica of the truck described by Colin Powell as an undetectable mobile lab in which biological weapons of mass destruction were presumably produced.⁴ Recently, Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s *Aural Contract: The Freedom of Speech Itself* (2011-2012) was an exhibition composed of, among other elements, an audio documentary that looked at the history and use of forensic speech analysis, which mentioned Powell’s address.⁵

Given the centrality of peacekeeping within the UN’s mission, as well as its stated commitment to deliberation (opposed by the non-elected nature of its representatives), Powell’s speech, in its attempt not only to legitimize a call to war, but also to do so through the language of objectivity and impartiality, exemplified what are, arguably, foundational contradictions that lie at the core of the UN bodies. In this context, the rhetorical strategy employed by Powell attempted to conceal not only the uncertain status of the visual material, but also the questionable legitimacy of the organisation.

• *The Nature of the Beast*

While the artworks mentioned above focus on particular details related to Powell’s presentation, Macuga’s installation sees it instead as a rich source of inspiration for a thorough reflection on the programmatic choices of art institutions and the use of images as instruments of political rhetoric. Indeed, Macuga’s work is traversed by an interest in institutional critique, an approach which has dominated the critical appraisal of *The Nature of the Beast* (Roelstraete, 2009; Wilson). This interest was the main reason why London’s Whitechapel Gallery decided



Fig.1 | The Bloomberg Commission. Goshka Macuga. *The Nature of the Beast*. 5 April 2009 - 4 April 2010. Photograph by Patrick Lears. Courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, Whitechapel Gallery Archive.

to commission Macuga to create a piece celebrating its reopening in 2009, following its renovation and expansion [Fig. 1]. The same interest also explains the artist's decision to focus on a particular moment of the gallery's history: its exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica* in 1939 in support of the Spanish Resistance. Included in the installation, and surrounding the tapestry on temporary loan (during the renovation of the corridor of the United Nations building in which it is normally showcased), the artist placed a mock-up of the Security Council's table and chairs, inside of which was displayed documentation about the exhibition of the painting at the gallery and at the Spanish pavilion in the International Exhibition in Paris in 1937 (which included, apart from Picasso's *Guernica*, a Calder fountain, a photograph of which Macuga also used in her piece), as well as objects relating to Powell's address at the UN, namely a sculpture reproducing the moment when Powell showed a small bottle of 'Anthrax' to the members of the Security Council, an Afghan rug depicting Iraq invaded by the United States and, finally, a series of continuously playing documentaries focusing, among other things, on the war in Iraq and the Spanish Civil War.

The multireferentiality of the installation, involving multiple mediums and types of images, bi- and three-dimensional, still and moving, original and appropriated, had direct consequences on the ways in which *The Nature of the Beast* addressed its visitors. Particularly, the rolling documentaries, which illustrated the complexities of war on the ground, demanded of the viewers a combination of political awareness and ethical sensibility. By means of this Duchampian gesture (the decision to recombine existing objects with others created especially for the installation, such as the sculpture and the rug), the original “humanist character of *Guernica* (its reflection on suffering rather than rebellion)” (Lafuente: 32) was accompanied by a call to active political agency. As a result, what started as an interest in the Whitechapel Gallery’s institutional history ended as a reflection on the internal functioning of another organisation, the United Nations. The installation drew one’s attention to the decision making processes of the UN, its ideological and historical background, its relation to the media, and, finally, through its references to the covering of *Guernica* on the day of Powell’s speech, to the sometimes contradictory consequences of its actions. In order to better understand the role played by processes of inter-imaging in achieving this effect, I will discuss in the next section the work of Georges Didi-Huberman and Marie-José Mondzain. The research of these two scholars illuminates the potential of montage as a means of disassembling historical narratives and as a catalyst for the empowerment of the viewer, respectively.

- **From Montage to the Atlas**

Despite the ubiquity of manipulated images and their use as instruments of political rhetoric – as Powell’s UN Security Council address exemplifies –, the French philosopher and art critic Georges Didi-Huberman argues that all images are potentially relevant historically and sociologically, even if they neither point to a definite meaning nor function analogously to language or rationality. Indeed, discussing the manipulative effects of media disseminated images, Didi-Huberman suggests that

What happens is somewhat more complicated, more *dialectic* in reality. There’s a type of knowledge that pre-exists all approaches to, all forms of reception of images. But something interesting happens when our pre-existing knowledge, petrified in its defined categories, is momentarily shattered – which starts at the precise moment when the image appears. (...) To stand in front of an image is both to call knowledge into question and to re-evaluate it (Didi-Huberman et al.: 83-84, original emphasis)⁶

The author calls ‘appearance’ or ‘emergence’ (*surgissement*) this ability of images to destabilise knowledge in the very moment when they appear as such to the viewer. He also maintains

that this ability is not inherent to all images. Mediatized imagery, for example, is most often neutralized by the ceaseless fluxes of information in which it is included. However, this is not to deny that the relationship between the viewer and the images that surround her is more complicated than what such a simplified dualism (opposing mediatized to non-mediatized images) might lead one to conclude. Instead, Didi-Huberman argues that this constitutive oscillation – between indifference and confrontation – is not only the basis for one's capacity to apprehend images, but also the main reason behind the haunting power of the visual:

It is not me who oscillates. It is the experience of images itself that could not take place without this oscillation. It is a dialectic, successive rhythm – yes-no-yes, open wings-closed wings-open wings, and a succession. This is how a butterfly flies. (...) This is how a thought advances. (...) Suddenly – be it in front of *La Joconde* or in front of a detail of a televised story – something appears in front of you, something unexpected. The appearance opens a gap in your language, in (...) the stereotypes of your ways of thinking (Didi-Huberman et al.: 86-87).⁷

Didi-Huberman's considerations point to the inherent margin of uncertainty within which images operate (2009a: 139-228) but are also accompanied by discussions of the ways in which images, despite their inherent lacunae, cannot be denied as "instants of veracity" (2009b: 47). For example, discussing the four photographs of the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau that were taken in 1944, he mentions the "double regime of all images", combining instants of "truth (...) and of (...) obscurity" (2009b: 48, original emphasis)⁸ – which differs from posing that images are open to an unlimited number of interpretations. The constitutive oscillation of images, to employ the author's terminology, is central in *The Nature of the Beast*. Macuga creates a network of partial overlaps between the multiple elements, which illustrate contradictory, yet equally legitimate uses of the visual; representations of deliberation and of the horrors of war (the circular table and the tapestry in its background) are surrounded by reminders of the inability of the international community to avoid conflict (the rolling documentaries) as well as evidence of the complex relation between art and politics (the documents representing the contents of the Spanish pavilion in 1937). As a result, the viewer is confronted with the appearance (*surgissement*) of a complex network that destabilises the traditional understanding of representation as playing a neutral role when addressing the issues of war and suffering.

The ideas of the constitutive ambivalence of images and of the dependence of their meaning on the viewers are manifest in montage, whose hermeneutical character Didi-Huberman has thoroughly discussed in relation to the work of Jean-Luc Godard, Harun Farocki and others (see 2011: 68-195 and 2012a: 151-187, for example). With regard to Pasolini, for instance,

the author affirms that montage allows the director to establish “conflicts, fractures, passages” between different elements and “expressive dimensions” (2008).⁹ This idea illuminates the particular ways in which the elements that compose *The Nature of the Beast* relate to each other by means of conflicts but also through the mutual reinforcement of the haunting power of the visual. Furthermore, discussing Farocki’s filmography, Didi-Huberman reiterates the well-known argument that it is through montage that the former makes conflicting historical narratives visible. One of the fundamental contribution of montage resides, according to Didi-Huberman, in its ability to make cinema appear as a site of confrontation and mutual reinforcement between opposing forces, allowing images to make visible “anthropological and political changes” (2012b).¹⁰ However, the author stresses throughout his work that discussing cinematic narratives as forms of argumentation would be reductive (see, for example, 2012a: 45-56). Instead, the success of their address is dependent on their ability to directly ‘appear’ (in the sense mentioned above) to the viewer, an affective ability that cannot be predicted nor fully explained.

Indeed, although montage is a technique usually associated with time-based visual work, its generative potential can be extended beyond this original framework. Didi-Huberman’s recent interest in the work of Aby Warburg (2002, 2010) highlights this possibility. Besides creating a library organised according to a unique reference system – which classifies human history in the categories of ‘Action’, ‘Orientation’, ‘Word’ and ‘Image’ (Warburg Library) – Warburg also conceived the unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas*, composed of circa one thousand pictures, flexibly organised on several large-scale plates, which aimed at demonstrating the influence of Antiquity in later imagery, from the Renaissance to the early 20th century. Didi-Huberman argues that montage is at stake also in this context, as a strategy that exposes

the conflicts, the paradoxes, the reciprocal shocks from which all history is made. Which is why montage appears as the procedure par excellence of this process of exposition: things only appear by taking a position and they only reveal themselves after being disassembled. (...) Montage is to shapes what politics is to acts: one must put together the two meanings of disassembly, that is (...) the madness of transgression and the wisdom of positionality. (...) Which means that one will create a philosophically valid historical knowledge only if one makes visible, beside narratives and fluxes, the singular events, the heterochronies (...) or the anachronies (...) of the elements that compose each moment of history (2009b: 129-131).¹¹

I would argue along Didi-Huberman that the process of inter-imaging can indeed be understood as structurally similar to cinematic montage. That is, Macuga’s decision to relocate and recombine the visual materials that constituted *The Nature of the Beast* clarified

their different positions relatively to the conflicting roles that images can play both in the construction and in the dismantling of political narratives. *The Nature of the Beast* stresses, to use Didi-Huberman's terminology, the multiple 'heterochronies' associated with *Guernica* and, as a result, the constructed character of history as well as its centrality in supporting the orders that both frame and make possible one's action. However, the installation not only dissected the seemingly unquestionable authority that grounded Powell's discourse and his interpretation of the images, but it also made visible the multiple institutional settings, including art institutions, towards which individual action may be directed. As a result, Macuga's installation created a viewing experience that made visible the social basis of history, thereby activating the spectator's awareness of her agency as an historical actor and, indirectly, pointing to the fundamental differences between spectatorship and citizenship. This achievement also illustrates Jacques Rancière's argument that "it is the aesthetic regime of the arts" (2004: 20-30), characterised by the interrelation between its tendency towards autonomy and that towards heteronomy, which enables it to illuminate and reframe what he refers to as "the distribution of the sensible" (12-19), that is to say the articulation of the visible, the imaginable and the sayable. Rancière argues in particular that intermediate positions between autonomy and heteronomy may be sustained in art through hybrid forms such as collage and montage. In this context, Macuga's installation exemplifies how it is precisely in the intermediate position of the art world – as partially independent vis-à-vis other social fields (here patent in the installation's ability to be selective of particular reference points and to engage in processes of their recombination) – that resides art's capacity to be both inquisitive and generative of knowledge.

However, one is not to understand *The Nature of the Beast* as proposing a structured narrative to its viewers. Instead, returning to Didi-Huberman, it can be better grasped as an 'atlas', a notion that the author has examined in the Warburg-inspired exhibition *Atlas – How to Carry the World on One's Back?* that he curated in 2010. Originally, an atlas was a collection of maps aimed at comprehensiveness but since the end of the 18th century this notion has been associated with the construction of collections of images in disciplines such as medicine and astronomy, thus playing an important role in the development of scientific objectivity (Daston and Galison: 27-34). Didi-Huberman's argument is that the atlas can also be understood as a form of montage: instead of being a simple accumulation of images, it constitutes a visual form of knowledge that assembles disparate materials, reveals affinities and points to heuristic gaps without aiming at completeness. Consequently, the author expands the notion of the atlas and suggests that it has been used in the past and is still used today as a methodological tool by writers (Arthur Rimbaud, Jorge Luis Borges), artists (Marcel Broodthaers, Sol Le Witt, Walker Evans, Moholy-Nagy), filmmakers (Harun Farocki) as well as art historians and theorists (Guy Debord, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin) (see Didi-Huberman, 2010).

By proposing that Macuga's installation gains from being understood in terms of an atlas, I am at the same time arguing that its intentions should be distinguished from those of an archive, conceived as an ordered and fully englobing categorisation, as well as pointing to the heuristic potential of the atlas as a visual tool.

The atlas gives us an *Übersicht* in its discontinuities, an exposition of differences, where the archive drowns the differences in a volume that cannot be exposed to sight, in the continuous mass of its compacted multitude. The atlas offers us *panoramic tables* where the archive forces us first of all to get lost among the *boxes* (...). There would of course be no atlas possible without the archive that precedes it; the atlas offers in this sense the 'becoming-sight' and the 'becoming-knowledge' of the archive (2010: 187, original emphasis).

Given this distinction between the atlas and the archive, I disagree with art historian and curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's interpretation of *The Nature of the Beast*. She states that Macuga's search for relations among the visual material that the artist collected is driven by the desire to establish an archive. But this disagreement may simply be the result of a different use of the terminology. If one accepts, with Christov-Bakargiev, that Macuga dislocates the place, time and context of the visual material that she works with, which leads to a negation of orthodox historical narrative, then the notion of the 'archive' is necessarily contradictory. Indeed, Christov-Bakargiev seems to share Didi-Huberman's views on the 'atlas' when she writes that through

Macuga's radically free set of associations (...), unique events, echoed through time by similar events (...) become related. As in a dream, they occur synchronically and thus enter into a form of kairological time, where meaning condenses and the instant expands and thickens into consciousness. (...) Storytelling is also one-directional, but it openly declares itself to be an interpretation, a negation of history, a possibility amongst many. It denies its own factual authority by the very nature of its stated fiction (22).

• **Between the Spectator and the Citizen**

Another way of describing Macuga's overall practice which *The Nature of the Beast* exemplarily illustrates is to view it, with Dieter Roelstraete, as 'curatorial'. The philosopher and curator describes the artist's interest in assembling information associated with the institutions in which she exhibits her work as characterised by

unconventional juxtapositions and Borgesian classifications, wild leaps of thought and funky flights of fancy, all aimed at subverting or dismantling the canonical view of (art) history, at unmaking the world as we know and found it (2010: 15).

There is a general agreement, then, that the intention of *The Nature of the Beast* is to shatter the commonly held assumption of a close association between historical certainty and the visual. However, this intention does not necessarily effect an anxious viewer experience. Instead, as I shall show, the processes of inter-imaging that are at work in Macuga's installation illustrate Marie-José Mondzain's argument, according to which the viewer's presence is fundamental for the meaning of the visual to arise (an idea that partially converges with Didi-Huberman's notion of *surgissement*) and that instantly reminds us of the Wittgensteinian discussion of meaning as emerging from a network of similarities that overlap and crisscross, a conclusion that he reaches through several thorough analyses of the social foundations of the intelligibility of words, numbers and colours (2009).

In *Image, Icon, Economy* (2004a), her best known book, Mondzain discusses the power and ubiquity of images in contemporary culture and argues that their intimate relation with the organisation of power can be traced back to the Byzantine era. Of particular interest to Mondzain is the relationship between the organisation of the space of the image and that of the territory:

Iconicity here is not accidental to power, but intimately related to it. This is brought about not through any obvious, narrative messages that the image happens to broadcast, but through the infinitely more subtle means of the ways in which, for example, the lines and brush-strokes which represent Mary and the Christ child trace a trajectory through space. An icon is a plan for the occupation of space, and so is an empire (2000: 56).

This idea is particularly relevant to *The Nature of the Beast* as it points to a further way in which it articulates the position of the visual material vis-à-vis political power. Choosing to combine iconic visual material (*Guernica's* tapestry, the sculpture of Colin Powell, the reproduction of the Security Council table and others), Macuga stressed their individual pertinence as symbolic axes defining a cartography of partly overlapping political positions (opposition toward violence, fear and respect toward political figures, and acceptance of political processes as legitimate, respectively). However, in her more recent work, Mondzain has focused instead on the potentially conflicting intentions of the visual, thereby joining Didi-Huberman when she affirms that images hide

no secret message. (...) The image is open, exposed, its meaning yet to come, to be constructed by us (...), starting from the present which is ours, from the history that is ours. The power of an image is founded in its undecidable polysemy. We are affected by it and its force comes from the energy that liberates us (2012).

If images are indeed as powerful and ambiguous as Mondzain suggests (although it should be noted that the relation between their extreme ambiguity and their strength remains unresolved in her work), what is the place left to the spectator in her interaction with them? And how shall one position *The Nature of the Beast* in this regard? In *L'image peut-elle tuer?* [*Can the Image Kill?*], Mondzain discusses the potential of images to function as a site for the organisation of the community not according to violence but to the encounter between its members (2010a: 21-58). Elsewhere the author writes that

It is thanks to the effects of an image-producing operation that subjects gain access to their own visibility in the very same movement that designates this image of self as an image of, and for, the other. The image opens the field of our visibility up to us; the image is the gift of the other's gaze on me at the moment I mourn autonomy and my power to constitute myself alone. The image is not an object and this is why I am a subject (2010b: 311).

Mondzain is arguing that images are not objects of knowledge independent from the subject. Instead, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh of the world" (130-155), she understands images as being in what one can refer to as a topological relation with their viewers (that is to say, defining a flexible, non-Euclidean space that allows for deformations and mutual implications between objects while ensuring that the relations between them remain virtually the same). As a result, the process of activating the images that surround the viewer emerges as constitutive of her own subjectivity. In the same direction, the process of inter-imaging that is at play in Macuga's installation (by mobilizing a complex network of relations between disparate elements, which not only belong to different mediums but also exemplify highly different uses of images) illustrates the inherent insufficiency, discussed by Mondzain and Didi-Huberman, of individual images to fully reflect the complexity of the world while stressing the position of the visitor as an active viewer within such a network. The result exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological argument of the intimate association between the apparition of the world and the simultaneous apparition of the subject.

Finally, I should refer to a further way in which Mondzain's work is of interest with regard to *The Nature of the Beast*: the installation examines how images can support the viewer's

empowerment vis-à-vis the social narratives that surround her. In *Homo Spectator*, Mondzain argues, following philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, that, as the common etymology of 'author' and 'authority' suggests, the work of artists and cinema directors articulates the difference between authority and power (247-270). Indeed, according to Arendt, authority is a specific source of power, representing that which is vested in offices or in individuals as a result of their role in society. Against the political instrumentalisation of the visual as a means of instilling fear and other forms of social control, the creations of image makers make it possible to criticise and re-imagine the present. In light of this discussion, one can now understand how, while dissecting the seemingly unquestionable political authority over the interpretation of images and the corresponding relationship between the 'master' and the 'subject', the 'scholar' and the 'student' (Lacan: 14-25, 90-103), *The Nature of the Beast* also stressed the political role of the spectator as an implicated witness to that which surrounds her, thereby activating the spectator's awareness of her agency as an historical actor.

Finally, I would like to briefly address the shape taken by this particular artwork of Goshka Macuga: an installation. While the open use of the round table by groups and associations (which only had to communicate such a desire to the invigilators of the gallery) provided the viewers a first opportunity to exercise their active citizenship by symbolically taking the place of the UN Security Council members and thus deconstructing the authority of this political body, the possibility of the viewer to walk between the elements of *The Nature of the Beast* strengthened the temporal dimension of her viewing experience and illustrated the continuous character of the daily experience of spectatorship:

To be a spectator is to not have a fixed place, (...) [it is] to be almost anonymous, (...) always on the move, always displaced (Mondzain, 2004b).¹²

As a result, the spectator implied and effected by Macuga's installation seems close to the one described by political theorist Jeffrey Edward Green in his proposed development of an ocular (as opposed to a vocal, that is to say a participation-based) model of citizenship. This framework proposes to recognise spectatorship as an important dimension of life as well as a permanent form of engagement with the political (3-31). Multilayered artworks such as *The Nature of the Beast* may serve as an illustration of this model at work.

• Conclusion

My main goal in this contribution was to analyse the ways in which Goshka Macuga's installation *The Nature of the Beast* illuminated, particularly through its inter-imaging approach, the conflicting roles that images can play as both elements of political rhetoric and as means of

dismantling the very 'master' narratives that they help to produce. The work's achievement was made possible by the use of strategies of relocation and recombination; removing particular images from their original contexts and giving them new positions highlighted the contingency of the social and political orders that sustain them. However, Macuga's work not only pointed to the social character of all institutional organisations of power, thereby deconstructing the authority of holders of political offices over the interpretation of elusive images, but it also revealed our implication as viewers in supporting such an authority. As a result, and returning to the Lacanian framework of the four discourses, the installation did not provoke or amplify the anxiety associated with the disintegration of symbolic orders, an anxiety which would result from a mere analysis of the weak empirical evidence on which Powell's address was founded or, more broadly, of the fragility of images (including *Guernica*) vis-à-vis their political instrumentalisation. Rather, *The Nature of the Beast* empowered its spectators by pointing to the potential for action that all of us hold.

• Notes

- 1 This contribution results from the development of two papers: "Representing the Elusive: Contemporary Art and the United Nations" presented at the 'Images Art Politics' Symposium, University of Southampton, UK, March 2012 and "Problematizing 'Artification': Contemporary Art and International Politics" presented during the 'Artification' Conference, Aalto University, Finland, August 2012. I wish to thank the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology for the doctoral fellowship that supports my research as well as my supervisor, Dr. Jorella Andrews, for the helpful comments.
- 2 *Guernica* was painted by Picasso in order to call the world's attention to the bombing of Guernica, a Basque town, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) by German bombers in support of the Nationalist forces of General Franco.
- 3 A photograph of this artwork is available at URL: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/foryourart/4425641668>.
- 4 Several photographs are available on the artist's official website, URL: <http://www.inigomanglano-ovalle.com/index.php?/projects/phantom-truck>.
- 5 Several photographs of this artwork are available at URL: <http://www.theshowroom.org/research.html?id=369>.
- 6 All translations in this article are mine. The original reads: "Ce qui se passe est un peu plus compliqué, plus dialectique en réalité. (...) Mais il se passe quelque chose d'intéressant lorsque notre savoir préalable, pétri de catégories toutes faites, est mis en pièces pour un moment – qui commence avec l'instant même où l'image apparaît. (...) Être devant l'image, c'est à la fois remettre le savoir en question et remettre du savoir en jeu".

- 7 “Ce n’est pas moi qui oscille, c’est l’expérience même des images qui ne saurait aller sans cette oscillation. Un battement dialectique: oui-non-oui, ailes ouvertes-ailes repliées-ailes rouvertes, et ainsi de suite, rythmiquement. C’est comme cela que vole un papillon. (...) C’est comme cela qu’avance une pensée. (...) Tout à coup – que ce soit devant *La Joconde* ou devant le détail d’un reportage télévisé – quelque chose surgit devant vous, quelque chose d’inattendu. L’apparition ouvre alors une brèche dans votre langage, dans les pré-vision (...) de votre pensée”.
- 8 The author refers to “instants de vérité” and the “*double régime* de toute image” combining “vérité et (...) obscurité”.
- 9 The author mentions “des conflits, des fractures, des passages” and “des dimensions expressives”.
- 10 The author refers to “des changements anthropologiques et politiques”.
- 11 “Les conflits, les paradoxes, les chocs réciproques dont toute l’histoire est tissée. C’est pourquoi le montage apparaît comme la procédure par excellence de cette exposition: les choses n’y apparaissent qu’à prendre position, elles ne s’y montrent qu’à se démonter d’abord. (...) Le montage serait aux formes ce que la politique est aux actes: il y faut ensemble ces deux significations du démontage qui sont (...) la folie de transgression et la sagesse de position. (...) Façon de dire qu’on ne construira un savoir historique philosophiquement digne de ce nom qu’à exposer, outre les récits et les flux, outre les singularités événementielles, les hétérochronies (...) ou les anachronies (...) des éléments qui composent chaque moment de l’histoire”.
- 12 “Être un spectateur c’est ne pas avoir de place fixe, (...) être presque anonyme, (...) toujours en mouvement, toujours déplacé”.

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