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Memory and Materiality in Georges Didi-Huberman's Transvaluation of Surface

Abstract

Studies of material objects in the field of memory studies have followed diverse epistemological and disciplinary trajectories, but their one shared characteristic is the questioning of philosophic assumptions about the inanimate things and lower level organic objects, such as plants, within the Aristotelian hierarchy of beings. Rather than accept at face value their categorizations as passive or deficient in contrast to the human subject, that critical scholarship has considered and re-valued the place and role of non-human entities in the formation of mnemonic cultures. This essay considers the nexus of materiality and memory in the work of French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, with the aim of contributing to explorations of mnemonic affordance of things and plants . The essay proposes that Didi-Huberman's project can be approached from the perspective of its an 'undoing' of the key binaries of Western historiography of art and material culture: surface/depth, exteriority/interiority, visibility/invisibility and malleability/rigidity. Focusing on imaginal representations of memory objects in Didi-Huberman's two essays, *Bark* and *Being a Skull*, the essay situates these texts within the context of his philosophic reading of Aby Warburg's art historiography and iconology, and argues that Didi-Huberman's undoing of the binaries that have traditionally structured thinking about materiality and memory is akin to a philosophic project of transvaluating surface.

Keywords

Georges Didi-Huberman, surface/depth, memory and materiality, inverted intentionality

Introduction

Studies of material objects in the field of cultural memory have followed diverse disciplinary, epistemological and thematic trajectories,¹ but their one shared aspect has been the challenge posed to the canonical philosophic imaginary of inanimate things and lower level organic objects, including plants,

articulated by the Aristotelian hierarchy of beings (*scala naturae*).ⁱⁱ Within that hierarchical paradigm inanimate and vegetal beings are defined as passive, inanimate, non-agential and appropriable, whereby they have formed the backdrop for the human subject's emergence as an agent of history. Among others, Bruno Latour has written about modern societies' "object-avoidance tendency," which limits the dominant political conceptions to human actors, postulating instead the re-framing the public from the perspective of humans' "complicated entanglements" in material things.ⁱⁱⁱ Similar concerns have motivated recent objects-centered studies of collective memory, resulting in consideration of animals, plants, things, etc. as mnemonic containers and carriers, and as transferors of memory. Perhaps best known in the context of the 'vegetal turn' in memory studies is the scholarship on arboreal mnemonic capacities, which considers trees to be sentient being, capable of remembering and recalling.^{iv} In his summary of the scientific research on "brainy behavior" in diverse flora species, Michael Pollan argued that studies on plant memory require that we re-think the dominant meanings of 'memory', moving away from its cultural associations as immaterial and intangible, and towards its recognition as materially, corporeally and physically inscribed contents, as exemplified by the so-called 'epigenetic effect' in plants (when "the molecular wrapping around the chromosomes" is altered, determining in turn "which genes will be silenced and which expressed").^v Sarah Laskow, reporting on the work of evolutionary ecologist Monica Gagliano, argues that vegetal mnemonic affordance, understood in the basic terms of "hold[ing] on to past events in ways that change how [the subjects] react to new challenges," is not only contained within the life-span of individual plants, but can also be trans-generationally transmitted.^{vi} The consequence of this research and its media reporting is the increased pressure to 'dethrone' the human subject in terms of production and consumption of memory through staging commemorative social events.^{vii} Against the philosophic backdrop of *scala naturae*, there has emerged a critical scholarship trajectory that Rosanne Kennedy aptly terms "multidirectional eco-memory," whereby humans and non-humans are linked within an ecological mnemonic assemblage,^{viii} and what Michael Marder describes as more-than-human "mnemonic centers of gravity," and vegetal "keepsakes of [memory]."^{ix}

Taking as a starting-point the question of non-human mnemonic affects and affordances,^x this essay focuses on the nexus of materiality and memory in the work of Georges Didi-Huberman. Didi-

Huberman is best known to the Anglophone academic readers for his path-breaking philosophy of image and for his impact on the ‘visual turn’ in theoretical humanities, but he has also made contribution to knowledge in the areas of critical epistemology, ethics, art history, psychoanalytic studies, cinema studies, and political theory.^{xi} His conceptualizations of the temporality and historicity of images have been categorized as philosophical anti-humanism, and recognize as an important critical intervention into dominant traditions in art historiography.^{xii} Didi-Huberman’s recent photographic essay *Bark* has been interpreted as an intervention to post-humanist studies of collective memory and visibility, as well as historical trauma and testimony.^{xiii} Aleksandra Ubertowska has argued that in *Bark* Didi-Huberman construes an environmental (or ‘post-genocidal’) narrative of historical trauma, by ascribing a mnemonic and testimonial capacity to the natural landscape at Auschwitz-Birkenau.^{xiv} Jacek Małczyński situates *Bark* within the field on environmental art and history of the Holocaust, arguing that the essay expands anthropocentric conceptions of witnessing.^{xv} What has been less frequently noted in regard to *Bark* is that its analysis of visual material at the interstices of materiality, affectivity and memory seeks to realize a *philosophical* objective: undoing binary formulations underpinning cultural understandings of visibility and materiality, such as surface and depth, exteriority and interiority, visibility and invisibility, and malleability and rigidity.^{xvi} According to Andrzej Leśniak, it is important to view the imaginal analyses in *Bark*, in *Being a Skull*, and elsewhere, in the context of Didi-Huberman’s repudiation of the “hidden metaphysical assumptions” of canonical art history, where the category of ‘depth’ is taken as a locus of profundity, and of a secret and concealed meaning, defined in opposition to surface’s shallowness and superficiality.^{xvii}

Their originality notwithstanding, most post-humanist interpretations of Didi-Huberman’s nexus of materiality and memory, do not take the notice of the philosophical framework within which these analyses are positioned, and perhaps align their theoretical orientations too closely with the scholarship on causative and agential powers of environmental or inanimate ‘objects’.^{xviii} This comes at the cost of overlooking the extent to which Didi-Huberman’s theory and analysis of images is indebted to what he calls, referencing Aby Warburg’s historical model, a *phantasmal scheme of history*. In other words, the mnemonic affects in *Bark* of for instance photographs of concentration camp fences, doors, furnaces, or

the surrounding birch trees is tied closely to their embodiment of miscellaneous temporalities. These *material afterlives of the camp*, not unlike the aesthetic works that Warburgian art historiography recognized as carriers of displaced and forgotten past meanings, form for Didi-Huberman “dynamic point[s] of encounter” between past, present and future.^{xix}

In this essay I focus on selected ‘memory objects’ *Being a Skull*, which centres on the philosophic discussion of sculptures and installations by Giuseppe Penone, and *Bark*, which documents Didi-Huberman personal visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Assuming that the deconstruction and undoing of the aforementioned binaries forms the epistemological underpinning of the imaginal analyses undertaken in Didi-Huberman’s work, I argue that a potentially productive approach to understanding his philosophic and interpretative project is through the conceptual lens of a ‘transvaluation of surface’. A central category in the Nietzschean philosophy of value, transvaluation [*Umwertung*] connotes a critical “philosophic practice” oriented at calling into question and oppugning dominant (Christianic) values with the goal of their overcoming.^{xx} Regarding transvaluation of the category of ‘surface’, Stephen Hutchings has written about the importance of depth/surface binary in European aesthetics, which has “helped to cement the Body/Soul [...] dualism [in] western metaphysics,” providing a medium of mediation between the timelessness and universality of the soul and its personal manifestations on the body.^{xxi} Transvaluation of surface is thus a critical reappraisal and contestation of the binary distinction between, on the one hand, the visible exteriority of bodies, and, on the other hand, their invisible interiority as a site of precious profundity and spirituality, which, as Judith Butler has argued in *Gender Trouble*, in regard to the gendering and sexuation of human bodies, reduces surface to a “sign [making visible] a natural(ized) identity” that remains hidden at the bodily core.^{xxii} Working within the paradigm of vegetal philosophy, Michael Marder has also stressed the importance of the depth/surface binary for Christianic articulations of the soul, and for the human-centrism of the modern western culture more broadly, which is consolidated through a pejorative designation of plants (with their photosynthetic life functions located on the exterior) as beings “bereft of interiority.”^{xxiii}

Didi-Huberman invokes the category of ‘surface’ both as an aesthetic notion and as a phenomenological register of connections, intersections and in-betweenness.^{xxiv} For Didi-Huberman

surface *does reveal*, but not the object's hidden essence (as in Butler's critique). Rather, not unlike the concept of symptom in psychoanalytic theory,^{xxv} the surface of objects makes perceptible what has been blocked, lost, or repressed. I suggest that the category of surface has for Didi-Huberman aesthetic and philosophic, and perhaps also ethical, significance insofar as surface records plastic inscription of past connections and interactions within and upon itself. As such, plasticity is a surface quality of inert things, plants, and bodies alike.^{xxvi} In other words, material surfaces are organized by a fossil-like logic; as bearers of "heterogenous time" [*temps hétérogènes*], they preserve traces of what is gone. This plastic fossilization, however, is not a "mortifying act," but, rather a marker of survival.^{xxvii} I trace how such imaginal analytics of the materiality and memory nexus plays out in regard to two important 'objects' in Didi-Huberman's oeuvre, bark and skull. I argue that focus on Didi-Huberman's interpretations of these objects as bearers of repressed past(s) helps to conceptualize mnemonic effects and affordances of non-human beings.^{xxviii} Philosophical engagement of materiality in terms of temporal and symptomatic imprints, as well as remnants and fossils, contributes to overcoming the legacies of *scala naturae* in cultural memory studies, and it retrieves inanimate and vegetal items from their position of inactive *aides-mémoire* in respect to social production, preservation and consumption of memory.

'Inverted Intentionality': On the Philosophic Method of Didi-Huberman

Building on Nietzsche's conception of 'plastic power', Didi-Huberman writes about the "traumatic effect" of "the very development of contiguous forms."^{xxix} This helps to capture the temporality of mnemonic objects in terms of 'living fossils' and as 'heterochrony', which Didi-Huberman borrows from evolutionary theory for "heterogenous phases of development" of those life-forms that embody retrogressive traits. It also references the work of Aby Warburg, and specifically his discussion of Dürer's engraving of a monstrous sow, in which Warburg saw an incorporation of pagan prophecism.^{xxx} Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was a German Jewish art historian and a theorist of culture, whose work has had great influence on Didi-Huberman's philosophy of image, in particular as regards Warburg's study of the cultural transmission of antique forms and aesthetic and mythical motives, in which he opposed linear and continuous historiographic imaginaries of art and cultural products. His concept of *Nachleben* sought to

capture the aspects of culture that are ‘survivals’, or ‘afterlives’, of had passed; and Warburg explored it in a diversity of context including his ethnographic study of Native American cosmologies, of Renaissance art during his residence in Florence; and in his famous late-life project *Mnemosyne*.

For Didi-Huberman photographic images of, for instance, plants or inanimate objects at a site of concentration camp are also governed by the logic of *Nachleben*; they are also “living fossils” that have outlived their own time; they are akin to “creatures that have survived but are [...] anachronistic,”^{xxxix} and “deposits of meanings” [*gisement de sense*], which are opened and displayed belatedly [*après-coup*].^{xxxix} Didi-Huberman captures the plural and asynchronous temporality of images through the prism of spectral metaphors develop in Warburg’s “phantasmal model of history,” such as the figure of an unappeased ghost. In consequence, the category of surface is retrieved from its inferior position vis-à-vis the inner ‘concealed core’ as a site of plastic inscriptions, fossilizations and anachronisms.

The shared characteristic of the two items at hand—bark and cranium—is that neither is easily classifiable within the *scala naturae* framework. Both the human skull and the arboreal periderm traverse the rigid stratification between the living and the inanimate. Their ontological status remains unstable as the formations of the arboreal and human tissue oscillate between discursive positions of ‘things’ and ‘bodies’, with, especially in the case of the latter, disciplinary, racialized and political effects.^{xxxix} The very title of the book, *Being a Skull*, suggests that the cranium object cannot be reduced to the status of an observed and observable object, or a human property (something that each person ‘has’); instead it exerts an effect on the subject’s gaze (it *affects*). In the visual experience “[...] we [become] involved, implicated in something that is not exactly a thing, but [...] a vital force that we are unable to reduce to its objective elements.”^{xxxix} The act of viewing can, for instance, stir in the subject disturbing and disquieting affects— anxiety, shame, paranoia or dread^{xxxv} In *Ce que nous voyons*, Didi-Huberman describes the experience of viewing minimalist art of Frank Stella whereby strong affective component undermines the principles of ocularcentrism.^{xxxvi} The viewer of Stella’s installation sees themselves *reflected* in the object as a connection is forged between the cubic form of the art object and (the subject’s) grave.^{xxxvii} This is not to say that the object *represents* the grave in any determined sense, but, rather, that there is a resonance or echo between the form and material of the object and repressed psychic contents. In a discussion of Dürer’s

transfer method in his cranial images in *Being a Skull*, Didi-Huberman describes that effect as “not the absence of order or reason but rather their *displacement*, their fundamental strangeness.”^{xxxviii} While Dürer’s snail-like cranial representations locate the skull within the realm of things rather than persons, they are a result of the subject adopting an inverted and impossible “*viewpoint from below*,” which blurs the boundaries between observation, excavation and invention, bringing into light the object’s sudden phantasmal appearance.^{xxxix}

The images in *Being a Skull* and in *Bark* are approached as bearers of heterogenous time, erased memory and undisclosed testimony through to a dual interpretative strategy. First, Didi-Huberman situates the objects at hand within settings where they had so far been invisible, including (in *Bark*) birch trees and other plant communities at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau museum. The result is emergence of new significations and connections, as well as an inversion, or dislocation, of habitual modes of seeing and of dominant “frames of intelligibility.”^{xl} This coincides with Didi-Huberman’s interest in the categories of invisibility and disappearance, understood not as markers of absence, but as a discursive and subjective “a condition of blindness,” and the subject’s “*willingness not to see*.”^{xli} Inscribed in the visual experience, and the act and practice of gazing, is an undoing of the subject; “[b]efore an image, however old it may be, the present never ceases to reshape, provided that the dispossession of the gaze has not entirely given way to the vain complacency of the ‘specialist’.”^{xlii} In many of Didi-Huberman’s texts the reader encounters careful consideration of specific aesthetic and political conditions of disappearance and appearance; for example, writing in the context of the cultural inability to ‘see’ non-iconographic and figurative imagery in the Renaissance period, Didi-Huberman zooms on the marble panels in Fra Angelico’s *The Madonna of the Shadows* as an example of the “discipline,” in a Foucauldian sense, and “‘order of discourse’ of art history.”^{xliii} In *Bark*, Didi-Huberman makes an argument that the formal commemorative project, which transforms places of mass destruction (Auschwitz-Birkenau) into cultural sites also structures the gaze and determines what is visible and what becomes invisible (for example, the plants and river and soil adjacent to the camp are unseen and unseeable from the perspective of formal collective memory of the place). In *Survival of the Fireflies*, the point of departure is an observation made by Pasolini in his 1975 essay “Where Have All the Fireflies Gone?” about the ‘disappearance of fireflies’,

to which Didi-Huberman responds: it is not that the bioluminescent insects (or the political ideas that they metaphorize in Pasolini's essay) have become absent, it is that *we have lost the capacity to see them*.^{xliv}

The second approach is more directly related to Warburg's theory of cultural transmission, and specifically to the concept of an atlas, and the atlas-like arrangement of images. This seemingly miscellaneous visual composition activates imagination in the act of gazing, which Didi-Huberman defines, following Baudelaire, as the formation of "intimate and secret relations of things, the correspondences and the analogies."^{xlv} Elsewhere Didi-Huberman has also spoken of such imaginal arrangements that spur the subject's "floating attention" through juxtaposition, denaturalization and association-making,^{xlvi} and in *Confronting Images* he has drawn out explicit parallels between his imaginal analysis and the Freudian framework of *Traumarbeit* (dreamwork).^{xlvii} Freud approached the apparent *similarity* of different fragments of a dream as something that is never fixed or settled, but, rather, as a relational process of connecting and adjoining distant elements into metonymic-metaphoric constellations. For Didi-Huberman, when images are pluralized and juxtaposed with other images, their presumed 'wholeness' or unity disintegrates into incongruous fragments and details.

These two strategies of re-covering the objects past relations and contiguities, and of their visual presentation that disrupts habitual frameworks of intelligibility, are mutually imbricated. They also point towards a philosophic orientation related to Didi-Huberman's commitment to a reversal, or inversion, of intentionality [*intentionnalité inversée*]^{xlviii}—a position that concerns both questions of the aesthetics of visuality and the ethics of gazing.^{xlviii} Larsson situates Didi-Huberman's method of 'inverted intentionality' within the French (counter-)tradition of opposing the "mastery over the image" and the "privileging [of] the unilateral gaze of spectator," focusing instead on the aesthetic dynamics that endow the "object of the spectator's gaze [...] with the ability to return the gaze [...]."^{xlix} Leśniak links 'inverted intentionality' to attempts at rethinking the relation between the realm of visuality and the political: at hand are different ways of probing conditions whereby the visual experience enables the subject to appear and thus to undertake political action, without "unequivocal[ly] subordinat[ing] [images] to explicit political ends."¹

In her work on phenomenological and semiotic confluences in Didi-Huberman's project, Krasíńska suggests that for Didi-Huberman images are akin to a "puzzle" or undetermined "pointer[s]" that do not presuppose any definite or stable relation between the realm of visibility (which corresponds to the object's surface) and the realm of invisibility (what remains hidden or unconscious).^{li} Drawing on the Freudian theory of associations, Didi-Huberman's project presupposes a "convergence," as Krasíńska argues, between phenomenology and semiotics of images.^{lii} As in the experience of viewing Stella's cubic art objects, described in *Ce que nous voyons*, the object is endowed with a capacity of bringing forth, i.e. to the surface, hidden, erased or prohibited contents and connections.^{liii} Hagelstein aptly captures that associative relation in words "[the] object *looks at me*, [...] the tomb *concerns me*," by drawing on the double meaning of the French word 'regarder' ('to look' and 'to concern').^{liv} The act of viewing becomes inseparable from the gazing at the subject's deaths; "on stage in front of us is our own death" [*en scène devant nous notre propre mort*].^{lv} In *Bark*, to which I turn shortly, the photographed arboreal fragments (bark removed from birch trees in Auschwitz-Birkenau) also form plural associations and connections, including their proximity to the site of the camp, as well as the way they involve thinking about the viewer's own death ("What will my child think when he comes across these remnants after my death?").^{lvi} Importantly, while these arboreal memory objects form a chain of associations with traumatic history, they also invoke the future.^{lvii} The philosophic orientation of 'inverted intentionality' throws into relief the fact that in *Bark* the viewer *inserts themselves and their own time* into the disjointed temporal matrix of genocidal history, thereby probing ethical responsibilities that form through the gaze.^{lviii}

Arboreal Memory Objects: *Bark*

The opening images in *Bark* present ligneous fragments that the philosopher had peeled off birch trees during his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and which he subsequently arranged and photographed against the background of blank white paper. The graphic arrangement of the bark strips, as if they were a 'script' (one that "preced[es] all alphabets"), exemplifies Didi-Huberman's commitment to the exploration of a dialectical relation, or 'coalescence', of images and words.^{lix} The photographed fragments of arboreal 'skin' provide an entry-point into philosophic reflections on the mnemonic capacities and affordances of

material objects, as well as on their epistemic and ethical status as “silent witnesses” to traumatic history.^{lx} As such, the opening arboreal imageries, as well as other photographs of objects, plants, and water in *Bark*, point in the direction of a philosophic nexus of memory and materiality. In the process of gazing at them, the subject develops an ethical relation to the past, which extends beyond the formal commemoration of the camp, of what Didi-Huberman calls the “museification of a historical event.” For his such museification of the past poses an obstruction to the ethics of gaze insofar as it discursively embeds the objects in mono-temporal narratives.^{lxi} In other words, in order for it to be a museum of the camps and their mass murder, the genocidal event must be defined as something entirely in the past, something finished and without any continuity in the present.

The bark fragments as biotic memory objects opens up question of non-human mnemonic affordance through their epistemological and philosophic undoing of the binary of depth and surface. In other words, the bark is a figure of instability of the depth/surface distinction to the extent that it simultaneously signifies separation *and* connection. The entry-point into this imaginal polyvocality of bark is etymological: the French word for ‘bark’, *écorce*, comes from the Latin word *scortea*, meaning ‘coat’, ‘cloak’ or ‘garment’, based on the Proto-Indo-European lexical unit *sker-*, which denotes an action of cutting, or shearing. Thus, bark as arboreal cortex, or epidermis—the outermost or superficial layer of the tree—is *that through which one cuts*, and which one separates. The root word of *écorce* (*sker-*) invokes “both the skin and the knife that wounds or removes it.”^{lxii} Bark is thus the “introductory part of the body liable to be affected, scarred, cut up, separated [...]”^{lxiii} Latin has a different word for the inner segment of the bark that adheres to the trunk, *liber* (from Proto-Indo-European *leubh*, ‘to peel’). This was the part of the tree used by many cultures as a writing material (and hence its Latin lexical relation to the words ‘book’, ‘paper’, and ‘parchment’). On the one hand, bark is a figure of exteriority, rigidity and separation, and on the other hand it denotes adherence, connection, plasticity and inscription. Bark materializes memory in the most literal sense: it provides material for *storing* or *recording* the past.^{lxiv} It is an object “made of surfaces, of cut-up pieces of cellulose, extracted from trees, where words and images meet.”^{lxv} In what sense, then, does bark stripped from the birch trees growing at site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum constitute a memory object? What is this scorteous nexus of memory and materiality that Didi-

Huberman invokes? After all, the birch fragments are not sites of discursivity: they are blank and empty of any testimonial writing, just as the paper that forms their backdrop in the essay's opening image. I suggest that this blankness resonates with the perspective of 'inverted intentionality', which in *Bark* brings into view the key question: how does the subject need to look at the bark, how must they "move around the object" (as Didi-Huberman puts it elsewhere) in order for the mnemonic relations and associations to become visible to 'us', who are viewing it in the present?^{lxvi}

The opening image of bark pieces shows the viewer their outer layer, a rhytidome, which consists primarily of dead cells. The bark's "surface is grey, almost white. Aged already. [...] It frays in scrolls, like the remains of a burned book."^{lxvii} The association between the membranous ossification of the bark and cindered cellulotic remnants resonates with the narrativizations of the Holocaust as a burning and fire.^{lxviii} It is also helpful in elucidating the conception of a non-human mnemonic affordance, because it points to the objects' relation of proximity to the camps. The birch trees appear as their non-human witnesses, invoking the connection between attestation, presence and survival. As Jacques Derrida writes in an essay on Paul Celan's poem "Ashglory," a witness is "[the] one who testifies as the one who will have been present"; it is "the surviving third" [*terstis superstes*].^{lxix} What is important for elaborating the nexus of memory and materiality is the aspect of relational and responsive physical changeability of the arboreal appearance which rests on the recognition of their surfaces as plastic. The arboreal surface plasticity enables ossification, fossilization and 'inscribability' of the past upon the objects.

Just as Didi-Huberman's opening image makes visible the outer layer of the bark (the cork), it at the same time conceals from view the innermost part of the bark, which adheres to the trunk (the phloem), which is unavailable to the gaze of the photographs' viewer. The phloem's associations include human body (the inner bark is "still pink like flesh").^{lxx} It simultaneously invokes the vulnerability of a body and its capacity for resistance against destructive forces ("[i]t resisted the bite of my nails"). It is 'plastic' in the double sense of *taking form* and *resisting form*, which Catherine Malabou has elaborated in *Plasticity at the Dusk*.^{lxxi} When Didi-Huberman writes "I imagine that with the passage of time, these three strips of bark will be grey, almost white, on both sides," he hints at heterogenous temporal rhythms, and their material effects.^{lxxii}

The idea of ‘fossilized time’ is key to understanding the mnemonic affordance of the objects at hand. Didi-Huberman articulates the concept of ‘fossilized time’ as a material vestige of the past; a marking, an imprint or a ‘footprint’ (*vestigium*) of historic events, which in some ways mould or mark the object. Specifically, Didi-Huberman is interested in material traces of what has (allegedly) disappeared or been erased (in *Bark*, it means approaching the arboreal tissue as a container and a recording of the past). The ‘fossilized time’ points at the aforementioned concepts of survival and afterlife (*Nachleben*), implying “the paradox of a residual energy, of a trace of past life, of a death barely evaded and almost ongoing [...]”^{lxxiii} Such material items as the birch bark at Auschwitz are ‘anachronistic objects’ in the sense of belonging to, and having been shaped by, temporalities different than the present;^{lxxiv} this “symptomatic historicity of images” does not only look at material plasticity as a capacity to preserve, but also identifies “the fecund element in the disappearances.”^{lxxv} Importantly, plasticity is a quality of any materiality (and not only of things conventionally classified as ‘pliable’). Plasticity means, as Didi-Huberman puts it, “*that which yields a trace*”; it is a surface trace of contact and adherence: “that which yields a trace [...] is capable of becoming a memory, of returning, indeed, of a ‘renaissance’.”^{lxxvi}

The endurance of things beyond their spatio-temporal contexts of emergence (which is to say, their temporal heterogeneity and ‘anachronism’) endows these memory objects with the capacity to *trouble* their spectator. The vegetal, geological and man-made objects in *Bark* are capable of eliciting an affect. For instance, Didi-Huberman describes the powerful emotional response to viewing the crematorium walls and floors: “I [...] interrogate the layers of time through which I’ll have had to go beforehand in order to get to it [the crematorium floor]. And in order that it may rejoin, in this very place, the movement—the anxiety—of my own present.”^{lxxvii} He reflects later, “[...] these floors that have been worn out, wounded, riddled, cracked. Floors that have been gashed, gouged, opened up. These cloven floors fractured by history, these floors that can make you cry out,” and “[...] the scale doesn’t lie, and hits you with extraordinary force—a force of desolation, of terror.”^{lxxviii} These personal reflections on the spectator’s affective response to the material objects in the camp implies a philosophic articulation of the subject; one does not “stand before his object of study as he or she would before just any arbitrary item that is objectifiable, knowable, or capable of being pushed back into the pure past of history,” but that becomes

“involved, implicated in something that is not exactly a thing, but [...] a vital force that [the subject is] unable to reduce to its objective elements.”^{lxxix}

Memory as a Symptom

The concept of material memory in Didi-Huberman’s image philosophy builds on the exploration of heterogenous temporalities of objects that he had encountered Auschwitz, but that do not have a formal status of ‘museum exhibits’ (birch bark, flowers, fences, walls, doors, floors). Another way of uncovering their relational mnemonic affordances is through the concept of the symptom and symptom-formation [*Symptombildung*], which Didi-Huberman borrows from Freud.^{lxxx} Psychoanalytic notion of the symptom directs the viewer’s attention to the ‘underside’ of images as, within the realm of visual representation, symptoms signify “the suddenly-manifested knot of an arborescence of associations or conflicting meanings.”^{lxxxi} By presenting the objects at hand as plastic inscriptions of the past, and as material afterlives of something that had disappeared, Didi-Huberman theorizes cultural workings of memory analogously to the return of repressed contents (for Freud such returns always occur through substitutive, occluded and distorted forms). Freud’s symptom theory is articulated within the framework of depth and surface,^{lxxxii} whereby symptom is presented as a stand-in form for wishes and desires not permitted to surface (to be satisfied), and hence “in ‘abeyance’” [*unterbleiben*].^{lxxxiii} Considered in relation to Didi-Huberman’s memory and materiality nexus, this psychoanalytic conceptual prism casts the material afterlives of historical events (recording upon plastic object surfaces) not in terms of the *continuity* of past and present, but as *reemergence* of what had been erased: “[t]he surviving form [...] does not triumphantly survive the death of its competitors”; rather, “it survives [...]its own death.”^{lxxxiv}

What memory (or *memories*) do the arboreal fragments in *Bark* symptomatize? The birch trees in Auschwitz retain an organic connection to the bodies of the victims, whose buried remains and scattered ashes mixed with the soil, ground water and the pond, and became incorporated by and within them. Didi-Huberman writes: “the exuberance with which the flowers of the fields grow is simply the counterpart to a human hecatomb on which this strip of Polish land has capitalized.”^{lxxxv} In this sense the biotic, inorganic and geological objects in the essay are haunted: they are organized by spectral logic and their current

forms and shapes preserve these past apparitions.^{lxxxvi} The arboreal fragments are also a metaphorical figure of survival of Auschwitz as a past ‘place of barbarism’, which is *invisible in the present*, because it has been superseded by Auschwitz as a contemporaneous ‘place of culture’. The relation between these two institutions—the camp and the museum—as well as between two disjointed temporalities is both uncertain and fraught. The essay makes a provocative statement that the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum, with its *raison d’être* of commemoration, conservation and edification of the memory of the victims paradoxically also participates in the *forgetting* or *erasure* of Auschwitz as a place of destruction.^{lxxxvii} In Auschwitz as a cultural project, “death has departed, [...] the dead are no longer here.”^{lxxxviii} Because such project depends on the transformation and conversion of these events into a museified scenery, “a fictitious place devoted to Auschwitz’s memory,” it is also vulnerable to commercialization, even vulgarization, of memory.^{lxxxix} Didi-Huberman makes a record of his own affective response, which crystalizes in a sudden realization that “there is nothing more to see of all this,” that Auschwitz as a place of destruction has become replaced by Auschwitz as a cultural project.^{xc} The two disjointed temporalities of Auschwitz in *Bark* also mean that there are two meanings of ‘survival’ in the essay: survival [*survivance*] as the conservation and display of material artefacts in the Auschwitz-Birkenau, and survival [*survie*] as the “struggle for life [...] in a ‘place of barbarism’.”^{xc}

The subject directs his gaze away from the museified space of memory and at fortuitously encountered arboreal and geological ‘items’ with the goal of identifying memory that has not become a museum exhibit. The photographed bark pieces come to signify a possibility of memory beyond museification. The tracing of anachronism and traumatic origins of these material objects proceeds alongside two distinct trajectories, which, following Jean Laplanche, one could call ‘metaphoric’ and ‘metonymic’ figurations.^{xcii} The metaphoric procedures in *Bark* start in “biological imagery,”^{xciii} that is the philosopher’s reflections on the layered morphology of birch bark, pointing at the temporal heterogeneity of forces that have moulded and imprinted these arboreal objects. The bark becomes a figure of dialectical play of concealment and disclosure, visibility and invisibility, and surface and depth in memory.

In turn, the metonymic figurations concentrate on relations of contiguity.^{xciiv} It is the birches and other plants' physical proximity and adherence to the camps that makes them into a *surface* of the camps. Already in the much-debated *Images in Spite of All* Didi-Huberman mentions the birch trees in terms of this layered positionality, namely their contiguity to the camp. The trees create a barrier that obstructs the view of the camps and prevents creation of images of the camps (“[...] apart from far-off aerial views,” writes Didi-Huberman, “*not one single view* exists of crematorium V—situated in a copse of birch trees, from which Birkenau gets its name—that is not obscured by some plant barrier”).^{xciiv} The birch trees and other vegetal beings are always already implicated in Auschwitz as they created the possibility of concealing the camps from the gaze of the witnesses, as well as prevented attempts at producing the visual documentation from the perspective of the camps' outside.

By approaching these biotic objects, together with objects such as crematoria doors, walls and furnaces, from the perspective of their mnemonic affordance, Didi-Huberman turns both the material instruments of destruction and the tools of memory erasure into witnesses. The trees' contiguity to the camps and their coinciding temporalities form a mnemonic relation. However, just as the photographic imagery presents the boundaries between the trees' periderm, cortex and phloem as unclear and unstable, so is the relation between the birches as an outer layer, or a surface, of the camps both that of separation (barrier) and connection (bridge).^{xciiv} The birches both prevent the view of the camps and they make (an aspect of) the camps visible. Because (together with geological objects, such as soil or the river) the trees and flowers at present-day Auschwitz have incorporated the human tissue of the burned and buried victims, these objects are “the only survivors [...] here.”^{xciiv} Images of the material afterlives of the bodies of the victims within vegetal and geological ‘bodies’ (conventionally classified as landscape and natural background of history, and not history itself)^{xciiv} form the basis for a dialectic of disappearance and re-appearance of Auschwitz.^{xciix} Didi-Huberman suggests that “[t]he destruction of people does not mean that they are departed”; rather, “[t]hey're here, they are indeed here: here in the flowers of the fields, here in the birches' sap, here in this tiny pond where lie the ashes of thousands dead. A pond, still water that requires our gaze to be on the alert at every instant.”^c

Finally, this notion of materiality of memory has implications for the historical and literary studies of the Holocaust (and genocidal memory studies more broadly) insofar as it aligns with the critiques of conceptualizing historical trauma in terms of an ineffable event. In *Bark*, as well as in *Images in Spite of All*, Didi-Huberman has explicitly opposed the philosophic tradition that idiomatizes the Holocaust as an unspeakable event, or an event without witnesses, or what he calls “[a] murder [...] without remains and without memory,” “[the] ‘unsayable’ and [the] ‘unimaginable’.”^{ci} For Didi-Huberman, the language of the ineffable, used in reference to the Holocaust, is metaphysical. It also relies on the binary opposition of depth and interiority,^{cii} which Didi-Huberman identifies as operative within the framework of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*.^{ciii} *Images in Spite of All* is a fierce critique of *Shoah* and in particular of Lanzmann’s decision to exclude archival images of the camps from the film; speaking from a position of imaginal phenomenology, Didi-Huberman postulates that photographs have the capacity “to curb the fiercest will to obliterate.”^{civ} *Bark* remains consistent with, and amplifies, the critique of ineffability from *Images in Spite of All*.

Photographs are ‘surface objects’ *par excellence*; they are “[a]lways entirely on the surface and through intermediary surfaces”; and they “testify only to the surface of things.”^{cv} The photographs of bark, randomly collected and perfunctorily arranged, are ‘superficial’ not only in the technical sense of imaginal capturing upon a substrate of the film stock, but also because of they are collected at random and in passing. They are “[q]uite a little thing,” and “almost nothing.”^{cvi} They apparently have little, or no significance for collective memory; rather, they activate something inescapably private and intimate in memory (“private treasures [...] they are neither intense nor significant, save in the personal memory of the one who cherishes them”).^{cvi} These surface objects contrast starkly with the cultural imagery created by Lanzmann in *Shoah*, which (as Didi-Huberman argues) represents the Holocaust through the metaphysical category of surface/depth distinction. The gas chamber in Lanzmann’s *Shoah* “signifies the heart of a tragedy and of a mystery: the ultimate place of absence of witnesses, analogous [...] in its radical invisibility, to the empty center of the Holy of Holies.”^{cvi} The attribution of mnemonic affordance to arboreal, geological, or inorganic objects in *Bark* defies the language of depth and core, and, instead, inverts the dominant cultural representations of surface as subordinate to a hidden nucleus. Surfaces are

sites of fossilization and testimonial plasticity. Rather than being reduced to manifestations of concealed truths, surface objects “transform [...] the depth of things around them.”^{cix} Surfaces are not “*that which conceal* [...] the true essence of things,” but, rather, “*that which falls* from things: that which comes from them directly, which detaches itself from them, which thus proceeds from them. And which detaches itself from them to come and linger in wait for us, beneath our gaze, like strips of bark from a tree.”^{cx}

Cranial Affects

Didi-Huberman’s essay *Being a Skull* considers the ‘object’ of the human cranium through the prism of its material, aesthetic and ethnographic discursifications, which, within the modern philosophy and science, have been organized by the depth/surface binary (cranial hardness and exteriority is opposed to cerebral softness and interiority). The titular phrase of ‘being a skull’ suggests that while cranium has been considered an inert and rigid object in Western modernity, the focus is on the perspectives that situate it at the interstices of personification and thingification. The ‘object’ of a skull exemplifies what Roberto Esposito calls (in relation to human body) “the flow channel and the operator [...] of a relation that is less and less reducible to a binary logic” of persons and things. By assigning to cranial imagining the task of ‘transvaluating surface’, Didi-Huberman clarifies further the philosophic stakes of the nexus of materiality and memory.

The arboreal imageries in *Bark* and the and cranial ones in *Being a Skull* have much in common. Both the periderm and the cranium are perceived as outer layers and lifeless coverings of the precious and living ‘core’ (the cambium and the brain, respectively). In dominant cultural interpretations, the objects of bark and skull are signified through the functions of protection and concealment. In contrast, Didi-Huberman sees these ‘surface objects’ as sites of fossilizing processes and as plastic retainers of mnemonic traces. Rather than uniform, rigid and inert structures, they are layered, heterogenous, pliable and vibrant registers of history. Their membranous strata are akin to excavation sites—through the dual dynamic of suture and fracture, they materialize past contacts and connections as present-day sediments, latent effects, and contaminations.^{cxii}

Being a Skull zooms onto those anatomical and artistic imagery of cranium that complicate and subvert its reductive significations as a lifeless container of the vital organ of the encephalon. This includes the work of two Italian artists that defy the dominant modern representations of the skull as a cerebral ‘box’: Leonardo da Vinci and Giuseppe Penone. Exemplary of these modern anatomic-artistic images of the skull as a container are Paul Richter’s sketches included in his 1889 *Artistic Anatomy*.^{cxii} It collates together the “[descriptions of] malformations” with “symptomatic ugliness” and with “[prescriptions of] ‘correct forms’ and ideal beauty.”^{cxiii} Didi-Huberman shows that the historical emergence of the skull as an object of modern scientific and artistic interest coincides with its epistemological and discursive relegation to the position of a secondary signifier, subsidiary to the interior and vital organ of the brain. Against the backdrop of modern anatomic-artistic representations of the skull as a ‘box’, Didi-Huberman elaborates the philosophic and critical potential of cranial *counter-imageries* in a way that is similar to his opening observations in *Bark*. Just as bark simultaneously embodies the qualities of *cortex* (the arboreal shielding) and of *liber* (the adherence to and contact with the trunk), so does the object of the skull both encase and protects the brain, creating “*system of contact*” with the cerebral matter that it encloses.^{cxiv} In his “The Cerebral Ventricles, and the Layers of the Sculp” (ca. 1490), Leonardo da Vinci sketched pellicular cranial structure. The drawing juxtaposes a skull with a layered bulbous vegetal formation: an onion. In contrast to the surface/depth binary of the modern anatomical depictions, whereby the skull is reduced to its role of protectively encapsulating the brain, da Vinci represents both the cranium and the encephalon as layered entities, referencing their shared characteristic of morphological stratification.^{cxv} The image of an onion triggers unexpected resonances and associations with contemporary cranial images of layered osseous tissue, which emphasize its contiguity to the brain mass. While the notion of contiguity also features in *Bark*, and paves the path for the attributing testimonial and mnemonic affordance to biotic and inanimate entities, *Being in Skull* adds to it another key importance: contiguity not only denotes a proximate and adjacent positions, but also connotes a somatosensory orientation that emerges at the interstices of surfaces (the Latin word *contingere* means ‘touch upon’). The plastic surface of a cranium “registers [the] pulses [of the brain]” and “adapt[s] to the form it protects.”^{cxvi} Rather than a rigid envelope, the skull is a site of contact, vibrancy, vitality, nascence and rhythm.

Da Vinci's bulbous figure emerges as part of critique of the surface/depth binary: its layered morphology suggests that "the onion's faculty of containing can be identified exactly with what it contains [...]," and that, rather than conceal and protect the precious core, the scaly and fleshy leaves are *all there is*.^{cxvii} Paraphrasing Michael Marder's remarks on philosophic figuration of plants, one could say that it represents a vegetal form that is completely free of interiority.^{cxviii} Or, as the artists Jean Dubuffet puts it, the onion bulb consists of "[...] nothing but successive envelopes that in the end envelop nothing at all," which, however, "doesn't stop the onion from being a thing that exists."^{cxix} Its morphology points at what Didi-Huberman calls "a pellicular paradox," whereby "the onion's faculty of containing can be identified exactly with what it contains."^{cxx} As such vegetal-philosophic idiom of surface, it undermines the "hierarchy between the center and the periphery," whereby it epitomizes "[a] troubling solidarity, based on contact—but also on infra-thin interstices—[that] unites the envelope with the enveloped thing. Here, the outside is nothing more than a *molting* of the inside."^{cxxi} By situating a skull and an onion side by side, Da Vinci's drawing represents cranium as a 'being' that is both the container and the contained.

This undoing of the depth/surface binary prepares the philosophic ground for envisioning cranium as a memory object, not unlike that of arboreal pieces in *Bark*. Central to this undertaking is Didi-Huberman's engagement with the artistic work of Giuseppe Penone, which inverts modern sculptural categories, including the opposition between rigid and pliable material. Didi-Huberman has used the phrase "network of poetic equivalence" to describe Penone's work; he wants to explore the ways in which Penone's sculptures and installations construct associative chains between diverse entities (bark, lining, leaves, eyelids, etc.). Penone's interest in these diverse items has to do with their classification as 'surface objects', or 'surface beings'.^{cxxii} Penone's work is based on a distinctive "sculptural phenomenology" of objects, which is focused on haptic sense-perception, contact, interstices, and malleability of all material.^{cxxiii} This approach pertains to the questions of emergence and production of cultural memory in that material surface inscriptions and 'fossilization' of contact within/upon objects corresponds to his popular techniques (including frottage in the 1978 project, *EyeLids*). The sculptural processes, whereby force and impact become incorporated and preserved by contiguous objects, is posited as a exemplification of cultural mnemonic processes that *Bark* also deals with. Just as in the case of arboreal vegetation in the

concentration camps, the objects in *Being a Skull* are porous and plastic, which in turn engenders osmotic relations, allows them to absorb contents, to be impressed and imprinted, and transformed under pressure.

For Penone sculpture is not a mimetic art, but an ontogenetic one.^{cxxiv} In his remarks on stone plasticity and erosive river processes accompanying the *Essere Fiume* series, Penone spoke of the “creative turbulence of forms” that flowing water gives to the contiguous material, such as sand, rock, soil or stones. For Penone the river assumes a sculptural relationship to that material as it “sketches the form” by “continuous work [of] small and big blows, from the soft passage of sand, sharp ruptures, slow friction from great pressures, of muffled collisions.”^{cxxv} In *Essere Fiume* Penone molds stones taken from the bottom of the river following closely the natural process of the erosive fluvial transportation of gravel material. Reflecting on the formal choices underpinning this artwork, Penone asserts that plastic arts embody the logic present in the geological and biological processing of matter, as for him it is “not possible to think of stone or work in a manner which differs from that of the river. The blows of the chisel, the scoop, the gradine, the drill, abrasive stones and sandpaper are tools of the river.”^{cxxvi} The attribution of agential faculty to the river in Penone’s description is achieved by the use of active verbs, all expressing a form of labor (“grinding,” “scraping,” “transport[ing]”), which maps onto a kind of vitalist philosophic imaginary: the river’s achievement is to turn the “dead element” of the stone into a vibrant form; through its labor, the river “quicken[s] the life of the rock.”^{cxxvii} Penone also thinks of the fluvial processing of stones as *memorialization*—by calling the river “[a] watery mass of memory,” he signifies it as a force capable of inscribing the effects of its labor upon the stone surfaces by a way of preservation of the past.^{cxxviii} The river “conditions, characterizes and shapes its container through the anger of its floods, the calm of its droughts and the continuousness of its flowing.”^{cxxix}

It is noteworthy, I think, how closely Didi-Huberman situates Penone’s sculptural philosophy and practice and Aby Warburg’s approach to memory of cultural forms. The presentation of the corresponding acts of “extract[ing] a stone that the river has shaped” as the process of “going backwards in the history of the river” in Penone’s are clearly modalities and illustrations of Warburgian *Nachleben*. There is a striking family-resemblance between Penone’s associative chain of geological, vegetal, insect, and human plastic interactions with contiguous materials and what Warburg called ‘emotive formulas’

(*Pathosformeln*)—the absorption and etching of affective forms within/onto object surfaces.^{cxxx} The post-humanist premise of Penone’s sculptural philosophy is the organizing “vegetal [or] fluid logic” of the material world, which traverses natural processes on the one hand and cultural and creative activities on the other. The designation of some elements as rigid or refractory and others as malleable (foundational to the Western plastic arts) is an outcome of a limited anthropocentric perspective on time. Instead, for Penone “[...] all the elements are fluid. The stone itself is fluid: a mountain crumbles, becomes sand. It is only a question of time. It’s the short duration of our existence which leads us to deem a certain material as being either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’.”^{cxxxix}

These aesthetic and philosophic insights have a direct bearing on the re-imagining the skull, not as a cerebral container and a rigid sheath, but as a plastic and stratified composite, capable of registering contact, vibration and touch. In his 1990 project *Paesaggi del Cervello* (*The Landscapes of the Brain*), Panone uses a technique of an ‘endocranial frottage’; he applies “charcoal to cast of a child’s brain, putting scotch tape over the charcoal, then using a photographic process to enlarge the image on tape onto large strips of plastic,” which results in “[the] drawings [looking] like x-rays of what we cannot see inside our skulls. These x-rays of the brain look as if they could also be x-rays of a tree, or a block of marble, or the earth.”^{cxxxix} At hand is an artistic exploration of plasticity of the cranial bones, which, as Didi-Huberman argues, inadvertently echoes Freud’s curious remarks on the elasticity of the infant’s skull, whereby the maternal pelvic bone works as its ‘cast’.^{cxxxiii} For Freud, cranial plasticity offers an apt biological metaphor of the subject’s failure to detach libidinal investment from the maternal object.^{cxxxiv}

In *Paesaggi del Cervello*, the brain “adapts [the cranial bone] to [its] form,” which appears as a site capable of “registering [the cerebral] pulses,” but that cannot “read [...] the surface that it touches.”^{cxxxv} The stratified cranial imagery signifies the skull (and, especially, its inner surface, the dura mater) as that which adheres to, and touches, the brain *and* that as a site of unknowability and nondisclosure. It reveals the paradox of the brain’s limitation to ‘know’ what is most proximate to it, because it “is not capable of reading the surface that it touches.”^{cxxxvi} Contrasted with Richter’s representations of the skull as a rigid and lifeless envelope of the cerebral matter, Penone develops cranial imaginary of a plastic stratum that contains and conserves within itself imprints of past contacts,

connections and pressures. The artist's technique of frottage is modelled on cranial flexibility and processes of ossification and incision-making as cephalic impressions are etched onto pliable material. Didi-Huberman comments on *Paesaggi del Cervello*: “[b]etween ‘me’ and ‘space’, there is nothing but skin. It is a receptacle, an imprint-bearer of the world around me that sculpts me. At the same time, it’s an excavation site of my destiny—of the time that sculpts me. And in the end, it’s a writing of my flesh, an ensemble of traces that emit, from the interior of my skull, an unconscious thought—a thought which also sculpts me.”^{cxxxvii} The surface impressions and etchings made through the endocranial frottage are mnemonic traces that register haptic encounters beyond objectification and knowability.

Conclusions:

Didi-Huberman's essays *Bark* and *Being a Skull* intervene into the philosophic and cultural discourse that Birgit Neumann has described as a “recalibration” of memory studies through the non-anthropocentric lens.^{cxxxviii} Didi-Huberman approaches the question of mnemonic affects of objects and plants through a dialectic of image and language, that in turn articulates visuality as a condition of political experience. This articulates the process of cultural memory production as a plastic moulding of and inscription of (invisible and repressed) contents upon material surface. This process is figured as ‘fossilization’ of movement, affect and gesture.^{cxxxix} This means, too, that something vital and dynamic remains in the present, albeit in a petrified form, through its embeddedness within material interstices and surfaces. I have argued that Didi-Huberman's aesthetic and historiographic interventions underwrite a philosophic attempt at *transvaluating* the category of surface, by releasing it from the subordinate and secondary position vis-à-vis the category of depth, and by investing it with an array of new relationally-centered cultural significations—contact, connection, and haptic adherence.

The essays *Bark* and *Being a Skull* are attempts at theorizing the nexus of memory and materiality in respect to the objects of arboreal bark and human cranium. What bark and crania have in common in Didi-Huberman's philosophic mediations is that they are both surface objects. They illustrate how mnemonic ‘fossilization’ works: by sealing and preserving traces of past contacts and connections, bark and crania become mediums of survival, kind of guarantors of ‘afterlife’ (*Nachleben*) of what has been

destroyed. In regard to the skull, by zooming onto its artistic and philosophic counter-imageries, Didi-Huberman captures its epistemological oscillation between the category of a person and of a thing, and critiques both the ‘metaphysics of depth’ and the organizing matrix of *scala naturae*. The epistemic and testimonial, as well as political, stakes of this critique become clear in *Bark*, which articulates mnemonic affordance of fragments of birch trees at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau. These arboreal memory objects afford the subject who interacts with them through sense-apparatus of sight and touch the possibility of forming a mnemonic connection via metonymic and metaphoric interpretative pathways. As such, these ‘impure’ objects do not only ‘fossilize’ or preserve heterogenous pasts, but also insert the singular temporality of the subject’s life within this mnemonic matrix. While they undermine the premise of objective ‘knowability’ of the things at hand, as sites of contact and connection these objects do generate a kind of relational knowledge-production. It is akin to *knowledge as a connection*, which emerges through subjective immersion in the world, and inverts the subordinate position of mnemonic object vis-à-vis remembering subjects.

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ⁱ Examples of the diverse scholarship in this field include explorations things as bearers or 'containers' of memory; material articulations of memory cultures; testimonial objects; mnemonic architecture; and the mnemonic agency of things. See Assman, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 109-119; Assman, *Cultural Memory*; Bruchac, "Object Matters"; Erll, *Memory*, 66-81; Erll, and Rigney, introduction, 1-14; Hirsch and Jones, "Testimonial Objects," 353-383; *Memory and Material Culture*; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Memory," 329-338; Stewart, *On Longing*; Sturken, "The Objects that Lived," 13-26; Tanović, *Designing Memory*; Zirra, "Shelf Lives," 458-473, Zolkos, "Justice, the Confessional," 213-226; "The Inorganic".

ⁱⁱ Charles, "Teleological Causation," 227-266. For critical discussions of the status of inorganic beings and the lowest-level biotic objects (plants) within the Aristotelian classification of beings, see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Brown, *Other Things*; Hall, *Plants as Persons*; Marder, "Plant-Soul," 83-100; Marder, *Plant-Thinking*; Meeker, and Szabari, *Radical Botany*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik,” 16.

^{iv} Cf. Assman, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” 109-110; Droege, “Memory and Consciousness,” 107-109; Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, 82-84.

^v Pollan, “The Intelligent Plant.”

^{vi} Laskow, “The Hidden Memories of Plants.”

^{vii} In *De memoria et reminiscencia* Aristotle makes a distinction between memory (*mnêmê*) and recollection (*anamnêsis*). While the latter is an exclusive human faculty, *mnêmê* is extended to all ‘ensouled beings’ that are capable sense-perception (humans and animals). *Mnêmê* is the capacity for the “retention, storage and (largely passive) retrieval of sensations in response to certain stimuli.” In turn, *anamnêsis* is associated closely with the rational faculty as it signifies a “deliberative search [*zêtêsis*] for information that one knows one has acquired before, a kind of reasoning [*sylogismos*] based on certain premises and leading to a conclusion,” Lilião, Lo Presti, Perler, and van der Eijk, “Mapping Memory, 679; Mesaroş “Aristotle.” However, the mnemonic faculty of *mnêmê* is not present in the lower primary beings (plants), which Aristotle characterizes as incapable of perception. Maher, *Plant Minds*, 79-97; Marder, “Vegetal Memories.”

^{viii} Kennedy, “Multidirectional Eco-memory,” 268-269. I expand Kennedy’s focus from human and non-human animals, to vegetal and inanimate beings as also constitutive of such mnemonic assemblages.

^{ix} Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal*, 117.

^x For conceptualization of mnemonic affect, see e.g. Callard, and Papoulias, “Affect and Embodiment,” 246-263.

^{xi} See e.g. Alloa and Cappelletto, *Dynamis of the Image*; Elkin, *Theorizing Visual Studies*; Farago, *Compelling Visuality*; Gustafsson, *Crime Scenery in Postwar Film*; Harvey, *Sharing Common Ground*; Lampert, *Simultaneity and Delay*; Larsson, *Didi-Huberman and the Image*; Manghani, *Image Studies*; Smith, *Georges Didi-Huberman and Film*; Richter, *Afterness*; Saint and Stafford, *Modern French Visual Theory*.

^{xii} See in particular Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*; Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*.

^{xiii} For an overview of philosophic and aesthetic motifs in *Bark* see Rys, “Bark.”

^{xiv} Ubertowska, “Krajobraz po Zagładzie,” 137-138.

^{xv} Małczyński, “Polityka natury,” 149-150; “Jak drzewa świadczą,” 373-385.

^{xvi} Widely discussed in art historiography, visual studies and philosophy, the work of Didi-Huberman has received some (though perhaps not enough) attention in scholarship on cultural and collective memory. See Baer, *Spectral Evidence*; Cherry, *The Afterlives*; Dziuban, “Polish Landscapes,” 34-47; Iversen, *Photography, Trace*; Małczyński, “Jak drzewa świadczą,” 373-385, Ubertowska, “Krajobraz po Zagładzie,” 132-146; Walden, *Cinematic Intermedialities*.

^{xvii} Leśniak, “Images Thinking the Political,” 305; Chester, “Surface,” 254-258.

^{xviii} I direct those who are tempted to interpret Didi-Huberman’s imaginal analyses as grounded in new materialist and non-anthropocentric conceptions of visual object’s ontology to remarks that Didi-Huberman makes in his reflections on the work of Foucault: “It seems to me that there is no ontology of discourse with [Foucault]. [...] in an almost mimetic fashion, I am trying to work with images without seeking their ontology.” And, further, he says also: “We don’t build an ontology of images and we don’t build an ontology of discourses. We observe, in history, the emergence of certain values based on use. We’re observing something at work. Work in its very processes; its plans for immanence.” Didi-Huberman, “Knowing When To Cut.”

^{xix} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 26.

^{xx} Herman Siemens, “The first Transvaluation,” 171. While Didi-Huberman does not invoke the concept of transvaluation directly, he has discusses Nietzsche’s philosophy of time and pathos at length in *The Surviving Image*, 75-108; and in *Atlas*, “Survivals of Tragedy.”

^{xxi} Hutchings, *Russian Modernism*, 28.

^{xxii} Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 91. Plant philosophers have critiqued the Aristotelian conceptions of plants as “bereft of interiority” and as soulless beings, whose life-functions were located peripherally, Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal*, 31.

^{xxiii} Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 73.

^{xxiv} Cf. Duarte, “Reading Georges Didi-Huberman,” 1-9; Saint, “Didi-Huberman,” 173-176.

^{xxv} Cf. Hanza, “Images and Symptoms,” 38-48; Krasieńska, “The Convergence of Phenomenology,” 27-40; Larsson, “And the Word,” 1-19.

^{xxvi} Catherine Malabou has undertaken an important philosophic articulation of plasticity within the continental tradition: Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk; The Ontology*.

^{xxvii} Didi-Huberman, *Atlas*, “Gods in Exile.”

^{xxviii} Throughout the essay I use the terminology of ‘affordance’ partly as a way of bypassing the problematic word ‘object’ (which I cannot entirely avoid). ‘Affordance’ is a nominalization of the verb ‘to afford’, meaning ‘to provide’ and ‘to make available for use’, which was coined by James J. Gibson to characterize relational characteristics of items and entities that translate into ‘action possibilities’ and ‘action invitations’, and which Gibson saw as traversing the epistemological binary of subject / object; see Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*; Ingold, *Being Alive*. Harvey and Knox employ the concept of affordance in a discussion of material characteristics, or attributes, of objects, which they articulate in oppositional terms (“hard or soft, sharp or blunt, liquid or solid, pliable, malleable or rigid”); see Harvey, and Knox, Introduction to *Objects and Materials*, 1-17. As such, the concept of affordance helps me to zoom onto mnemonic relations and effects that material objects call forth through their diverse significations and positionalities in the images analysed in *Bark* and *Being a Skull*.

^{xxix} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 94.

^{xxx} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 37; Warburg, “Pagan-Antique Prophecy,” 637-641.

^{xxxi} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 37.

^{xxxii} Didi-Huberman quoted in Hagelstein, “Georges Didi-Huberman,” 35. See also Didi-Huberman, “Out of the Plan,” 261, 263; Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 12-13.

^{xxxiii} Esposito, *Persons and Things*, “The Value of Things”; Cazetta, Oliveira, and Tavares, “Anatomical Atlases.”

^{xxxiv} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*.

^{xxxv} Didi-Huberman, “Image, Language,” 19.

^{xxxvi} See e.g. Jay “The Rise of Hermeneutics,” 307-326; *Downcast Eyes*.

^{xxxvii} Elsewhere Didi-Huberman calls these connections “mutually entangled implications of images.”

Didi-Huberman, “Image, Language,” 19.

^{xxxviii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Snail,” emphasis in the original. See also Grethlein, *Aesthetic Experiences*, 152.

^{xxxix} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Snail,” emphasis in the original.

^{xl} Didi-Huberman, *Atlas*, “The Inexhaustible, or Knowledge Through Imagination.”

^{xli} Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image,” 33-34’ emphasis mine.

^{xlii} Didi-Huberman, “Before the Image,” 33.

^{xliii} Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*.

^{xliv} Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, “Hells?” and “Survivals.”

^{xlv} Baudelaire quoted in Didi-Huberman, *Atlas*, “The Inexhaustible, or Knowledge Through Imagination.”

^{xlvi} “Son[i]a #201. Georges Didi-Huberman.”

^{xlvii} Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 139-170.

^{xlviii} Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons; Phasmes; Phalènes*. Alloa calls it ‘phasmid thinking’, and argues that moths and butterflies provide a kind of entomological figure for Didi-Huberman’s thinking about subject-object relationship, in that, “instead of assimilating the environment to [themselves], [they] assimilate [...] to the environment [and thus] un-learn or [...] un-prepare [...] in order to see [...]” Alloa, “Phasmid Thinking,” 103. See also: Larsson, “Suspicious Images”; Ionescu, ““On Moths and Butterflies.”

^{xlix} Larsson, “Suspicious Images”; see also *Didi-Huberman and the Image*.

^l Leśniak, “Images Thinking the Political,” 310.

^{li} Krasieńska, “The Convergence of Phenomenology,” 27.

^{lii} Krasieńska, “The Convergence of Phenomenology,” 27.

^{liii} Krasieńska, “The Convergence of Phenomenology,” 28-29.

^{liv} Hagelstein, “Georges Didi-Huberman,” 35

^{lv} Hagelstein, “Georges Didi-Huberman,” 34.

^{lvi} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lvii} In the psychoanalytic terms, the images form ‘retrogressive’ and ‘progressive’ interpretative pathways. Laplanche, “Notes on Afterwardsness,” 264-269.

^{lviii} The starting-point for this is the coalescence of word and image encapsulated by the photographic arrangement of the bark on paper, which becomes a source of epistolary associations. In a striking opening of the essay Didi-Huberman writes that “three strips of time” and “a fragment of memory” are also an “unwritten thing I attempt to read; a fragment of the present [...]; a fragment of desire, a letter to write—but to whom?” They are a kind of inheritance to be come across posthumously by the descendants, and as such bear a relation to the writer’s own death. And he asks: “[w]hat will my child think when he comes across these remnants after my death?” Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lix} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*; “Son[i]a #201. Georges Didi-Huberman.”

^{lx} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxi} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxiii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxiv} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxv} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxvi} “Son[i]a #201. Georges Didi-Huberman.”

^{lxvii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxviii} Cf. Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust*; Wilson, and Lindy, *Trauma, Culture, and Metaphor*.

^{lxix} Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 74.

^{lxx} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*,

^{lxxi} Cf. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk*. Didi-Huberman discusses two dimensions of plasticity in the dual context of Warburg’s historiographic project and Nietzsche’s philosophy, as the dialectic of survival, defined as “the indestructability of traces and remains,” and metamorphosis, “their relative effacement, their perpetual transformations.” Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 94.

^{lxxii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxxiii} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 46.

^{lxxiv} This in turn renders highly problematic any historiographic attempts at periodization and any philosophic commitments to the linear conception of time; rather, it “*anachronizes* history.” Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 48, emphasis in the original. While resisting the oppositional and

sequential understanding of past and present dominant in Western historiography, and in the classical history of art in particular, the emphasis on the anachronistic character of objects defines them as bearers of those contents that have been repressed or blocked from the dominant narratives of modernity, which pivot upon the notion of contemporaneity as the overcoming of the past, and of its violence, excesses and pathologies. See Didi-Huberman “Before the Image”; Chambers, *Locations*, 71-84. Elsewhere, Didi-Huberman describes the aforementioned anachronism and temporal heterogeneity of certain images as “impure time.” Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 38-41; Weigel “The Readability of Images.” In *Bark* there is a moment when, upon the manual touch, the bark flakes off the tree and dirties its surroundings, reminds Didi-Huberman of “the impurity that comes from things themselves,” as well as “the contingency, the variety, the exuberance, the relativity—of all things.” Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxxv} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 46, 50. On the phenomenology of appearance and disappearance in Didi-Huberman’s work, see Oberprantacher, “The Shimmering Phenomenon of Clandestinity,” 98-118.

^{lxxvi} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 50; emphasis mine.

^{lxxvii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxxviii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxxix} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 85.

^{lxxx} Freud, “Repression”; “Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety.” Didi-Huberman, “Dialektik des Monstrums,” 621-645; “Artistic Survival,” 273-285; *The Surviving Image*, 174-339.

^{lxxxi} Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 19.

^{lxxxii} Altman, and Coe, *The Fractured Self*.

^{lxxxiii} Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety,” 95.

^{lxxxiv} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 36.

^{lxxxv} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxxxvi} Cf. Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 38-67.

^{lxxxvii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{lxxxviii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

lxxxix Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

xc Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

xcⁱ Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

xcⁱⁱ Jean Laplanche construes the terminology of metaphoric relations of analogy and resemblance, and metonymic relations of proximity by bringing together insights from Jacobson's structuralist linguistics and interpretations of psychoanalytic practice. Laplanche, *Life and Death*, 129-131; "Time and the Other," 254-255. On metaphor and metonymy in cultural memory studies, see Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 95-112.

xcⁱⁱⁱ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of*, 141.

xc^{iv} Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of*, 123.

xc^v Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 8, emphasis in the original.

xc^{vi} Cf. Larsen, "Boundaries," 97-113.

xc^{vii} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

xc^{viii} On the idea of mnemonic landscapes see: Sendyka, "The Difficult Heritage," 4-14; Małczyński, Domańska, Smykowski, and Kłos, "The Environmental History of the Holocaust," 183-196.

xc^{ix} Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, "Hells?"

^c Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{ci} Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 22.

^{cii} Cf. Bell, introduction, 27-29.

^{ciii} Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 90-114. See also: Chaouat, "In the Image," 86-96; Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History*, 193-199; Rose, "Auschwitz as Hermeneutic Rupture," 124-130.

^{civ} Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 23.

^{cv} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{cvi} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{cviⁱ} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{cviⁱⁱ} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{cix} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*.

^{cx} Didi-Huberman, *Bark*, emphasis in the original.

^{cx} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 96-98; *Atlas*, “Survivals of Tragedy.”

^{cxii} Paul Richter was a professor of creative anatomy at l'École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. He also worked at the Salpêtrière hospital, assisting and collaborating with Jean-Martin Charcot on his studies on hysteria and epilepsy. Didi-Huberman has written about Richter and his anesthetization of the anatomical body also in *Invention of Hysteria*, where he describes Richter's work as crucial to Charcot's project of presenting the female hysteric as a modern spectacle. Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria*, 115-116, 126.

^{cxiii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, 40, “Being a Box.” While Didi-Huberman does not address directly the role of modern cranial imageries in the consolidation of racist, anti-Semitic and eugenicist positions in the European expansionist and exterminatory history, the implication of his argument is that the anatomic representational objectifications of the skulls in modernity had important bearing on them.

^{cxiv} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, 85, “Being an Onion,” emphasis in the original.

^{cxv} Clayton and Philo include the following analysis of the drawing: “Leonardo lists the layers in order: ‘hair; scalp; muscular flesh; pericranium arising from the dura mater; cranium, that is, bone; dura mater; pia mater; brain’. This is essentially repeated in the detail to lower right, with dura mater and pia mater transposed. While most of these layers correspond with modern usage, Leonardo used the term pia mater to refer to what is now called the arachnoid mater (named as such by Frederik Ruysch in 1664); what we now call the pia mater is practically inseparable from the underlying brain and neural tissue, and Leonardo would have been unable to differentiate it as a separate layer of the brain.” Clayton, and Philo, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 60. By contrasting the skull representations as a cerebral container with da Vinci's stratified cephalic imaginary, Didi-Huberman demonstrates further his intellectual allegiance to the Warburgian method of non-linear historiography, whereby a past object separates from “its own history,” and forms “[a] dynamic point of encounter” within the present. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 26.

^{cxvi} Penone quoted in Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Fossil.”

^{cxvii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being an Onion.”

^{cxviii} Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 25.

^{cxix} Dubuffet quoted in Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being an Onion.”

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- ^{cxx} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being an Onion.”
- ^{cxxi} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being an Onion,” emphasis in the original.
- ^{cxxii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Fossil,” and “Being a Leaf”.
- ^{cxxiii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Leaf.”
- ^{cxxiv} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a River.”
- ^{cxxv} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a River,” Penone in Maraniello, and Watkins, *Giuseppe Penone. Writings*, 150.
- ^{cxxvi} Penone in Maraniello, and Watkins, *Giuseppe Penone. Writings*, 151.
- ^{cxxvii} Penone in Maraniello, and Watkins, *Giuseppe Penone. Writings*, 150, 151.
- ^{cxxviii} Penone in Maraniello, and Watkins, *Giuseppe Penone. Writings*, 149.
- ^{cxxix} Penone in Maraniello, and Watkins, *Giuseppe Penone. Writings*, 150.
- ^{cxxx} Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 123-137; Schankweiler, and Wüschner, “*Pathosformel*.”
- ^{cxxx1} Penone quoted in Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a River.”
- ^{cxxxii} Harper, and Moyer, *A Sculpture Reader*, 25.
- ^{cxxxiii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Dig.”
- ^{cxxxiv} Freud, “A Special Type of Choice of Object,” 168.
- ^{cxxxv} Penone quoted in Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Fossil.”
- ^{cxxxvi} Penone quoted in Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Fossil.”
- ^{cxxxvii} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Leaf.”
- ^{cxxxviii} Neuman, “Narrative Forms in the Age of Anthropocene,” 100-101; Zirra, “Shelf Lives,” 458-473; Craps in Lizarazu, and Vince, “Memory Studies Goes Planetary,” 1-15.
- ^{cxxxix} Didi-Huberman, *Being a Skull*, “Being a Leaf”; *The Surviving Image*, 124.