

The logo for 'le magazine' is contained within a white circle. The text 'le' is on the top line, 'mag' on the second, 'az' on the third, and 'ine' on the fourth. Each line of text is followed by a diagonal slash: a red slash after 'le', a green slash after 'mag', and a blue slash after 'ine'.

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— Meeting Point

#2

Dork Zabunyan
& Peter Szendy

Peter Szendy – Auscultating images

Peter Szendy is “updating” current thinking about images just as, according to Flaubert, Baudelaire, “[modernised] Romanticism” in his time. Here is a philosopher who has profoundly renewed our relationship with images, every kind of image: cinema, television, Internet, painting, and comic strips, etc. *Le Supermarché du visible* (published last autumn by Minuit) constitutes a salutary benchmark from which to survey a contemporary world that is saturated with images. Several reasons explain why this book, which you can read as a survival guide for people living in an age of generalised hyper-visibility, is so important. First of all, and we must insist upon this fact to avoid any misunderstandings, the conceptual thought processes that Peter Szendy suggests comprise an antidote to the pessimistic observations about the presumed effects of a visible world in overdrive. These supposed effects include derealisation: as an excess of images inexorably leads to a loss of reality or alienation, so the large-scale consumption of images necessarily leads to mass alienation. These harmful effects may indeed be a reality here and there, with local specificities (strategies implemented to monopolise the gaze vary from one country to another), but it appertains to the philosopher to outline a critique that provides a way out, or to hint at an evasive manoeuvre that allows us to glimpse an alternative. This alternative is notably embodied in Peter Szendy’s writing itself, which is yet another characteristic of *Le Supermarché du visible*. In this book, its author’s conceptuality is inherent to the works it deals with and therefore our image environments, as suffocating as they may be, find their salutary counterpart in moments of time and space created by filmmakers from Robert Bresson to the Marx Brothers and from Jacques Tati to Brian De Palma. Szendy accurately analyses and describes their work, whilst turning the reader away – using subtle twists and turns within the films themselves – from all the mechanisms that shape or condition our way of seeing. There are no “immediate organs” said Karl Marx, quoted by Szendy, there are only “social organs” that find in the art of images thousands of ways to emancipate themselves. This naturally results in another specific characteristic of



January 17th, 2018. Dork Zabunyan (left) talks with Peter Szendy, a few days after a first public discussion at the Jeu de Paume bookstore, Paris. Photo Adrien Chevrot.

Le Supermarché du visible, which soberly develops a politics of images, without claiming to have the last word on their final meaning. In fact, it would be more exact to say a policy for auscultating images (as Peter Szendy himself put it in the conversation that we had) because the idea is indeed to examine or auscultate, like a philosopher-doctor, the future of these images in market terms, their high-speed circulation and the cinematographic inventions that concern them – always with a view to revealing the moment when they act as counterpoints that bring rhythm, punctuate, envelope and even “phrase” our everyday lives.

Dork Zabunyan

The conversation



Dork Zabunyan: Hello Peter.

Peter Szendy: Hello!

Dork Zabunyan : I'm very pleased to meet up with you again for a new *Meeting Point*. Our get-together today continues on from our recent discussion with Antonio Somaini at the Jeu de Paume bookshop when we spoke about your latest publication, *Le Supermarché du visible. Essai d'iconomie*. Today we are going to take this book as a starting point and try and consider your work more globally. In fact you are a musicologist and you've written a lot about music, for example *Listen: A History of our Ears and All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage*, as well as *Hits: Philosophy in the Jukebox*. However your thoughts have gradually turned to the world of images, moving images in the widest sense, and you have written about both cinema and television, notably TV series. Today we'll talk about this wide field of investigation that lies at the crossroads of music and cinema and, in conclusion, possibly evoke a few new perspectives as far as the visual arts are concerned.

Le Supermarché du visible provides a fresh new look at theories about cinema and moving images. This "essai d'iconomie" (iconomic essay), to quote its subtitle, renews theoretical approaches by its well-thought out and rigorous use of images taken from what is usually described as lowbrow or popular culture, such as TV series to which you devote some remarkable pages (on *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*). Your thinking therefore pays no heed to the usually accepted hierarchy between low and highbrow culture and value judgments that distinguish between what is noble or on the contrary worthless in the field of the arts and culture, which doesn't mean that there are no distinctions to be made. Your position in relation to certain television productions situates your development more generally in the footsteps of one of those authors who seems to inspire you the most: Walter Benjamin. In fact, too many of those who comment on Benjamin forget to implement one of the very requirements that

he applies in his own texts: a heuristic openness to cultures other than those which belong to the pantheon of the arts, or that undeniably lay claim to artistic legitimacy. In a way, your work endeavours to encompass and question with dignity these 'objects' that are too often considered unworthy of serious attention. In this respect, I'd like to quote a page from the beginning of *Hits: Philosophy in the Jukebox* (Fordham University Press 2012), which seems to highlight your approach: "But I have also written this book to give some dignity to these objects that are so often and in so many discourses considered as entirely lacking in merit. I even want to lend them a philosophical dignity, in something of the same way that ragpickers, kitsch, signs, ads, the mania for collecting and children's books were elevated to the status of philosophical objects in the work of Walter Benjamin."

Peter Szendy : Yes you're absolutely right. This paragraph from *Hits* is something that I would be quite happy to put my name to today! The only thing I might have some scruples about – without there being any question of backing



Robert Bresson, *Money*, 80 minutes, 1983

down as far as the dignity of these so-called popular or mainstream objects is concerned and even, on the contrary, taking a step further in asserting their dignity – is to have used the term “object”. Fundamentally, these lines that you have just quoted put me in the position of a “subject” analysing “objects” of mainstream culture. The first time I spoke about this, I was talking about hit pop songs. In this book however and in a slightly contradictory way, I am presenting an analysis of the way in which these objects constitute our psyche. I am analysing the way in which a hit song loops back on itself and showing how hit songs constantly exchange and take the place of each other in a sort of market. And yet it is not just an external, objective market, but a psychological market as well. In other words it is in the very heart of our psyche, as Benjamin explains so well, that these hit pop songs exchange with each other and take each others places to such an extent that the psyche – in other words our inner life or our subjectivity – is made up of them. Retrospectively, it therefore seems problematic to postulate the pre-established position of a “subject” confronted with “objects” that are produced for the masses, when the very subjectivity of the “subject” is the product of the “objects” in question. What I am interested in at the moment is how these *sequencings* – a term I prefer to *objects* to designate hit songs or film sequences – interlace with the subject and observing how these *sequencings* produce subjective effects. I think that it is very important to rethink this terminology because postulating something as if there were a watertight border between one kind of sequence and others (which are considered to be mainstream) comes down to not allowing oneself or at least preventing oneself from analysing this *market* - in a very general sense - that structures us.

I am always very surprised for example when someone like Jean-François Lyotard in his magnificent and astounding text *L'acinéma* traces a very dense and protective border around a certain kind of cinema that we could call experimental. Whereas he talks about the capitalist modus operandi of mainstream cinema in very general terms, it is apparent that what he is saying actually makes it possible to analyse experimental moments within mainstream cinema and vice versa.¹

1. Jean-François Lyotard, « L'acinéma », dans *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*, Galilée, 1994, p. 60 : « (...) deux directions s'ouvrent pour concevoir (et produire) un objet, cinématographique en particulier, conforme à l'exigence pyrotechnique. (...) Ces deux pôles sont l'immobilité et l'excès de mouvement. En se laissant attirer vers ces antipodes, le cinéma (...) produit de vrais, c'est-à-dire vains, simulacres, des intensités jouissives, au lieu d'objets consommables-productifs. »



DAFT PUNK, *Around the World*. Director Michel Gondry, 1997

And therefore his analysis should quite logically lead us think beyond this sort of wall that has been erected between what we suppose are different genres... as if we even knew what a genre really was!

Dork Zabunyan: Yes... and that reminds me of a question I've been wanting to ask you for a very long time about your transition from musicology to moving images, which took place without any sort of renunciation of your previous work. How did you carry out this transition from writing mainly about the world of music and sound – e.g. in *Listen: A History of Our Ears* (Fordham University Press 2008) and *All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage* (Fordham University Press 2016) – towards books where the world of images has gradually become of primordial importance, such as in *Apocalypse-Cinema and Other Ends of the World* (Fordham University Press 2015) or your latest book *Le Supermarché du visible*? I'm not exactly trying to distinguish between two periods in your writing, one that now belongs to the past and another that is the subject of your current research (after all you already touched on cinema in *All Ears* for example and music turns up here and there in *Le Supermarché du visible*), but rather to highlight

something that is part of a shift from one domain to the other, without preventing the coexistence of both in certain of your publications.

Peter Szendy : It's true that I turned my attention to cinema rather like an outsider, by which I mean it's not where I am from originally. I came gradually to cinema through music and by watching more and more films, first of all as part of my work on music and listening. Deep down, I was trying to find in cinema a sort of filmography of listening. And then for *Hits*, I went looking for a filmography of melodic obsession - there are a lot of examples - in Alain Resnais' films of course, which you already mentioned, and in the films of Hitchcock. At first my approach was therefore quite banal and my research theme-based. I was hoping to find allegories in films of the themes I was interested in, however I feel as if, in the end, something emerged, as if from underneath all this, something that I tried retrospectively to formulate or theorise in a book entitled *Of Stigmatology: Punctuation as Experience*. What I find interesting in music and cinema (and probably in other fields as well) — in the analysis and relationship with the text, even indeed beyond the text — is the question of punctuation, and therefore the phrase and the phrasing. And like an echo to this question of phrasing or like its counterpart as far as reception and perception are concerned, I am interested in the notion of auscultation. In the end, I really began to address cinema based on a concept that I discovered quite late on in the work of Dziga Vertov the *ciné-phrase* (cinematographic phrase), which sums up pretty well the way I consider cinematographic images. It all comes down to making images into phrases. And as I was saying before, the phrasing of these images elicits as a sort of answer, as it were, the idea of the auscultation of images, i.e. examining them by knocking or hitting them, rather like when a doctor taps on your body and listens to the resonance. Adding punctuation to images is a way of questioning them and making them provide answers. As a matter of fact it's quite Nietzschean, because it echoes his idea of "philosophising with a hammer", not at all with the idea of destroying something, which is the usual interpretation, but in order to examine or auscultate it. For Nietzsche it really is a medical metaphor.

Dork Zabunyan: Exactly. In *Le Supermarché du visible*, you take another look at Benjamin's concept of *Bildraum* ("image space"), which is related to a constellation of concepts that you consider decisive. First of all you point out—and it's an essential characteristic—that this *Bildraum* does not refer to a specific "mode of contemplation": we do not contemplate this space, in fact we can



Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 80 minutes, 1929

no longer contemplate it because we are, on the contrary, “*innervated*” in so far as we are in *immediate* contact with these images in which, in fact, we are enveloped. To quote you commenting on the notion as it works in the writings of Benjamin: “(...) anywhere —Benjamin writes— where proximity looks at itself with its own eyes, this image space (*Bildraum*) comes into being, the space we are looking for, this world that is universally and entirely actual”. And you continue by showing that it is a space of “direct imaginal action - where images act directly”, a space “where images are destined to *touch each other* (to knock into each other, to rub up against each other or to spread without delay or distance) [...] at the heart of the purest immediacy” (p. 85-88). This passage made me think of a possible comparison between Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze as a way of trying to understand what was once described as the “civilisation of the image” and which would evoke today all the subjective experiences, as well as all the uses we make of images in a world that is saturated with visual (and auditory) signs of all sorts. You suggest a connection between these two authors in *Le Supermarché du visible* in relation to Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* and

sketch out this “meeting” between Deleuze and Benjamin *via* Serge Daney (to whom Deleuze addressed a very important “letter” in 1986 that was included in *Pourparlers* (Minuit, 1990). This letter to Daney is rather like an “iconomic essay” i.e. a short text about the circulation of images and the way in which this circulation fashions films and in return our way of seeing, feeling, speaking and thinking. A similar encounter also takes place around the *Bildraum* concept and this world of images which, according to Deleuze is in its “third age”, an age which is undoubtedly still the one we are living in. It is the age of a certain “mannerism” that refers “to the tense, convulsive form of cinema that leans, as it tries to turn round, on the very system that seeks to control or replace it”. Let’s not forget that at the time we were in the midst of a period of tortuous relations between cinema and television. It is “the image’s third phase: when there’s nothing to see behind it, not much to see in it or on the surface, but just an image constantly slipping across pre-existing, presupposed images, when ‘the background in any image is always another image’, and so on endlessly, and that’s what we have to see”, Deleuze adds, as if he were, in parallel, assigning cinema with a task. What is your opinion of Deleuze’s diagnosis, which is another way of examining or auscultating the contemporary history of images and finding our way in this disoriented universe?

Peter Szendy: I think the works of both Benjamin and Deleuze refer to a common source: Bergson. It’s something I rapidly touch on in *Le supermarché du visible*. The pages where Benjamin evokes the “image space”, which is according to him a space that is 100 % full of images, remind me of a lovely French expression: “à touche-touche” (so close they could touch – translator’s note), which is used for example when describing the proximity of cars in a traffic jam. This space that is literally jam-packed with images is what he calls *Bildraum*, and that’s an idea he got from Bergson. In the work of Deleuze there is the idea that the universe, as he says at the beginning of *The Movement Image*, is a meta-cinema in which images are moving around in every direction. That also comes from Bergson. That therefore is where the two meet, in a rather strange and obviously anachronistic way. You could imagine Deleuze and Benjamin like two intellectual meteorites launched in opposite directions, but which at a given moment crash into each other, precisely about this question of *Bildraum*. Why did I say they were launched in opposite directions? In fact because I think that for Benjamin, this idea of a space saturated with images is a revolutionary utopia. When he speaks about the immediacy of images that act by touching each other and



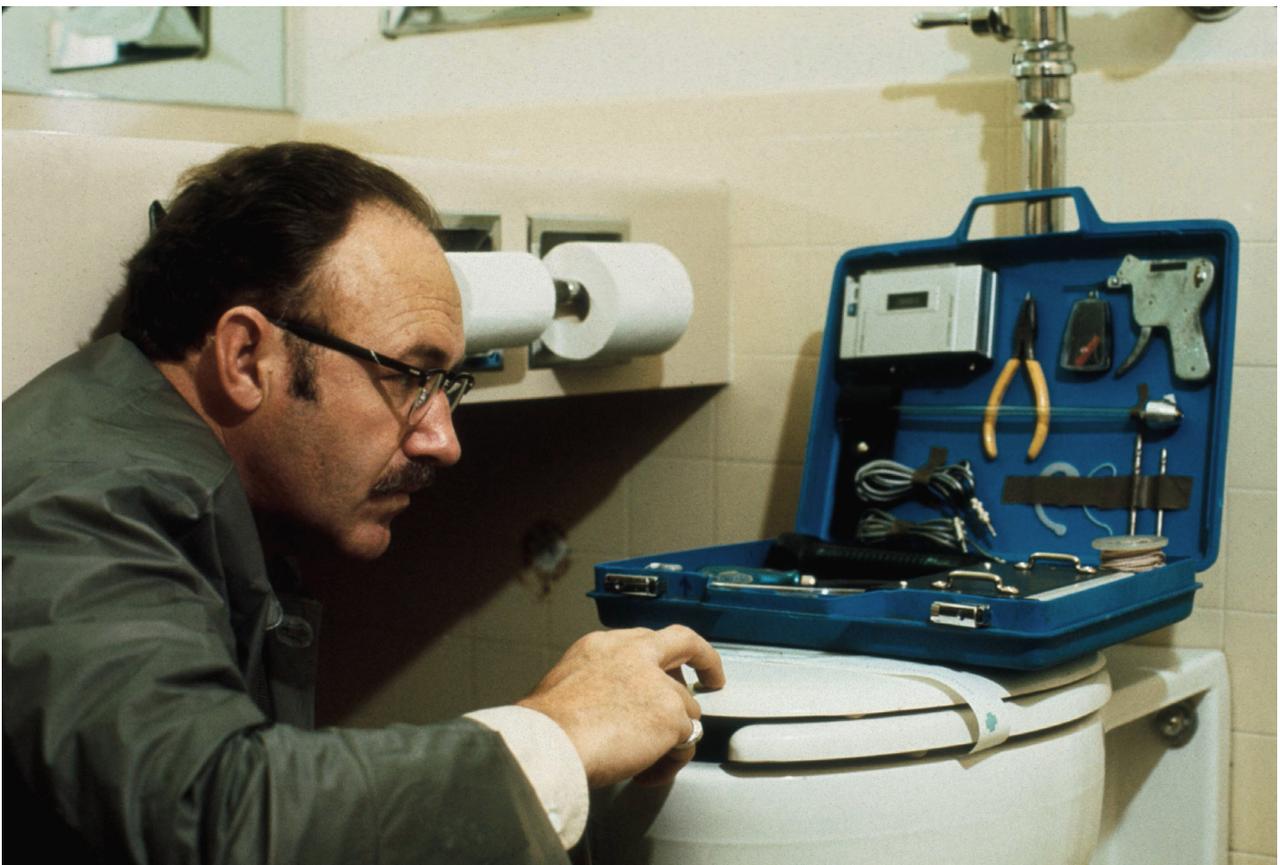
Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 80 minutes, 1929

immediately propagate this action from image to image, it represents not only his desires, but also his dreams! This is where, in surrealism, he catches a glimpse of the revolutionary eventuality that he is waiting for, a messianic possibility to be exact. Whereas in the work of Deleuze, it seems to me that from *The Movement Image* to *The Time Image* and finally in his letter to Serge Daney, the idea of a space saturated with images leads to a diagnosis that would be the one in Deleuze's last text I believe, his *Post-Script on the Societies of Control*. And it is quite clear in the text of his letter to Serge Daney that Deleuze analyses this imaginal saturation in terms of data, a flow of data, which does indeed lead towards the notion of a society of control. And yet I would say that the very idea of a revolution, or perhaps more modestly resistance within the society of control, would suppose the need to reinvent almost everything that Walter Benjamin said. Obviously and unfortunately we don't know how to do that! It's something I both regret and wish for.

Dork Zabunyan : Ok, so that leads me to one last question in the continuation

of our discussion about image spaces. We have mustered an entire terminology of space in order to talk about the *Bildraum* concept and I was wondering if it wouldn't be possible to envisage an additional shift. After going from music to cinema, why not a shift from cinema to the world of exhibitions? Could we imagine a *Supermarché du visible* addressing things that are exhibited?

Peter Szendy : I would be delighted. I am a great believer in translating, whether of a text or a book. In the field of exhibitions, since that is the question you asked, the notion of "translation" would have to be understood in terms of space, interior design and scenography, assembling, interrupting and the interpenetration of spaces. I would also think in terms of the phrasing of spaces because, at the end of the day, that's exactly what an exhibition visit is. It is a body that walks about, that strolls around, but which makes phrases while sauntering. You will have realised by now that this idea of phrasing is important to me, including in the urban space. An exhibition's 'architecture' is all about phrasing. In the same way



Francis Ford Coppola, *The Conversation*, 109 minutes, 1974.

that translating into another language implies that the translator must reinvent the text, I believe that reinventing something in a completely different medium, one which is grounded in a radically different logic, implies a task of translation that I am probably incapable of doing myself. And I'm delighted that I can't do it alone - in other words, I would be happy to work in the context of an exhibition with someone who can "translate" for me, or should I say rephrase!

Dork Zabunyan: Thank you very much Peter Szendy for all these new horizons that you have hinted at in our conversation.

Peter Szendy: Thank you Dork.

Peter Szendy is a French philosopher and musicologist. He is the David Herlihy Professor of Humanities and Comparative Literature at Brown University and he is a lecturer at the University of Paris Nanterre and advisor for programming at the Philharmonie de Paris. Peter Szendy previously taught at Marc Bloch University in Strasbourg, while being an editorial consultant at IRCAM from 1994 to 2001. He specializes in the aesthetics of music, literature, and cinema. He is also the author of librettos of operas or vocal works. His published works include *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, with a foreword by Jean-Luc Nancy, Fordham University Press, 2008; *Prophecies of Leviathan. Reading Past Melville*, with an afterword by Gil Anidjar, Fordham University Press, 2010; *Hits. Philosophy in the Jukebox*, Fordham University Press, 2011; *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials. Cosmopolitical Philosophical Fictions*, Fordham University Press, 2013; *Phantom Limbs: On Musical Bodies*, Fordham University Press, 2015; *All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage*, Fordham University Press, 2016.

Dork Zabunyan is Professor in Film Studies at Paris 8 University. His main publications include *Foucault va au cinéma* (Bayard 2011), *Les Cinémas de Gilles Deleuze* (Bayard 2011), *Passages de l'histoire* (Le Gac Press, 2013), and most recently *L'insistance des luttes* (De l'incidence éditeur, 2016). He contributes to *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, *Trafic*, *Critique* and *artpress*.

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