



Dybbuks of Derrida: Traces of Deconstruction in Contemporary Jewish Art

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Introduction

The title of this essay is designed to give a decidedly Jewish twist to one of Jacques Derrida's well-known books – *Specters of Marx* (1994).¹ In this work Derrida introduced the portmanteau *hauntology* as a way to register the spectral surplus of ontology that marks our being in the world as a being haunted. Hauntology evades the metaphysics of presence and introduces haunting into every concept to the extent that ontology becomes the forever failing attempt to exorcise the ghost from the concept. As Derrida writes, “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concept of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism.”² While such uncanny and spectral logics occupied Derrida in the last decade of his life, and to this extent we might say that he became haunted by hauntology, it is interesting to note that he never invoked or conjured the *dybbuk*, a Jewish version of these spooky specters, in his vast corpus of writings. As the spirit of the deceased that inhabits and cleaves to the body of a living person, the dybbuk is part and parcel of this uncanny class of beings between. Indeed, the dybbuk provides a wonderful parasitic figure for thinking about the practice of deconstruction itself or as a double of itself.³

Spun out of the lore of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism and documented beginning in the first half of the sixteenth century in the Sephardic communities around the Mediterranean, the dybbuk was popularized during the Jewish cultural renaissance in Russia by the famous folklorist S. An-sky through his play *The Dybbuk or Between Two Worlds* (1914),⁴ which tells the tragic love story of the scholar Hannan and his beloved Leah. When Leah is to be married off to a rich suitor, Hannan turns to the Kabbalah to find the magical means to get her back but dies in the process. On the evening of the wedding, the dislocated soul of the dead lover returns to take possession

Detail, Melissa Shiff, *ARK* video sculpture at the Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006.
(Photo: Courtesy of the artist)



1 | Film still of Lili Liliana as Leah in Michal Waszynski, *The Dybbuk*, 1937. (Photo: Courtesy of the author)

of Leah's body and she begins to speak with the voice of the dybbuk that the rabbis must exorcise (Fig. 1). It is a perfect Derridean parable: the onto-theological rabbis refuse to accept the dybbuk as it floats between two worlds (between being and non-being) and as it lodges itself as a parasite cleaving to its beloved host. It should be recalled that in the literature the dybbuk is often figured as both a restless soul and an evil spirit (as "a notorious sinner in his lifetime"⁵) who takes possession of a woman. While the idea of the restless soul fits well with Derridean dissemination and the endless play of the signifier, the idea of an evil spirit speaks with a religious and moral authority that seems unsuited to deconstruction's post-Nietzschean subversion of the binary opposition of good and evil. Or perhaps one can say that the deconstructive spirit will always appear as something evil to those of a more philosophical bent who desire to set boundaries and systematic classifications and therefore want to exorcise this dybbuk. It is also possible to argue that the figure of the dybbuk resonates as well with Derrida's own liminal and complex relationship with Judaism and Jewish thought (e.g., in referring to himself as "the last of the Jews" or as "otherwise Jewish").⁶ This subject has been taken up in such recent books as Gideon Ofrat's *The Jewish Derrida* (2001)⁷ and Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Rafael Zagury-Orly's co-edited volume *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (2003), which includes

Derrida's essay "Abraham, the Other" as well as in Hélène Cixous's tribute, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* (2004).⁸ I am indebted to all of these texts for their valuable reflections on Derrida's interrogative relationship with Judaism and Jewish thought.

It is the goal of this essay to explore how both Derrida and deconstruction function as a type of dybbuk in selected works of contemporary Jewish art that draw inspiration from his writings in the lens-based media of photography, video, and film.⁹ In marking the continuing relevance of Derrida as a touchstone for contemporary Jewish artists over the past decade, I am directly challenging one of the central assumptions made by Daniel Belasco, who served as the curator of a recent survey exhibition that took place at the Jewish Museum in New York. Proclaiming a new Zeitgeist that prompted his exhibition *Reinventing Ritual*, Belasco offhandedly states that we have moved beyond postmodernism and deconstruction into a new age of reconstruction. "If postmodernism was about deconstruction, then our time is about reconstruction. The contemporary impulse is exemplified by Sandi Simcha Dubowski's documentary film *Trembling Before G-d* (2001) which argues that one can be both gay and Orthodox. This film documented the struggles of men and women trying, in their individual ways, to make peace with the tensions between the two identities."¹⁰ While the attempt to "make peace" between being gay and being Orthodox documented in Dubowski's film may be laudable, this does not alter the fact that it is somewhat self-deluded and cloaks a number of irreconcilable differences. For one, this reconstructive approach elides the fact that homosexuality remains an abomination for Orthodox Jews, who invoke Biblical chapter and verse. In bringing together the lion and the lamb and trying "to make peace with the tensions between the two identities," Belasco's conciliatory and rather conservative project represses the aporias and violent contradictions from which deconstruction cannot look away.

This problematic position is further exemplified by the reconstructive way in which Belasco frames the video *Dancing with Men* (2003) by the British artist Oreet Ashery in this exhibition. This transgressive work stages the Hasidic drag king performance by Ashery's alter-ego Marcus Fisher as she/he infiltrates the all-male ultra-Orthodox religious rave celebrating the Lag b'Omer festival at Mount Meron in Israel. One notes how Belasco seeks to tone down the transgressive aspects of the work and convert it into a voyeuristic documentation of an intense religious ritual. "Once the subversion of cross-dressing is accepted, her video *Dancing with Men* becomes less about her transgression and more a documentation of the variety of music and fashion, from Hasidic to reggae to hip-hop, among the participants enacting the ritual of pilgrimage."¹¹ In this way, Belasco's reconstructive project sucks the deconstructive life out of *Dancing with Men* and shifts

attention away from both its performance of identity and troubling of gender (à la Butler) or its subversion and overturning of hierarchies (à la Derrida). (In this context, it should also be noted that this work is also part of Boris Groys's curated exhibition *Medium Religion* where it is specifically and more appropriately referred to as an "intervention."¹²) Rather than making a reconstructive statement about some mismatched hybrid identity (like queer Jewish Orthodoxy), deconstruction poses the alterity or strangeness of Jewish identity at its origins or as something that is just not (nor ever was) itself. It recalls this provocative question posed in relation to the work of Edmond Jabès: "Would 'Jew' be the other name for this impossibility of being oneself?"¹³ Belasco's monolithic "contemporary impulse" of reconstruction represses the deconstructive dybbuk as a viable option found in the contemporary artists and the lens-based works that I will be exploring and championing in this essay.

Through a close reading of these artists and their haunting works, I want to demonstrate how they speak in the voice of the Derridean deconstructive dybbuk – in the name of a restless and diasporic soul that asks profound and unsettling questions (sometimes about Judaism itself) and that resists simple identification. These artists are the French photographer Frédéric Brenner (1959–), the Canadian photographer Simon Glass (1956–), and the Canadian video sculptor Melissa Shiff (1967–). Simon Glass's digital photography series *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* (2005) is in direct dialogue with Derrida's essay "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority',"¹⁴ while Melissa Shiff's video sculpture installation *ARK* (2006) draws upon Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.¹⁵ In the case of French-Jewish photographer Frédéric Brenner and his twenty-five-year photographic odyssey *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*, Derrida has been a major interlocutor, culminating in his commentaries for approximately a dozen of Brenner's photographs in the volume *Voices* (2003).¹⁶ It is important to insert the voice and the figure of the dybbuk into the conversation between Derrida and Brenner. By doing this, the essay raises the specter of deconstruction's Jewish inflection and its strange attraction for this particular photographic artist. But it will become apparent that, rather than being under the influence of a single text by Jacques Derrida, Brenner's photographic œuvre and its vision of Jewish diaspora is haunted by the dybbuk of deconstruction in general.

Affirming "Stranjew" Bodies: Derridean Dybbuks Speaking through Frédéric Brenner's Photographic *Diaspora*

In 2003, the French photographer Frédéric Brenner published *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*, which showcases his documentation and staging of Jewish

diasporic life over twenty-five years and in forty countries. In the fall of that same year, the Brooklyn Museum in New York mounted the retrospective exhibition *The Jewish Journey: Frédéric Brenner's Photographic Odyssey*.¹⁷ For Brenner, diaspora can only be understood in relation to Derridean constructs of *différance* and deferral as originary. This approach subverts the possibility of self-same identity and opens unto questions of alterity and exteriority right from the beginning. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that Brenner takes as his starting point the Biblical injunction *Lekh Lecha* found in Genesis, chapter 12, verse 13, where God tells Abram to leave his father's house and his country for a land that the Lord will show him.¹⁸ (The exact passage reads: "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee.") By focusing on this sacred scriptural passage that relates a divine injunction to exteriority (to get out of oneself, to be beside oneself), Brenner's project underscores Jewish identity as always already separated and estranged from itself. For Brenner, Jewish self-identification paradoxically means being at home in a state of exile and exodus and he affirms this diasporic condition as a blessing rather than a curse. Commenting on *Lekh Lecha* as the Jewish diasporic point of departure, Brenner stated the following in an interview that I conducted with him: "And I believe that historical circumstances have enabled the Jewish people to enact this injunction of God to Abraham. And from this point of view, I never considered diaspora as a curse, but truly as a vocation, as a project. This is at the heart of what I do."¹⁹ Brenner even insists upon this paradoxical status to those dwelling in the nation-state of Israel today in his photographic project *Exile at Home (Galut Bayit)*²⁰ for, as John Paul Ricco has phrased it, they too "exist as exposures to, and promises of, a future to come."²¹ Interestingly, Derrida also discusses the same Biblical passage when he writes about the status of the stranger in the work of the French Catholic scholar of Islam Louis Massignon (as well as in the texts of the Jewish philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Franz Rosenzweig) in his essay "Hostipitality."²² Here, Derrida wants us to recall that all three monotheistic religions, as Abrahamic, take as their point of departure the going forth of the patriarch Abram from Ur and therefore share this originary logic of the stranger (or *gêr* in Hebrew).

Brenner's allegorical photographs are always interrogative sites full of symbolic condensation (in Freud's sense) that raise compelling questions and require unpacking through exegesis and commentary (or in Hebrew, *Midrash*). I would like to focus on two of the dozen images that Derrida interprets in order to illuminate further how Brenner's photographs speak in the voice of the deconstructive dybbuk. The first image is a highly theatrical tableau taken from Brenner's American project of the mid-nineties, *jews/*



2 | Frédéric Brenner, *Spiritual Gathering, Navajos and Jews*, Monument Valley, Arizona, 1994. (Photo: Courtesy of the Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York)

america/a representation. Brenner's image *Spiritual Gathering* (1994) stages a monumental meeting (and a mirror reflection) in the desert between a group of New Age Jews and Navajo natives in Monument Valley, Arizona (Fig. 2). It is an encounter of two spiritual traditions and imperilled ethnic groups who have had to deal with mass genocide in the West. In this image, Brenner uses the rearview mirror of an automobile to produce a haunting reflection where, in this meticulously symmetrical staging, the dividing line of the highway performs a photographic trick. The prayer shawls of the Jews bounce off the ceremonial garb of the Navajos. The slash marks two clans in the desert, separated yet sharing the same space in a reversible play of mirror reflections that show us how it is that the presence of the other functions as a necessary blind spot for the constitution of self-same identity. In other words, this image's logic of alterity visualizes how identity is constituted and risked through the other.²³ Referring to this "strange gathering," which is also a gathering of strangers, Derrida's reading focuses on how these two communities share a disaporic condition that constitutes what he calls

both an “irreducible experience of the proper as nonproper” and a state of “ex-appropriation.” Again, Derrida insists that such ex-appropriation must never be reified or projected into something like the experience of a promised land. Rather, in keeping time with the immemorial and eliciting an exposure to the outside, ex-appropriation has to remain open to the indeterminacy of the future, thereby eliciting Derrida’s formulation of “messianicity without messianism.”²⁴ As Derrida writes about this diasporic gathering of spirits, “We, all of us, all the presently living, the living ones of the past and the specters of the future, all of us, men and animals, have no proper place and no beloved land except a promised one, one promised since an ageless ex-appropriation, older than all of our memories.”²⁵

Not surprisingly, Derrida also “identifies” with Brenner’s paradoxical exposure of *Marranos Celebrating Passover in Secret* in Belmonte, Portugal (1988). In this image, a group of these proud crypto-Jews, all dressed in sacred white vestments and displaying such things as the unleavened bread (*Matzoh*) that enables them to keep the rituals of the Passover holiday, continue their secret centuries-old tradition of going into the attic to celebrate the ancient Israelite’s exodus and liberation from Egypt (hence, the theme of diaspora again). The Marranos are those Sephardic Jews who were forced to hide their religious practices in order to escape expulsion or forced conversion to Christianity in Spain in 1492. As Derrida attests: “They still have to hide, these Marranos, to celebrate the exodus from Egypt. Here they do so in an attic.”²⁶ It should be noted that Brenner was so taken with their story that he co-directed an ethnographic documentary on the subject with Stan Neumann entitled *The Last Marranos* that was released in 1991.

In exploring the mysteries of the Marranos and their crypto-Jewish ontological/hauntological status, Derrida is particularly fascinated by Brenner’s paradoxical exposure of their secret. Marking what he calls their “invisible visibility” before the lens, he uses language to describe the photographic Marranos of Belmonte that echoes his discussion of ghosts in *Specters of Marx*.²⁷ “They make of their secret an archived invisible visibility. They are the only ones, in this series of photograms, to keep the secret that they exhibit and to sign their belonging without belonging.”²⁸ Yet, the signing of one’s belonging in non-belonging is one of the crucial aporia that can be traced throughout Brenner’s *Homelands in Exile* given its deconstructive refusal to function as a mere photographic (re)presentation of diaspora. Rather, one might say that Brenner’s diasporic exposures frame his subjects as posed in exteriority. Such a reading of the exposed/protected secret of Brenner’s Belmonte Marranos also resonates with Derrida’s own crypto-Jewish *Circumfession* and his paradoxical self-identification with the Marranos. “I am one of those *marranes* who no longer say they are Jews even

in the secret of their own hearts, not so as to be authenticated *marranes* on both sides of the public frontier but because they doubt everything.”²⁹ This unlimited and generalized doubt records a version of the haunting of the undecidable that adheres (like a dybbuk) to being crypto-Jewish. For Derrida, the Marranos trace the impossible logic of the Jewish secret that wants to expose/protect itself as other. As he writes in “Abraham, the Other”: “that is why I play seriously, more and more, with the figure of the marrano: the less you show yourself as Jewish, the more and better Jew you will be.”³⁰ Finally, Hélène Cixous pursues a similar line of inquiry in her meditation on the status of Derrida’s own liminal relationship to Jewishness and his non-identitarian sense of affiliation in the section “A Desire to Be a Marrano.”³¹ In “This Stranjew Body,” Cixous links Derrida and the Sephardic Marranos together as *stranjew*s in a perceptive neologism that couples the status of being Jewish with that of being the stranger.

A (Jewish) Haunting of the Undecidable: Simon Glass’s *The Ten Commandments* and Jacques Derrida’s “Force of Law”

In fall 2005, I had the opportunity to curate the exhibition *Command J: Jewish Laws, Digital Arts* as part of the ReJewvenation festival at the University of Toronto. The exhibition included Simon Glass’s *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*, a suite of ten giclée prints 44” × 22” embellished with gold leaf.³² These striking images juxtapose the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments with weapons prohibited by the Canadian criminal code – snub-nosed pistols, switchblades, and butterfly knives. As Glass put it in his artist statement, “The law is juxtaposed with imagery suggesting its most grave consequence, namely violence”³³ (Fig. 3). Thus Glass’s series meditates on violence that is in excess of the law and the violence of the law itself to the extent that force and enforcement are bound up with the law. Taking up the mystical authority of these Old Testament injunctions, Glass’s project puts itself in direct dialogue with Walter Benjamin’s “*Zur kritik der Gewalt*” (1921),³⁴ Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*,³⁵ and Jacques Derrida’s “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’ ”

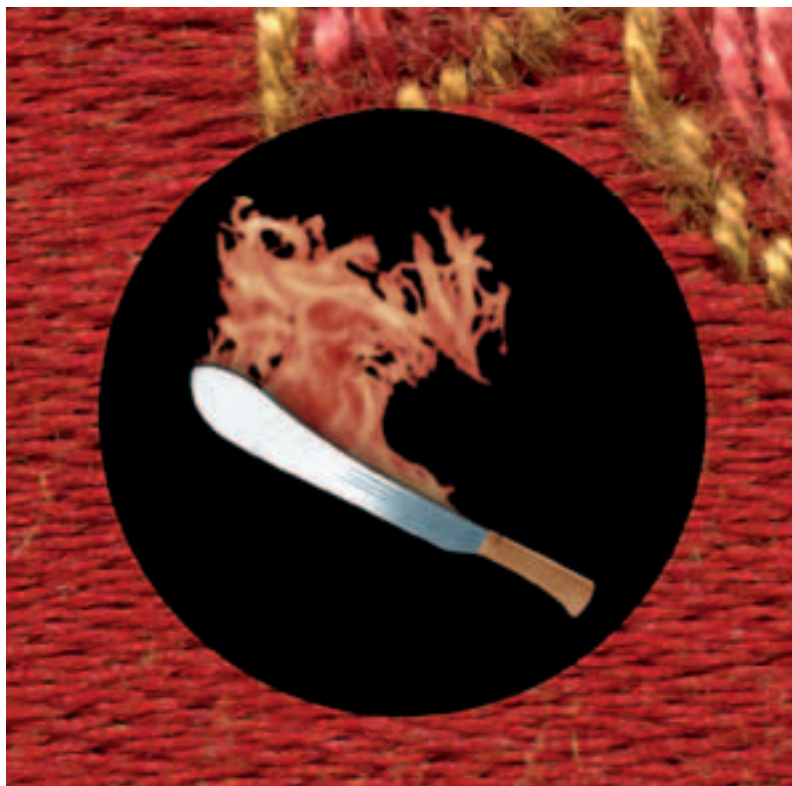
Illustrating YAHWEH’s Ten Commandments by means of these contraband weapons, Glass’s work raises politico-theological and Biblical themes such as sacrifice, the unaccountable and destructive nature of “divine violence,” and the wrath of God. Brandishing these guns and knives, these “Laws of Glass”³⁶ affirm a distinctively Judaic perspective that situates itself in direct opposition to the Greek mythic tradition on the subject of violence. As Derrida reminds us, Benjamin’s “*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*” offers “a Judaic perspective that opposes just, divine (Jewish) violence, which would destroy



3 | Simon Glass, "Sixth Commandment," *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*, 2005. Giclée print with 23.5k gold leaf, 55.9 × 111.8 cm. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

the law, to mythical violence (of the Greek tradition) which would install and preserve the law.”³⁷ Derrida’s text also provides us with further insight regarding Glass’s attraction to and fascination with Benjamin’s essay. For Derrida, “this text is haunted by the themes of exterminating violence” (259) and therefore anticipates the Holocaust (which is uncannily “haunted in advance”³⁸ here). This helps us to explain the trajectory of Simon Glass’s work from the 1990s when he was largely preoccupied with the “exterminating violence” of the Holocaust to *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*. In photographic series such as *YAHWEH!* (1995), *Zundel’s Place* (1995), and *untitled (Auschwitz)* (1997), Glass staked out the position of a Canadian-Jewish artist for whom the catastrophe of the Holocaust offered an opportunity to probe and reflect upon the limits of representation and comprehension. In the series *YAHWEH!*, he entered the space of unknowing by superimposing “the unutterable name of the God of the Jews” “upon photographs taken in 1945, upon the liberation of various concentration camps in Europe.”³⁹ Here, it remains an open question as to whether these haunting images affirm or subvert a theodicy of Holocaust suffering.⁴⁰ In the work under consideration, the historical violence of the Holocaust is transposed into the foundational violence of the Ten Commandments.

In “Force of Law,” Derrida follows Montaigne’s thinking by distinguishing between laws and justice. He writes: “The justice of law, justice as law is not justice. Laws are not just in as much as they are laws. One does not obey them because they are just but because they have authority.”⁴¹ Indeed, Derrida posits justice (not unlike the Messiah itself) as “an experience of the impossible”⁴² and goes on to refer to “justice as the [undeconstructible] possibility of deconstruction” such that “deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law.”⁴³ In his artist’s statement, Glass links and separates justice and law in the following Derridean manner: “There can be no justice without law, yet no law will always be just.”⁴⁴ One looks for justice in Glass’s *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*, but one finds only obstacles to *Gan Eden* or Paradise, to *Meshiach ben David* or messianic justice. Benjamin’s post-Edenic reflections on the origins of language and on the judging word that differentiates and divides good and evil are quite relevant here: “This judging word expels the first human beings from paradise.”⁴⁵ Glass visually references the grand theme of the expulsion from Paradise and the obstacles preventing one’s return in two small, circular insets at the bottom of the First and Tenth Commandments. In the First Commandment is the thistle, a reminder that, after the expulsion from Paradise, Adam was made to struggle against the thorn and the thistle in order to produce food. Meanwhile, Glass’s Tenth Commandment features a final weapon – the rotating flaming sword



4 | Simon Glass, “Flaming Sword” (detail) for the Tenth Commandment, *The Ten Commandments/ Prohibited Weapons*, 2005. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

at the east entrance to the Garden of Eden – that signifies the impossibility of human re-entry (Fig. 4). Are we to understand the flaming sword of paradise as God’s prohibiting weapon? If so, how can we extinguish its flame and “get ourselves back to the Garden” (as the Canadian chanteuse Joni Mitchell once phrased it)?⁴⁶

But the messianic impulse to transform the legally bound world of judgment and sentencing into one of justice and peace requires more than a simple plea for utopia. Barring some kind of divine intervention, there can be no final end to violence because it inhabits the founding of the law. Thus, non-violence (in which the Messiah presumably abides) must be viewed as the *telos* rather than the essence of discourse. In “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” Derrida locates a similar problematic. By exploring the violence that institutes and constitutes language and discourse through an examination of the relations between war and peace, Derrida arrives at this paradox: “There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since *finite* silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it.



5 | Simon Glass, "First Commandment," *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*, 2005. Giclée print with 23.5k gold leaf, 55.9 × 111.8 cm. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

Violence against violence. Economy of violence.”⁴⁷ To apply Derrida’s analysis to the case at hand, the Ten Commandments, in their attempt to stringently codify these foundational Jewish laws, can be viewed as the first defeat of violence – but it is a victory achieved only through the inscription and threat of violence (Fig. 5).

It is possible to think of these “Laws of Glass” – this meditation on the broken tablets of Moses – as practicing their own economy of violence using digital photographic means. Simon Glass’s *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* are not so self-assured and definitive as to claim to be hastening the coming of the Messiah. Such an interpretation would produce an unreasonable expectation that relies on an inflexible dogmatism. Nevertheless, in this photographic series Glass engages with what Derrida calls *messianicity* or what is linked to the question of and the quest for justice and the undeconstructible. Derrida discusses “messianicity without messianism” in both *Specters of Marx* and “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.” In the latter text, he defines it in the following manner: “This would be the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration.”⁴⁸ In this way, *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* grants the idea of justice the possibility of coming to be through the promise and the impact of a light writing that shoots and cuts its way toward justice, using the camera and digital montage as weapons, even as this work risks injustice by accepting and practicing the violence of the law and of photographic writing itself. Suspended in the interval between the bounded representation of the law and the incalculable demand for justice or the slash between *The Ten Commandments* and *Prohibited Weapons*, Glass’s deconstruction offers what Derrida has marked as the “just decision” – one that has undergone the ordeal that “delivers itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of laws and rules” and that subsists in the “haunting of the undecidable” thereby acknowledging that which remains as “an essential ghost [or dybbuk] in every decision, in every event of a decision.”⁴⁹

A Spectral Vision of (Jewish) Messianicity: Melissa Shiff’s ARK in the Light of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*

In 2005, Melissa Shiff was invited by the Jewish Museum in Prague to create a work of art celebrating their one hundredth anniversary. Her response was the video sculpture *ARK* that was launched in the fall of 2006. As Shiff describes it, “My ARK is a metaphor for the museum as ark and archive.”⁵⁰ This ambitious and bold work comes into dialogue with both the Biblical



6 | Melissa Shiff, *ARK* video sculpture at the Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006.
(Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

allegory of Noah's Ark and Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* as it reflects upon the turbulent history of this particular museum in the dark light of the Holocaust. Shiff states: "It occurred to me that the museum functions much like Noah's Ark in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, given that one of the functions of the museum is to salvage and save precious objects that might otherwise be destroyed by natural disaster or human catastrophe.



7 | Melissa Shiff, *ARK* video sculpture adjacent to the Pinkas Street Synagogue in Prague, 2006. (Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

ARK became the perfect metaphor for a project about the museum and particularly about this museum that was able to save so many objects amid the destruction of European Jewry.”⁵¹ Using hundreds of actual photographs from the Museum’s collection, Shiff mobilizes and animates them, using the software program After Effects, into a thirty-minute video wherein the *ARK* becomes a three-dimensional movie screen. In this way, Shiff’s video *ARK* provides a radically new way to display these Judaica artifacts and the museum collection in general (Fig. 6).

The narrative arc of the *ARK* video moves from the passages in Genesis on Noah’s Ark to the present-day flood in Prague in 2002. Much of the video illuminates the history of the museum and demonstrates the amassing of its collection (particularly during the Nazi period) as the Jewish ritual objects come into the *ARK*, along with their accession cards, two by two. Occupying

an alley next to the Holocaust memorial in the Jewish quarter in Prague (the Pinkus Street Synagogue), Shiff's "para-museological" ARK moved the archive from inside the museum's hermetic interior to the outside, where it was viewed from the street as a public art project (Fig. 7). In this way, Shiff's ARK functions as a postmodern para-site or "dangerous supplement" in Derrida's sense as these Judaica apparitions (the ghosts of these objects) question what properly belongs inside or outside the museum's walls.

Derrida is invoked very early in Shiff's video at the moment when the museum is instituted in 1906. The following text scrolls over the ARK. "Arkhe. The commencement and the commandment. Where authority and social order are exercised in this place from which order is given." Shiff's quotation is actually an abridgement of a longer text from the first page of *Archive Fever*. "Arkhe, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence* – physical, historical, or ontological principle – but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given – nomological principle."⁵² Interestingly, Shiff focuses here on the question of order rather than origins. This makes sense when we recall that the "archive fever" that possessed this institution was a direct result of the dis-orderly conduct and aggressive genocide implemented by the Nazis from 1939 to 1945. The archive grew from one thousand objects to two hundred thousand during the Holocaust period as the Jewish archivists worked on this Judaica collection in collaboration with the Nazis to satisfy Hitler's perverse dream of a Museum of the Extinct Race. In this portion of the video, Shiff's ARK begins to fill up at an accelerated pace and objects rain down from the sky amid a stormy sequence. Following the archival impulse, Shiff describes how the Jewish Museum's project involves "the feverish desire to salvage, to save, to escape oblivion and to ward away the relentless force of the formless."⁵³

When Derrida discusses Freud's own *mal d'archive*, he alludes to the Holocaust as well and speaks of "the great holocaustic tragedies of our modern history and historiography."⁵⁴ It should be recalled that *Archive Fever* engages with Freud's thinking on the death drive beyond the pleasure principle as and at the strange root of archivization – not its other but rather as its internal motor or drive. To quote Derrida, "All the texts in the family and of the period of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* explain in the end why there is archivization and why anarchiving destruction belongs to the process of archivization and produces the very thing it reduces, on occasion to ashes, and beyond."⁵⁵ One might say that Shiff's ARK offers us this terrifying case history of the Jewish Museum in Prague to make exactly this point. In other



8 | Melissa Shiff, *ARK* video sculpture at the Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006.
(Photo: Courtesy of the artist)

words, the *ARK* offers visible evidence of how radical an archiving destruction advances the archivization process. Indeed, *ARK* may be viewed as a video sculptural response to Walter Benjamin's infamous "angel of history" that leaves disaster in its wake and "keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage." It is an apt figure for making a comparison with Shiff's *ARK* in that Walter Benjamin specifically made reference to history as "the storm" that "irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."⁵⁶ As already suggested, this is exactly what Shiff's video illustrates during the turbulent and stormy Holocaust period as the archiving ark is filled to the brim with this pile of Judaica remains that can be viewed as either treasure, booty, or debris depending upon one's perspective

(Fig. 8). These remains are the fallout from the anarchiving disaster known in Hebrew as the Shoah (calamity). The same thing goes for the 2002 flood that brought Prague to a halt and generated another feverish campaign to save the archival documents in danger of being destroyed before it was too late. Shiff articulates the Benjaminian dialectic this way: “My video creates a tension between the form and structure of ARK as archive and the unpredictability of the ebbs and flows of history that leave disasters in its wake.”⁵⁷

But Shiff also takes on the question of the archive in relation to temporality when she turns to *Archive Fever* again in her video and when she paraphrases another passage from Derrida at the conclusion of the narrative. As the time counter clocks the present (i.e., 2006) and before it spins out into the future, we read the following: “The true obligation and imperative of the ARCHIVE is to remember the future.” Refusing to relegate the archive simply to the past, this counter-intuitive statement links up with Derrida’s emphasis on the importance of futurity and situates the archive in relation to the promise as well to the rhetoric of messianicity. As Derrida insists, “But it is the future that is at issue here, and the archive as an irreducible experience of the future.”⁵⁸ This means that Shiff’s video sculptural installation and archival monument, built to mark a centennial commemorative celebration, belongs as much to the future as it does to the past. Given the twist of its future anteriority, both the archive and the ARK allow for the haunting return of the specter or dybbuk. After all, Derrida reminds us that “the structure of the archive is spectral”⁵⁹ and that “a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise.”⁶⁰ Shiff’s spectral video with its reanimation of the Jewish Museum’s collection offers an oblique way to give or return a voice to these abandoned treasures of a destroyed culture and to project them into (the promise of) an unknown future. From this perspective, it is futurity rather than memory that is the crucial aspect through which Derrida understands the importance of being/becoming Jewish. He writes: “What would be the least Jewish, the most ‘un-Jewish’, the most heterogeneous to Jewishness, would not be a lack of Judaism, a distancing, as the French translation says, with respect to Judaism (religion, belief in God, Israel’s election), but the nonbelief in the future.”⁶¹ In this way, Shiff’s video project and projection is allied to the Jewish injunction to remember not just the past but also the future or what is to come.

A Final Dybbuk

In the opening scene of the Coen brothers’ film *A Serious Man* (2009), we encounter another alleged dybbuk, although one whose logic operates more



9 | Film still of Traitle Groshkover/The Dybbuk (Fyvush Finkel) in the Coen brothers, *A Serious Man*, 2009. (Photo: Courtesy of the author)

in line with the classic Christian ghost in the sense that its operative structure seems more related to a return from the dead rather than a cleaving to the living. But rest (or no rest) assured, there is no certainty or determinacy in this film that affirms a Judaism that is full of questions and mysteries. For starters, undecidability rules as to whether the man who comes to visit a modest home in a Polish shtetl is or is not an inhabitant in the land of the living. While the wife, Dora, is convinced that Traitle Groshkover died of typhus and has been dead for three years, her husband, Velvel, is a rational man and he refuses to believe in this undead possibility.

In posing questions to and of rabbinical authorities (and, by extension, of God) for which there are no definite nor definitive answers, the story of the forlorn and anxious physics Professor Larry Gopnik – not unlike the Biblical story of Job to which the film has been compared in numerous reviews – becomes a part of that great Jewish tradition of and as a “book of questions.”⁶² By foregrounding the Jefferson Airplane’s 1967 classic psychedelic rock track “Somebody to Love” in the credit sequence and later incorporating the first line of the song into the plot to serve as the basis of old Rabbi Marshak’s rabbinical advice to Larry’s son Danny when he returns his confiscated

transistor radio to him, this deconstructive film is very self-conscious about the post-Nietzschean world that it occupies, one far beyond moral and epistemological certainties, recalling the Airplane's aporia: "When the truth is found to be lies."⁶³ The film constantly suspends itself between tragedy and comedy, keeping its audience on constant edge in a deconstructive defiance of the "law of genre" (as Derrida once referred to it).⁶⁴

Meanwhile, Derrida's "haunting of the undecidable" also figures into other aspects of the plot. For instance, the Coen brothers' film engages with the figure of Schrodinger's cat, that famous thought experiment and (indeterminate) mascot for quantum mechanics. We see Larry Gopnik at the blackboard during one of his classes asking questions of his students as if haunted or even possessed by its paradox. With Schrodinger's cat, the logic of the undecidable lodges itself at the heart of this supposedly scientific discipline: "Is that right? Isn't that right? And that's Schrodinger's paradox, right? Is the cat dead or is the cat not dead?" Of course, that same question can also be asked of the figure that appears in the shtetl. Professor Gopnik reveals how Schrodinger's cat functions as the dybbuk of modern physics.

As a fabulous filmic parable of a deconstructive dybbuk, the opening scene ends with Dora stabbing Traitle with an ice pick (Fig. 9). He appears to be bleeding, thereby confounding those who would say he is already dead. But then he gets up to take his leave so perhaps he is a ghost or dybbuk after all. With the ice pick still lodged in his chest, on his departure from Velvel and Dora's home he muses: "Perhaps I should go. One knows when one isn't welcome."

In reviewing contemporary artistic projects by Frédéric Brenner, Simon Glass, and Melissa Shiff that invoke Biblical scripture and the texts of Jacques Derrida and that map out a Jewish version of hauntology, we welcome these deconstructive dybbuks into the houses of being and art rather than attempting to banish them in the reconstructive names of either identity or integration.

NOTES

I want to thank the organizers of the ART+RELIGION symposium (Tim Clark, François LeTourneux, Loren Lerner, as well as Jeremy Stollow) for inviting me to deliver the keynote lecture on contemporary Jewish art that serves as the basis for this expanded text. I also want to acknowledge the astute and generous editorial comments and suggestions of Martha Langford as well as the excellent copyediting of Joan McGilvray.

- 1 Jacques DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 2 Ibid., 161.
- 3 The deconstructive implications of the figure of the dybbuk and its connection with the occult practice of exorcism is taken up by the French art historian Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN in *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004). The book reviews in part the ways in which the German cultural theorist Aby Warburg functioned as a dybbuk in the life and work of his student Erwin Panofsky and Panofsky's desire to exorcise his teacher. Didi-Huberman's interpretation makes a lot of sense when we consider that Warburg's theory of culture put a great deal of importance on the idea of *nachleben* (survival or afterlife), thereby stressing in the visual cultural realm "the powers to adhere and to haunt that inhere in all images" (xxii). The book begins with a preface (appropriately entitled "The Exorcist") in which Didi-Huberman situates the dybbuk as something undeniably hauntological. Focusing on the plot of S. An-sky's play, he writes, "The first [aspect of the dybbuk] is the ghostly power to rise again to effect a psychic haunting and to defy all chronological law of before and after, of old and new: it is after being dead that the dybbuk begins to speak fully, to live its thought, its youth, even to 'be born' for good in its substantial unity with Leah" (xxii). Moreover, Didi-Huberman's analysis of the dybbuk echoes the logic of contamination and the dangerous supplement that is so crucial to Derridean deconstruction. "The second characteristic of a dybbuk is adhesion, in accordance with a like defiance of all topological laws of inside and outside, of near and far" (xxii). I thank my colleague Kajri Jain for suggesting Didi-Huberman's book.
- 4 For a newly translated and edited version of the famous play as well as a collection of critical essays on its multi-talented author, see Gabriella SAFRAN and Steven J. ZIPPERSTEIN, eds., *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian-Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- 5 Yoram BILU, "Dybbuk and Maggid: Two Cultural Patterns of Altered Consciousness in Judaism," in *AJS Review* 21, no. 2 (1996): 348. I thank Rachel Haliva for this reference.
- 6 Derrida takes up the phrase "the last of the Jews" in "Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases" in *Jacques Derrida*, Geoff Bennington and Jacques Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 190. Meanwhile, Derrida refers to being "otherwise Jewish" at the conclusion of his essay "Abraham, the Other" in Bettina BERGO, Joseph COHEN, and Raphael ZAGURY-ORLY, eds., *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 35.
- 7 Gideon OFRAT, *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. Peretz Kidron (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001). It should be noted that one chapter of Ofrat's book is entitled "Derrida's *Ruah*" (112–120). It begins: "*Ruah* is the Hebrew word for 'wind,' 'spirit,' 'ghost,' 'phantom,' 'specter'" (112). Similar to my point about the dybbuk, Ofrat comments that Derrida "has never mentioned the Hebrew word *ruah* in reference to his specters and phantoms" (113). It also explains why Ofrat focuses on the use of the word *ruah* twice in Derrida's texts in relation to the question of spirit.
- 8 Hélène CIXOUS, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

- 9 I thank Aurèle Parisien for reminding me of the privileged space of lens-based media and their reproductive capacities for the staging of such hauntological effects. Derrida considers this relationship in Jacques DERRIDA and Bernard STIEGLER, "Spectrographies," in *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 113–34. As Derrida says during the filming of his interview with Stiegler: "We are already specters of a 'televised.'" (117).
- 10 Daniel BELASCO, "Chopping Noodles: The Art of Jewish Practice," *Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 9.
- 11 Ibid., 14.
- 12 This particular description of Ashery's project situates her wavering subject position as follows: "In her interventions as an orthodox Jew in picture-perfect attire in London, Berlin and Tel Aviv, she confronts her secular environment with the explicitly 'other', thereby probing the limits of multicultural and multi-religious societies. By confronting orthodox Jewish tradition with its own taboos, such as homosexuality, transvestism and sexuality, Ashery simultaneously describes her own 'queer' return to this very tradition." The exhibition originated at the ZKM's Museum für Neue Kunst in Karlsruhe, Germany from 23 Nov. 2008 to 19 Apr. 2009. Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, http://www02.zkm.de/mediumreligion/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=57%3Aoreet-ashery&catid=34%3AKuenstlerliste&Itemid=53&lang=en. The opening complementary program to the exhibition also featured a lecture and discussion around the theme "Grammatheology: Jacques Derrida and the Religious Dimension to Media Transformation."
- 13 This questioning quotation from Derrida's "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" is cited by Gerard BENSUSSAN in "The Last, the Remnant ... (Derrida and Rosenzweig)" in *Judeities*, 38. It was originally published in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) but in a somewhat different declarative version. "But the Jew's identification with himself does not exist" (75).
- 14 Jacques DERRIDA, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- 15 Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 16 Frédéric BRENNER, *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*, 2 vols., *Voices* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
- 17 For further information about this exhibition, see the Brooklyn Museum website. Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/2670/The_Jewish_Journey%3A_Frederic_Brenners_Photographic_Odyssey
- 18 It is interesting to point out that the same Biblical passage that motivates much of Brenner's photographic practice also appears in the text of Jacques Derrida in his essay "Hospitality" and his discussion of Abraham as a stranger. "But from the perspective of hospitality, these thoughts of substitution were turning toward Abraham the hôte or the stranger, to whom Yahweh said; 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house' (Genesis 12:1) and be a stranger" (414).
- 19 Louis KAPLAN, "What Is Represented Is What Is at Stake: Frédéric Brenner on *jews/america/a representation*," *C/R: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 100.
- 20 Frédéric BRENNER, *Exile at Home* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998).

- 21 John Paul RICCO, "The Surreality of Community: Frederic Brenner's *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*" in *Culture Machine* 8 (2006). Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/43/51>
- 22 Derrida writes, "In this text, one reads the formulation of a central theme that inspires Massignon's entire exegesis and spiritual struggle, namely that the three monotheistic religions, as Abrahamic religions, are issued from a patriarch that came to this earth as a 'stranger, a hôte, gér,' and a kind of saint of hospitality. We will return to this major reference of Genesis 12:1, which plays a determining role in both Rosenzweig and Levinas (another time, we shall also return to the notion of the stranger in Levinas), where Yahweh orders Abraham to depart, to leave his land, and the house of his father, transforming him into a hôte (but, obviously, while promising him a land)." See Jacques DERRIDA, "Hostipitality," in *Acts of Religion*, 369.
- 23 I take up the reading of this image (143, 145) as well as many others in the context of Brenner's American project in "Slashing Toward Diaspora: On Frédéric Brenner's *jews/america/a representation*," in Louis KAPLAN, *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 131–54.
- 24 I will elaborate further upon this important Derridean construct in relation to the work of Simon Glass.
- 25 Derrida in BRENNER, *Voices*, 101.
- 26 Ibid., 65.
- 27 Derrida puts it this way: "The specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood." See DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx*, 115.
- 28 Derrida quoted in BRENNER, *Voices*, 65.
- 29 DERRIDA, *Circumfession*, 170.
- 30 DERRIDA, "Abraham, the Other," in *Judeities*, 13.
- 31 Hélène CIXOUS, "This Stranjew Body," in *Judeities*, 56. This passage begins, "If one could be a marrano – which is like the desire to be an Indian – this seizes hold of him one morning, a foreign seizure like the one that takes hold of Kafka, that *Wunsch, Indianer zu werden*." Thus, Cixous's invocation of the stranger as mediated through the text of Kafka intersects with Brenner's *Spiritual Gathering* photograph and the Jewish/Navajo encounter in an uncanny manner.
- 32 The exhibition took place at XPACE in Kensington Market in Toronto from 21 October – 20 November 2005. The other artists and works in this exhibition were Hélène Aylon (*The Digital Liberation of G-d*), Jeffrey Shaw (*The Golden Calf*), and Melissa Shiff (*Gender Cuts/The Jew Under the Knife*). These thoughtful and provocative works by four contemporary artists in technologically based media raised important questions for traditional Jewish laws and commandments, whether it be Jeffrey Shaw on the Second Commandment, Melissa Shiff on the rite of circumcision, Simon Glass on the Ten Commandments, or Hélène Aylon on the Torah in general.
- 33 Simon GLASS, "Artist Statement," in *Command J: Jewish Laws, Digital Arts*, ed. Louis Kaplan (Toronto, ON: ReJewvenation, 2005), 6.
- 34 Indeed, Glass claims that it was the discussion of divine violence and the Sixth Commandment in particular ("Thou shalt not kill") in Benjamin's 1921 essay "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*" (Critique of Violence) that initially sparked his interest in the

- project. Benjamin's discussion of the Sixth Commandment begins, "For the question 'May I kill?' meets its irreducible answer in the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.'" See Walter BENJAMIN, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 250.
- 35 Giorgio AGAMBEN, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 36 I have written previously about this photographic series in "Laws of Glass: *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons*," *Prefix Photo* 17 (Spring/Summer 2008): 54–67.
- 37 DERRIDA, "Force of Law," 259.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 258–59.
- 39 Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, <http://simonglass.ca/pages/artworks/Yahweh/Yahweh.html>
- 40 Derrida's essay concludes with his active resistance to the temptation to read Benjamin's text and the concept of divine violence as providing a justification for the Holocaust. He writes, "One is terrified at the idea of any interpretation that would make of the holocaust an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just and violent anger of God." See "Force of Law," 298. I would argue that Glass's earlier work poses the same risk even as it withdraws such an interpretation for the viewer by holding out atheism as an appropriate response.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 240.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 244.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 243.
- 44 GLASS, "Artist Statement," 6.
- 45 Walter BENJAMIN, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 327.
- 46 Of course, I refer here to the cosmic lyrics that Mitchell composed for the song "Woodstock" (1969). The lyrics contain a series of messianic imaginings for a new golden age of peace and love that will free the soul. The refrain invokes the Garden of Eden as a return to the future. "We are stardust, we are golden, We are billion year old carbon, And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."
- 47 Jacques DERRIDA, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 117.
- 48 DERRIDA, *Acts of Religion*, 56.
- 49 Derrida entitles this section of the essay "Second Aporia: The Haunting of the Undecidable." To recite the full passage: "The undecidable remains caught, lodged, as a ghost at least, but an essential ghost, in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness [*sa fantomaticité*] deconstructs from all assurance of presence, all certainty or all alleged criteriology assuring us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision." See DERRIDA, "Force of Law," 253.
- 50 Melissa SHIFF, "Centennial Ark: The Making of a Video Ship," *Ark/Archa* (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006), n.p. The exhibition was curated by Michael Hajkova and opened on 14 Sept. 2006. For further details on the project and the press coverage that it received, see the Jewish Museum website. Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, <http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/avice3.htm>. One can also find

a number of images and a video clip at Shiff's website. Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, <http://www.melissashiff.com/works/ark/>

- 51 SHIFF, "Centennial Ark."
- 52 DERRIDA, *Archive Fever*, 1. The Derrida citation also serves as the epigraph to curator Michaela Hajkova's catalogue preface "ARK: ARCHive/ARCHetype/ARCHitecture."
- 53 SHIFF, "Centennial Ark." As Robert Enright reminded me at the ART+RELIGION symposium, one might think of the Holocaust as the *dybbuk* (in the sense of the evil spirit) that haunts contemporary Jewish art. I have indicated how the Holocaust preoccupied Simon Glass's earlier work in this way. This is also the case in the works of other lens-based artists such as Christian Boltanski and Shimon Attie.
- 54 DERRIDA, *Archive Fever*, 90.
- 55 Ibid., 94.
- 56 Walter BENJAMIN, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.
- 57 SHIFF, "Centennial Ark."
- 58 DERRIDA, *Archive Fever*, 68.
- 59 Ibid., 84.
- 60 Ibid., 36.
- 61 Ibid., 74.
- 62 I refer to Edmund JABÈS, *The Book of Questions*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976).
- 63 Here, I recall Friedrich NIETZSCHE's important essay, "Of Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873). To cite Nietzsche's version of the Jefferson Airplane's twist: "Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are." See *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 47.
- 64 DERRIDA, "The Law of Genre," in *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1, trans. Avital Ronell (Autumn 1980): 55–81.

Les *dibbouks* de Derrida : traces de déconstruction dans l'art juif contemporain

LOUIS KAPLAN

Le présent essai examine de quelle façon certaines stratégies et idées reliées au regretté philosophe français Jacques Derrida et à la déconstruction hantent et inspirent une sélection de productions de l'art juif contemporain dans les médiums de la photographie, de la vidéo et du film. Alors que la pensée de Derrida, après *Spectres de Marx*, s'est développée autour de l'hantologie, le présent essai se tourne spécifiquement vers la figure juive du *dibbouk* pour démontrer comment elle fait écho aux idées de Derrida et à sa relation liminale et complexe avec le judaïsme et la pensée juive.

« Les *dibbouks* de Derrida » jettent un regard attentif sur trois artistes contemporains afin de montrer comment ils parlent par la voix du *dibbouk* déconstructeur derridien – au nom d'une âme inquiète et diasporique qui pose des questions profondes et dérangeantes (parfois à propos du judaïsme lui-même) et résiste à une identification simple. Ces artistes et leurs œuvres définissent une version juive de l'hantologie. Ce sont le photographe français Frédéric Brenner (n. 1959), le photographe canadien Simon Glass (n. 1956), et la sculptrice vidéaste canadienne Melissa Shiff (n. 1967).

La série de photos digitales de Simon Glass *The Ten Commandments/ Prohibited Weapons* (2005) est en dialogue direct avec l'ouvrage de Derrida *Force de loi* : « *Le fondement mystique de l'autorité* ». Des images frappantes juxtaposent le texte hébreu de l'Ancien Testament aux armes interdites par le code criminel canadien – revolvers de poche, couteaux à cran d'arrêt et couteaux papillons, soulignant la violence irréductible de la loi et de sa transgression. Ces « Lois de Glass », méditation sur les tables brisées de Moïse, mettent en pratique leur propre économie de violence au moyen de photographies digitales. Suspendu dans l'intervalle entre la représentation stricte de la loi et la demande incalculable pour la justice, Glass s'engage, dans cette série photographique, dans ce que Derrida appelle *messianicité* ou ce qui est lié à la question et à la quête de la justice et de l'indéconstructible. Glass met ainsi en scène l'intérêt de Derrida pour « la hantise de l'indécidable » dans toute « décision juste » en tant qu'elle préoccupe le *dibbouk* juif.

L'installation de vidéo-sculpture de Melissa Shiff *ARK* (2006) engage le dialogue avec le texte de Derrida « Mal d'archive, une impression freudienne » et l'Arche de Noé dans des réflexions sur l'histoire mouvementée du

musée juif de Prague et à la lumière de désastres naturels (inondations) et de l'Holocauste. Le présent essai examine de quelle manière *ARK* aborde les questions de spectralité, de futurité et de messianicité, et comment ces notions acquièrent plus de sens lorsque vues à travers la lentille de la pensée derridienne. Ces connexions ne sont pas seulement enracinées dans le fait que la vidéo *ARK* incorpore deux citations de Derrida, mais aussi dans la conscience déconstructiviste d'*ARK* de ses propres angles morts archivistiques. De cette manière, l'*ARK* de Shiff, avec son cas de figure du musée juif de Prague, montre de façon évidente que la destruction d'archives va de pair avec tout processus d'archivisation.

Dans le cas du photographe juif français Frédéric Brenner, auteur de l'odyssée photographique qui s'est déroulée sur un quart de siècle *Diaspora. Terres natales de l'exil*, Derrida a été pour lui un interlocuteur majeur, et les commentaires du philosophe s'inscrivent sur une douzaine de photographies de Brenner dans *Voices* (2003). Plutôt que de se situer sous l'influence du texte de Derrida, l'œuvre photographique de Brenner, avec sa vision de la diaspora juive, est hantée par la déconstruction en général. La section se concentre sur deux photographies qui parlent par la voix du *dibbouk* déconstructeur – *Marranes célébrant la Pâque en secret* (1988) à Belmonte, Portugal, et *Spiritual Gathering* (1994), qui met en scène une imposante rencontre entre des juifs nouvel-âge et des Indiens Navajos dans le désert de Monument Valley, Arizona. Les deux images unissent le statut de juif et celui d'étranger. Alors que la première image souligne la fascination de Derrida pour le statut ontologique des crypto-juifs ou marranes, la seconde met en scène un rassemblement d'étrangers qui partagent un état d'exappropriation où ils n'ont pas leur propre place.

En soulignant la pertinence actuelle de Derrida comme pierre de touche pour les artistes juifs au cours de la dernière décennie, le présent essai interpelle une affirmation centrale dans la récente exposition de Daniel Belasco au Jewish Museum de New York. Proclamant une nouvelle *Zeitgeist* qui suggère une « réinvention du rituel », Belasco affirme d'emblée que nous avons dépassé le postmodernisme et la déconstruction pour entrer dans un nouvel âge de reconstruction. Toutefois son « impulsion contemporaine » vers la reconstruction réprime le *dibbouk* déconstructeur en tant d'option viable démontrée par ces trois cas de figure.

L'essai conclut par une exploration des implications déconstructrices d'un autre exemple tiré d'un film populaire, en retraçant le sens (indécidable) et la signification du *dibbouk* qui hante la séquence d'ouverture du film des frères Coen *A Serious Man* (2009).

Traduction : Élise Bonnette