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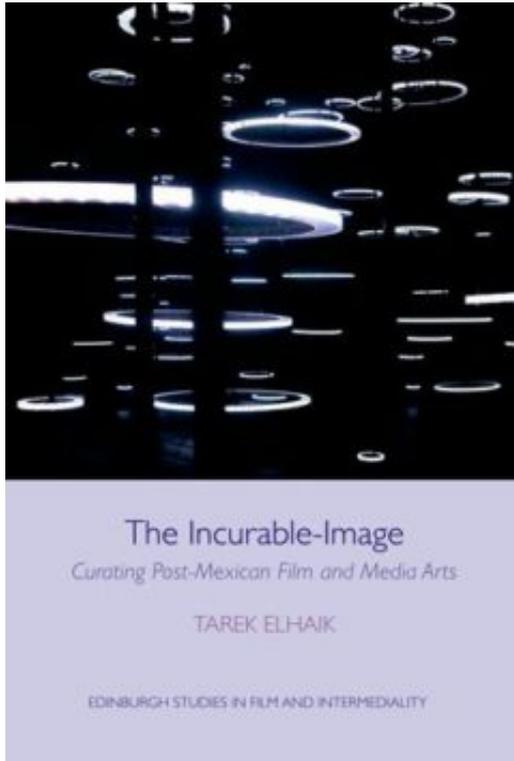
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Tarek Elhaik's *The Incurable Image: Curating Post-Mexican Film and Media Arts*

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By Christopher Fraga



The Incurable-Image: Curating Post-Mexican Film and Media Arts

by [Tarek Elhaik](#)

[Edinburgh University Press](#), 2016, 198 pages

Tarek Elhaik's first book—an ethnographic examination of multi-media artists, curators, and fellow anthropologists loosely centered around Mexico City—is a bold, highly theoretical effort to revive something of the experimental ethos of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and the works that followed in its wake. Rather than experiment with textual form, however, Elhaik seeks to formulate a new vocation for contemporary anthropology, one that is both “critical and clinical.” Drawing liberally on the vitalist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Elhaik aspires to reconceptualize

anthropology as a kind of “symptomatology”: that is, as a means of diagnosing cultural ailments and of identifying pathways to other, more salubrious “forms of life.”^[1] *The Incurable-Image* consists of a collection of interconnected essays that identify the symptoms of a “post-Mexican condition” (Bartra 1992, 2002) before drawing lessons from contemporary efforts to “curate” it. Medical anthropologists and scholars working in science and technology studies will find here a complex reconceptualization of film and media arts as twenty-first-century forms of care.

The 1980s saw Mexico grow increasingly permeable to transnational flows of capital in its various forms, a cultural and economic process that reached a new plateau in the mid-1990s with Mexico’s participation in NAFTA. This new permeability was accompanied by the country’s so-called “transition to democracy” after the single-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party was fundamentally (albeit not irrevocably) shaken.^[2] Together, these political and economic developments posed an insuperable contradiction to nationalist narratives of Mexican exceptionalism, deeply undermining the unitary national identity that had been forged in the early twentieth century by a coalition of politicians, artists, filmmakers and anthropologists. According to fellow anthropologist Roger Bartra, with whom Elhaik is in dialogue throughout his book, public mourning for the loss of this collective Mexican identity risked tipping into a pathological “melancholia” (82-86). Elhaik builds on Bartra’s account by examining how “post-Mexican” cultural producers have continued to grapple with this loss in the early twenty-first century. Focusing primarily on multi-media artists, filmmakers, and curators, Elhaik diagnoses a “malaise” in contemporary curatorial and moving-image culture (62, 128), the most critical symptom of which consists of a concept of Elhaik’s own creation: the “incurable-image.”

The clearest illustration of this concept comes in the essay that takes it as its title. Taking his lead from the French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, Elhaik interprets the first two shots of Rúben Gámez’s experimental film *La fórmula secreta* (1965) as a *Pathosformel*, that is, as a “visible expression of [a] psychic state that had become fossilized, so to speak, in the images” (Didi-Huberman, cited on 59). The first shot of Gámez’s film shows what appears to be an inverted bottle of Coca-Cola dripping into an intravenous tube, the end-point of which lies off-screen, withheld from view; Elhaik reads it as a symbol of U.S. cultural imperialism. The second shot follows the shadow of a *zopilote* (the American black vulture, *Coragyps atratus*) as it frenetically surveys the Zócalo, Mexico City’s main square and the political and ecclesiastic heart of the country; Elhaik notes the *zopilote*’s symbolic displacement of the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) that adorns the Mexican flag. Taken in sequence, these two shots stage the Mexican body politic as terminally ill,

its death-by-Coca-Cola foretold by the carrion-eater circling ominously overhead.

Elhaik insists that this “defiguration” does more than simply disrupt the symbolic order of Mexican nationalism.^[3] It “releases an incurable-image,” which he takes as “the sign of a more profound mutation in Mexican visual culture and the point of departure for the production of another anthropological unconscious” (ibid). By highlighting the incurability of such images, Elhaik does not mean to suggest that they should be withdrawn from display. Rather, he asserts that they call for a new, “postclinical form of curation still to come” (64), one that would “require us to think of other forms of collectivity through a different deployment of images” (67). Additional examples of incurable-images illuminate what such a deployment might entail, and its potential therapeutic value. For instance, Elhaik posits Roger Bartra’s ironic choice of the axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*), an amphibian common to central Mexico, as “an incurable-image of Mexicanism” (81). This playful, humorous mode of repetition reveals some of the remedial possibilities of incurable-images, which Elhaik conceptualizes in terms of “*fugas*.” As Bartra explains over the course of a transcribed conversation with Elhaik, the Spanish word *fuga* encompasses several distinct meanings: it translates the musical term “fugue,” with its use of multiple melodies in counterpoint, but it also refers to flight (in the Deleuzean sense of a “line of flight”) and to leakage (as in a gas leak or a water leak) (97-98).

Another essay describes Elhaik’s own efforts to curate a film series called *Soy México* (111-114) in 2011. Part of this project involved bidding an “affirmative farewell” to the maguey plant (*Agave* spp.) as an incurable-image of Mexicanist aesthetics by programming the climactic sequence from Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished masterpiece *¡Que viva México!* (1931) alongside Rubén Gámez’s little-known animated short *Magueyes* (1962) and Olivier Debrouse’s experimental documentary *Un banquete en Tetlapayac* (2000). Maguey plants feature prominently in all three of these films, and Elhaik’s series sought to weave these images into a kind of cinematic counterpoint. Observing that this international group of filmmakers had to “crisscross the political, affective and aesthetic landscapes of so-called alternative modernities” (117) before reaching the Mexican countryside and its stately agaves, Elhaik presents *Soy México* as a “post-Mexican fugue” of his own making.

In “The Incurable Park,” Elhaik continues to follow some of the practical pathways that have been illuminated by his concept of the “incurable-image,” this time by considering “pedagogy as a form of curation” (131). This essay offers the clearest example of how his alternative conception of anthropology departs *both* from conventional methods of ethnographic fieldwork on the one hand, and from the socially

oriented forms of artistic practice that have characterized the “ethnographic turn” in contemporary art on the other. Leading a small seminar at the Escuela Adolfo Prieto in Monterrey, an industrial city in northern Mexico (129), Elhaik trained his students to see a nearby public park, Parque Fundidora, as symptomatic of what Deleuze has characterized as “societies of control.” Taking his notion of the incurable as their point of departure, they sought out the blockages and impasses that shape the Parque Fundidora. Elhaik incorporated the results of this exercise into a more experimental mode of textual production that is indeed quite reminiscent of the *Writing Culture* era: a collaboratively authored text comprising eight short diagnoses written up by the participants in Elhaik’s seminar (all of whom were professionals connected in some way or other to the Monterrey art scene).

Several features of Elhaik’s collection of symptomatological essays merit highlighting. As he warns in the Introduction, his book will “not quench the reader’s thirst for things Mexican” (6). He completely eschews not only the genre conventions of ethnographic writing, but also the foundational concept of *ethnos* as such. Responding to the (post-)Mexican artist Eduardo Abaroa’s complex installation *The Total Destruction of the National Museum of Anthropology* (2011), Elhaik casts aside the notion of a geographically delimited field site populated by individual human subjects. (Indeed, as far as Elhaik is concerned, Abaroa’s fantasy of destroying Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology “is the destruction of *anthropos*, tout court” [45].) Instead, he insists on situating his work in what he identifies as a “post-Mexican assemblage” with nodal points in Mexico City, Monterrey, Tijuana, and the southern border town of Frontera, as well as Los Angeles and San Diego. He regards this assemblage as being populated by a dynamic cast of “conceptual personae” (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994), consisting primarily of “the artist,” “the curator,” and “the anthropologist.” The actual biographies of the physical human bodies that host these personae are irrelevant to his purposes; what matters are only the “vital anecdotes” (idem, 72-73)—like that of Bartra’s ironic engagement with the axolotl, or Gámez’s recourse to hungry *zopilotes* and warring magueys—that enable Elhaik to produce his design for a post-human, post-social, post-cultural anthropology.

Elhaik’s commitment to conceptual experimentation is commendable, as is his Nietzschean attempt to conjure some of anthropology’s “untimely futures” into being. This is a highly sophisticated book, steeped in an eclectic blend of cutting-edge anthropology, continental philosophy, and contemporary art theory. More to the point, however, these essays raise a deeper set of epistemological and methodological questions for our discipline. If Eduardo Abaroa was successful in destroying *anthropos* tout court, if “we are the hinterlands of images, nothing more and nothing less” (72), as Elhaik rather polemically asserts, if indeed we are none too

human after all, what would be the place of science in the anthropology of images still to come? If assemblage-work is now preferable to fieldwork (34 and *passim*), how are we to map the geo-spatial contours of such assemblages with any empirical rigor? In consistently advocating for the creation of concepts, conceptual personae, and “curatorial thinking” over empirical description, human informants, and cultural practices, Elhaik seems to be espousing something like a philosophical disenfranchisement of anthropology (to adapt an expression from Arthur Danto). Many of us will no doubt be reluctant to abandon our existing commitments and conceptual repertoires in favor of Elhaik’s newly minted design for a contemporary anthropology, but his book nevertheless offers a welcome reminder that even our most cherished concepts can go rancid and turn poisonous if we go too long without dusting them off and reexamining them.

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Notes

[1] As Deleuze puts it in his reading of Nietzsche's philosophy, "the sciences are a symptomatological and semiological system" (1983, 3; cf. 75). See Smith (1998) for a cogent overview of Deleuze's own "symptomatological method," and his *critique et clinique* project more broadly. Nietzsche is another key philosophical interlocutor throughout these essays, though Elhaik does not make this very explicit.

[2] See Bartra (2002) for a more detailed explanation of how these changes gave rise to a "post-Mexican condition."

[3] Elhaik's elliptical invocation of "defiguration" (58) comes from an exchange between philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and psychoanalyst Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, quoted in English translation in Sparks (1997, xxi-xxii). See Elhaik (2016, 73n.2 and 73n.5).

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