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The Convergence of Phenomenology and Semiotics in Georges Didi-Huberman's Aesthetics of the Symptom¹

Abstract

The goal of this article is to present the aesthetics of the symptom proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman, which in the context of the theory of the image attempts to integrate a phenomenological and semiological description. The article starts with his critique of the discipline of art history as dominated by an effort to make it a science and to widen the range of knowledge about images, whose most striking manifestation the French author finds in Erwin Panofsky's iconological method, which is modelled on the "neo-Kantian" key, i.e., the philosophy of symbolic forms. Didi-Huberman proposes going back to the conclusions drawn from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where we find, for example, the concept of the aesthetic idea. The impreciseness of experience and impossibility of reducing experience to a concept should, as Didi-Huberman contends, be given due recognition in the history of art, which he justifies with the application of the term "symptom" adapted from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. The symptom undermines the central position of the art historian as a subject of knowledge and opens the theory of the image to lack-of-knowledge. In turn, the aesthetics of the symptom is supposed to encompass both the meaningful and the phenomenal.

Keywords

symptom, aesthetics of the symptom, phenomenology, semiotics, history of art, Georges Didi-Huberman, Erwin Panofsky, Immanuel Kant

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The relationship between sense perception and experience articulated through concepts is a special area of interest of aesthetics. While research in semiotics, for instance with regard to the theory of the image, focuses on an aspect of signs that is already constituted, phenomenological investigations endeavor to capture the very moment of perception in which conceptual form has not yet been set. This sort of dialectic of the aesthetic experience, which assumes a tension between the phenomenal and the conceptual aspect of experience, was—in a way—already expressed in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, although it there acquired a harmonious form of free play of the imagination and the intellect.

The abovementioned tension within aesthetic experience is strongly emphasized in the conception of Georges Didi-Huberman, which he builds with reference to selected Renaissance images and through a critique of his own academic discipline, where the interpretation of painting plays an important part. Drawing attention to the maximum potential of Erwin Panofsky's positivistic history of art and iconological method of interpretation, Didi-Huberman proposes a kind of "regress" back to Kant and, in particular, to his *Critique of Judgment*. The conclusions drawn from this treatise on fine arts and aesthetic experience were, according to Didi-Huberman, temporarily lost by most influential art historians—making a space for historians' hopes for the "scientification" of their discipline that they found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and in the neo-Kantian trend of the philosophy of symbolic forms.

The resistance to this dominant "scientified" option for the history of art, manifested by Didi-Huberman foremost in his introduction to *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, became a point of departure for its author's formulation of his own methodological position, which was relatively general and expressed succinctly but which, I believe, well demonstrates Didi-Huberman's intentions. His position is formulated as the aesthetics of the symptom, whose aim is to integrate two modes of describing a painting: the phenomenological one and the semiotic one. The aim of this article is to present what, in Didi-Huberman's thought, constitutes the basis for the aesthetics of the symptom—namely: 1) the notion of the symptom, located as a counterpart to symbolic function; 2) application of the symptom in conducting a critical study of the history of art as knowledge; 3) the two paths of the "development" of the history of art as a science based on neo-Kantian elements. Only preceded by these investigations can the point regarding integration of the phenomenological order with the semiological order be more fully presented, which will return at the end of this text.

The Symptom

The notion of the symptom in Didi-Huberman's thought, although adapted from Freudian psychoanalysis, has no clinical application. It refers to the realm of critique of knowledge. As we read:

It is because he reopened in dazzling fashion the question of the subject—a subject henceforth thought as split or rent, not closed, a subject inept at synthesis, be it transcendental—that Freud was also able to throw open, and just as decisively, the question of knowledge (Didi-Huberman 2005, 6).

In psychiatry, the symptom is “the unpredictable and immediate passage of a body into the aberrant, critical state” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 260) in which gestures lose their clear representational function. In Freudian thought, the symptom includes the works of a hidden structure; it is antithetical and at the same time totally devoid of sense. An example of a symptom is given in an observation of a patient who with one gesture, as a woman, clutches her garments to her body while with another, in the role of a man, is trying to tear it off herself. The simultaneity of these two gestures is characterized by intrinsic contradiction and, according to Freud, represents an attempt at hiding an unconscious fantasy. The symptom is thus characterized by singularity, while at the same time it is an “implementation of a signifying structure” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 261). It does it in such a way however, that its sense cannot be identified as a stable meaning, but at the most as a puzzle or a pointer. The symptom, as a semiological entity, is therefore located between an event and a structure.

What symptom constitutes in the context of the image is explained by the experience of forgetting a dream, as described by psychoanalysis. It is important to note the distinction that Didi-Huberman makes between a pictorial image and a dreamt image. An image, as a work of art is, in a certain sense, a social entity: it is shared and received, as well as understood in a certain way. Being aware and seeing accompany its perception. The aim of a dreamt image, on the contrary, is not to be understood. Dreaming is characterized by isolation, but also, as a consequence, by the power of the gaze. “Paintings are of course not dreams”—says Didi-Huberman—“We see them with open eyes, but this may be what hinders us and makes us miss something in them” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 156). This “something” plays a particularly important role in the experience of a painting: it is situated “in place of an opening and a scission” where eyesight is torn, or rent, between seeing, characteristic of being awake, and watching, characteristic of dream-

ing. “In this rend, then, something is at work that I cannot grasp—or that cannot grasp me wholly, lastingly—because I am not dreaming” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 156). This “something” that escapes me when I am conscious seems related to the pathic experience described by Bernhard Waldenfels, when he writes about

[...] something which provokes sense without being meaningful itself yet still as something by which we are touched, affected, stimulated, surprised and to some extent violated. I call this happening pathos, *Widerfahrnis* or affect (Waldenfels 2007, 74).

In Didi-Huberman’s thought this “something” present in the image can be captured by the paradigm of *f o r g e t t i n g a d r e a m*, which is not the same as *d r e a m i n g*. Dreaming, understood as a certain closing of the eyes to an image (the image being a work of art), symbolizes the aesthetic theories that Didi-Huberman considers “the most beautiful” and at the same time “the most desperate, too, since they are generally doomed to stalemate or madness” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 157). These kinds of aesthetics turn to mere impression only, to impenetrability of matter and lack of knowledge. Meanwhile, the art historian is characterized by a desire for knowledge. He wakes up “every morning with the sense of a sovereign, but forgotten dream visuality” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 157). The state of forgetting implies the dream’s fragmentation directly after waking, it implies its being destined to falling apart. Forgetting, then, is not a lack of memory but a problem of thoughts, a process of recollecting of the substance of the dream. This “something”, which is a trace—a set of remains, a signal about forgetting—is the symptom.²

² The relation of the notion of the “trace” to the term *Nachleben* present in Aby Warburg’s writings, to which Didi-Huberman refers in his *L’image survivante*, opens many interpretative possibilities when confronted with Derrida’s deconstructive figures, as is explored by Andrzej Leśniak in his monographic book dedicated to Didi-Huberman. In it we read: “If we undertake a parallel reading of Didi-Huberman’s text and fragments from Derrida, we need to take into consideration the far-reaching consequences of comparing *Nachleben* and *trace*. From the perspective sketched by deconstruction, *Nachleben* would not be only and exclusively a notion describing the (first and foremost time-related) structure of the image and its temporal complexity. This notion would also refer to the manner in which meanings are generated in an image. If an image exists thanks to perdurance, then its every reading and every interpretative attempt has to be constructed with an awareness of the theoretical consequences of applying the figure of the *trace*, that is to say, of ambiguity, of the original suspension between presence and absence” (Leśniak 2010, 204).

Didi-Huberman enriches the description of the symptom by its relation to symbol, and especially to the symbolic function of the image proposed by Ernst Cassirer and adapted to the methodology of art history by Erwin Panofsky. Symbolic form is internally integrated; it displays a “formal integrity” that implies, “in the end, that it is an object of reason, that it has all the characteristics of the Idea, and that it subjects the world of individual phenomena to its transcendental law” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 169). The integrity of the symbolic form, tending toward subordination of a multiplicity of forms to one single idea of reason, is supposed to make it possible to express this function “in terms of knowledge” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 169), which in Didi-Huberman’s opinion brings this neo-Kantian formalism closer to metaphysics than to positivism:

That [symbol] had been envisaged from the angle of the primacy of relation over terms and of function over objects (or substance) indicates the importance of the road travelled, the full interest of the project undertaken by Cassirer and then by Panofsky. [...] But Cassirer and then Panofsky were deceived in their belief that, thanks to such a principle, they had definitively gone beyond the traditional givens of metaphysics (Didi-Huberman 2005, 169–170).

The mistake of the formalists, according to Didi-Huberman, lay in reducing relations to the “unity of synthesis,” which made their method incomplete and even idealistic.³ This is also the reason why Didi-Huberman finds value not in the symbol’s unifying function, which is in the center of Cassirer and Panofsky’s conceptual system, but in Freud’s meta-psychology of work, where the symptom is that which “breaks up all discursive unity, [...] intrudes upon and smashes the order of the Idea, opens systems and imposes something unthinkable” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 169).

³ An authentic relation—one whose account includes symptoms and does not ignore them or incorporate them into synthesis—resembles in its form a fishing net. Didi-Huberman’s description of this relation, which he presents in the context of the symptom, is very plastic: “When we draw the net toward us (toward our desire for knowledge), we cannot help but notice that the sea for its part has withdrawn. It flows everywhere, if flees, although we can still make out a bit of it around the knots of the net, while formless algae signify it before drying out on our shore. We understand, reading Freud, that it is the psychoanalyst’s business to recognize that when he draws the net toward him, the essential has still disappeared. The fish are indeed there (figures, details, fantasies such as art historians also love to collect), but the sea that makes them possible has kept its mystery, present only in the damp glow of a few algae stuck to the edges” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 170).

In Panofsky's theory, a symbol contains a certain substance of meaning. In terms of methodology it corresponds with deduction. As Didi-Huberman says, "[t]he deduction opens only to close again," it gives meaning and at the same time it "closes itself to other possible links, to other virtual associations" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 173). The symptom, which is dynamic in nature, is in turn not reducible to a function; it corresponds with the psychoanalytic notion of work, which eventually is also expressed "in a crude material language of the meaning"; but on the other hand, we are dealing here with a "branching out" of associations of sense and visualization of "equivocal knots and the conjugation of symbolic treasure with markers of not-meaning" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 178). Meanwhile, in Panofsky's theory we can find an equation between the symbol and the symptom. To him, symptoms are symbolic forms or allegories present in various works of art, recognized in the third stage of his method, i.e., iconographical interpretation.⁴ Works of art are, in Panofsky's thought, manifestations (symptoms) of a general history of spiritual culture, and the deeper sense of works of art is based on symbolic forms. Didi-Huberman does not deny the symptom and the symbol a common denominator; however, we will not find out how to discover their common sense if we apply the formula of the question "What does the symptom symbolize?" The symbolic dimension of the symptom is indeed not reducible to a simple relation of two elements; it constitutes "an open set of relations between sets of terms that can themselves be opened" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 179). Didi-Huberman says:

[The symptom] symbolizes events that have taken place and also events that have not taken place. It symbolizes each thing and also its contrary [...] And by symbolizing it represents, but it represents in a way that distorts (Didi-Huberman 2005, 179).

That which the symptom informs about does not allow any sort of transcription, because the symptom is a rupture. The symptom "speaks to us of the insistence and return of the singular in the regular [...] of the rupture of equilibrium and of a new equilibrium, an unprecedented equilibrium that soon will break itself again" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 162). For this reason the symptom requires a—specifically hermeneutic in spirit—incessant renewing of interpretation. The theory of art, on the other hand, confronted with the symptom, faces a different task: not distinguishing the symptom from

⁴ Panofsky's method proposes three stages, as follows: a pre-iconographical description, an iconographical analysis, and an iconographical interpretation (Panofsky 1939, 3-17).

the symbol but capturing the moment “in which knowledge of the symbol is traumatized and interrupts itself in the face of the not-knowledge of the symptom,” which propels its own rich symbolicity into “an exponential spurt of all the conditions of meaning operative in an image” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 180).

The Symptom and Critique of Knowledge

The humanities also have their own symptom, broadly speaking; and in particular, the history of art, which from the start (from Giorgio Vasari) up until modern iconology has always eliminated what in an image constitutes a trace, a reminiscence, a manifestation of forgetting. The psychoanalytical experience—aided by such notions as deferred action, repetition, deformation, and overworking—is able to equip the methodology of the history of art with critical instruments that will enable a reflection into, as Didi-Huberman says, the very status

[...] of this object of knowledge with regard to which we will henceforth be required to think what we gain in the exercise of our discipline in the face of what we thereby lose: in the face of a more obscure and no less sovereign constraint to not-knowledge (Didi-Huberman 2005, 7).

Meanwhile, art historians have been situating themselves “in a neo-Kantian way” in the center of knowledge created by them, looking for signs and symbols in works of art—without, however, paying attention to the symptom, because “[t]hat would have been to accept the constraint of a not-knowledge, and thus to dislodge themselves from a central and advantageous position, the powerful position of the subject who knows” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 161–162). The admission that knowledge is ruptured like the image would lead to a loss of the central, privileged position of the art historian, while at the same time it would allow the neutralization of the “methodological sufficiency” and “closure” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 8) of this discipline.

With regard to this, Didi-Huberman claims that:

[...] [b]ooks on the history of art nonetheless know how to give us the impression of an object truly grasped and reconnoitred in its every aspect, like a past elucidated without remainder. Everything here seems visible, discerned. Exit the uncertainty principle. The whole of the visible here seems read, deciphered in accordance with the self-assured—apodictic—semiology of a medical diagnosis. And all of this makes, it is said,

a science, a science based in the last resort on the certainty that the representation functions unitarily, that it is an accurate mirror or a transparent window, and that on the immediate ('natural') or indeed the transcendental ('symbolic') level, it is able to translate all concepts into images, all images into concepts (Didi-Huberman 2005, 3).

Panofsky's model fits into the iconographic discourse of knowledge, into "the positivist myth of the omni-translatability of images" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 3), about which also Gottfried Boehm writes that "it constitutes only a system of reference for the contents of images and their identification" (Boehm 1978, 445). As Boehm remarks, the obviousness of the assumption about translatability of the image into language, being a basic foundation of the discourse on art, has caused the question about the relation between the image and the word, t h i s fundamental question, to be obscured (Boehm 1978, 447). Even the very fact of "one-directionality" implied by Panofsky's method proves the iconographic model to be insufficient:

If [...], as can be demonstrated based on the example of Panofsky's methodology, interpretation follows the idea of substitution, then a translation from language back to image is in fact impossible—and that, because its iconic thickness has not been translated and can only count on an emphatic call (Boehm 1978, 456).

The problem is, that the essence of images lies not in their preceding the metaphysical distinction between sign and meaning, inside and outside, sensuality and concept, form and content; however, art theory has managed to transfer onto the image a model characteristic of language, namely the "independence of meaning from its sensible manifestation" (Boehm 1978, 449). The source of the problem created by previous methodologies of art history lay in its deep conviction that works of art should be freed from their outer visual dressing so as to uncover their foundation, which is the meaning (contents) of the image. Panofsky's division of the image into separate levels of sense was an example of a denial of the notion that a work of painting was entitled to the right of autonomy—to its own separate language. With regard to this, Boehm poses a rhetorical question: "And what if—once the subsequent layers have been lifted—the image disappears, i.e., dissolves in language? Is the image a puzzle, and only its solution counts?" He then states:

Within the framework of this methodology, the image [...] itself does not create meaning and is not capable of representing its own truths. More precisely, the image 'is' so long as it refers to the sphere of the logos, with which it merges in an interpretation (Boehm 1978, 452–453).

The symptom, in turn, seems not to be leading toward *logos*. It is indeed irrational, and because of that it discourages those investigators who cherish positivistic inclinations. Due to the rent and unsettling character of the image, one must, however—as Didi-Huberman claims—at least try to draw critical and methodological consequences from the Freudian study of the symptom, which is characterized by the fact that it “has no vocation as symbolic synthesis or as totalizing interpretation” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 157).

Two Kantian Keys

Didi-Huberman thus writes about Panofsky’s inspiration by neo-Kantian theory while discussing the latter’s iconological method:

Panofsky turned to Immanuel Kant because the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* had managed to open and reopen the question of knowledge, by defining the play of its limits and its subjective conditions. [...] By grasping the Kantian or neo-Kantian key—via Cassirer—Panofsky opened new doors for his discipline. But no sooner were these doors open than he seems to have securely closed them again, allowing critique only a brief moment of passage: a current of air (Didi-Huberman 2005, 5).

According to Didi-Huberman (and Boehm), the iconological method leads directly from forgetting about the visual dimension of the image, one that does not allow a transcription to the language of concepts. Iconological interpretations are supposed to display a certain “totality,” a holistic nature, without leaving space for “the rest.” This is how, in Didi-Huberman’s view, three engravings by Albrecht Dürer are analyzed.

In his famous work dedicated to Albrecht Dürer, Panofsky interprets three masterpieces produced by Dürer in the span of two years, titled *Knight, Death and Devil*; *St. Jerome in His Study*; and *Melancholia I*. Although they do not constitute a set, Panofsky noticed in them a unity of content, i.e., an expression in a symbolic form of three different life paths that reflect the scholastic classification of the virtues as moral, theological and intellectual (Panofsky 1955, 151). Thus in the first engraving we find a symbolic representation of a Christian’s life in the sphere of human activity, decisions, and deeds; in the second one, a life devoted to religious contemplation; in the third one, the destiny of a secular genius in his earthly life, revolving around the sphere of knowledge, arts and imagination. All three interpretations are very substantial, and they explain in a symbolic way every detail, even the smallest, noticeable in the image. The interpretation of the *Melancholia I* is

the most ample. Panofsky interprets this work as a representation of the destiny of the Renaissance artist, and in fact as a symbolical self-portrait of Dürer himself. Didi-Huberman's doubts regarding the deciphering of the message of the third engraving relate to an (in his view) neglected religious aspect, the symptom. Noting a similarity between the figure of Melancholy and Dürer's image of *Christ Man of Sorrows* from the frontispiece of the *Small Passion* (created in 1511), and referring to the relationship between *Melancholia I* and *St. Jerome* (both of which were finished in the same year and share a particular mood and a number of complementary oppositions), Didi-Huberman states that in his third engraving Dürer "also articulates a religious paradigm, the imitation-of-Christ paradigm, in which melancholy found a field of application as paradoxical as it was sovereign" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 174). Didi-Huberman also expresses his astonishment that such an accomplished expert on the Renaissance as Panofsky would not have considered the aforementioned context. Didi-Huberman finds an explanation of this fact in the neo-Kantian foundations of iconology, according to which it aims at acquiring "a synthetic unity." If Panofsky had introduced into his interpretation of the *Melancholia I* the motif of *imitatio Christi*, it would have resulted in contributing an *o v e r - d e t e r m i n a t i o n*, equivocation, and antithetical sense to the analysis; it "would have complicated, and doubtless partly ruined, the clarity of the deductive model that Panofsky ardently wished for." Finally, a reference to this theme would also introduce an anachronistic element in the form of "a medieval symptom into one of the most emblematic works of the entire Renaissance" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 174).

Didi-Huberman says:

The synthesis invoked provides, in effect, a principle of interpretation that, in itself—in other words, in its generality—satisfies the mind, without neglecting to explain a great many iconographic details of the engraving. As an interpretation, then, it is strong and persuasive, even incontestable. It provides a comforting feeling of closure, of something settled, of something locked up; it impresses upon us the idea of a definitive advance in Dürer's studies (Didi-Huberman 2005, 171).

To leave no remainder is a sort of suppression of a symptom, a "tyranny of the system." Everything is subordinated to the leading idea, that is, to the "will to synthesis," and hence the presented approach does not permit itself to be subsumed under the symbolic form but belongs to the type "I don't want to know anything about it" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 172).

In view of everything above, it becomes clear why Didi-Huberman writes about Panofsky's introduction to his *Studies in Iconology* that it "unfolds a semiological fable in which we start out from a certainty" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 180). This "tone of certainty" is indeed, as the author of *Confronting Images* proposes, a "Kantian tone": a specific syndrome which, however, Kant might not have acknowledged. And so we read:

[A]n academic discipline anxious to constitute itself as knowledge, and not as normative judgment, should have turned to the Kantism of pure reason rather than to that of the faculty of aesthetic taste. The Kantian tone generally adopted by the history of art perhaps originates in the simple fact that the *Critique of Pure Reason* can seem [...] like a large temple devoted to the profession of a gospel that is the foundation of all true knowledge. [...] [T]he Kantism of pure reason became a necessary way station for all those who sought to reground their discipline, and to redefine "art" as an "object" of knowledge rather than as a subject of academic squabbles (Didi-Huberman 2005, 93).

Here we see the directions in which two ways of (neo-)Kantian discourse on art branch out. The first one—taking as a pointer conclusions resulting from the *Critique of Pure Reason* and orienting itself to the sciences of culture (*Geisteswissenschaften*) (Cassirer 1923)—maintains that man lives surrounded by symbolical forms and that his access to reality is always already mediated. Panofsky refers to this very trend in his original iconological method. The second type of neo-Kantian discourse continues trains of thought developed in the *Critique of Judgment*, among them the one claiming that aesthetic experience (the experience of beauty and, in some interpretations of the third *Critique*, also of art) is not reducible to knowledge and concepts, because its nature is undefined. Rüdiger Bubner, in reference to Kant's aesthetics, thus writes about a "non-empirical surplus":

For the sensuously given particular here facilitates an immediate representation of the universal that cannot be divorced from the particular itself [...] Our inability to provide any theoretical explanation actually harbours an aesthetically felt experience of surplus (Bubner 2003, 244).

In view of the above, as Didi-Huberman observes, at the opposite end from the "economy of certainty" an "economy of doubt" is found: an aspect of uncertainty that remains in close relationship to the theory of the symptom (with the surplus, this "something more"). Thus the two Kantian (or neo-Kantian) keys turn out to be two separate modes, one of which is characterized by the desire for knowledge, and the other by the submission to not-knowing. The first one is associated by Didi-Huberman with the symbolic

form, with the “aspect of certainty” characteristic of the positivist history of art, according to which everything that is visible in an image can be forged into a notion. The other one branches out from *The Critique of Judgment*, by absorbing, as it seems, what Kant wrote about the aesthetic idea:

But, by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e., concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible (Kant 1911, 314).

It is worth noting that iconology, according to Didi-Huberman, “pretends to define the conditions of what will be thinkable in a work of art,” while “the opening to the symptom gives us access to something like an unthinkable that comes before our very eyes to traverse images” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 183). The fragment of *Critique of Judgment* cited above, and in particular the phrase referring to the image as “inducing much thought,” has to be appropriately understood in order to be associated with “openness to the symptom.” We are not talking about something that is thinkable and thus able to be named in this or that manner; our objects are, rather, associations of sense that branch out and make it impossible to merge the experience and the concept into one. (On the other hand, in the first *Critique* such a synthesis is constitutive for any experience.)

The two Kantian keys—two modes of description of the image (and hence also of the visual experience)—are, in other words, the semiological key and phenomenological key. Provided that the former one is closer to naming (conforming to the principle of certainty), and the latter one is linked to silence (conforming to the economy of doubt), then it would seem that they are far from being convergent. Didi-Huberman however insists on the necessity of combining both of these orders under the rule of a common idea: the aesthetics of symptom.

The Aesthetics of the Symptom

The symptom is not a univocal term, one that only makes us more open to the nonsensicality of the image. The symptom reveals the paradox and ambiguity of a work of painting in which both the relation of negation and the relation of identity are impossible to support: “the image effectively knows how to represent both the thing and its contrary; it is impervious to contradiction and must always come back to this” (Didi-Huberman 2005, 262). We can follow this in the details of the Renaissance paintings described by Didi-

Huberman, e.g., in Vermeer's *Lacemaker* and *Girl with a Red Hat*, which are capable of "binding together as they do, paradoxically—but closely—the work of mimesis and that of not-mimesis" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 262).

The aesthetics of the symptom for which Didi-Huberman formulates general guidelines is supposed to give an answer to the problem of what, in the work of art, is signifying and what is unthinkable, as this aesthetics assumes a convergence of these two methods of study: semiotics and phenomenology. He writes:

The concept of symptom is two-faced, being situated precisely on the boundary between two theoretical fields: a phenomenological field and a semiological field. The whole problem of a theory of art lies in the articulation of these two fields (Didi-Huberman 2005, 263).

Siding with one of the parties—the one that only looks at the structure and system of meaning, or the other one, which in an image sees first and foremost an event and an impenetrable matter—is a choice that leads to impoverishment of the description of the image and of the very aesthetic experience, which follows the dialectic of the work of art. As Didi-Huberman writes: "it is more simply to strive to take measure of a work of figurability" and "the relation between the figure and its own 'figuration' is never simple: this relation, this work, is but a skein of paradoxes" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 262). Because of that, if we limit ourselves only to phenomenology we risk "a definitive self-silencing, through effusiveness before that which is beautiful; [...] losing oneself in immanence – in an empathic singularity – of becoming inspired and mute, or indeed stupid." On the other hand, by limiting ourselves to the other order, the semiological one, we risk "talking too much, and silencing everything not strictly within its purview" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 263). In the given distinction of orders, immanence and transcendence battle for primacy over one another, and this is why Didi-Huberman proposes a cross of both modes, when he writes:

So it is necessary to propose a phenomenology, not only of the relation to the visible world as empathic milieu, but of the relation to meaning as structure and specific work (which presupposes a semiology). And thus be able to propose a semiology, not only of symbolic configurations, but also of events, or accidents, or singularities of the pictorial image (which presupposes a phenomenology) (Didi-Huberman 2005, 263–264).⁵

⁵ Martin Seel also expressed his own position with regard to integration of the semiotic and phenomenological theory of the image: "Appearing must be conceived of

The aesthetics of the symptom—the aesthetics of the boundary of two orders—correlates itself with its founding Freudian notion of the symptom. This correlation should augur positively for the aesthetics of the symptom: the durability of the symptom, and its resilience against being engulfed by that which is systematic, originates from, as Freud claims, its “borderline position.” In his *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* we read that the contradictory forces that meet in the symptom “become reconciled through the compromise of a symptom development. That is why the symptom is capable of such resistance; it is sustained from both sides” (Freud 1920, 684).

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not as being in opposition to the phenomenal being of objects but merely in opposition to propositionally fixed aspects of this being—that is, in opposition to their being-so, as it is determinable by partial epistemic modes of access” (Seel 2005, 48 and ff).