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The hermeneutics of the image – sensual appearance of sense

Abstract

The task of the hermeneutics of the image is to grasp the sensual emergence of meaning, to describe the conditions of its forming and the possibilities for its understanding. Gottfried Boehm suggests an answer to the question about sensual sense and formulates the most important aspects of the potential for creation of meaning. This potential is rooted in iconic difference, which manifests itself both through the liberating power of contrast and as a relation between the part and the whole – that is, a relation between transitions, or consecutiveness, and the simultaneity of the image. Sensuality, which organises and articulates the pictorial meaning, remains unseen, even elusive – “empty” – though it drives the play of difference and oscillation.

Key words

hermeneutics of the image, Boehm, iconic difference, iconic thickness, simultaneity, aesthetic non-differentiation.

The first reaction to a painting’s visual impression is often to define its subject and historical and symbolic content. In iconology, the next stages in the interpretation procedure are recognition of the state of affairs and definition of their background: historical, mythological, biblical, etc. An image presents itself not through sentences and judgments, rather it brings to light visual forms, which can be named, although a name is not

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enough. If they are something more than illustrations or rebuses (whose solution can become exhausted of their linguistic meaning), images carry a sensuality that cannot be eliminated, a sensual potential to create meaning.

The task of image hermeneutics – which was formulated by Gottfried Boehm – is to grasp the sensual appearance of sense, to determine the conditions of its forming and the possibility of its understanding. It is this difference from linguistic meaning – which cannot be radical – that requires hermeneutic thinking. At the same time, the description of the emergence of sensual sense requires phenomenological sensitivity, which enables focusing on pure visibility. This modified approach allows an understanding of the image as a sphere where meaning is created.

The aim of this paper is to describe the sensual potential of creation of meaning, presented by Boehm in relation to Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory, and to complete this perspective using Georges Didi-Huberman's analysis. This potential is rooted in iconic difference, which manifests itself both through the liberating power of contrast and as a relation between the part and the whole – that is, a relationship between transitions, or consecutiveness, and the simultaneity of the image. Sensuality, which organises and articulates the pictorial meaning, remains unseen, even elusive – “empty” – though it drives the play of difference and oscillation.

Aesthetic non-differentiation

Focusing on the sensual aspects of appearance requires the apprehension of the image as a whole; as a unity of content and visibility, without abstracting the formal and the material, significant and symbolic, the presented and the presentation.

Elements depicted on the surface of the canvas appear through their visual attributes and are fulfilled in their appearance. In essence, the specificity of the image is the unity of being and phenomenon: being becomes phenomenon through painting¹. Boehm refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer's category of aesthetic non-differentiation, which claims that in the hermeneutical experience of its sense, a work of art is inseparable

¹ G. Boehm, “Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes”, [in:] *Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften*, Hrsg. H-G. Gadamer, G. Boehm, Frankfurt am Main 1978, p. 451.



Fig. 1. Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak



Fig. 2. Giorgio de Chirico, *Self-portrait* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

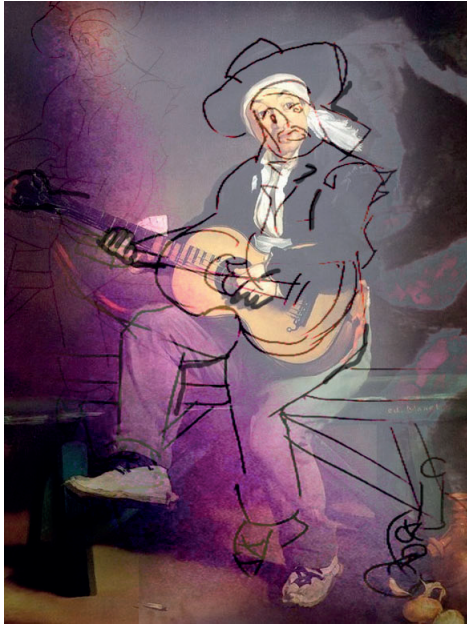


Fig. 3. Edouard Manet, *The Spanish Singer (or The Guitar Player)* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

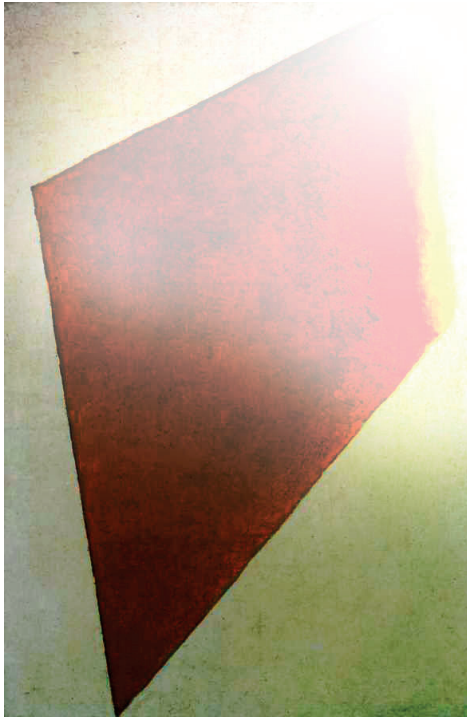


Fig. 4. Kazimir Malewicz, *Suprematic painting 1917* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

from its non-aesthetic elements. The experience of sense is in unity with the formal, the semantic, the subjective and the cultural².

The Gadamerian postulate of aesthetic non-differentiation means that the separation of what is presented from its presentation is secondary and does not correspond with the hermeneutical engagement in the process of understanding a work of art. The same applies to the method used in creating a work of art, e.g. painting and acting, and the concept on which the work is based.

The unity and sense of the work of art are revealed in a simultaneous presentation of meaning and becoming-present within the presentation, together with the circumstances in which the work is being shown – all this is a part of the work's being. The work of art fulfils itself in bringing forth meaning (setting up a world) and thus achieves presence and sense. The sensuality of the work allows for the presentation and brings forth certain aspects of being that were previously unseen, it allows its original presentation. A painting as a work of art is part of the event of being that occurs in its presentation³.

However, the function of the sensuality of the pictorial is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is constitutive for presentation of being in its individuality and uniqueness and is involved in this being through presenting these (an image is not a sign and is not destined to be self-effacing)⁴. On the other hand, as the medium is superseded – it does not become thematic, but the work presents itself through and in it⁵. Experience of sense is the basic experience of art.

Understanding fulfils itself in an engaging dialogue; in recognition of this question a work of art is the answer – in its actualisation. Gadamer, when analysing Velázquez's horses, explicates the meaning of the painting by confronting the image of a childhood rocking horse with the emperor's commanding and watchful gaze. All this is possible through the sensuality of the work of art, the figural apprehension of certain attributes, in the confrontations between colours and shapes. Perceiving the interaction of all these elements united in one sense is – according to Gadamer – the importance of seeing. He argues that questions about the accuracy of the horses' representation or Charles V's physiognomy

² H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinscheimer, D.G. Marshall, London–New York 2004, pp. 73–74.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 134

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

are pointless⁶. But how to create the emperor's commanding gaze without presenting the facial expression in appropriate relations of lines and colours? It is the game of those elements (i.e. shape, colour, representation of physiognomy) that allows the reading of meaning. Gadamer is opposed to too much formalism but does not analyse the function of the sensual in a work of art and in the creation of sense.

This matter is analysed by Boehm, who emphasises the unity of sensual appearance and creation of being in aesthetic non-differentiation.

The image is a palette of colours arranged into the visibility of the phenomenon. It is its own demonstration and, as a result, a painted object cannot be separated from the way it was painted. The way it is shown is the phenomenon itself and, in this sense, the image is characterised by the unity of being and phenomenon. The image is a process of presenting⁷. Sensuality – understood as givenness of being in its concreteness and visibility – is the constitutive element of the image and has inexhaustible potential to create meaning.

Iconic difference

Visual and non-visual attributes (which can be seen through a pictorial medium) depicted in a painting are presented through concrete juxtaposition: attributes, colours, lines, forms and background. The basic relationship is contrast – objects appear in visual contrast through the impact of pictorial elements.

This is how iconic difference works. It allows the painter to differentiate, distinguish, bring forth. One of its first names is line: that which di-

⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker, Cambridge 1986, p. 30.

⁷ Boehm also refers to the Heideggerian understanding of the work of art, which allows him to consider the image as a process, a being, which has a temporal dimension. This is what brings forth the view and sense through its own articulation and exposition. As Heidegger said: “the temple work, in setting up a world, does not let the material disappear; rather, it allows it to come forth for the very first time, to come forth, that is, into the open of the world of the work. The rock comes to bear and to rest and so first becomes rock; the metal comes to glitter and shimmer, the colours to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to speak” M. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, [in:] *Off the beaten track*, trans. J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge 2002, p. 24. Therefore, paint takes shape and saturation in contact with different paint, it brings forth a certain visibility, an occurrence of a given phenomenon.

vides, defines a space and separates the two parts, while at the same time connecting them. It places them opposite each other and does not allow them to fall apart. The line as a rift-design (*Riss*) from the descriptions of Martin Heidegger (*reißen*, draw a line), is both tension and compatibility, it defines the belonging of what is separated: “The rift carries the contestants into the source of their unity, their common ground⁸”. It brings forth by closing, in other words, it draws and closes the shape in a given view (at the same time establishing the view) and sets the figure.

The line is a strictly pictorial way of bringing forth – as such, it does not exist in real life, there is no line of the horizon, the landscape, there is no contour of apples, but the line is implied. Maurice Merleau-Ponty could add that the line is a result of the meeting between what is seen and who is seeing, that it is the effect of corporeal and perceptual engagement in the sensual, visible world. The line in a painting, as the unseen, is a gesture that shows the relationship between visible beings⁹. First of all, it sets directions and relationships, changing the dynamics of image depending on the angle of deflection – it trespasses on the neutrality of the white canvas, introducing a difference and a play of sense.

Iconic difference makes it possible for the figure to be brought forth out of the background – as the outline or the border of colours. What has emerged becomes a point of intensity, a point of *concentration*, i.e. a *focus*, against the background, which is an ambiguous, unidentified (non-identifying) field. The latter is a condition for the possibility of drawing out a figure. It brings both figure and painting into light.

That difference – in *Gestalt* psychology – draws out the figure and the background: the figure always appears in the background as a distinct element, as a configuration of directions, shapes and sizes, which create some order. The guitarist in Édouard Manet’s painting (*The Guitar Player*) is an example of a clear horizontal-vertical figure. The face of the guitarist stands out against the background: the light colour of his face, of his head-scarf, of the front of his shirt showing from under his jacket, create the main axis of the painting, which is balanced by other light elements painted around the lower part of the guitarist. The *focus* of the face is the strongest, because of the contrast between the dark background, in which the dark hat and jacket are hardly visible, and the light

⁸ Ibidem, p. 38.

⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, [in:] *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. G. Johnson, trans. M. Smith, Illinois 1993 pp. 139–149.

face, shirt and light-coloured hand, which is almost lit up by the white cuff, thus drawing our attention to the guitar. The guitar is the dividing line between the top and the bottom of the painting and also what connects them.

In the lower part of the painting the contrast is less distinct, there are more lines, shapes and colours. The strongly articulated figure stands against the empty ground, and, similarly, the face and the shirt, the hands and the fingerboard, the shoes and the still life are islands of heightened activity on a secondary level of the hierarchy. The various *foci* tend to be seen together as a kind of a constellation; they represent the significant points of intensity and carry much of the meaning¹⁰.

The points of intensity create a clear composition of appropriate placement, similarity and difference of colours. The combination of simple elements can be seen through separation. Thus, similarity becomes a power that attracts separated figures and creates order – “comparisons, connections, and separations will not be made between unrelated things, but only when the setup as a whole suggests a sufficient basis¹¹”. This means that figures have to be arranged according to the relationships of shapes, colours, directions and sizes, and separated by “between-space”. Boehm reverses Arnheim’s claim that similarity is the initial condition for the recognition of difference, and argues that it is difference and separation that are the conditions for noticing similarity. This is the fundamental function of iconic difference – creating the possibility for recognition and apperception.

Boehm refers to Leonardo da Vinci’s words about seeing landscapes in blotches on walls, to emphasise the meaning of iconic difference in perceiving figures¹². The painter taught his students to recognise figures in blotches on walls and to look for visual order on these walls – so as to see the iconic difference. According to Boehm this is the iconic potential of imagination¹³.

The process of appearance and the crystallisation of form was presented by Kazimir Malewicz in the painting *Suprematist painting* (1917/8)

¹⁰ R. Arnheim, *Art and the visual perception*, Los Angeles–London 1997, p. 77.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

¹² L. da Vinci, Leonardo, *Traktat o malarstwie*, trans. M. Rzepińska, Gdańsk 2006, p. 154.

¹³ G. Boehm, “Der stumme Logos. Elemente einer Bildwissenschaft”, [in:] *Jahrbuch des Wissenschaftskollegs zu Berlin*, Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin 2001/2002, p. 205.

with a yellow quadrangle. In it, an unevenly-coloured, asymmetrical yellow quadrangle can be seen. It reveals itself in the top right-hand corner of the painting and smoothly transitions from the white background to the strongly outlined figure with sharp edges in the bottom left-hand corner. The two left edges are outlined with dark chalk, which emphasises the contrast within the figure as well as between the edges and the background. The axis of the figure is tilted towards the bottom left corner of the painting. The lower corner of the figure almost touches the edge of the canvas, overbalancing the opposite corner. The figure seems to have pierced the canvas. The thrust was so strong that it cracked the quadrangle and shattered its right side, thus blurring the border with the white of the background. The blurred effect softens the destructive character of the thrust. The event of the painting could also be perceived as the background engulfing the figure.

Edgar Rubin formulated the basic rules of the figure's emergence from the background (*Visuell wahrgenommene Figuren. Studien in psychologischer Analyse*). The figure is usually smaller than the background – this is often an inspiration for the pictorial experiments that both Arnheim and Boehm recall (e.g. *Yellow Relief over Blue* by Ellsworth Kelly from 1991 or the painting *Prometheus strangling the vulture* by Jacques Lipchitz from 1936). Attempts to reverse the relationship are not simple and as a figure the background escapes the eye. The density of an assigned area is helpful in figuration, whilst the reverse – the combination of a multi-chaotic background with a simple smooth figure – gives the impression of immateriality. Fields that are symmetrical and convex more easily become a figure. Concave elements, according to Arnheim, will be perceived more as a background, e.g. as a hole in the figure. The relationship between the top and the bottom has also a figurative importance; it is more common to perceive the figure at the bottom. In this respect, colours have different potentiality (e.g. blue vs. red). All these forces define one another and together determine figuration. Rubin shows that the relationship between the figure and the background is ambiguous and therefore reversible.

Identification of objects and figuration itself require an interspace of blurred and ambiguous content. This space is a vast continuum, which brings to light the figure and the relationships between figures and the whole painting. Through emptiness and ambiguity, iconic boundaries give space for drawing out the figure and for organising the painting as a collection of related elements. This is a paradox of iconic thick-

ness. These elements, which cannot be attributed to a particular figure of meaning, organise figuration and allow the explication of sense: "This impossibility of utterance which is not capable of describing the intensity of the phenomenon and breaks down in it, (...) exposes what is pictorially the thickest¹⁴". Emerging from this vagueness, being becomes a phenomenon, a sensual particularity that is always given within the context of its appearing. The interchangeability of meaning of the background and figures, and the importance of their difference were the main points of Georges Didi-Huberman's analysis of the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel. He analysed a small part of the painting, in which Icarus's legs are protruding from the foaming waves and his floating feathers are presented. They are – as white spots – indistinguishable, and only the background, in this case the ship and the water, allows us to distinguish them from one another, to recognise the feathers and identify the character and the story. The title of the painting and knowledge of the myth also play an important role in the process of recognition.

Iconic boundaries (of lines and colours as interspaces) not only allow for the emergence of the figure, but also for the transition between the figure and the background, as well as between the figures¹⁵. They delimit and connect. The transition suggests possible directions for the gaze, reveals the connections and tensions, and possible spatialisations and temporalisations in subsequent experiences of the image. Iconic boundaries allow the manifestation of the sensual sense. Paul Cézanne, having discarded the rules of perspective, created paintings in which, through transition, it is easy to move between figures and background. What is near and what is far become interchangeable. In this way, colours organise the composition and the unfocused gaze captures the contours that were formed in all the transitions¹⁶.

¹⁴ G. Boehm, *Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes*, op. cit., p. 463.

¹⁵ G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, trans. J. Goodman, Pennsylvania, 2009, pp. 239–240.

¹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt" [in:] *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. G. Johnson, trans. M. Smith, Illinois 1993, p. 6.

Simultaneity

The image is open to a multiplicity of experience due to simultaneity. Simultaneity does not imply stopping the course of time, grasping the most important moment of a story; nor is it an element of a linear chain suspended between retention and protention. It is, rather, a cramming, a densification of possible configurations of time, their pulsations. As Boehm noticed, simultaneity is accumulated potentiality, which is fulfilled in transitions and borders.

Rudolf Arnheim presents similar intuitions: “actually, the order of a picture exists only in space, in simultaneity. The picture contains one or several dominant themes to which all the rest is subordinated. This hierarchy is valid and comprehensible only when all the relations it involves are grasped as being coexistent. The observer scans the various areas of the picture in succession because neither the eye nor the mind is capable of taking in everything simultaneously, but the order in which the exploration occurs does not matter”¹⁷.

Simultaneity opens many paths for the possible experience of the dynamics of the shape. It organises all elements as part of the whole, which both determines and changes them¹⁸. Their unity organises the simultaneity of the image: “the simultaneity of different directions of sense establishes the form in which the transition happens between border contrasts¹⁹”. It is the unity of all transitions, unity established in relation to the whole pictorial system of the phenomenon that emphasises the contrast and harmony between the internal elements. This unity works like a hermeneutic circle, understanding the parts through the work of art as a whole and the work of art as a whole through the parts. It also means that the content of the painting cannot be fully expressed on the grounds of simultaneity.

From Boehm’s point of view inexhaustibleness of sense is based in multiplicity and thickness. According to Gadamer, who also uses the term inexhaustibleness of sense, this is related to the inexhaustibleness of possible questions that can be asked by the viewer, who is always

¹⁷ R. Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

¹⁸ “A composition is nothing other than an exact law-abiding organization of the vital forces, which, in the form of tension, are shut up within the elements”, *ibidem*, p. 92.

¹⁹ G. Boehm, *Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes*, *op. cit.*, pp. 162. 461 [trans. K. Weichert]

a part of culture. The interpreting audience actualises the sense of the work of art through questions and hermeneutic dialogue. The visual dynamics of sensuality are only the medium through which we can find different meanings, depending on the situation the interpreting audience is in. Sensuality does not seem to be playing an important function in this context.

Boehm, on the other hand, focuses on the dynamics between the parts and the whole, which are characteristic of the image. He emphasises the relationship between simultaneity and consecutiveness in which the act of seeing is performed: "if, as interpreting viewers of images, we accept the obvious hermeneutic condition of the connection between the part and the whole, then the function of what has not been articulated becomes obvious²⁰". That which has not been articulated allows us to draw out the recognisable elements of a painting. Understanding takes place in the transition from unverbaised thickness – which gives the viewer the possibility to notice elements on the horizon of the whole – to consecutive development of particular meanings and differentiation of one element from the other. Simultaneity is a scenario of multiple viewings, which allows for endless merging of elements.

Sensuality as the Other

The dynamics of the visual, as a meaning-generating process is not exhausted in a single sense, it exceeds it. This seething potentiality of colours unassigned to any figure, of borders and contours and of the background, allows the gaze to oscillate in the transitions. The potential of this ambiguity and multivectorality was performed in the self-portrait of Giorgio de Chirico (1924–5); the more we look at the figure, the more it melts into the background and becomes ambiguous. It allows us to see Giorgio as a painter, historical figure, painted sculpture and a sculpture in the process of creation – a person turned into stone. The artist emerges from his art, understood as a process. He provokes many different interpretations. "The painting does not ascertain, but it presents, shows, interprets that person in many aspects simultaneously²¹". The meanings

²⁰ G. Boehm, "Bildsinn und Sinnesorgane", [in:] *Ästhetische Erfahrung heute*, Hrsg. J. Stöhr, Köln 1996, p. 164.

²¹ G. Boehm, *Der stumme Logos. Elemente einer Bildwissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 211.

coincide and we can only express them in separate sentences, often contradictorily.

These tangles do not create an unambiguous, finished object, but rather one that is open – in its ambiguity – to different interpretations and possible paths for glances. This way, the simultaneity reveals the coexistence of all possible alternatives. It extends a network of relationships and transitions before the viewers. This paradoxical transition, this iconic thickness of emptiness, which allows for multiple readings, remains elusive. It may – through its articulation – even disrupt the experience of the image. Georges Didi-Huberman tracks this pictorial disruption and deconstructs the history of art, mainly with regard to Erwin Panofsky – he tries to speak about rupture, about what is visual and what is illegible in presentation, about the moment of seeing, but not perceiving, which confronts the viewer with his lack of knowledge and opens him to the sensuality of the image.

Didi-Huberman relates what is legible and visible to semiology in art theory, which is based on three categories: visibility (potential of the shapes to be recognised as objects), legibility (potential of the object to be associated with a certain myth, history, topic or narration) and invisibility (when the image indicates or symbolises a metaphysical idea)²². Perception of presentation is, first, a recognition of elements and allegory, and second, it is an intuitive synthesis based on the acquired knowledge of topics and concepts contained in the literary medium. To synthesise, therefore, is to recognise the multiplicity of sensuality in the idea, in the topic, or in history – in Panofsky's symbol. Visuality, however, does not manifest itself in the visible or the legible. Although it allows them to appear (as the background allows the figure), it may distort them, encroaching upon the independence and robustness of the figure. It is the place of rupture – the Other of the sense in sensuality. The hat in Johannes Vermeer's painting *Girl in a red hat* is an example. The title, the location and the volume of the object indicate that it is indeed a hat; but instead of a regular hat, there is something else, something billowy – the irrational expansion of red paint²³. The more the viewer watches the hat, the more alien and different it becomes, yet still, it can be nothing else but a hat.

²² G. Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 15.

²³ Ibidem, p. 182.

A similar thing happens to threads in *The Lacemaker*. The image seems to be obvious in terms of iconography. It shows a girl making bobbin lace. All axes and lines, the girl's gaze and hands are directed at the sewing, which, however, remains invisible. In the foreground, as if on a pillow to the left of the girl, appear red and white lines, or splashes, which introduce opacity to the reading of the image. It is red and white paint, of a ragged, blurred shape, a blot of paint left alone, the play of a wandering brush, "a blaze of substance, colour without a fully controlled limit"²⁴. It is a sensual whimsy, an accident, a disturbance. However, it is just a part of the picture; using the mimetic context, one can assign to it the form of thread, but it is rather an uncontrolled phenomenon of painting. The thread and the hat, like many other examples (e.g. the building wall in *View of Delft*, or the background wall in the fresco *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico), are symptoms of sensuality – thickness, texture and colour of paint that exceed the shape they have been assigned to. Once spotted, this defines the space in the painting through a disruption and resembles what is unseen in the image, but which at the same time builds this image and releases its dynamics.

In *Confronting Images*, Didi-Huberman shows another side of figuration: visual otherness in visibility, the necessity of the non-sense and the power of defiguration. Boehm suggests that iconic thickness and sensuality defy unequivocal explication, but he focuses mainly on the meaning-generating aspect of images. However, Didi-Huberman looks for places where meaning is disturbed and demonstrates how the image's sensuality is fated to defy sense. These two perspectives look at the image from two different sides and thus complement each other.

Summary

The image's sensual power to generate meaning emerges with the first line, outline or border, which evoke a rich variety of relations of disconnection and connection, belonging, balance, tension. This is the first function of the iconic difference, which is revealed in contrast – distinguishing, differentiating, specifying, determining. Thus emerge the figure, the view, the landscape amidst shape and colour: they can be perceived thanks to the imaginative potential of iconic difference.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 252.

The image fulfils itself as a whole. It is a process of presenting by transitions, oscillations, directions; which appear in the simultaneity of the image. The difference works between the consecutive and the simultaneous – the contemporaneity of all possible alternatives. This seething potential is made possible by the iconic thickness – non-differentiation, non-assignment, emptiness or remaining unseen. As the iconic thickness is emphasised, so it becomes misapprehended and can even lead to a rupture in the presentation of the figure. Thus, sensuality emerges against the legible background as a symptom. The creative force of the sensuality of the image lies in the radically incomplete comprehensibility – it becomes a place of re-determination and oscillation. It is a process.

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