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*And the Word Becomes Flesh: Georges Didi-Huberman's Symptom in the Image*

ABSTRACT

In 1990 French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman announced he would undertake what he termed an 'aesthetics of the symptom'. What exactly this symptomatic approach may mean for art history has often been overlooked in appraising his historiographic project. This essay traces the trajectory of Didi-Huberman's retrieval of the Freudian symptom in relation to Honoré de Balzac's 1831 short story *The Unknown Masterpiece*. While Frenhofer's failed portrait of his mistress Catherine Lescault has long symbolised the irrecoverable gulf between reality and artifice, model and copy, I argue there is an alternative way of imagining Lescault beyond the terms of mimetic failure by drawing on Didi-Huberman's aesthetics. If it is possible to recast Frenhofer's masterpiece not as unsuccessful imitation, but as a successful *presentation* of the human body, as is proposed in the 1985 book *La peinture incarnée*, the terms of this aesthetic production need to be re-examined in light of Didi-Huberman's reception in English. With its origins located in Sigmund Freud's early studies of hysteria, the attendant issues of overdetermination and the *pan* of the image provide an entry point into Didi-Huberman's critique of mimesis and his particular approach to art history.

Originally published in 1831, Honoré de Balzac's short story *Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*) continues to occupy a privileged position in French art history.<sup>1</sup> The tragedy of the central protagonist Frenhofer and his inability to represent the body of the 'perfect' woman Catherine Lescault has traditionally been interpreted in allegorical terms concerning the limits of artistic creativity and representation, reality and artifice. Despite this, is there another way of interpreting Frenhofer's plight beyond the familiar narrative of Platonic failure? Drawing on French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman's retrieval of Freud's symptom and its attendant issues of the *rend* and the Christian motif of the Incarnation, this paper will argue that what is at stake here is a model of representation that can no longer be thought of in figurative or mimetic terms. Catherine Lescault's portrait will be considered in respect to Didi-Huberman's critique of representation. This requires a necessary shift in our understanding of imitation to a *presentation* of the human body.

Georges Didi-Huberman has emerged as an important voice investigating the epistemological foundations of the discipline of art history. One of the most important cornerstones of Didi-Huberman's project is his ongoing critique of the idealism underpinning representation. In its

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the body of literature produced by the art historians practicing at l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, including Damisch, 1984; Didi-Huberman, 1985; Marin, 1985. Also see Chabanne, 1985.

broadest sense, idealism privileges the notion that ideas are primary, while non-ideas, such as physical and material things, are secondary. We can recognise this line of thought descending from Plato who derided manifest images as secondary and derivative as opposed to the higher Forms. Viewed in terms of this intellectual heritage, Didi-Huberman's work provides a timely update to the previous generation of philosophers who each, in various ways, sought to complicate Platonic understandings of mimesis.<sup>2</sup> Didi-Huberman's anti-Platonism, however, departs from his predecessors, and his work is deeply indebted to the metapsychology of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

It is against this background that Didi-Huberman formulated the concept of the symptom's role in undermining the idealism of art history. It is possible to detect an anti-mimetic impulse in Didi-Huberman's work as early as 1985 in *La peinture incarnée suivi de 'Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu' de Balzac*.<sup>3</sup> Here, drawing on Balzac's short story, Didi-Huberman introduces a multipronged strategy by way of the symptom, the Incarnation and the torn image (*l'image déchirure*) to reject the idealism that he argues continues to underwrite the discipline. To be clear, Didi-Huberman introduces the symptom in his 1985 reading of Balzac's short story, *La peinture incarnée*, establishing its distance from conventional understandings of representation. The term, however, is cursorily sketched, with Didi-Huberman's full debt to Freud appearing later in his well-known 1990 work, *Devant l'image*.<sup>4</sup> This essay departs from Didi-Huberman's text by returning to the primal scene, Frenhofer's painting, to re-examine this symptomatic approach to the image and its clear critique of mimetic understandings of representation. It is an opportunity to rescue Frenhofer from his Platonic purgatory as well as offering an entry point into the background and structure of some of the key operative terms in Didi-Huberman's critique of representation.

In 1990 Didi-Huberman announced he would pursue 'an aesthetic of the symptom':

So it is necessary to propose a phenomenology, not only of the relation to the visible world as empathetic 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). That's what an aesthetic of the symptom, in other words, an aesthetic of the sovereign accidents in painting, would tend toward.<sup>5</sup>

Didi-Huberman was searching for alternative models of representation that would help break with classic theories of mimesis and the logocentrism privileged by traditional approaches to the discipline of art history. His solution lay in Sigmund Freud's accounts of hysterical symptoms and dream formation and signals a self-conscious departure from traditional art history terminology. What, then, does 'an aesthetic of the symptom' offer the discipline of art history? Didi-Huberman himself posed the question asking 'What, at bottom, can symptom

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, 1983; Derrida, 1981; Foucault, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1990; Translated Didi-Huberman, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, pp. 263-64.

mean in a discipline wholly committed to the study of objects that are presented, offered, visible?’<sup>6</sup>

Let's begin, however, with a detour. Not with Freud, but Balzac's novella *The Unknown Masterpiece*. Set on the Paris Left Bank in December 1612, Balzac's narrative unfolds around the old painter Frenhofer's mysterious portrait of his mistress Catherine Lescault. After ten years working in complete isolation Frenhofer finally reveals his masterpiece to his younger artistic counterparts Porbus and Poussin. Proudly, he declares ‘This is the woman I love!’<sup>7</sup> In Frenhofer's mind his masterpiece ceased to be a representation, but had *become* his mistress. He successfully traversed the copy and its model and the canvas became alive. ‘Where's the art? Gone, vanished! Here's true form—the very form of a girl.’<sup>8</sup> No longer a mere representation, Frenhofer's portrait was a living, breathing woman, ‘It isn't a canvas, it's a woman! A woman with whom I weep and laugh and talk and think.’<sup>9</sup>

If mimesis is conventionally defined in terms of imitation, Frenhofer's portrait is condemned as an artistic failure. Far from a perfect rendering of the ideal woman, Porbus and Poussin can only see frenzied skeins of paint, save a foot in the corner of the canvas, ‘but a delightful foot, a living foot!’<sup>10</sup> The tip of the foot is alive, emerging from the chaos of the painted abstraction. Frenhofer finally sees the portrait through the eyes of his colleagues, as a ‘wall of paint.’<sup>11</sup> It is indeed a canvas, not a woman. Frenhofer burns his paintings and dies in the night.

*The Unknown Masterpiece* inhabits one of the great fault lines traversing the history of representation. Frenhofer's failure has traditionally been interpreted in Platonic terms, a testament to the irreconcilable gulf separating the original from its copy. A ‘successful’ mimetic painting would have been indistinguishable from its model. As Elizabeth Mansfield explains, ‘Poussin's bafflement—and Frenhofer's madness—spring from the same source: a desire to make visible the ideal, to paint what is too beautiful to picture.’<sup>12</sup> In his book *The Invisible Masterpiece*, Hans Belting remarks in respect to Frenhofer's tragedy, ‘Perfect art was a shadow, a mere ghost of classical times, and not even Orpheus was able to bring it back into the world because he lost it when he tried to look at it.’<sup>13</sup> Ontologically denounced by Plato, the image always retains a derisory or secondary status. Frenhofer's failure reflects the desire and ultimate failure of mimesis to achieve absolute equivalence with its ideal form.

Frenhofer himself draws an analogy between his plight and the Greek myth of Pygmalion. Pygmalion's love towards his sculpture is typically read in terms of Platonic fear and anxiety generated by the spectator's desire towards the image. Frenhofer muses ‘It's ten years now, young man, that I've been struggling with this problem. But what are ten short years when

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<sup>6</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Mansfield, 2007, p. xii.

<sup>13</sup> Belting, 2001, p. 126.

you're contending with nature? How long did Lord Pygmalion take to create the only statue that ever walked!' <sup>14</sup> Like Pygmalion, Frenhofer so loved his mistress he sought to incarnate her, to turn the canvas and paint into a living, breathing being. 'Her eyes seemed moist to me, her flesh was alive, the locks of her hair stirred... She breathed!' <sup>15</sup> Yet there exists a crucial difference forever separating Frenhofer and Pygmalion. The goddess Athena granted Pygmalion's wish, and his marble become flesh. Frenhofer, however, died in anguish, reminding us of the ultimate futility of the mimetic ambition of making absence present. Frenhofer's portrait is forever fated, unable to achieve equivalence with its model.

Despite this, is there another way of interpreting Frenhofer's 'failure' beyond Platonic terms? There are several clues in Balzac's novella alerting us to the possibility of a breach or rupture with mimesis. Frenhofer's goals lay beyond notions of imitation, rejecting Plato's condemnation of the art of representation and its departure from the ideal form. <sup>16</sup> Early in the text, whilst correcting Porbus's portrait of *Mary of Egypt*, Frenhofer exclaims: 'It's not the mission of art to copy nature, but to express it!' <sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the logic of mimesis is predicated on the assumption there is an original model. Paradoxically, there is no model. Balzac gives no indication that Catherine Lescault actually exists. Unlike the other female character in the text, Gillette, Lescault is physically absent from the unfolding drama. Later, unveiling his canvas Frenhofer exclaims, 'You're in the presence of a woman, and you're still looking for a picture.' <sup>18</sup> Frenhofer sought to incarnate Lescault, to transform the canvas into flesh. His canvas is alive, the body of a living, breathing woman. Frenhofer's painting does not conform to the representative assumption of the mimetic: the portrait is not a copy, as there is no original.

### **Hysterical Looking: Freud and Charcot**

How may we begin to think of Frenhofer's act of representing an absent origin? By turning to Didi-Huberman's retrieval of Freud's symptom it is necessary to examine its trajectory across the body of his work. The symptom plays a significant organising role for Didi-Huberman's critique of art history's predilection for mimesis. As early as 1985 in his text *La peinture incarnée* Didi-Huberman proposed the 'symptom, rather than mimesis' as an alternative to mimetic understandings of representation. <sup>19</sup> What, then, are the conditions for the symptom's emergence, and how does it operate in Freud's work? It is also necessary to examine the structure of the Freudian symptom in order to understand how Didi-Huberman deploys it throughout his writing.

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<sup>14</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, 1987, 10.596-98.

<sup>17</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> 'Symptôme, et non plus mimesis.' Didi-Huberman, 1985, p. 61 (Author's own translation).

For Freud, the symptom was a privileged function of the unconscious and first appears in Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*. From the outset the hysterical symptom is decoupled from a single point of origin:

In the great majority of cases it is not possible to ascertain the point of origin by means of simple medical examination, however detailed, in part because it often involves experiences which patients find unpleasant to talk about, but principally because they really cannot remember them, and often have no sense of the causal connection between the precipitating event and the pathological phenomenon.<sup>20</sup>

Freud underscored the difficulty in establishing direct causal relation between the original trauma and visible hysterical symptoms. This key insight was derived from his observations of the celebrated French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, whom he studied with in Paris for several months in 1885 and 1886. Freud regularly attended Charcot's famous Tuesday lectures at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière, the infamous Parisian asylum for 'madwomen'. Freud observed that Charcot 'was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist—he was, as he himself said, a '*visuel*', a man who sees.'<sup>21</sup> Freud described Charcot's process of working:

He used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, till suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him. In his mind's eye the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave way to order: the new nosological pictures emerged, characterized by the constant combination of certain groups of symptoms.<sup>22</sup>

Charcot's interpretative methods were enhanced with the use of photography. The photographic image recorded the visible signs of hysteria in order to document and analyse the symptoms. Charcot developed a visual iconography whereby every symptom was able to be classified according to a pre-existing taxonomy. Hysterical disorders were organised in terms of their visual appearance so that every gesture could be recorded, categorised and interpreted. The intersection between the privileged clinical gaze of the camera with the documentation of the hysterical symptom was the subject of Didi-Huberman's doctoral thesis and published in 1982 as *Invention de l'hystérie*.<sup>23</sup> In this text, Didi-Huberman explores the circularity between the various types of posing, staging and lighting the subjects underwent in the process of documenting the 'authentic' displays of hysteria. The patient was rewarded for their performance, with Charcot's 'best' patients becoming the privileged subjects of his hysterical iconography.

Freud eventually distanced himself from Charcot's analysis of the physical manifestation of the hysterical symptom, rejecting the possibility that there was a direct causal relationship which could be represented by the hysteric. Freud argued that what mattered was less the

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<sup>20</sup> Breuer, 1974, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Freud, 1962, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Freud, 1962, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1982; English Translation Didi-Huberman, 2003.

visible appearance of the symptom than the need to develop a thorough understanding of the unconscious processes contributing to its presentation. Consequently, the symptom does not behave predictably according to the rules of an *a priori* iconography. If Charcot developed a direct causal relationship between the visible manifestation of the symptom and its source, Freud deferred attribution to a single point of origin or trauma, a process he called *overdetermination*. In the case of Frau Emmy von N, for example, Freud observed that her symptoms were related to a series of traumatic childhood memories. When asked why she was so easily frightened, Emmy von N recalled four traumatic childhood events.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the formation of the unconscious-like symptoms and dreams can be attributed to multiple causes in conflict. Freud writes '*a hysterical symptom develops only where the fulfilments of two opposing wishes, arising each from a different psychological system, are able to converge in a single expression.*'<sup>25</sup> Freud continues:

A symptom is not merely the expression of a realized unconscious wish; a wish from the preconscious which is fulfilled by the same symptom must also be present. So that the symptom will have *at least* two determinations, one arising from each of the symptoms involved in the conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, if Charcot sought synthesis, Freud embraced oppositional conflict. Freud's symptom was the consequence of the process of repression, whereby the ego withdraws from inappropriate impulses or memories. In *Inhibitions Symptoms and Anxiety* Freud outlines this process in relation to the ego's defence struggle against the id. Freud defines the symptom as 'a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression.'<sup>27</sup> Incompatible with the ego's ethical standards, repression occurs when the ego rejects the inappropriate impulse. The ego attempts to keep the impulse at bay via means of repression. Despite this psychic defence mechanism, the repressed impulse returns, albeit manifested in a disguised or displaced form. As a result, the symptom is the physical manifestation of unresolved conflict between the ego and the id. For Freud, the psychic processes driving the symptom's formation were inherently dialectical, the symptom driven by the conflict between the ego and the id with no opportunity for resolution.

Freud's theorisation of overdetermination is crucial for Didi-Huberman's critique of mimesis as it developed the notion of a slippage in the relation between signifier and signified. The overdetermined symptom presents a rupture in the mimetic economy as there is no longer a direct relation between the origin and its representation. By decoupling the symptom from a single traumatic origin, the signifier no longer lays claim to the signified. As the hysterical symptom is the physical enactment of multiple possible causes, it is thereby disguised and displaced, signalling a gap or space between the physical manifestation of the symptom and its origin. The symptom does not present a stable set of signs and symbols that can be 'read' or 'interpreted'. Here Didi-Huberman follows Lacan's modification of the Saussurian sign.

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<sup>24</sup> Breuer and Freud, 1974, p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, 1976, p. 724 Freud's emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Freud, 1976, p. 724.

<sup>27</sup> Freud, 1926, p. 91.

For Saussure, the relation between the signifier and signified was reciprocal and equal. Lacan, however, departs from this, emphasising the unstable and unpredictable relationship between the signifier and signified. Signification is not a stable and predictable relationship, but a series of slippages.<sup>28</sup> Accentuating the symptom's slippage in signification Didi-Huberman writes 'the sign is an object, the symptom is in movement. The sign is manipulable, the symptom escapes, slips through the fingers. The sign is erected, the symptom describes the fall.'<sup>29</sup> Representation can no longer claim mimetic transparency, but now will always be overdetermined, caught in a chain of signification with no recourse to an origin.

The overdetermination of the symptom complicates the notion that a work of art is a series of visual signs that can be read and decoded like a language. To return back to Balzac's novella, Porbus and Poussin are bewildered because Frenhofer's painting is unreadable. A mimetic rendering of the painting would have presented the artists with a coherent set of visible signs and a clearly recognisable iconography. Standing before the portrait of Catherine Lescault, they are presented with a swirling mass of chaotic matter, with the exception of her perfectly rendered foot. Like the hysterical symptom, Frenhofer has decoupled the image from its origin, negating the spectator's ability to 'read' the painting:

'Do you see anything?' Poussin whispered to Porbus.

'No. Do you?'

'Nothing.'<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the illegible rendering of Lescault, Porbus' painting *Mary of Egypt* consisted of clearly identifiable subject matter; the painting could be read by Frenhofer and Poussin as an unmistakable rendering of Mary 'undressing in order to pay her passage to Jerusalem'.<sup>31</sup>

Freud's early research into hysteria was to directly lead him into the theorisation of dreams. In an 1899 letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, Freud extended the formation of hysterical symptoms to the dream-work and the concepts of condensation and displacement writing 'I want to reveal to you only that the dream schema is capable of the most general application, that the key to hysteria as well really lies in dreams.'<sup>32</sup> The psychic process at work for dreams is the same as symptom formation. Again, the formation of the unconscious is overdetermined, attributed to a plurality of possible causes. In the *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud recounts one of his own dreams, the dream of the *botanical monograph* to stress the overdetermination or non-linear causality of the terms *botanical* and *monograph*: 'I have written a monograph on an (unspecified) genus of plant. The book lay before me and I was at the moment turning over a folded coloured plate. Bound up in the copy there was a dried

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<sup>28</sup> For Lacan's revision of Saussure see Lacan, 1977, pp. 149-54.

<sup>29</sup> 'Le signe est manipulable, le symptôme échappe, glisse entre les doigts. Le signe s'érige, le symptôme décrit une chute.' Didi-Huberman, 1995a, pp. 199-200 (Author's own translation).

<sup>30</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Freud, 1985, p. 338.

*specimen of the plant.*<sup>33</sup> Freud highlights the rhizomatic connections of both dream terms *botanical* and *monograph*. For instance he links *botanical* with Dr Gärtner and his 'blooming' wife, a patient named Flora and the story of a lady who had forgotten her flowers. The dream-thoughts branch from the forgotten flowers to his wife's favourite flowers, which in turn linked to the artichoke, the recollection of a trip to Italy and so on. Importantly, each dream-thought branches into multiple associations. *Monograph* is associated with Freud's specialised area of study and his expensive hobbies. The terms 'botanical' and 'monograph', wrote Freud 'found their way into the content of the dream because they possessed copious contacts with the majority of the dream-thoughts...they constituted 'nodal points' upon which a great number of the dream-thoughts converged.'<sup>34</sup> The dream terms *botanical* and *monograph* are the points of intersection where multiple dream-thoughts intersect. As Freud demonstrates in the case study, 'each one of those elements is shown to have been determined many times over in relation to the dream-thoughts.'<sup>35</sup> For Freud, it was a matter of commencing with the manifest dream, and working backwards to examine the chain of associations, the nodal points of the rhizoid structure of the latent dream-thoughts.

As we have seen, the process of overdetermination for Freud is the same for both dream and symptom. Overdetermination eliminates any vestiges of one to one correspondence between the dream's manifest content — what we can remember, and the latent dream thoughts, or the actual psychic meaning. The dream converts wishes and desires into the disguised and displaced images of the manifest content. Freud uses the metaphor of the rebus to emphasise the overdetermination of the dream image:

Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical. A boat has no business to be on the roof of a house, and a headless man cannot run. Moreover, the man is bigger than the house; and if the whole picture is intended to represent a landscape, letters of the alphabet are out of place in it since such objects do not occur in nature. But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be *presented* by that element in some way or other.<sup>36</sup>

The images are figurative, but *dissembled* via the dream-work. Like the symptom, Freud warns of attempting to 'decode' or 'read' the dream arguing 'If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error.'<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that the 'symbolic relation' here is understood by Freud as a rhizoid network of relations. It is through the processes of

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<sup>33</sup> Freud, 1976, p. 386.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, 1976, p. 388.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, 1976, p. 389.

<sup>36</sup> Freud, 1976, p. 382.

<sup>37</sup> Freud, 1976, pp. 381-82.



condensation and displacement that the link between the dream and resemblance is unable to be fixed as it dissolves in a chain of associations.

Freud's famous passage has significant repercussions for Didi-Huberman who argues 'It is with the dream and the symptom that Freud smashed the box of representation.'<sup>38</sup> The dream signals a shift from representation to *presentation*. Overdetermination and the psychic processes of the dream-work ensure the dream does not imitate, it *presents*. Analogous to the series of slippages between signifier and signified, latent dream thoughts no longer bear any direct relation to the dream's manifest content.

### **The Symptom in the work of art: what is a pan?**

Freud's paradigm of the symptom is evoked by Didi-Huberman to emphasise its material status in the form of the *pan*. The *pan* first emerges in his 1985 *La Peinture incarnée* and is reworked over the next decade. By 1990 in the 'Appendix: The Detail and the *Pan*', Didi-Huberman defines the *pan* as 'a symptom of paint within the picture.'<sup>39</sup> In his well-known discussion of Jan Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (1665), Didi-Huberman identifies a zone of red paint in the foreground that places into crisis the logic of the painting's mimetic representational system. Didi-Huberman formulates the *pan* against a strain of scholarship emphasising Vermeer's use of the camera obscura as a device framing his construction of illusionism. Svetlana Alpers, for instance, famously attributed Vermeer's 'circles of confusion' to the 'quirks of this device.'<sup>40</sup> The symptom in Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* is the materiality of the paint itself. No longer repressed, 'it *infects*'<sup>41</sup> the mimetic economy of the painting. Later, Didi-Huberman will write: 'It is the waste, the unobserved, the counter regime of figurative representation that I describe as the 'symptom'.<sup>42</sup>

In *La Peinture incarnée* Didi-Huberman makes the link between the *pan* and Derrida's *supplément*, writing 'It is something of the order of the instant, the scansion, supplement, fantasy.'<sup>43</sup> Didi-Huberman's analogy is worth investigating as it is omitted in later English language translations. Furthermore, it brings Didi-Huberman into classic Derridean territory, aligning his critique of mimesis with Derrida's critique of logocentrism. The supplement is a key term introduced in Derrida's reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida extends Rousseau's concept of the supplement to discuss the relationship between writing and speech. Rousseau condemned writing for being a representation of speech and thereby a destruction of presence. Derrida demonstrates that

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<sup>38</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 261. The English language version is a reworking of an earlier article from 1986. See Didi-Huberman, 1986.

<sup>40</sup> Alpers, 1983, p. 31. On Vermeer's relationship to the camera obscura see also Fink, 1971; Mayor, 1946,

<sup>41</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 256 Didi-Huberman's emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> 'C'est ce rebut, cet inobservé central, ce contre-régime de la représentation figurée, que je qualifie de « symptôme.' Didi-Huberman, 1995a, p. 195 (Author's own translation).

<sup>43</sup> 'C'est quelque chose de l'ordre de l'instant, de la scansion, du supplément, du fantasme.' Didi-Huberman, 1985, p. 44 (Author's own translation).

despite Rousseau's privileging of speech as the most truthful direct expression of self, Rousseau paradoxically recognises that the ability to express himself in speech is not nearly as effective as his written communication. As a result, writing both undermines and supplements the presence of speech.<sup>44</sup>

For Didi-Huberman, the *pan* behaves like the supplement, simultaneously reinforcing and undermining the mimetic claim to presence. The *pan* reminds us that mimesis *desires* equivalence with the subject of representation, claiming an impossible correspondence between the signifier and the signified, and therefore will always remain condemned structurally to failure. Mimetic success is predicated on the subordination of matter to form. Following the logic of Derrida's supplement, the mimetic economy of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* becomes untenable, collapsing under the pressure exerted from the *pan*'s materiality. Derrida writes 'Difference produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible.'<sup>45</sup> Surging forth from the surface of the canvas, the *pan* simultaneously destabilises and reinforces the mimetic drive to repress its own material existence.

What we see in Frenhofer's painting is a swirling chaotic mass of matter, a 'wall of paint.'<sup>46</sup> Unlike the small rupture in *The Lacemaker*, the *pan* has now swollen to overwhelm the entire portrait of Lescault. This is precisely Frenhofer's profound insight. The portrait cannot be measured in terms of a mimetic failure, but instead reveals the structural paradox residing at the heart of mimesis. By privileging the materiality of the *pan* over the verisimilitude of form, Frenhofer demonstrates imitative success rests on mimesis' capacity to conceal and even repudiate its own materiality. Mimesis cannot claim representational truth status without its material support. This very materiality, however, guarantees separation from the subject it desires equivalence with. Regardless of its best endeavours to obscure its material origins, form never achieves parity. By reversing the hierarchical relationship between form and matter, the *pan* lays claim to this failure.

The origin of the term *pan* is literary, borrowed from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. In a well-known passage the writer Bergotte examines a patch of yellow in Vermeer's painting *View of Delft* (1660-1). In this passage, Bergotte fixated his gaze on the patch of yellow and obsessively repeats the phrase '*petit pan de mur jaune*' to describe this little patch of yellow wall. Bergotte then dies in front of the little patch of yellow paint. Didi-Huberman writes 'the yellow in the painting by Vermeer, as color, is a *whack*, a distressing zone of paint, of paint considered as "precious" and traumatic material cause.'<sup>47</sup> In the earlier text *La Peinture incarnée*, however, Didi-Huberman introduces the *pan* by way of Frenhofer. In *The Unknown Masterpiece* Balzac writes, 'Frenhofer stared at his picture for a moment and staggered as if from a *blow*. "Nothing, nothing!"'<sup>48</sup> Standing before the great 'great wall of

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<sup>44</sup> Derrida, 1976, pp. 141-64.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, 1976, p. 143.

<sup>46</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, pp. 17, 248. Here the *pan* is translated as 'whack' but it maintains a multivalent resonance, including 'section' (of a wall), 'panel' (in tailoring), 'patch' (of blue sky – or of a painting).

<sup>48</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 43. (My emphasis)

paint', Frenhofer's anguished cry 'Nothing, nothing!' serves as the entry point for Didi-Huberman's discussion of the 'effect of the *pan*'.<sup>49</sup> Didi-Huberman emphasises the *pan*'s phenomenology, and its capacity to disrupt and unsettle the spectator by drawing an analogy with Roland Barthes's *punctum*. Evoking the phenomenology of Barthes's *punctum*, as 'that accident which pricks me',<sup>50</sup> the *pan*'s effect is more 'intense for me, panicked, vertiginous.'<sup>51</sup> Like the *punctum*, the *pan* is haptic, a rupture in the picture plane that punctures and pierces the spectator.

If the origin of the term *pan* is literary, the structure is Lacanian. Here we may begin to measure the symptom's proximity to its closely related concepts, the image as rend, (*l'image déchirure*) and the Incarnation. In *La peinture incarnée* Didi-Huberman carefully advances the image as rend in dialogue with Jacques Lacan's *vel* of alienation outlined in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.<sup>52</sup> Lacan's theory of alienation is famously predicated on a choice. It is not a straightforward either/or choice, however. As Lacan describes it, alienation is the impossible choice between being and meaning. The subject cannot be both: 'If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning that...constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious.'<sup>53</sup> The 'or' is the alienated subject. In electing to choose being, the subject dissolves. Alternatively, by choosing meaning, the subject is deprived of an unconscious. Alienation is therefore an imposed choice, condemning the Lacanian subject to appearing only in division. Lacan here draws on the example of Hegel's master slave dialectic, '*Your freedom or your life!*'<sup>54</sup> There can be no freedom for the slave without life, but there will be no life without freedom. Both choices are imposed, thereby becoming "dissymmetrical." In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, alienation is a temporary phase of development in the progressive freedom of self-consciousness. In consciousness' journey, the struggle with alienation is a necessary step in the progressive freedom of self-consciousness. Unlike Hegel, however, Lacan's theory of alienation cannot be dialecticised, the subject remaining forever split.

What are the implications of Lacan's *vel* of alienation for Didi-Huberman in his development of the *pan*? Here, the parties are not the master and slave but the absent Catherine Lescault and Frenhofer's painting. The 'subject' of Frenhofer's painting is his mistress Lescault. The 'Other' is the surface of the painting. For Frenhofer, the choice is either his mistress or the painting. It is an impossible choice, as Frenhofer cannot have both. Between the overlapping sections of the sets resides the *pan*: it is the undecidable element of the in-between. Following the logic of Lacan's *vel* of alienation, the *pan* consequently imposes a torn model of subjectivity, the rend. Like the non-meaning or *vel* in Lacan's diagram of alienation, it paradoxically joins and divides. By electing to show Porbus and Poussin his canvas, Frenhofer lost both, descending into the non-meaning of the alienated *vel*.

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<sup>49</sup> 'l'effet de pan.' Didi-Huberman, 1985, p. 44 (Author's own translation).

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, 1984, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> 'pour moi intensif, panique, vertigineux.' Didi-Huberman, 1985, p. 44 (Author's own translation).

<sup>52</sup> See Didi-Huberman, 1985, pp. 47-49.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan, 1998, p. 211.

<sup>54</sup> Lacan, 1998, p. 212.

Lacan's rent or torn model of alienation has epistemological ramifications as it undermines the Kantian structure of knowledge that is transcendental, stable and centred. Opposed to this, Didi-Huberman's subject is faced with the paradox between seeing and knowing. Like Lacan's *vel* of alienation, the spectator is faced with an impossible choice, a dialectical oscillation that Didi-Huberman formulates in the following terms: 'to know without seeing or to see without knowing. There is loss in either case.'<sup>55</sup> The split between seeing and knowing imposes a paradox: to *know* is to sacrifice 'the real of the object'.<sup>56</sup> To *see*, however, is to submit to a 'dismantling' of the certainty of the Kantian *a priori*. Both terms posit an irrevocable slipping away, a feeling of loss. Against privileging one term over the other, or attempting to synthesise and resolve the conflict, Didi-Huberman instead elects to inhabit the ambiguity, to 'proceed dialectically, then, and without hope of synthesis.'<sup>57</sup>

If Didi-Huberman's spectator is necessarily rent or torn via Lacan's *vel* of alienation, the notion of conflict existing between two opposing terms unable to be synthesised is extended to become a primary operative principle throughout Didi-Huberman's writing. As opposed to the self-enclosed certainty of classical representation, the image is necessarily 'rent, breached, ruined at its center as at the crucial point of its unfolding.'<sup>58</sup> Like Lacan's alienated subject, Didi-Huberman's image is allowed to remain permanently in conflict. Unable to achieve unity in synthesis, the image as *rend* (*l'image déchirure*) remains irreconcilably torn, resulting in a corresponding *opening*. Emulating the structure of Lacanian alienation, the image as *rend* allows for the paradoxical cohabitation of dualisms: knowing and not-knowing, presentation and representation, opacity and transparency, visual and the visible, resemblance and dissemblance. For Didi-Huberman, this is the 'work of the negative in the image'.<sup>59</sup> Carefully keeping his distance from Hegel, the image as *rend* is the image that must remain unsynthesised, maintaining a productive tension between oppositional forces.

### **What is the relation of the symptom to the Incarnation?**

The emphasis on the materiality of the *pan* is amplified in Didi-Huberman's close examination of the series of *marmi finti* or fictive marble panels of Trecento artist Fra Angelico. Here, the materiality of the *pan* is put to work in an altogether different mode of address. No longer tasked with undermining the logic of mimesis, the materiality of the *pan* is imagined as a pure presencing of the Divine. The panels are located directly below Fra Angelico's *Holy Conversation (Madonna of the Shadows)* (1438-50) (Fig. 1.) in the corridor of the San Marco Convent in Florence and have been conspicuously absent from the existing Fra Angelico literature. With a gesture to Derrida's reading of Kant's *parergon*, Didi-

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<sup>55</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 140.

<sup>56</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 140.

<sup>57</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 40.

<sup>58</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 142.

<sup>59</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 142.

Huberman demonstrates the panels are simultaneously inside and outside the work. Like the frame, the panels perform a paradoxical function—they are both subsidiary and constitutive. Following the logic of the supplement, the marginal becomes integral by virtue of its marginal status.<sup>60</sup> For Didi-Huberman, the panels are not performing a pedagogical service to the illiterate congregation. Nor do they fulfil a mimetic or figurative function. Alberti's advice to painters in *On Painting* was to think of the picture plane as 'transparent and like glass,'<sup>61</sup> or even 'an open window,'<sup>62</sup> indicating the transparency of the painterly materials. Now, evoking the phenomenology of the *pan* and its haptic ability to touch the spectator, Didi-Huberman writes: 'Here, then, was a type of painting that sought presence before representation. It was not designed to withdraw, as a classical landscape withdraws behind the 'window' of its framing. On the contrary, it was designed to advance toward the eye, to disturb it, touch it.'<sup>63</sup>

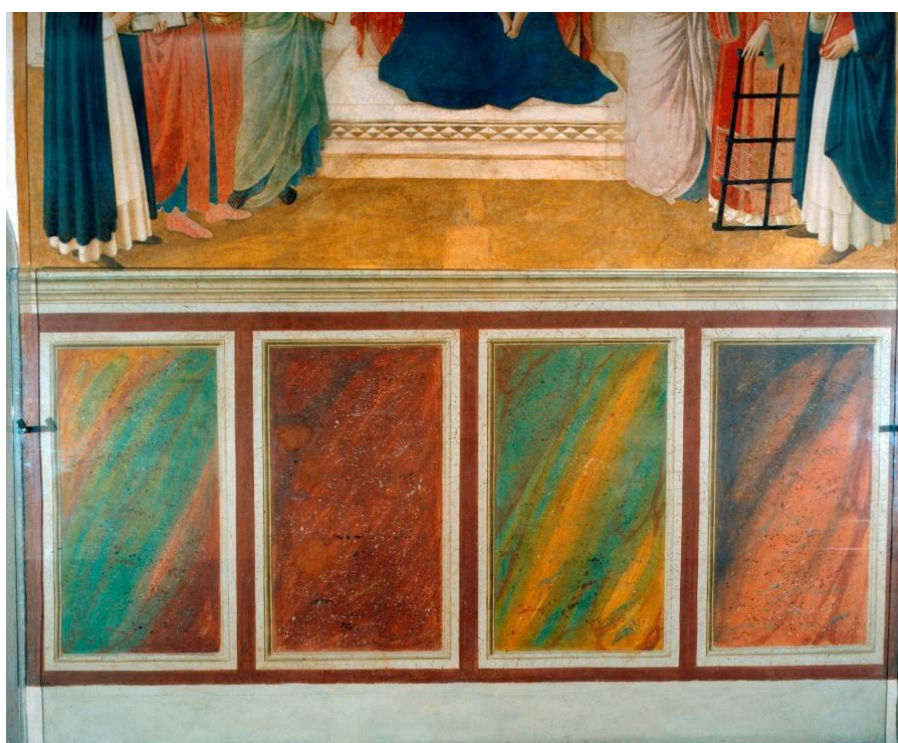


Fig.1. Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows* (detail), c. 1438-50. Fresco. Florence, convent of San Marco, east corridor. (Nicolò Orsi Battaglini.)

<sup>60</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 54. Derrida writes 'A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the word done (*fait*), the fact (*le fait*), the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside, not simply inside.'

<sup>61</sup> Alberti, 2004, p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> Alberti, 2004, p. 54.

<sup>63</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1995b, p. 10.

Didi-Huberman argues Fra Angelico's panels take us to the heart of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Derived from the Latin root *caro*, or flesh, the Incarnation is the Divine embodying itself in human form, and this form inhabiting the earth. This is given its most succinct formulation with John 1:14, 'And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.' Didi-Huberman thus advances the hypothesis that Fra Angelico's panels are 'the opposite' of what an art historian understands.<sup>64</sup> The invisibility and unrepresentability of the Divine lies distinctly at odds with the Renaissance theoretical emphasis of the imitation of physical appearances: painting need only concern itself with what is visible and thereby representable. In the opening pages of his 1436 treatise *On Painting* Leon Battista Alberti asserts 'No one will deny that things which are not visible do not concern the painter, for he strives to represent only the things that are seen.'<sup>65</sup> The Incarnation therefore functions as a limit event for representation, as it cannot be rendered in mimetic terms. This is the paradox confronting Christian artists: how to visually affirm the presence of God, without reducing the image to the anthropomorphism of the Greek and Roman gods.

How did Fra Angelico render the mystery of the Incarnation in visual form? To answer this question, Didi-Huberman turns to the negative theology of early Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite who was writing at the end of the fifth century. Dionysius warns of the dangers of attempting to create a direct correspondence between the corporeal body and the Divine. Dionysius's God is unknowable and ineffable, existing beyond the limitations of human thought and representation. God is therefore formless. 'Images', Dionysius writes, 'have something of the lowly and vulgar about them.'<sup>66</sup> Dionysius' iconoclasm introduces the notion of *dissemblance* to best present the Divine.<sup>67</sup> As nothing can appropriately resemble God, He is best addressed visually in terms of dissemblance.

For Didi-Huberman, Fra Angelico's *marmi finti* is the art of negative theology in accordance with Pseudo-Dionysius's writings.<sup>68</sup> Dionysius argues that even the lowliest matter can be an appropriate representational form of presenting the Divine. He claims 'Using matter, one may be lifted up to the immaterial archetypes...Of course one must be careful to use the similarities as dissimilarities to avoid one-to-one correspondences'.<sup>69</sup> With Dionysius' exhortation of the virtue of matter in mind, Fra Angelico's panels declare their own materiality as pure *pans* of paint. Didi-Huberman retrieves matter from its traditional subordination to form arguing, 'Before representing anything, it *presents* matter, paint; and what it represents is also matter, a fictive multicolored marble.'<sup>70</sup> Paint, freed from the constraint of describing or illustrating, becomes the privileged site of spiritual exegesis, a material presencing of the Divine. God is *presented* as opposed to represented.

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<sup>64</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1995b, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> Alberti, 2004, p. 37.

<sup>66</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, 2.140A.

<sup>67</sup> Derived from the Latin translation of the Greek originals, *dissimilitudo* in French becomes *dissemblance*. In Colm Luibhéid's English translation, *dissimilar* is used. I have elected to retain the French translation *dissemblance*.

<sup>68</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1995b, pp.50-56.

<sup>69</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, 2.144B-C.

<sup>70</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1995b, p. 55. My emphasis.

Again, Didi-Huberman reminds us of his anti-idealist program, that the 'great mimetic theme of figurative representation' cannot account for the physical materiality of these images.<sup>71</sup> It is important to recognise that imitation must be thought of here in terms of its limit, the Incarnation. The dual representational economy demands that one cannot be thought of without the other, but must remain in dialectical opposition. As a result, access to God is predicated on an opening up, a rift or rend in the world of classical imitation. What is called forth is not an image of God, but a symptom, a material vestige, a trace of the Divine.

If we return to Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, we are now at a point where we can rethink the portrait beyond mimetic failure. Didi-Huberman emphasises Frenhofer's desire to realise Catherine Lescault writing 'Frenhofer, in my opinion, aimed for Incarnation.'<sup>72</sup> It is impossible to ignore the theological overtones of the Trinity as Frenhofer characterises himself as 'a father, a lover, and God Himself'.<sup>73</sup> Let us imagine Frenhofer, momentarily, as God, the Creator of nature: 'This woman's not a creature, she's a creation.'<sup>74</sup> According to the Trinity, God created man in his own image. If Lescault was painted, imitated in her image according to Frenhofer, this leads us directly back to the paradox confronting all visual representations of the Divine and the problematic of the Incarnation: God has no image. What Frenhofer painted was not the semblance of Lescault, but her *dissemblance*. The portrait is the non-figural dissemblance of an unrepresentable divine. Lescault is presented as the mystery of the Incarnation, beyond the order of mimetic resemblances and imitation of the corporeal human body. Both Poussin and Porbus pay respect to the divine nature of Frenhofer's canvas:

'Here,' continued Porbus, touching the canvas, 'right here ends our art on earth.'

'Whereupon it vanishes in the heavens,' said Poussin.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, like Fra Angelico's *marmi finti*, Lescault is rendered as a formless chaotic mass, a 'wall of paint'.<sup>76</sup> Congruent with Pseudo-Dionysius's negative theology, Frenhofer has privileged the *dissemblance* of painterly matter over the *semblance* of imitation. Like Fra Angelico's panels, Frenhofer retrieves the materiality of paint from its subordination to mimetic form. The skeins of paint are no longer tasked with mimetic representation, but the Incarnate *presencing* of Lescault, a bringing forth of a divine body.

We have now traced the trajectory of Didi-Huberman's invocation of the Freudian symptom as a general disruption to the mimetic understanding of representation. The symptom offers an alternative to this mimetic representation. By decoupling the symptom from a single direct originary trauma, the process of overdetermination ensnares the symptom in a chain of

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<sup>71</sup> Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 186.

<sup>72</sup> Didi-Huberman, 1985, 43. « La peintre Frenhofer visait l'incarnat » (Author's own translation).

<sup>73</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>74</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>75</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 42.

<sup>76</sup> Balzac, 2001, p. 40.

significations. As such, the symptom cannot be read as it no longer bears any prescribed relation to the signified. The symptom does not imitate, it presents itself. Frenhofer's portrait of Catherine Lescault clearly demonstrates the complex encounter between matter and idea, abstraction and figuration, copy and origin. By inserting the portrait into the economy of the Incarnate, it becomes possible to rescue Lescault, and therefore Frenhofer from his literal condemnation as a maddened representational failure. To reimagine Lescault on the terms of the symptom in her image is to shift our understanding of representation, no longer just pure mimesis and semblance, but as always also a material dissemblance.

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## **Illustrations**

Fig.1. Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows* (detail), c. 1438-50. Fresco, Florence, convent of San Marco, east corridor. (Nicolò Orsi Battaglini.).