

# Holism in Epistemology and Aesthetics: A Breakthrough to Beauty<sup>1</sup>

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Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens,  
that thou wouldest come down...”  
(Isaiah 64:1)

In this article I would like to defend holism in order to outline a claim that any authentic expression or statement – be it in exact sciences, philosophy or art – is always creative. Creativity is the effort to articulate that which one feels borne and overwhelmed by; it is the very life divine and human that has no categorical limitations and can thus be reckoned as Art *par excellence*. For this to be plausible, art must be defined as a breach through the opacity and remoteness of the human to the translucence and congeniality of the divine. As such, art always bears the essential feature of unlikeness, some grounding dissimilarity to the world seen and cognized – a Wound. Art is authentic Life born in pangs of constant ascetic rends through the wellness of the immanent. The transfiguring *kenosis* opening up to the Real requires that prettiness be torn in order that Beauty be born.

Holism is a universal principle. It remains the same in every domain and discipline as long as they are creative in the above-mentioned sense. In this essay, I aim to illustrate this truth more precisely by questioning the conceptual exhaustibility both in gnoseology and aesthetics by presenting the contemporary French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman’s vision of art history and hermeneutics.

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## *Didi-Huberman and the Problem of Objectification in Art*

Didi-Huberman insists that it is necessary to go beyond mimetic rationalization in art. His critical approach is founded on questioning, firstly, the “certainty key” encouraged by the Giorgio Vasari’s iconographic principle of imitation of the visible, and secondly, Erwin Panofsky’s iconological principle of imitation of the intelligible.

### *Vasarian Positivism*

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), the Italian painter and first art historian, adopted a vision that makes the death of an object a condition *sine qua non* for its scientific study. Thus, as Huberman argues, Vasari developed what would become a Hegelian position with regard to historicity.<sup>2</sup> One of Hegel’s principles is that history can be thought of only with the death of its singular objects. The movement of thesis and antithesis through which the content of Spirit realizes itself requires that every form exhausts itself and dies, so as to reveal its own truth to history.<sup>3</sup>

Huberman quotes from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835), where the philosopher lapses into hermeneutic analysis of our perception of Greek statues, and asserts that only their visible form remains, while “the works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit”<sup>4</sup> so that “the admiration we experience on seeing these statues...is powerless to make us kneel.”<sup>5</sup> Huberman concludes that from Hegel’s reflections it follows that:

the idea of a history that has internalized and superseded the world of its object, and thus...the idea

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 49.

that syntheses effected by “self-conscious” historians are “superior” to their past object.<sup>6</sup>

Henceforth, objects are

placed *under their [historians’] gaze*, but deprived of something that we of course no longer want anything to do with: something that has efficiently passed away. Something, however, that made the whole life of these objects, their function and their efficacy: something that in turn placed everyone *under the gaze of the object...*<sup>7</sup> (*italics mine*)

Thus, Huberman asserts that Vasari’s Hegelian method has imposed specific goals onto the history of art. Imitation is the main principle of these goals, where every gap must be bridged by concepts and words, and art becomes an *adaequatio* (conformity) between the visible and the intelligible. This naïve realism degenerates into a metaphysical idealism where the dualism of the intelligible and the visible survives, while all knowledge is reduced to a concept. For Huberman, this move amounts to a closure, an elimination of what he calls “the visual” in a work of art – a symptom of what evades conceptualization.

### *Panofsky’s Kantian Critique*

Huberman bemoans the fact that the German art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) critiqued Vasarian positivism by adopting the Kantian premise of pure reason rather than his aesthetic philosophy. If, for Kant, knowledge is confined to concepts and is akin to *mimesis*, the aesthetic idea is fundamentally inadequate to anything conceptual. The aesthetic cannot be determined by anything representational or

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<sup>6</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 50.

imaginative. For Kant, Huberman shows, the genius of art is absolutely estranged from the spirit of mimesis – imitation.

Huberman writes that by applying Kant's epistemology – rather than his aesthetics – to art criticism, Panofsky initiated a switch from positivism to a sort of subjective idealism, from iconography to iconology. The *adaequatio* was henceforth not between the visible and the intelligible, but between the intuited representation and its processing through the transcendental unity of apperception (consciousness). In other words, the relation was no longer between the eye and the world, but between the soul and the world of the eye. Thus, we basically pass from the enslavement by nature to the enslavement by consciousness. Indeed the idea of reflexive consciousness remains central for Panofsky; consciousness, which Huberman claims, “the art historian must revisit constantly, in the humblest as in the noblest operations of his practice.”<sup>8</sup>

For Huberman, the problem with the “Kantian Vasari” discovered by Panofsky is that if consciousness creates its own object, there is no space for the unconscious. The Kantian wish is to avoid every possible loss through the synthetic intuition, and so mimesis, that is at the foundation of such a method, doesn't allow any inadequacy between the aesthetic expression and the concept. Imitation of nature becomes imitation of intellect; images are not read, but thought. In both cases, however, we are in the realm of the visible, and there is no space for the visual. According to this model, images are mere renditions of the concept, and representation becomes a means to make two heterogeneous domains – the sensible and the intelligible – converge through transcendental synthesis.

From this, Huberman infers that Kantian metaphysics has endowed art criticism and art history with a certainty that dissolves every mystery in a concept. The image is flattened to fit consciousness that is able to produce nothing but ideas. For Huberman, Panofsky's iconology is a box with mirrored walls where consciousness is trapped; reason is reduced to

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<sup>8</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 94.

positivistic function, all gaps are bridged by logic and truth is reduced to cerebral cognition, with dialectic as the driving mechanism of it all.

### *Didi-Huberman's Solution*

Huberman's challenge was to open the box, look for a crack, and *rend* – tear asunder, split, burst – both the image and the logic. His dialectic moves back and forth between knowledge and ignorance, opening up the visible to the visual. He suggests that the unconscious is not simply that which *should become* conscious, the way Panofsky would wish it to be. It is what *remains symbolized* through disfiguration and dissimilarity.

Huberman differentiates between “representation” and “presentation.” The former is the “mimetic signifying” that makes some content visible and legible, the latter is the disfigured symbolizing that delivers a content in an undifferentiated, logically displaced, “cracked” and hence visual way. Huberman appeals to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

It is with the dream and the symptom that Freud smashed the box of representation. And with them that he opened, which is to say rent and liberated, the notion of image. Far from comparing the dream with a painting or a figurative drawing, he insisted on its value as distortion (*Entstellung*) and on the play of logical ruptures by which the “spectacle” of the dream is often breached, as by a perforating rain.<sup>9</sup>

For Huberman, the locus of truth in artistic images is not logical coherence, but paradox, the co-presentation of possibilities that may be mutually exclusive.<sup>10</sup> Does this mean rejection of logic?

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<sup>9</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 144.

<sup>10</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 148.

What does this mean? That everything eludes us? Not at all. Even a rain of stars has its structure. But the structure we are talking about is open...in the sense that the structure will be rent, breached, ruined at its center as the crucial point of its unfolding. The “world” of images does not reject the world of logic, quite the contrary. But it *plays* with it, which is to say, among other things, that it creates spaces there – spaces from which it draws its power...<sup>11</sup> (*italics in original*)

The visible should be “a transparent means” to let show the opacity of the visual. However:

It is not a matter of appealing to a poetics of unreason, of the drive-driven, or to an ethics of mute contemplation, or even to an apologia for ignorance before the image. It is just a matter of looking intently at the paradox, the kind of learned ignorance to which images constrain us.....In no case is it a matter of replacing the tyranny of a thesis with that of its antithesis. It’s a matter only of proceeding dialectically: of thinking the thesis with its antithesis, the architecture with its flaws, the rule with its transgression, the discourse with its slips of the tongue, the function with its dysfunction...and the fabric with its rend...<sup>12</sup>

For Huberman, the problem is the hermetic, exhaustive character of certainty, whose determinism for perfect clarity leaves no space for the freedom of mystery. In that sense he opposes the art of the religious Middle Ages to the art of the humanistic Renaissance: the former’s principle was symptomatic, symbolic, presentational, appealing to the unconscious, while the latter was mimetic, sign-like, representational and appealing to the conscious.

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<sup>11</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 143-44.

Huberman introduces a sharp opposition between the notion of life as expressed by Christian “incarnational” art on one hand and by humanist, immanent art on the other. He sees in the humanist enterprise a wish to kill death by immortalizing “champions of resemblance” – be it in Vasarian “Parnassus of demigods” or simply mimetic art.<sup>13</sup> For him, the Western art of portraiture became synonymous with the terms “resemblance,” “natural” and “living.”<sup>14</sup> But at the same time, he claims, imitation always amounts to its opposite, namely to perpetuating death, to making it live.

This perspective, according to Huberman, is the drama that Christianity is there to remedy. Christianity sees that from original sin, man and world are in a state of constitutive dissimilarity to God. This unlikeness brings forth death and hence must be rent. Huberman writes,

And if resemblance, from a Christian point of view, is thinkable only as an immense drama, that is first because through his transgression and the loss of his “being in the image of,” Adam did nothing other than *invent death* for us. Not to resemble (God), that’s another way of saying: we are all going to die.<sup>15</sup> (*italics mine*)

Thus for Huberman, the challenge of Christianity and Christian art is to put to death this invented death. To do so Christian images must contain a contradictory movement:

to carry death within them, to proceed to something like a perpetual “putting to death” – a sacrifice, then – to the end of managing religiously the common desire for the death of death...For a foreigner who suddenly discovered the world of western Christian images,...the first astonishment would doubtless go right to this very point: what comfort with regard to death can Christians

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<sup>13</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 219.

<sup>14</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 219.

have derived from a God perpetually in the image of dying on a cross?<sup>16</sup>

Huberman's words follow the paradox that true, authentic resemblance is achieved through revealing, displacing the false resemblance, the actual *dissimilarity*, the "wax casting of nature" that finds itself in a fallen, and hence ugly, state. In order to authentically resemble, it is necessary to become unlike; in order to live, it is necessary to die. To achieve this in art, the artist must:

*let death insist in the image*, to open the image to the symptom of death. For just as anyone who says "I don't love you" nonetheless pronounces the word of love, so anyone who talks of resurrection lets the work of death insist within him.<sup>17</sup> (*italics mine*)

For Huberman, the Western image is constantly oscillating. It ebbs and flows, it is between ruse and risk, between a dialectical operation and the symptom of being torn, between a figuration always posed and a disfiguration that always interposes. He considers Western images as an interplay of imitation and incarnation. When we see an imitation, we grasp worlds. With imitation, the image is posed before us; it is stable, susceptible of having ever more knowledge drawn from it. It excites our curiosity endlessly through its representational configurations, details and iconological riches. Imitations ask us to go "behind the image" to see whether some key to the enigma might not still be hidden.

But before incarnation, the ground collapses. There exists a place, a rhythm in which the image seeks something like its own collapse. We stand in front of the image as if before a gaping limit, a disintegrating place. Fascination becomes exasperated; it reverses itself. It is like an endless

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<sup>16</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 220.

<sup>17</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 227.

movement, alternately virtual and actual; it is powerful. Our frontality before the image is suddenly rent, and this violent splitting away in its turn becomes frontality, one which holds us in suspense, motionless. For an instant we no longer know what to see under the gaze of this image. We see the unintelligible exuberance of a visual event. We are before the image as before an obstacle and its endless hollowing. We are before the image as before a treasure of simplicity, for example a color, and we are there-before....as if facing something that conceals itself.<sup>18</sup>

But what does the *rend* essentially consist of?

A reading of Huberman inspires us to say that the holistic principle – what accounts for the *rend*, the tearing asunder, a burst – seems less technical mimesis (that is the necessary and unavoidable product of a creative act), than the attitude of unachieved-ness, unaccomplished-ness, openness of a humble consciousness, the awareness of perpetual relativity and the need of adjustment to the one and unique constant of the universe – the Light divine.

It seems that the holistic principle overarching aesthetics and epistemology consists in the fact that mimetic classicism in aesthetics is no more the locus of Beauty than concepts are the locus of Truth, since the fabric of both the image and of the concept must be open to Beauty and Truth. They must be open to the vision of which they can only thus be manifestations.

The moment of Beauty is a moment of Truth because this is what one glimpses when the clouds of mediation drift apart. The force driving them apart is the freedom of the unachieved, the perpetual *élan* towards and awareness of the origin, the archetype, the simple, the One. Say it all in a work of art and in a word reflecting a concept, and say nothing, reveal and conceal. Be certain of one's uncertainty, wander and come back, insist and let go, let the uttered live beyond oneself,

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<sup>18</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 228.

let it talk back and become the locus of thirst, of eternity, of revelation.

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent... (Matt 27:51)