



The deterritorialization of the aesthetic experience: the artwork in the post-covid19 society

Dr. Potamias Spyros

Department of Social and Political Sciences

University of Cyprus

Email: spotamias@yahoo.gr

Cyprus

Mandilara Iro

Technical University of Cyprus

Email: iro.mandilara@gmail.com

Cyprus

ABSTRACT

The pandemic of covid-19 accelerated to such an extent the prefigured tendencies - under the development of digital technology of modification of the way of distribution and reception of the works of art, that it would be generally admitted "to talk in terms of before and after this crucial moment" f. Morris, 2020). The present article attempts to outline this ongoing decisive change, in which the world of art is subject, not from the aspect of an aesthetic-artistic evaluation of the artworks that are created entirely by digital means and mediums, but from the aspect formed by the famous m. McLuhan's thesis "the medium is the message". In other words, from the point of view of the consequences caused on the contemporary aesthetic experience of man by the medium, by the digital broadcasting of the works of art, that constitutionally presuppose and require the physical presence of the audience.

KEYWORDS: digital reproduction, de-artisation, aura, information, traumatic neurosis

I. Since the end of the 1950s, a gradual dematerialization of the work of art has been taking place, through the experimentations of the Situationist International, the artists of conceptual art, and the performance practices (happenings, performance, body art, and so on); a "transition from the object to the 'immaterial' artistic act" (Daskalothanasis, 2006, 10), a disconnection of the artwork from the specific object that is artistically processed in a context of a defined style or tradition, for the sake of a plethora of actions and short-lived events, that now constitute the artwork. Therefore, an amorphous, incorporeal, ephemeral, variable artwork emerges; an artwork, which "is beyond the object" (Heinich, 2015, 97) and its material boundaries, which focuses on and highlights exclusively the artist's intention and action and not the way, in which these are expressed and crystallized in the form of an artistic object, which addresses only the aim and the process of its the conception, as well as the interpretations that come from it - since "the artwork is the concept of the artwork" (Walravens as mentioned in Heinrich, 2015, 93) and is completely indifferent to its material realization and its tactile substance. However, this dematerialization presupposes the physical presence and the active participation of the audience for the communication of the work of art and, by extension, makes it one of its constituent elements, since the immaterial artwork is, ultimately, the experience itself lived by the public through the various actions and events; a public that constitutes, in the last analysis, the basic witness of the execution of the immaterial artistic event.

With the arrival of the 21st century and the rapid development and wide spreading of digital technology that characterizes it, the dematerialization of the artwork – a process that was intensified during lockdowns' curfew¹ tends to be

followed by its deterritorialization, its separation from the *here* and *now* of the aesthetic experience, its disengagement from "its unique existence in a place, where it is located" (Benjamin, 1963,11), that is, its disconnection from the spatiotemporal boundaries posed by its live exhibition; a fact, which permits its reception independently of the place and time of its performance. In other words, as long as the work of art, through its digital reproduction and rebroadcast, is disengaged from the specific time and space of its display and the necessity of the audience's physical presence, it is converted into a mobile, mass-reproduced entity that travels quickly and freely through spacetime, able to be distributed in different countries and cities simultaneously and at different times of the day, available at any time throughout the globe at a price much lower than that of a live performance. Moreover, it is massively² consumable, since it is not subject to the spatial restrictions of live attendance, restrictions imposed by the fact that live artistic events take place in different locations far from each other at about the same time. In this way, it becomes possible for the artworks to direct at a worldwide market, i.e. at a remarkably expanded audience,³ to be rapidly distributed to every corner of the globe, to be consumed in great quantities, and, as a result, every cultural product is replaced exceptionally quickly by another one and is available to the audience in a flexible way; a way, which adjusts to the way of life of the contemporary flexible employee.

Therefore, the deterritorialization of the work of art that has been taking place, leads to the formation of an extremely antagonistic global art market in which only a relatively few, colossal cultural corporations can afford the significantly expensive technological requirements and innovations of digital

² The experiment of the comedian M. Malkoff is typical. In May 2012, while trying to watch on Netflix as many movies as possible in the span of a month, he managed to watch 252 movies in total, which is about 8 per day (see Tyrone, 2013, 1).

³ For instance, let us mention that the Platforms Project Net, that was created in Athens during the pandemic, had more than 11,500 viewers from 80 countries while, during about the same period, 33,000 new subscribers from 65 countries watched the digital program of the Onassis Foundation (Kanellopoulou, 2020, 11-12); in addition, the international exhibition Art Basel Hong Kong attracted 250,000 viewers in a single week, in contrast to the 99,000 people that visit it on average each year (Miliareti-Varvitsioti, 2020, 2).

¹ With the respective differences having been considered, we could claim that if the Spanish flu expedited the release of the phonograph which was advertised by the newly founded Edison record company as the medium, through which "someone could attend concerts... without being in danger of contracting the flu" (Sknitsas, 2020, 24), the covid19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the digital reproduction and transmission of the works of art.



recording can survive. Namely, it leads to further internationalization and centralization of the cultural capital, as well as to the acceleration of the capital's turnover time, since every cultural product is distributed at fast rates and is consumed relatively immediately, i.e., since the duration that each cultural product remains in the sphere of circulation is reduced. On the other hand, the deterritorialization of the artwork can better adjust to the brief and "flexible leisure" (Dawson M., Spingel L. as mentioned in Tyron, 2013, 11) of today's worker, to the fragmented and irregular free time available to satisfy his/her cultural needs, as he/she is enabled to have access to an artistic event anywhere and anytime he/she can or wishes to do so, at home or on the go, the to the whole or a part of it, all at once or fragmentarily, on TV, a PC, a tablet or even a smartphone⁴; that is to say, he/she is offered the ability to watch an artistic event, through various devices, from different locations and at different times.

II. The deterritorialization of the work of art is achieved through its transformation into a collection of digitalized "units of image" (Deleuze, 1989, 28), into many directed, fragmentary, and self-moving digital tele-images. Directed, as they depict only what the director chooses, they give prominence to only what the camera sees, as "the camera looks for me and obliges me to look, leaving as my only option not to look" (Sontag, 2005, 132); fragmentary, because the whole work is fragmented into frames and shots that point out its individual "multiple voices" (Deleuze, 1989, 167), which, on the one hand, mainly focus and give great importance to an endless number of fleeting details, to events pointless for the overall understanding of the work, to some extremely inessential or even totally trivial elements of the work,⁵ to microscopic and barely noticeable elements that escape the physical, on-site observation and on the other hand, are presented "into a series of discrete moments lacking narrative coherence" (Costello, 2005, 174); and, self-moving, as their life and motion is completely independent of the object, of the original work's physical existence, as well as of the subject, of the motion of the person who comes in contact with the original work of art and of the time demanded for the sensory and cognitive appropriation of each one of those images. In other words, the artwork is turned into a patchwork of fragmentary, "debilitated, compacted, superimposed" (Sarlo, 2003, 305) digitized tele-images which focus on "details, illuminated a flash, fixed forever" (Sontag, 2005, 64) to the viewer's perception, which succeed, replace and rapidly wipe out one another, following the model of the Hollywood cinema, of the video clips or even advertisements⁶. "No sooner has the beholder seen a film frame than it has already changed" (Benjamin as mentioned Kang, 2014, 124); a process which forces the receiver to perceive the artwork at a glance. That is to say, the work of art

is turned into an intense conglomeration of rapidly varying, fragmented, and inessential images, a quickly self-moving mass of digitalized images that are of minor importance to the understanding of the original work, an uninterrupted continuum formed based on fragments defined from the camera's movement pace and the montage, into a phantasmagoria of images parading in front of the viewers that magnetizes and implicitly directs their gaze via a wild pace that "forces them to look" (Virilio, 1994, 14) at these images and captivates them instead of the opposite.

This self-abandonment and diffusion of the viewer to the pace and reality of the camera, the rapid switching of individual details undetectable to the naked eye, this subjection of the beholder to a barrage of constantly varying images, on the one hand, brings about the abolition of the amount of time necessary for the penetration, the cognitive and sensory absorption of the perceiving subject in the work of art, the elimination of the amount of time needed to delve into an artwork, process and critically absorb it. Put differently, the visual stimuli succeed one another at such a speed that no time is left for the perceiving subject to think, that he/she becomes unable of experiencing and, as a result, of understanding each artwork in a pace, time, distance, mental attention, way, intensity that he/she needs to or wishes, and also that the original work requires, that he/she, as it happens to Artaud's suicide victim in the *Eighteen Seconds*, becomes "incapable of achieving these / her thoughts, he/she is reduced to only seeing a parade of images within him, an excess of contradictory images, [that] his/her spirit has been stolen" (Artaud as mentioned in Deleuze, 1989, 166). That is to say, this consecutive succession of images does not provide the viewer the ability to contemplate (Benjamin, 1963, 38), and does not provide time for concentration and meditation, since the view of any of the projected images is interrupted instantaneously by a new sequence of images; a process which "forces him/her to a confused distraction... transmutating his/her gaze to a fleeting glance" (Daremas, 2007, 246)⁷. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the artwork through its tele-visualization distracts the viewer's attention from the apprehension of the essence of the work, and transposes it to the endless number of its inessential details or, in other words, by presenting the detail that escapes the physical vision as the essence of the original work something that is reinforced by the use of high definition technologies - the real content of the latter is obscured and the perceiving subject is prevented from judging which elements of each particular work are essential and which are not, as well as the viewer is completely detached from the ability of contact with and by extension the ability to apprehend the original work of art as a whole.

In other words, the tele-visualization abolishes the possibility of communication between the perceiving subject and the authentic work of art, not only for the perceiving subject to observe the work but also for the work to reciprocate it, to "return this gaze" (Benjamin, 1980, 646) in the sense of

⁴ Besides, this is the reason why the capability of watching T.V., video and movies while being in motion is promoted as a distinct characteristic of the iPhone, iPad and similar mobile devices.

⁵ For example, the tele-visualization of an opera not only forces the rhythm of the montage upon the music rhythm which is crucial, but also presents to the viewer a series of details that are unperceivable during a live performance and which are uncorrelated and do not assist the viewer's understanding of its real content, like the subtle expressions of the singers' faces, the kinesiology of the conductor, the way that the flautist places her/his fingers on to the flute, the gleaming brass instruments, the hair coiffure of the female singer, the sweat of the male singer. As E. Panofsky bitingly notes, details that encourage the viewer to count the hairs of Romeo moustache (Panofsky, 1975, 21).

⁶ According to N. Postman, the average duration of a scene in the American TV is 3,6 seconds "so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see". (Postman, 2005, 86).

⁷ As far as the intensified inability of mental concentration, Google's calculations present an exceptional interest. According to these calculations, the duration of undivided attention of the millennials' generation is limited to 9 seconds (see in Patino, 2020, 16-17).



imparting the meaning that comes from it, the crystalized content in it that is oriented towards the receiver. Thus, the tele-visualized work of art does not return the human gaze because each tele-image: (1). lasts only a few seconds, thus abolishing the necessary time for communication or mutual acquaintance between the perceiving subject and the work, the amount of time needed for the receiver to understand every single image and by extension to connect them internally, (2). depicts some minor details of the work by giving them a colorful appearance aiming at momentary pleasure (Adorno, 1980, 324), details that are inessential and obstruct the conception of the real essence of the work, and (3). divides the work to such a degree that precludes its comprehensive conception. Taking all this under consideration, we could claim that the tele-visualized work of art can't be perceived by the viewer as an authentic essential, cohesive, deep, and complete aesthetic experience.

However, since the perceiving subject does not experience the work of art authentically and does not conceive it essentially and in an all-round way or, conversely, since the tele-visualized work of art consists of a “*glamour of images... without real meaning*” (Ewen, 1988, 22), an artwork stripped of its essence, the latter is converted into a digestible piece of information, into an entertainment outer sheathing, whose perception requires no mental concentration, aesthetic cultivation or critical thinking; it is converted into a “*standardized unity of data, easily absorbable and... cleansed from any inconvenient circumstances and complexities*” (Pavlidis, 2012, 122), an instant, spectacular and ephemeral stimulus, into an artwork that, being detached from its true content, refuses to become a *locus of truth*, to be transformed into knowledge, to “*penetrate consciousness and to be absorbed in its coherence*” (Adorno as mentioned in Pavlidis, 2012, 127). That is, the original artwork is de-artist through its digital tele-visualization, relinquishes its real content, and is transformed into “*something merely factual ... [and art] is bartered off as a commodity*” (Adorno, 2002, 17); a commodity, which is mass reproducible, available for everyday use, immediately accessible, quickly and in great quantities consumable and also affordable, as “*it exists in the context of the economically feasible and does not exceed one's mental skills*” (Kondilis, 2007, 290); a swiftly disposable thing among things, an exchange value with aesthetic luster (Markus, 2001, 16).

III. The ‘de-artistation’ of the artwork is amplified by the fact that man is unable to understand a work of art in depth and in its entirety solely through vision, without the combination of all the senses, considering that each of them perceives different aspects of the work, without the live feeling of the work, without placing oneself his/her body, the yardstick of human perception in situ and be oriented in relationship with the artwork, without perceiving the physical, tangible properties of the work (i.e. size, volume, mass, shape, texture, fluidity, temperature, brightness) and its spatial characteristics, the way that it is placed in space (Herder, 2002, 36-38), without being able to perceive the alteration of space in time through one's own movement or the

movement of a physical body, without developing the, as E. B. de Condillac calls it, *spatial vision*, meaning the ability to relate and coordinate vision with the other senses, through which the visual information is transformed into three-dimensional objects. Namely, a meaningful and rounded conception of the work of art requires motivation as well as the combination of all human senses, including the kinesthetic perception of the perceiving subject, i.e., the sense of movement, the placement and the orientation of the body in space about the other physical bodies of the space. This combination of senses contributes exceedingly to each sense's improvement of controlling, expanding, developing, and strengthening the rest of them. In contrast, the physical interaction of man with space disappears completely in the tele-visualized work of art, due to the formation and enforcement of an “*omni-directional space*” (Deleuze, 1989, 265), a space that is always “*approaching, receding, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through the locomotion and focusing of the camera and through the cutting and editing of the various shots ...[and] special effects*” (Panofsky, 1975, 19), a space that unceasingly and at the will of mechanical recording modifies the depth, the angles, and its coordinates. Furthermore, the ‘relationship’ of the tele-visualized artwork with the viewer cancels the human proportions, since this relationship is now defined by the proportions of the screen and the camera's point of view. Thus, the tele-visualized work of art is indifferent to the kinesthetic perception of man, abolishes the possibility of combining the human senses, and subjugates all these senses to vision, ceasing, in this way, to develop not only all the other ones except for vision but also vision itself, as its development demands the contribution of all the other senses. Consequently, the distancing of the viewer from the physical space of the work's exhibition or performance results not only in the incapacity of meaningfully and roundly conceiving of the original work of art but also in the deprivation of his/her aesthetic cultivation.

At the same time, the fact that the viewer loses his/her association with the real space of the artwork, the tendency of gradually depriving contact with the physical space of the work, its live perceiving experience, leads also to the loss of the ability to recognize the aesthetic inferiority and poverty of the digitally tele-visualized copy compared to the original, as far as the content it bears and the aesthetic cultivation it promotes are concerned. Namely, this leads to the inadequacy of realizing on the part of the beholder the ‘de-artistation’ that the work of art is subject to. Instead, the tele-visualized, digitally reproduced artwork appears in the consciousness of the viewer to be aesthetically completely equal to the original, as if it constituted its precise, accurate and complete rendering at all levels as if it was able to totally and without loss communicate the original work, proposing the idea that the natural contact with the artwork is not necessary. However, since the original and the copy are equated, the viewer tends to attribute the way of viewing and the characteristics of the copy to the original, since these are the ones he/she knows, these are the ones he/she mainly communicates,



and comes in contact with, these are the ones that he/she desires and is educated by and seized by. Or, put differently, one tends to conceive the original via copy, the real via image. This means that, while facing the original, one tends to put an emphasis and pay attention on the individual detail and not on the totality of artwork, on the information and not on knowing, on the fragmented and not the cohesive vision, on the quick and not on the concentrated perception. This, confirms the Adornian premonitory prediction, according to which we are not far from a condition, where the artworks will be mechanically mass-reproduced, where their reproductions digital nowadays will become themselves the works of art. Unfortunately, the aforementioned tendency possibly led even to the partial distortion of the original, similar to what possibly happened with the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, against which there were accusations of adopting a way that corresponds with the aesthetic of the viewership.

IV. The constant exposure of the perceiving subject to a huge mass of tele-visualized and by extension 'de-artised' artworks impossible to be essentially and cohesively understood, the overload of his/her perceptual system with fragmentary and thus incomprehensible over their inner connection information and audiovisual stimuli, the meaningless hyperstimulation of the senses from blasts of incoherent and impressive images parading and falling upon the viewer, the hypertrophy of the eye that is the extreme expansion of the visual perception of man that exceeds the natural limits of speed and ability to perceive details ultimately, the barrage of the viewer's psychic world by huge, uncontrollable and unmanageable quantities of external stimuli causes a perceptive shock to the perceiving subject, as W. Benjamin puts it inspired by S. Freud, a perceptive, emotional and mental breakdown, an abrupt rupture, and disturbance of the psychic order, balance and integrity, a *traumatic neurosis*. In other words, the outsized mass of stimuli-information that invade the viewer cause a wide split in the defensive, *protective shield* of the human psyche that prevents the intrusion of an overwhelming amount of *unsuitable* violent, intense, aesthetically and mentally impossible to be appropriated *the energy of the outer world*, or, put differently, tears that protective covering layer, this stimulus-warding off filter that ensures man's contact with only a small portion of outer stimuli and, thus, he/she can handle them, to sensorially, mentally and emotionally process and control them, comprehend and lighten them. As a consequence, these stimuli injure and endanger the unity and stability of the human psychic world (Freud, 1961, 21-27). However, the human psyche is trying to avoid this trauma, as "*the ego is afraid of being damaged*" (Freud 1955, 210) and "*its cohesion gets destroyed*" (Freud, 2018, 119) from the endless and sharp audio-visual stimuli, it steers itself towards an *hypercathexis* of the *stimulus-repelling system*, a reinforcement of its psychic self-protection barrier from these stimuli; a fact that is accompanied by, or, to put it more correctly, it causes, in turn, the "*paralysis of its associative mechanisms*" (Benjamin, 2005, 527) and as a result, the atrophy of the sensorial, emotional and

cognitive function of the senses, the attenuation or even paralysis of the sensorial, emotional and intellectual forces that pertain to the aesthetic experience.

The numbness of contemporary man in front of the aesthetic experience, his/her inability to respond, and his/her denial to perceive the aesthetic stimuli as a direct consequence of his/her anaesthetization in front of the world of art as well as reality itself. As S. Buck-Morss notes "*the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as anesthetics*" (Buck-Morss, 1992, 18). On the one hand, man is converted into a subject, which is led to general indifference in front of all the works of art, since none of them is allowed to cross the barrier of his/her psychic self-protection. He/she turns into a subject that adopts a *blasé* stance in front of the aesthetic experience, experiencing all artworks as things that are insignificant, pointless, and indiscriminate over their meaning, value, and particular quality, and none of them require particular attention (Simmel, 1997, 178-179) since all potentially threaten his/her mental stability. That is to say, the viewer underestimates and disdains not only the deterritorialized-televisualized works of art that bombard him/her every day but, in the final analysis, the aesthetic experience itself as a whole too; a condition that is intensified by the fact that the viewer as we have already mentioned equates the tele-visualized work with the original. On the other hand, and due to the lack of cultivation of man's emotional and mental world through the arts, this anaesthetization takes the form of an unsympathetic, insensitive, untouched, cold response towards all of life's situations without exception; a response that resembles that of Michele, A. Moravia's literary hero from *Gli indifferenti*, where it is impossible for the various incidents and emotional or sentimental situations that he experiences to be engraved "*upon the white and flat-screen of his indifference... and come and go like shadows without a trace... without depth or value, like an ephemeral game between shadow and light*" (Moravia, 2019, 332).

V. Finally, the digitized, deterritorialized-televisualized work of art offers the contemporary man the ability to shape his own imaginary art space based on one's taste and particular interests, one's own *smart* and flexible way of art consumption, the ability to browse individually, willingly or at the suggestion of the behavioral algorithms of various platforms, from wherever one is, whether at home or in motion and any day one wishes, "*at the exhibitions of New York's museums with his morning coffee, to stroll through the corridors of the Louvre in the afternoon and on the evening to have a taste of the Bavarian Opera*" (Dieckmann, 2020), thus, it allows one to construct his/her private art watching the program. This constitutes the complete individualization of the aesthetic experience and the viewer's desocialization, the attribution to the aesthetic experience of a kind of mobile and flexible privatization (Williams, 1974, 19). Thus, due to artwork's deterritorialization, due to the by definition demise of the audience as a collective body and the completely individualized and elastic consumption that it



induces, the contemporary viewer is completely deprived of the possibility of intrapersonal contact and interaction with the other members of the audience and, consequently, the possibility of drawing and articulating common conclusions, the possibility of understanding the work collectively as well as developing emotional and moral bonds. This means that the viewers' ability to experience their cohesion as members of an aesthetically constituted community is removed or, put differently, the aesthetic experience ceases to form based on co-experienced and collectively shared emotions and meanings, thus transforming into an over-individualized, subjective experience; an experience that is in principle unable to contribute to the shaping of man's *consciousness* (*συν-ειδέναι*) and *com-passion/empathy* (*συν-αισθάνεσθαι*).

VI. We could generally claim that the original art creation, through its digital tele-dispersion, its conversion into a work that aims exclusively at bewitching the eye at the expense of its aesthetic and artistic value, its conversion into a

phantasmagorical spectacle for indifferent viewers, into a sellable, easily, quickly and mass consumable commodity, loses further its Benjaminian *aura*, its, according to our assessment, use value, its being as a means of understanding reality, as the “*conceptual arsenal*’ from which people take the means of understanding the world, provided that people haven’t been desensitized and aren’t indifferent about events” (Meier, 1997, 65), as a means that can have a crucial contribution to the shaping of the *con-sciousness* and *empathy* of humanity as well as a means of cultivating the human senses and emotions. As a result, this condition of art makes the present man an obtuse viewer, shaping him into an insensitive, aesthetically uncultivated, over-individualized, dissocialized, and passive consumer of commercialized image information, thus bringing humanity closer to the tragic day that Rembrandt’s portrait paintings and Mozart’s symphonies will cease to exist due to the absence of an aesthetically cultivated man capable of perceiving them (Spengler as mentioned in Gough, 2005, 124).

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