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AESTHETICS in the AGE of NEW MEDIA

Edited by Lorenzo Serini and Marta Vero

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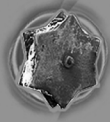
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Introduction

Lorenzo Serini and Marta Vero

‘Today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all of our culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication’¹. With these words Lev Manovich in his book *The Language of New Media* evaluates the impact of new media on the contemporary world. Computer-based media and digital technologies (e.g. internet, computer multimedia, virtual reality, interactive installations, digital video, digital image, digital sound, etc.) are by now omnipresent and affect almost all aspects of our society.

New media and new technologies have changed and reshaped not only the way we perceive and live in the world but also our imagination and creativity: in particular, the world of new media has opened up to new possibilities of communication and to new forms of art. For this reason we decided to dedicate the first volume of *Odradek* to the interesting status of aesthetics in what we might call – recalling Walter Benjamin – the age of new media.

¹ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 43

All the authoresses and authors focus on aesthetics in the age of new media from different points of view, with ideas and methods.

Nevertheless, the nature of the problem here in discussion demands a highly interdisciplinary perspective: the multidimensional aspects of the new media object, an interplay between technology and culture, involves several fields of study such as computer science, science, philosophy of perception, sociology and art. In particular, our essays deal with several aspects of aesthetics in the age of new media by referring to philosophers such as Baumgarten, Hegel, Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Deleuze, Derrida and Vattimo, among others. Let us continue this brief introduction with a summary of each essay in the volume.

In the opening of this volume, **Elisabetta Di Stefano**'s essay *Nuovi media, nuova estetica?* (*New Media, New Aesthetics?*) takes into account the problems regarding aesthetics in the age of new media. Her essay begins with a crucial question: how should we understand aesthetics today?

Di Stefano proposes her answer by considering how aesthetics has been historically understood. She observes that the term 'aesthetics', originally coined in 1735 by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, indicates at least three different disciplines: theory of beauty, theory of

perception (*aisthesis*) – as Baumgarten understood it – and philosophy of art. The authoress considers whether aesthetics in the age of new media can be assimilated to one (or more) of the listed disciplines or if it needs to be completely rethought.

Di Stefano then acknowledges that “the debate between aesthetics and new media is still an open question. It is a congenital *aporia* in media studies where the conceptual instability is due to the fact that innovation runs faster than reflection and analysis”. Bearing in mind these three different ways to understand aesthetics and the lack of a precise place for an aesthetic theory in media studies, the authoress turns her attention to new media. First of all, Di Stefano raises a question about the expression ‘new media’ itself.

She points out that the characterization of digital media as *new* is slightly ambiguous: in fact, each medium that comes into being is initially considered new and revolutionary. This is the case of the so-called new media (i.e. digital-virtual-interactive devices) but it has been also the case of older media (e.g. radio, telephone, television) that used to be considered new when they first appeared. Accordingly, the newness of new media is only relative: the new technologies of our era will be considered *old* when newer technologies revolution them. Moreover, Di Stefano observes that the passage from an older to a newer medium is not to be understood as a replacement: new technologies do

not bring to a completely new and different medium but rather preserve many characteristics of old media.

Hence, in her essay Di Stefano prefers to adopt the notion – elaborated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin – of ‘remediation’, that is, in the words of the authoress, “a re-elaboration in which old and new media interact each other, in a continuous process of confrontation and integration”.

Precisely for this essential relationship between new media and older media, as well as for the lack of solid aesthetic categories to interpret the age of new media, Di Stefano proposes to look back at Walter Benjamin, who has developed strong interpretative lens (e.g. ‘vicinity’ and ‘distance’, ‘the loss of aura’ and ‘choc’) to study aesthetics of ‘new media’ in his age (e.g. radio, telephone, cinema), the age of mechanical reproduction.

Di Stefano claims that rethinking and actualizing Benjamin’s philosophy can help us to theorize aesthetics in the age of digital technologies. According to the authoress, this can be done by considering medium as “the technical and artificial conditions that can filter our sensorial experience”, and, as a consequence, aesthetics as theory of perception.

The essay concludes that “neither theory of beauty nor philosophy of art can account for the complex scenario of aesthetics in the age of new media”; nonetheless, new media studies cannot be separated from a theory of perception (*aisthesis*).

Ultimately, new media aesthetics is to be understood as the study of the effects of technology on our forms of perception of reality and of our symbolic construction of reality.

Daniela De Leo's essay *La percezione estetica di oggi* (*The Aesthetic Perception, Today*) moves from the conclusions of Di Stefano's inquiries. De Leo focuses on how aesthetic perception has been modified by new technologies and in particular on the relationship between perception and art.

The authoress chooses to engage with aesthetics from a phenomenological-hermeneutical perspective that, in her own words, "permits to define without defining: 'things are what they are in a specific way and in a specific time and in relationship with people who use them and interact with them'".

By paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, De Leo states that perception "is both a mental activity and the product of this activity, which refers at the same time to a position of thought and to a position of reality".

Accordingly, the perception of the aesthetic object, or the aesthetic perception, over and beyond the Cartesian dualism of pre-given subject and object, is to be understood as "a reversible relationship between subject and object, where the two poles continuously exchange each other roles giving form one another". Thus, De Leo, bearing in mind Gadamer's *Truth*

and Method claims that art, based on the aesthetic perception, is a form of knowledge *sui generis*, different from scientific knowledge, but still a form of participation to truth.

The authoress also sheds light on art as a particular form of knowledge: “the experience of encountering a work of art discloses a world; that is not a mere astonishment and a sensible pleasure for the exteriority of forms. As soon as we stop to see a work simply as an object, to see it as a world, when we see a world *through* the work of art, then we realize that art is not merely sense perception, but knowledge”.

Having analyzed the nature of aesthetic perception – from a phenomenological and an hermeneutical point of view – and its cognitive role, De Leo highlights the importance of this approach for new media aesthetics. In particular, the authoress focuses on Gadamer’s notion of ‘aesthetic non-differentiation’, namely, aesthetic perception is not something different from our experience of the world, or, to put it otherwise, art is profoundly connected to human praxis and to the realm of history.

This idea of a non-differentiated aesthetic can be successfully applied to new media art that puts into discussion the traditional opposition between art and life. In the age of new media, the work of art loses its ‘aura’ – to use one of the Benjamin’s concepts analyzed by Di Stefano – that is its shade

of prestige, distance, and unapproachability, and becomes a direct form of communication with the public. The essay concludes that if 'beautiful art' is dead, new forms of art in the age of new media are not only alive but also rich of possibilities.

The first two essays have focused on the general problem of aesthetics in the age of new media, the following contributions will take into account particular art forms made possible by the coming of new technologies and particular aspects of their aesthetic experience. **Paul Crowther** deals with the notion of creativity in computer art. His essay, entitled *Condition of Creativity: Drawing and Painting with Computers* (*Condizioni di creatività: disegnare e dipingere con i computer*), addresses the relationship between human creativity and the one of computerized machines that draw and/or paint by means of the relation between hardware and programming. Crowther starts by considering the work and thought of Harold Cohen and, in doing so, presents his principle claim: "unless computers acquire selfhood then they will always follow a different order of creativity from that of humans, but the difference at issue here can actually be used to extend the scope of human creativity itself".

Despite the essential difference between human creativity and the creative possibilities of computers that draw and/or paint, the author concludes that

these machines can be used by the artist to extend his/her personal creativity. Accordingly, if on the one hand a computer that draws and/or paints cannot be considered an artist itself – at least, unless it gains selfhood – on the other, the ‘dialogue’ between the human artist and the computerized machines makes possible a new kind of creativity.

In *Installations – and the Life of Image*, **Elena Tavani** takes into consideration multimedia installations and the nature of the image generated by them. In the words of the authoress, this particular kind of new media artwork can be roughly defined as an “interactive multimedia environment”.

Tavani observes that the case of installations is an eloquent example of one of the principle characteristics of new media aesthetics we have already dealt with, namely, the turn – theorized by Benjamin – from an aesthetic of distance and contemplation to an aesthetics of immersion and interaction. Indeed, multimedia installations are not to be contemplated and hermeneutical interpreted but rather to be used and lived as an environment.

The authoress focuses precisely on the installative works of art as particular kinds of environment where the spectator is called to be a protagonist, and in doing so, to interact with the author, the place, and other people. In this sense, the artwork invades social life and, vice versa, social life is active part of

the artwork. Moreover, Tavani claims that the image generated by multimedia installations is not merely the arithmetical product of the individual images generated by each media involved in a particular installative artwork. Accordingly, she concludes that “this does not only make the overall *image* generated by the installation a composite, analogic-synthetic one, but provides all of the digital imaging stored in the programme with an external reference, and adds to the computer-generated diffusive effects the opportunity of concretely affecting the here and now, which thus takes on the role of environment”.

The product of the installations thus is a “living image” that connects “organic life and technological life, a mix of alive entities and inanimate things”. In this sense, multimedia installations and their images would artistically represent the increasing mediatization of our lives.

The main point of **Ester Fuoco**'s essay *La figura del performer nell'era dell'arte 2.0* (*The Figure of Performer in the Era of 2.0 Art*) is to emphasize that new technology produces an ‘enhanced theatre’ or, in the authoress own words, “strengthens the quality that is already inherent in that form of art, set design, acting, performance, everything is made more intense”. Thus, Fuoco takes into account the particular case of technological contemporary theater likewise Crowther considers the art of drawing and/

or painting with computers. Both the essays address the same phenomenon in two different new media art forms, respectively, 2.0 theater and computer drawing and/or painting: new technologies enrich – *enhance* and *extend* – the possibilities of older forms of art.

Especially, Fuoco's essay analyses the change of the role of the actor in the contemporary theater scene. According to the authoress, the traditional actor becomes the *figure* and the performer: the actor is, in fact, completely detached from a psychological frame, namely, from his/her being a subject and he/she is reduced to his/her scenic presence, to his/her exhibited body that has the same ontological condition of the digital images.

Together with the transformation of the author in figure, or performer, the scene changes from the place of illusion (i.e. unreal) to *environment*, the place of reality, or better an *other kind of reality* a reality enhanced by new technologies.

Fuoco concludes her essay by observing that theater in the age of new media reinterprets and reconfigures the old theater – as Di Stefano points out – in a 'new language'.

It is precisely this new language that dazes the audience used to traditional theater: the old theatrical language involves a distance between the scene and reality, between the actors and the public, whereas in 2.0 theater the scene is reality and the public is compelled to immerse in and interact with it.

Raoul Frauenfelder in *Technology and touch between Derrida and McLuhan* deals with another peculiar aspect of aesthetics in the age of new media, that is the relationship between sense of touch and technology. Touch, the tactile perception, emerges several times in our essays, but Frauenfelder spells out the ironic relation between it and digital technologies: at first glance, digital devices seems to emancipate from touch – as rudimental manual work – but, in fact, the tactile experience proves again to be the principal way to access our virtual reality, one need only to consider touchscreens.

Starting from this preeminence of touch in the age of technology, the author critically analyses McLuhan's 'metaphysics of touch' and 'metaphysics of technology' by means of Derrida's philosophy. The essay criticizes McLuhan's wish "to get rid of writing technology in order to restore an original dimension of perception, meaning and society" and return to a native and more natural condition of human being – in a Rousseau-like fashion –, "a dimension of purity and mutual embrace with the external world".

Moreover, according to McLuhan, this native and more natural experience of the world is an immediate and fully tactile contact with beings that is anesthetized by the writings technologies. Frauenfelder, bearing in mind Derrida's teaching in *On Touching*, refuses the McLuhan's idea of

a metaphysical touch that immediately and fully represents nature and on which it would be based the unity of tribal (i.e. not-technological) world. In fact, touch always implies a form of technique, and technology always implies the sense of touch. Hence, in closing the author – with Derrida – claims that “touch is always a supplementary touch, as testified by the virtual technologies of touch that show a technical origins of tactile experience”.

The following contribution, **Matthew Edward Harris’s** *The End of Metaphysics? Gianni Vattimo on the Will to Power as Art in the Age of Internet*, reads some everyday phenomena such as Apple’s I-technology (e.g. I-Phone, I-Pod, I-Pad, I-Tunes, etc.), cookies, and Facebook through the interpretative lens of Giovanni Vattimo’s philosophy.

In particular, this essay focuses on the Italian philosopher’s famous idea of ‘weak thought’, that is a specific kind of knowledge that considers – and tries to rethink – all the fundamental notions of the Western culture (Ego, God, Truth, etc.) after the end (or better, in the dying) of metaphysics.

As the author notices, Vattimo thinks that new media, especially new technologies of communication, facilitates the end of metaphysics, that is – in the understanding of the philosopher influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger, “the establishing of a permanent, unchanging and certain ground for

truth”. New forms of communication indeed, opening the contemporary subject to the relativity of cultures and values, strongly contribute to weaken the metaphysical belief in a single, permanent, established truth. Accordingly, new media would be the direct way towards a post metaphysical world.

On the contrary, Harris argues that ‘cookies, social media and Apple technologies reassert the ego (the foundational modern metaphysical bedrock) and bring back hierarchical distinctions in a strong sense, that they show a non-reactive challenge to nihilism that questions ‘weak thought’.

Harris observes that if, on the one hand, new technologies of communication free the subject from the metaphysical chains, on the other, they chain him/her up in an even more violent way: the chained subject thinks of his/herself as free when he/she is in fact controlled and driven by subtle commercial mechanisms. In this sense, new technologies that free the subject in a virtual reality of almost infinite possibilities (e.g. the internet) strongly reaffirm a metaphysical ego.

The most eloquent example in this essay is that of Internet cookies (i.e. “small pieces of data sent from a website and stored in a user’s while the user is browsing. Every time the user loads the website, the browser sends the cookie back to the server to notify the website of the user’s previous activity”, from *Wikipedia*): the internet that provides ‘freedom’

and multiplicity by means of cookies, at the same time, directs the virtual subjects and absorbs the multiplicity into the unity of a controlled ego. Therefore, Harris concludes that “technology, social networking and the internet (...) could be interpreted as a continuation of metaphysics”; new media, according to the author, “have absorbed, even neutralized, the trends towards plurality and weakening that occurred through the use of older, more traditional media”.

In *Becoming-Fantastic: Deleuze and Mackay on Fantasy RPG (Role-Playing Games) Performance*, **Joshua Hall** analyses the complex phenomenon of gaming. As Di Stefano remarks, “new digital technologies tend to infiltrate into everyday practices to such an extent that weaken the boundaries between art and life, high culture and low culture, aesthetic experience and entertainment; this is proved for example by the new order of creativity built by videogames”.

The phenomenon of gaming is complex precisely because oscillates between a ‘mere infantile or adolescent escapism’ and an interesting building site of new artistic possibilities and of a serious engagement with the world. Anyway, gaming is a popular and diffuse phenomenon of the new media age and merit further critical attention. The author helps us in this sense by taking into account the

specific phenomenon of fantasy and fantasy gaming FRPG (Fantasy Role-Playing Games).

One of the main points of this essay, following Daniel Makay's works, is that "role-playing gaming not as a kind of game, but as a kind of performance, and thus as a new type of art form". We have already seen the importance of the notion of 'performance' in Fuoco's essay on 2.0 theater, likewise Hall shows the 'enhanced' reality of the fantasy world created in and by the role game.

This kind of game (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*) creates a new territory, an "imaginary-entertainment environment" where the gamer is continuously asked to edit and intervene in the gaming's dynamics. In doing so, the gaming repurposes – and reinterprets – four fundamental aspects of the 'real' world: "cultural, formal, social, and aesthetic". Moreover, the essay investigates the FRPG through Deleuzian philosophy: "the FRPG deterritorializes the players from their everyday (or 'real life') social existence only by reterritorializing them on the FRPG itself", and, by doing so, gaming proves to be a kind of counter-culture.

The volume closes with **Stuart Dalton's** essay entitled *The Philosophy of Popular Culture and the Unpopularity of Philosophy: A Medieval Love Story with Three Acts and an Unhappy Ending*.

Dalton takes into account the complicated relationship between popular culture and philosophy by means of an interesting analogy with the Middle Ages. In the words of the author, “the effort to popularize philosophy by linking it to popular culture repeats some of the same misunderstandings and mistaken that occurred in the Middle Ages when philosophy linked itself to institutional religion”.

The proportion therefore would be the following:

$$\text{TODAY PHILOSOPHY : POPULAR CULTURE =} \\ \text{MEDIÉVAL PHILOSOPHY : RELIGION}$$

Dalton observes that the current trend to publish books about ‘X and Philosophy,’ such as *Seinfeld and Philosophy* and others (the author gives a long on pp. 126-145), runs up against the same problems of the medieval effort to popularize philosophy.

Dalton’s conclusion is that “in both cases philosophy loses its identity and becomes ridiculous in the pursuit of an impossible popularity”. The essay highlights that ‘X and Philosophy’ books in order to appeal – and desperately entertain – popular culture end up misunderstanding the true essence of philosophy.

By being busy to please popular culture, philosophy loses its essential tendency towards free thinking, “the confidence that humans can discover the ultimate nature of things through their own thought, without deferring to any other

authorities, tradition of institutions”. Thus, Dalton states that philosophy, by speaking the language of the subculture, puts itself in a servile position in respect of popular culture, likewise Middle Age philosophy was servant of religion. In both of these cases, philosophy degenerates in something that is not philosophy anymore.

The author here is not criticizing popular culture and subculture but rather he is a certain attitude towards contemporary philosophy that appeals to the great public and loses its identity for commercial goals. The ‘X and philosophy’ books, as symptoms of this attitude, are not a genuine and fruitful dialogue between philosophy and popular culture.

This doesn’t change the fact that a healthier marriage between philosophy and popular culture can – and must – be celebrated.

The essay concludes by optimistically presenting examples of a positive and genuine attitude of philosophy towards popular culture: for example, Slavoj Žižek, “who has used popular culture as a way to clarify complicated theories” and “who produced numerous books and films that very effectively use popular culture in this way”.

Pisa, 26 July 2015