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## Celluloid is Not a Signifier Any More

**Abstract:** Nowadays art does not necessarily need to be militant or socially involved to be political since the categories of truth and reality are destroyed through the mediatic dissipation of notions of subjectivity and objectivity. Since the first obvious indications of the inception of the times of the “end of representation” – as Deleuze pointed out half a century ago – we have to deal with a widespread awareness about the persevering change of art and of reflections about art in the social framework of institutional and technological contexts. The analysis of interactions, starting with the invention of film/cinema, artistic practice and theory, including aesthetics, highlights the importance of the notions, categories and agencies of movement. The emergence of the so-called post-media epoch signals a new decisive change following the one, which was revealed as the overwhelming onset of mass culture. As the theoretical indecision about the features of an ongoing new change seems to be still dominant, the practice of art of any conceivable variety reflects basically the same indecision. The fact that ‘film’ is still the notion, which by and large means moving images, while digitalization made the material (celluloid) film obsolete, is an elementary metaphor of the process of the vanishing of signifiers, related to the notion of art. However, in a more complex term, the questions about the correlation between form and content are re-emerging in novel configurations as well as the epistemological and ontological problems of aesthetics, concerning the designations of objects of analysis.

**Keywords:** change; digitalization; film; legibility; mass culture; movement; post-media.

“Aesthetics suffers from a wrenching duality. On one hand, it designates the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience; on the other hand, it designates the theory of art as the reflection of real experience.”

Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Walter Benjamin’s well known – if not totally accepted, then at least seriously taken notice of – idea of a transformation from quantity to quality regarding the changes of the position of art within industrial society, traverses many contemporary discussions about aesthetics and artistic practice. In Benjamin’s view works of art and the perception of them in the “age of mechanical reproduction” function within the mass

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 260.

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culture. Works of art are enveloped by its main mechanisms of distribution of modes of aesthetic perception in the social framework. In brief, Benjamin discovered that such a framework is a space for including a politicized art in the struggles for emancipation.<sup>2</sup> In the age of the ubiquity of digitalization, it is tempting to speculate in the terms of a repetition of Benjamin's 'formula', now applied to a variety of obviously technologically enabled productions of art and other aesthetic phenomena. Timothy Murray was not the only one who got caught in the comparison of two transitions. In the age of "digital baroque" he ascribes a strong transformative impact to "computer wizardry" in a manner which evokes Benjamin's observation of the effects of industrial reproduction technology.<sup>3</sup> Even more explicitly Peter Weibel almost mimics the diction of the above-mentioned Benjamin's articulation: "Just like the case of the old technical media of photography and film, the pivotal successes of the new technical media consisting of video and computer are not just that they launched new movements in art and created new media for expression, but that they also exerted a decisive influence on historical media such as painting and sculpture."<sup>4</sup> Reading this, we should recall Benjamin's *vanishing aura*, which was the notion of a dialectical change that affected not only some new advances in art and in the movements of aesthetics but the status of art in its totality. Starting with Adorno, countless authors implied and/or ascribed to Benjamin an outlook, which in final analysis boils down to reproach of technological determinism. Adorno mentioned the "equation of technique and technology" in film. Adorno states that according to Benjamin, film "has no original" and so "the mass product is the thing itself".<sup>5</sup> Although Adorno clearly postulates that "the aesthetics of film is thus inherently concerned with society",<sup>6</sup> it seems that he does not take this assumption strictly seriously and he rather proceeds with his doubts about the capacity of film to attain an aesthetic impact comparable, for instance, to writing. Benjamin does exactly the opposite by demonstrating that such aesthetics becomes obsolete after the spread of mass culture. In the final analysis Benjamin gives full weight not to technology, but to the social or sociological and political consequences of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Within this understanding his suggestion of an impossibility to keep alive the 'old' aesthetics exposes its fundamental conceptual focus on the 'Subject' – in both relevant meanings: the abstract continental philosophical notion and the notion of an individual. A matter of a separate discussion is a question on the level of communication between both authors and personal friends since Benjamin overall 'avoids' the sort of philosophical terminology that permeates Adorno's discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, I am referring to Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in *Walter Benjamin. Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken 1969), 217–51.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Weibel, "The Post-Media Condition," March 19, 2012, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/post-media-condition>, acc. January 6, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor, W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 180.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

Benjamin's approach to the notion of mass culture made a crucial difference at the time – actually, posthumously after the publication of his essays in the 1950s – in view of some attempts to ascribe an artistic value to the cinema. Early film theoreticians such as Hugo Münsterberg, Jean Epstein and Rudolf Arnheim (among others) didn't really find a way of thinking about art beyond the canons of the time. Arguing that film was able to attain a comparable artistic level as literature, drama, poetry, music, etc., they failed to notice that such arguing itself was unnecessary; the onset of cinema actually transformed the field of defining art and aesthetic value before film theory noticed the fact. Nevertheless, they share common ground with Benjamin considering their analysis of interactions, starting with the invention of film/cinema, artistic practice and theory, including aesthetics, which highlight the importance of the notions, categories and agencies of *movement*. Cinema as the art of 'moving pictures' is right now becoming a history of a new age, which is being grasped by the chain of notions, beginning with 'postmodernity', including also the concept of post-media.

### Psychotechnology, cinema and the rest of art

By becoming history, which preceded its technological transformation, cinema transcended the limits of art subjugated by representation; however, this transcending through the instances of the exposing of differences could have not been fully recognized due to the technology of the *analogue* reflection of reality as the defining principle of the film. Since the first obvious indications of inception of the times of the 'end of representation' – as Deleuze pointed out half a century ago – we have to deal with a widespread awareness about the persevering change of art and of reflections about art in the framework of social, institutional and technological contexts. When discussing a decisive transforming influence of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and what they inscribed into the category of movement, Deleuze emphasized their inversion regarding representation. In a counter-Hegelian gesture they repudiated the 'mediation' and so they did not propose a new 'representation of movement'. Instead of this the relevant problem for them is about "a question of producing within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind."<sup>7</sup>

This thinking could well have anticipated Deleuze's later work on cinema, which is founded in the first of the two volumes by amalgamating the notions of image and movement (*image-mouvement*). Regardless, although the quoted sentences of Deleuze comprise wide scope of possible meanings and correlations, they open a way of thinking about cinema, which irrevocably established the agency of movement, especially in the field of aesthetics and art. Photography and film gradually became

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London and New York: Continuum, 1994), 8.

the components of an incremental process of changes, disruptions and discontinuities in more or less all artistic fields. *Fin de siècle* painting and sculpture with its artistic movements triggered a chain of changes, which demonstrated that art escaped the constraints of representation. What Nietzsche anticipated in his distancing from Kant's aesthetics through a turn from the aesthetics of the 'disinterested gaze' to the producer of artwork, was specifically materialized in analogue cinema as a "synthetic" art. A projection of a film on the screen presents the "manipulation" of camera focus, plan, frame, etc. Hence, it is an inevitable encounter of two domains of subjectivity (one of the author and other of a viewer) in an unprecedented mode regarding any of "previous" arts. Friedrich Kittler, while paying tribute to Hugo Münsterberg, coined the term "psychotechnology" to designate this relationship, in which the cinema audiences are confronted with the look of a camera as the look of the other. Since these matters were already widely discussed in film theory, I would mainly like to point out here that cinema due to its technology and the interaction in the social and artistic contexts, was involved in the transformation of art, which depended on the transformed perception by the audiences. Therefore, as we all know, the galleries were increasingly populated by a multiplicity of new styles, approaches and reactions to the realities related to the new modes of visual perception; writers like Döblin and Dos Passos used the "method" of film montage in their writings and so on – until the times of the highpoint of modernism, when cinema in "new waves" reflected its own reflections in many cases of the revolutionary politicized moving images. Still accounted for as "analogue", early video technology of magnetic tape recordings shown on cathode-ray displays (CRT) brought by, at the peak of modernism, a revolutionary change to art galleries. This technology decisively affected – in lasting conjunction with the forms of performance and of installation – the emergence of global artistic events in particular. Some painters, for example, more or less implicitly opened a visual dialogue with Etienne Marey's images, shot with the chronophotographic gun before the turn of the centuries. Then in 1930s Alexander Calder introduced his mobiles, sculptures, which actually moved as they were powered by electricity or just moving air. Parallel to cinematic 'new waves' in what was at the time Western and Eastern Europe the group *Fluxus* invented intermedia and interdisciplinary approach to artistic practices. Particularly Nam June Paik stands at the beginnings of video art, which, from his early work on, overwhelmingly conquers the spaces for artistic exhibitions. With the recent leaps of digital technology, it is evident that the boundaries between artistic categories have moved, blurred, transgressed. They have become irretrievably inconceivable except, of course, in their historical forms and formats. How much all these phenomena were instigated by cinema could be open to interpretation, but there is no doubt that focusing on movement in most art forms had to do with film. But as film acquired a special eminence as an art form, although somehow 'contaminated' by its mass cultural origin, film's material signifier, celluloid, is disappearing from usage. Films on celluloid are prevalently dispersed in film museums and archives, where they are being digitized. New films, which are entirely shot with digital technology, are

shown in cinemas, screened on some TV channels, they are streamed to smart televisions, to computers and mobile phones and then they join countless other “visual products” in the vast memories of virtual worlds.

### Post-media 1: totalitarianism of image

On May 12, 2018, Jean-Luc Godard held a press conference at Cannes film festival, where his latest film *The Image Book* (*Le livre d'image* – 2018) was screened. The event marked the process of transformations, which are very consequential for cinema as art and for all art that cinema already in its analogue age affected. The great cinematic and social revolutionary, now 87 years old, Jean-Luc Godard answered the journalists' questions via the FaceTime application on an iPhone. Among many implications of this historic event the first one concerned *The Image Book*, which actually adds many new nuances to Godard's older project *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–1999). *The Image Book* is obviously a montage to a great extent made possible by digital(ised) content from the times of film and television and their inherent historical and political manifestations in view of the trajectory of the meanings of the notions of reality. Hence, the second implication concerns the future of cinema. It seems as if Godard inferred that we are entering a different age, indeed, a different world, whose difference is nothing less but changed humanity. Saying that “many actors today contribute to the totalitarianism of the filmed image, against the thoughtful image”, Godard actually agrees with Stéphane Delorme, who recently pointed out to *persuasive design* as a tool of “designing the minds”. Delorme “accuses” psychologists and neuroscientists that they “sold to the enterprises of the Net their expertise on vulnerabilities of brain in order to *hook* the users.”<sup>8</sup> Still, Godard was not that univocal since he also bet on the future of film, which – like his modernist films in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century with their subversive and disruptive form – stand chances to disturb the very totalitarianism which it itself helps to recreate. Godard must have had the mainstream cinema in mind when he said that cinema “consists too much of showing what's happening. Films should show you what is not happening and what you never see anywhere, not even on Facebook.”<sup>9</sup> Intentionally or not Godard described what the participants in many artistic fields see as their main task. “Showing what is *not* happening” points to critical regard of realities, it calls for a moral invocation and it points to what is overlooked and/or repressed. The recent overwhelming topic of immigrants in all kinds of artistic practice can be taken as an appropriate illustration. In a broader view, Godard's intervention touches upon issues that transcend just the artistic concerns considering that he recognizes the roles of art in the world of multiple interactions. “Images become unplugged and unhinged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities,

<sup>8</sup> Stéphane Delorme, “Totalitarisme tech, Designing minds: changer l'humain,” *Cahier du cinéma* 750 (Decembre 2018): 14.

<sup>9</sup> Godard's quotes from his press conference are transcriptions and translations of his talk.

transforming spaces into sites, and reality into reality.”<sup>10</sup> In the settings, into which Godard’s thinking is inscribed, art does not necessarily need to be militant or socially involved to be political since the categories of truth and reality are destroyed through the mediatic dissipation of notions of subjectivity and objectivity.

## Post-media 2: radicant art

The emergence of the so-called post-media epoch signals a new decisive change following the one, which was revealed as the overwhelming onset of mass culture by Benjamin, and the other that has been marked in Alain Badiou’s philosophy as the *event* of the revolution of the 1960s. The culmination of modernism at the time and its liberating effects reached in the 21<sup>st</sup> century at the end of their trajectory, which consisted of meanings and aesthetic practice that travelled through the discourses of postmodernism in order to be, as Herbert Marcuse back in the 1970s would have it, “absorbed” into socio-economic-political arrangements of neoliberalism, which is the notion that marks the contemporary system of domination. In this respect one should evoke Benjamin’s emancipatory expectations, regarding the mode of mass participation, which at first appears in “disreputable form” in view of the evident usages of mass culture’s “instruments” by fascism at the time. We should see the epistemological pattern in his insight. Similar dialectics as those identified by Benjamin in the 1930s should work also in the post-media age: the new means of a dispersed communication, i.e. interactions through so-called social media serve as “fake news” vehicles. This is just the opposite from the democratization of communication, which was expected when these applications were gradually launched into the space of post-media. A special angle in view of this problem was contributed by Lev Manovich, who prefers to frame all such phenomena in the notion of artificial intelligence (AI). His way of thinking based on his expertise on digital technology is marked by his constant emphases on the “cultural” impacts, which in other words means that “aesthetics” penetrate a large scope of social life and practices. “But what is perhaps less obvious is that AI now plays an equally important role in our cultural lives and behaviors, increasingly automating the processes of aesthetic creation and aesthetic choices.”<sup>11</sup>

And what remained from the cinema? The answer is ‘film’ as an actually empty signifier, considering that celluloid as the material signifier in the notion of cinema is relegated to the past. In the times of post-media this fact far transcends the mere mode of production of cinema, but it also comprises of the modes of perception due to new digital devices, which are included in the dynamic of social forms of interaction with digital film. Of course, art, in general, was entangled in this transformation

<sup>10</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” in *Hito Steyerl. Too Much World*, ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Lev Manovich, *AI Aesthetics* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2018). This booklet was available only in Kindle edition without the conventional pagination and therefore a conventional referring to the page of the quote isn’t possible.

and it “refers to movement, to the dynamism of forms, and [it] characterizes reality as a conglomeration of transitory surfaces and forms that are potentially movable. In this sense, it goes hand in hand with translation as well as with precariousness.”<sup>12</sup> Bourriaud’s invention of *radicant* aesthetics, which takes note of ‘spatializing time’, is especially appropriate for cinema in its new forms after its celluloid signifier is gone. We are just at the beginning of the full flourishing of cinema, which is just opening a way to ‘another world’, which is now understood in terms of the *totalitarianism of image*. Cinema is now actually a plurality of genres, forms and ways of showing films on a range of media. This affects the change of the cinematic artistic practice in a variety of cinematic movements. In a wave of films and TV series, the totalitarian aspect of the digital image is ‘self-reflected’ in films, incorrectly labeled as science fiction, as a constant flow of, time and again, images within images. In this vein characters of quite complex narratives are forced to wander through different ‘realities’, not knowing exactly what is their own and what is the external technologically-induced memory. David Lynch’s second *Twin Peaks* (2017) series is a great example of the ‘radicant’ art considering how time and space run one into the other and, consequently, the characters acquire and enfold inner mysterious differences in their exploded identity. Some episodes of this series are based on an almost realistic paradigm only to be devastated by another episode, which is conceptually mixed with such a form of video installation that not so long ago would have been only imaginable in some artistic breakthrough galleries. Lars von Trier could be taken as another good example in his recent films for his combining visual references from divergent resources in the narratives, which are aimed not only to shocks for the audience but also to the reframing of ethical, aesthetical and ontological perspectives. In film *The House that Jack Built* (2018) he brings into the portraying of a serial killer a re-definition of art as the other side of evil. Of course, such high-end products can be taken primarily as the best examples of the nascent culture, in which art interferes with life in a so far not finally defined manner.

## Conclusion

I mentioned only some specific observations concerning the change of the very notion of aesthetics related to reconfigurations of artistic practice and its social space. As the theoretical indecision about the features of an ongoing new change seems to be still dominant, the practice of art of any conceivable variety reflects basically the same indecision. The coining of concepts of artistic periods from modernism to post-modernism towards ‘radicant art’ and the deciphering of the frames imposed by the aesthetic regime in Ranciere’s perspective mainly indicate that the normative aesthetics even in an elementary shape became definitely inconceivable. The fact that ‘film’ is still the notion, which by and large means moving images, while digitalization made

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<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), 79.

the material (celluloid) film obsolete, is an elementary metaphor of the process of the vanishing of signifiers related to the notion of art. In the aesthetic discourses of today a synchronization of technological determinism and the analysis of a surpassing as ever-singular meanings of art is evident. On the other hand, in the politics of artistic practice, the strategies of aesthetic social comments and commitments are unavoidable. As it looks, all movements, which I only superficially indicated are creating the aesthetics, which work as an agency within art; we have now no more overwhelming aesthetics, but the ubiquitous aesthetics of forms of life and death in the world of simulacra. Therefore, in more complex terms the questions about the correlation between form and content are re-emerging in novel configurations as well as the epistemological and ontological problems of aesthetics, concerning the designations of objects of analysis. Films, which exist only in virtual digital spaces, of course, make things more complicated.

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Article received: May 17, 2019

Article accepted: July 6, 2019

Original scholarly paper