Digital Nihilism and Digital Humanism.

An Aesthetic Genealogy

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The aim of this paper is to describe in an introductory way the debate that was generated when digital culture emerged in the 1990s with the advent of the Web. It is possible to trace a genaology of values and aesthetic implications that produced at least two major factions: the nihilists and the humanists. Digital culture, yet another frontier of technological progress, was thus interpreted both as a critical erosion of content and as a possibility of collective development for humanity. The paper traces some famous positions (e.g. Bolter, Lévy, De Kerckhove, Flusser, Baudrillard) with the only purpose of mapping this debate that in fact leads back once again to the great Western theme of representation, *mimesis*.

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First, I would like to say that my paper[1] will not touch on topics specific to digital aesthetics. My aim is another: to probe a kind of geneaology of values when digital culture began to spread in the 1990s. And as you can imagine from the title of my paper this scenario had, as always, two major factions: the humanists and the nihilists.

Let's start with some recent statements by Neil Young on digital, December 2022. Young refers to the transition into the digital as «that dark step where nothing is real»[2]. A few years earlier, between 2014 and 2015, Young tried to launch Pono, a high resolution audio player. As its advertising slogan stated, Pono «plays high-resolution music files and other formats better than any portable device». Moreover, this was the product description: «Pono is the culmination of Neil Young's goal to bring the quality of music that he and other artists experience in the studio to everyone»[3]. Nevertheless, as early as 2017 the product was taken off the market marking the failure, not so much commercially as ideologically, of Young's vision, who nevertheless continued his struggle in favor of analog versus digital sound. In 2002 Young's crusade against digitization found a new enemy: Spotify. On February 7, 2022 in a statement posted on his own site, neilyounarchives.com, Neil Young attacked Spotify for not only the no vax positions and spreading conspiracy theories about Covid-19 of the platform's star podcaster, Joe Rogan, but for the absolute commodification and total lack of quality of the music experience being offered. This is Neil Young's declaration: «To the musician and creators in the

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[1] This essay reproposes the talk I discussed at the opening day of the Como Lake Summer School on "Digital Aesthetics" on May 29, 2023. Similar theses of this paper of mine can also be found in A. Mecacci, *Estética difusa o de la globalización de lo estético*, in "Boletín de Estética", 66, 2024, pp.7-23.

[2] https://www.musicradar.com/news/neil-young-rick-rubin-digital

[3] https://www.amazon.com/Pono-Music-Portable-Player-Yellow/dp/B00WBS32K4. Interestingly, if not significantly, the color chosen for the device is yellow. A clear reference to Neil Young's most famous and best-selling album *Harvest* (1972).

world, I say this: You must be able to find a better place to be the home of your art. To the workers at Spotify, I say [co-founder and chief executive officer] Daniel Ek is your big problem – not Joe Rogan. Ek pulls the strings. Get out of that place before it eats up your soul. The only goals stated by Ek are about numbers – not art, not creativity»[4]. About a week earlier, when he had already left the platform, Young's words against Spotify had been more circumstantial: the problem was not just ideological, but artistic, indeed aesthetic: «Amazon, Apple Music and Qobuz deliver up to 100% of the music today and it sounds a lot better than the shitty, degraded and neutered sound of Spotify. If you support Spotify, you are destroying an art form. Business over art. Spotify plays the artists's music at 5% of its quality and charges you like it was the real thing»[5].

Neil Young's controversy against Spotify propones again the old question of authentic and inauthentic. On the one hand authentic (analog) art and, on the other one, a (digital) «shitty, degraded sound». As the title of Young's statement reads: more songs and less sound. That is, more quantity (to be monetized) and less quality (to be experienced).

The feud between Neil Young and Spotify is just one example – in this case made more bitter by the economic issues at stake – of what happens whenever a technological change emerges in the fruition and production of art, offering a scenario that may be better or worse than the past. And that always involves there being two factions. History has provided us with numerous examples, some as celebrated as in the case of Baudelaire.

Even Baudelaire – that is, the poet who has now passed into history as the forerunner of modernity and therefore certainly not suspected of blindness about the future – indeed had tremendous misgivings about photography, expressed in that problematic paraphrase, *The Modern Public and Photography*, contained in *Salon 1859*.

> As the photographic industry was the refuge of every would-be painter, every painter too ill-endowed or too lazy to complete his studies, this universal infatuation bore not only the mark of a blindness, an imbecility, but had also the air of a vengeance. […] If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally[6].

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[4] https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/feb/08/neil-young-to-spotify-workers-get-out-before-it-eats-your-soul
[5] https://m.neilyoungarchives.com/news/1/article?id=Spotify-More-Songs-Less-Sound
[6] C. Baudelaire, *Salon 1859*, in Id., *The Mirror of Art*, eng. transl. by di J. Mayne, Doubleday Anchor Books, New York 1956, pp. 231-232.

On the opposite side, just to give a small example, Joseph August Lux, the Austrian scholar and art crtitic who joined Deutscher Werkbund from the year of its founding on 1907, proposed in his *Aesthetics of Engineering* (1910) the mechanization of the aesthetic, making technical automatism coincide with aesthetic quality. Lux claims that «it is not our fault that for us, today, from childhood, technology is more important than Plato»[7]. And then he adds definitively that «the machine determines the forms of good taste»[8]. Lux's thesis was clear: an unaffected faith in the technicalization of aesthetic principles and their practical translation. This involved the idea that the more technologically better an object is the more beautiful it is. Therefore technological value as aesthetic value or rather aesthetic quality: «Stilgesetz der Technik», style law of technology as Lux defined it.

Another final example. When the word entered the cinema what reactions were there? Probably the most profound considerations were those offered, somewhat rhapsodically, to "Motion Picture Magazine" in 1930 by a doubtful Charlie Chaplin during the troubled making of *City Lights*: «The mechanical transition from silent to spoken cinema is inadmissible: the image created by the performance of a silent film cannot be reconciled with speech. Silence is the essence of cinema. For words, a different image must be created».

This opposition, shown in these three short examples, was once and for all summarized in Italy in 1964 by Umberto Eco in the two poles "apocalyptic" and "integrated". The discussion was framed by opposing characterizations, on one hand, of current intellectuals as apocalyptic and opposed to all mass culture, and, on the hother hand, of integrated intellectuals, so much a part of mass culture as to be unaware of serving it. As Eco meant, the apocalyptics reflect on mass culture, the integrated operate in it: «the image of the Apocalypse is evoked in texts *on* mass culture, while the image of integration emerges in texts which *belong to* mass culture»[9]. As if to say: on one side T.S. Eliot and on the other side Marshall McLuhan.

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[7] J.A. Lux, *Ingenieur-Ästhetik*, Lammers, München 1910. Lux's quotes are taken from a partial Italian translation: *Estetica dell'ingegneria*, in T. Maldonado (a cura di) *Tecnica e cultura*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1979, p. 97.
[8] Ivi, p. 110.
[9] U. Eco, *Apocalypse postponed*, R. Lumley (ed. by), Indiana Univerisity Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2000, p. 18.

Referring to these opposing ideologies, the indictment of new technologies we also find in digital culture through some easily detectable features: 1) distorting the essence of art (the thesis of Neil Young and Charlie Chaplin); 2) critical erosion and preservation of the status quo through massification and commodification (Adorno on culture industry); 3) banalization of content (the twentieth-century debate on kitsch); 4) configuration of distracted experiences (a concept already intercepted by Warhol back in 1963: «When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect»[10]); and finally 5) disappearance of reality (Baudrillard's extreme hyperreality thesis).

I would like to propose a rough mapping certainly not exhaustive of some proposals: pros and cons. Let us look at some favorable positions: digitization as a positive value then. First, this position was developed in the process of hypertechnologization of media: digital considered as essentially the domain of globalized communication.

Derrick De Kerckhove, as a first example. De Kerkchove transposes his master McLuhan's 1964 assumption that «all media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms»[11] within the new digital culture emerging in the early 1990s. The connection between media aesthetics and cognitive perception is thematized by De Kerkchove in the notion of brainframes[12], i.e., the idea that information processing technologies insert the brain into an interpretive framework of reality. The alphabet and perspective, the two forms of brainframes that have marked human perceptual evolution, are followed by the frame of the technological medium, exemplified by the role played by the video screen. Embedded in this overall reassessment of tactile and sensory processes are the dimensions of interactivity and multimedia, which also have obvious repercussions for aesthetic experience. The tendency, conveyed more and more by devices, to immerse oneself in representation is heightened, and it is in this framework that virtual reality according to De Kerkchove mutates into sensory remapping. This perceptual reconfiguration is precisely what art, within virtual reality, is called upon to do, that is to fulfill two interrelated functions: it is an internal operation of sensibility and, at the same time, an interpretation of the technology itself. Art is considered a manifestation of a psychotechnology that De Kerkchove identified as active

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[10] K. Goldsmith (ed. by), *I'll Be Your Mirror. The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, Carroll & Graf, New York 2004, p. 19. The sentence is contained in the famous interview given to Gene Swenson and published in "ARTnews" in November 1963 under the title *What is Pop Art?*.

[11] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 57.

[12] D. De Kerckhove, *Brainframes: Technology, Mind and Business*, Bosch & Keuning, Baar-Utrecht 1991.

in the concept of webness, the cognitive, and collective dimension that emerges in the web and manifests a connective and/or connected intelligence[13], a notion that recalls, albeit in its significant variant, the collective intelligence thematized by Pierre Lévy three years before in *Collective Intelligence. Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*.

Also in McLuhan's wake is the proposal developed by Jay David Bolter in *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (1999), a book co-written with Richard Grusin. But the debt to McLuhan is not only evident in the title, which updates the 1964 classic *Understanding Media*. We recognize this debt especially in the two starting principles that the two authors regain: no medium is ever isolated and the content of one medium is always another medium. A systemic interpretation of new media is then drawn, according to which three guiding assumptions can be pointed out: 1) each medium can never operate in an autonomous form; 2) new media reshape previous media; and 3) digitization makes this process faster and more effective. The key concept of this reading is denoted by the term remediation: each medium is engaged in a dynamic of remediation that restructures the very genealogical modes of representation. The growing proliferation of media devices is answered by the technological tendency to eliminate all forms of mediation, what Bolter refers to as «transparent immediacy» and «opaque hypermediacy». In the first case, there emerges a desire for the device to make itself imperceptible, transparent, creating immediate access to the data of the real – «virtual reality is immersive, which means that it is a medium whose purpose is to disappear»[14] – , in the second case there looms an aesthetic pleasure that, by lingering on multimedia and the difference between real and mimetic, seeks to reproduce perceptual-sensory richness: in fact «if the logic of immediacy leads to one either to erase or to render automatic the act of representation, the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible»[15]. Remediation – «the representation of one medium within another is a defining characteristic of the new digital media»[16] – thus looms both as a fundamental specificity of digital media and as evidence of a discontinuous, conflicting and competitive evolution of mutual remodulation, indeed of remediation, between old and new media. In a nonlinear process of adaptation and assimilation, but also of resistance and momentary

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[13] Id., *Connected Intelligence. The Arrival of the Web Society*, Somerville House, Toronto 1997.
[14] J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 21.
[15] *Ivi*, pp. 33-34.
[16] *Ivi*, p. 45.

incompatibilities, the technological systems of communication, especially in the transition from analog to digital media, attest to the principle of remediation as the barycenter on which the oscillation between immediacy and hypermediation revolves.

It is a focus that links Bolter's work from his analysis of the concept of hypertext[17] to his attempt at an interpretive synthesis of contemporary civilization in the sign of a digitization of knowledge that undoes, albeit in the problematic nature that this operation manifests, the hierarchical criteria of culture[18], but also a rethinking of the relationship between art and information processes, precisely digital art[19]. Within this scenario it is worth mentioning the notion introduced in the early 1990s by Roger Fidler of «mediamorphosis», later elaborated in *Mediamorphosis. Understandig New Media*[20], in which the interdependence of media is read through three conceptual paradigms (coevulution, convergence, complexity) that have marked the historical evolution of communication of which digital language represents the third stage, after the first stage of the expressive formation of thought and the second stage of written language.

Since the 1990s, the new media scenario has prompted a comprehensive rethinking of the interpretation of technological reality. Pioneering this reinterpretation of the interconnections between the virtual and the real were the studies of Pierre Lévy, who documented in a series of widely acclaimed works – *Collective Intelligence* (1994), *Becoming Virtual,* (1995), *Cyberculture* (1997) – the socio-anthropological as well as aesthetic implications of digital technologies. Introducing the notion of «collective intelligence» Lévy points to the unprecedented possibilities, activated by the digitization of communication systems, for the sharing, distribution and mobilization of skills and knowledge. For Lévy, this is, in an essentially optimistic approach, to detect the configuration of a space in which the distinction between production and receptions of meanings is diluted in favor of a continuum of reading and writing. A «deterritorialized semiotic plane» looms in which the very nature of the work of art changes, identifying with that of the device. An art of implication, first and foremost environmental, capable

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[17] J.D. Bolter, *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, Routledge, New York 2001.
[18] Id., *Digital Plenitude. The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2019.
[19] J.D. Bolter, D. Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors. Interaction Design, Digital Art and the Myth of Transparency*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2003.
[20] R. Fidler, *Mediamorphosis. Understanding New Media*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks 1997.

of organizing in the perspective of collective intelligence a new common dimension, cyberspace: a work in progress that emphasizes progress rather than work, «its embodiment is manifested in moments, places, collective dynamics, but no longer in individuals. It is an art without a signature»[21]. This architecture of cyberspace is aesthetically experienced in virtual environments, sign systems, and, on a more specifically perceptual level, interfaces. Accompanying the dissolution of the centrality of the subject (creator and user) and the uniqueness of the work is, for Lévy, the process of virtualization to be understood as the dynamic of this new common reality. Virtual art is what should make perceptible, manifest this evolution that deconstructs traditional message- and individuality-centered art in favor of a device through which the new artist no longer tells a story, instead «he is architect of the space of events, an engineer of worlds for billions of future histories, a sculptor of the virtual itself»[22].

Cyberspace is really this virtual network that organizes within it a «media ecology» in which totality is removed from universality and the image loses its spectacular or aestheticized dimension of appearance to redefine itself as an immersive process: «representation makes room for the interactive visualization of a model; simulation replaces resemblance. Drawings, photographs, and films are voided; they welcome the active explorer of a digital model, a collective of workers or players engaged in the cooperative construction of a data universe»[23].

An original interpreter of the transformation of the traditional image into the technical image was the Czech philosopher of communication, Vilém Flusser. Within his vast work, often marked more by intermittent intuitions than by a linear development also for the wide range of areas investigated, it is possible to trace a fundamental notion: the techno-image or technical image.

According to Flusser, as emerges in the posthumous collection of essays of 1997, *The Culture of Media*, the image is a «significant surface» whose historical evolution finds in technology a decisive paradigm shift: to the traditional image, which implies the vision of objects, the technical image takes over, which implies the computation of concepts. Therefore, imagination is joined by another faculty the «techno-imagination», that is, the ability to decipher all those images produced and conveyed through apparatus and

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[21] P. Lévy, *Collective Intelligence*, Perseus, Cambridge Mass. 1997, p. 123.
[22] Id., *Becoming Virtual. Reality in the Digital Age*, Plenum Trad, New York-London 1998, p. 185.
[23] Id., *Cyberculture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2001, p. 130.

devices: traditional images, that's the general thesis, are subjective abstractions of phenomena, technical images are concretions of objective abstractions[24]. This phenomenology of the image also pours into a philosophy of the history of the image: at the mythical time of the traditional image, supplanted for a long time by the historical time of writing, the post-historical time of the technoimage takes over. The universe of techno-images is revealed not only in the most immediate areas of application, such as photography[25], but in any scenario in which technology changes phenomena in information processes such as in the case of design in which the object, deposed the materiality of the object of use, is remodulated in the form of *Unding*, the Non-Thing, testimony of the definition of an intangible and informative culture[26].

These positions are more or less favorable or at least neutrally confident. But we know perfectly well at least one total criticism of the digitalization of the real: the well-known criticism advanced by Baudrillard. This process coincides for Baudrillard with the notion of aestheticization.

By exaggerating the negative meaning of aestheticization, Baudrillard collects, in his own way and in his own words, the legacy of Benjamin (the technical reproducibility of aesthetics) and McLuhan (the medium-is-the-message paradigm) capturing in the technology a new generation of meaning that offers itself as an aestheticized dimension. As reality is replaced by simulation, so the production responds to seduction as a principle that presides over the order of appearances, artifices, simulacra. Especially starting from the second half of the Eighties Baudrillard, taking as his patron Andy Warhol, identified in the aestheticization a double process: on the one hand the dematerialization of art («disappearance» is the term used) on the other hand, the materialization of aesthetics in an operational form

This represents a further step forward compared to the system of simulacra that oriented the postmodern. One enters a «transaesthetics» in which art, proliferating everywhere, finds itself engaged in its own disappearance. However, Baudrillard never distinguished «aesthetic» and «artistic» and it is precisely in the light of this indistinctness that aestheticization takes on ideological traits. The aesthetic *apparatus* of reality continues to function although its contents have become indifferent to this very operation:

[24] V. Flusser, *In the Universe of Technical Images*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2011.
[25] Id., *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, London 2000.
[26] Id., *The Shape of Things. A Philosophy of Design*, Reaktion Books, London 1999.

«all the industrial machinery in the world has acquired an aesthetic dimension; all the world's insignificance has been transfigured by the aestheticizing process»[27].

It is the technology that supports and realizes this total simulation of reality. The pervasive aestheticization which we have descended conceals the fact that it is precisely the ubiquity of technology «the art of disappearing»: the virtuality that kills the real. It is the thesis of *The Perfect Crime*, the 1994 text in which the idea of aestheticization finally converges in that of virtualization[28]. In the search for perfection, man adheres to this project thinking of himself as an artifact, as a machine. If Duchamp decides to deconstruct the object, it is up to Warhol to deconstruct the subject by identifying the ego with the machine. In its classical meaning art is, in this process in which the technical image already presupposes the cancellation of the subject, a «periphery». Aesthetics emerges as a practice of perpetual artificialization of dimensions that do not have art at the center. In this perspective, coming after Warhol means no longer having to ask the question «between beautiful and ugly, between real and unreal, between transcendence and immanence. [...] It is pointless to try to endow our art with an aesthetic consistency or an aeshetic teleology»[29].

The overlap of aestheticization and globalization is at the heart of the analysis of *Undoing Aesthetics*[30] by Wolfgang Welsch in which the pervasiveness of aesthetics is diagnosed through a dialectic of depth/surface. Aestheticization is not only the exhibition of the inclusion of aesthetic elements in the various phenomena of life that, in theory, should not turn out to be aesthetic (politics, economics, knowledge) or the aesthetic strengthening of dimensions that are already equipped with aesthetics (fashion, design, technology), but the symptom of a new epistemology of reality. It is in the light of this more problematic meaning of aestheticism that it is understandable that Welsch does not see in the postmodern a phase of ulteriority or antagonism towards modernity, but the way of self-definition of contemporary modernity and within this self-definition that emerges aesthetics as a connotating element. Aestheticization is therefore both a new stage of the modern and its heritage. The stratification of the processes of aestheticization also entails a definitive abandonment of the identification between aesthetic and artistic,

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[27] J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, Verso, London-New York 1993, p. 18.
[28] Id., *The Perfect Crime*, Verso, London-New York 1996.
[29] *Ivi*, pp. 17-18.
[30] W. Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics*, Sage, London 1997.

which could be assumed without much discussion as the fulcrum of widespread aesthetics.

The first level is the aestheticization involving the surface of the real (*Oberflächenästhetiesierung*). A dynamic that already pop had brought out: the aesthetics of the surface. At this stage there is a «embellishment» (*Verhübschung*) of daily experience. The aesthetic spreads in a pervasive way emerging not only in areas of obvious exaggeration (fashion and design), but in potentially infinite practices (food, tourism, sport and so on). They are in fact all those areas of experience made their own by the field of studies called Everyday Aesthetics. Reality is self-realized as an aesthetic construction: it is the passage of aesthetics from appearance to essence. A transition that the postmodern had already elaborated and which, in Baudrillard's terminology, had been synthesized by the change of the value of use in symbolic value. Anthropologically this aestheticized experience is declined in hedonism, in the search for «enjoyment without consequences». The subject participates in this incessant packaging operation, landing in the construction and consumption of his own image and that of others: a process of «glazing» which can be interpreted as the completely aestheticized stage of both the alienation of the subject and the fetishism of the commodity.

This surface aestheticization is followed by a profound one. Here it is no longer a matter of a cosmetics of the real, but its immaterial aestheticization. Simulation, the pivot of this technological construction of reality, no longer has an imitative, but productive function. The depth of this second stage transcends the aestheticized manifestations that modernity has gone through (the utopia of the beautiful soul, the post-modern cult of hedonism, the aestheticized strategies of the economy) and it is outlined as a scenario of derealization: reality as a media construction.

This is the level that configures the identification of *Homo Aestheticus*'s statute of the contemporary subject. The affirmation of a styling of the subject is therefore poured into a double condition that the technological attests. A double condition that Benjamin had already guessed: the derealization of reality is always a reconfiguration of the aisthesis.

This scenario implies that the legacy of the modern is an epistemological aestheticization. The aesthetic we find in everyday life is only the surface of an epistemology, that is, the construction of links between reality, knowledge and truth, which assumes the traits and modalities of a real aesthetic turn. A process that has behind

it a «proto-aesthetic», that is, the history of aesthetics itself that through two decisive moments, Kant (the epistemological character of the aesthetic) and Nietzsche (the aesthetic-fictional character of knowledge), lays the foundations for the aesthetic turning point of modernity. This causes – and Welsch, like all the interpreters of aestheticization, does not exempt himself from detecting it – even the digital one of course, the overcoming of the identity between aesthetic and artistic to arrive at a transartistic vision of the aesthetic, summarized by the formula «aesthetics beyond aesthetics». Aesthetics, through digital, would thus fall into its opposite: the aesthetic expanding everywhere becomes unrecognizable, aestheticization turns out to be anesthetized.

Going through this scenario, now thirty years old, causes a strange feeling. We read texts that ultimately resort to the same old metaphors: windows, mirrors, screens, surfaces. As if seeing, which the Greeks conceived primarily as an expression of the cognitive process, *theoria*, was the inescapable dimension of digital culture as well from whatever perspective we want to thematize it. And today as the digital flows into a new technological transformation, that of artificial intelligence, it seems that the positions remain the same: oppose the digital image or develop it? But weren't these also the positions of Plato and Aristotle, respectively, in the face of that fascination with the image that created a further level of meaning to the real and that the Greeks called *mimesis*, representation?