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Broken Mirror

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This paper examines the transformation of aesthetics by tracing the shifting relationship between art and reality through the conceptual frameworks of Oscar Wilde and Paul Virilio. It interrogates the functions of representation, imagination, and immediacy within the contexts of modern and postmodern aesthetics. Drawing on Wilde's paradoxical defense of artifice in The Decay of Lying and Virilio's critique of technological perception, the paper situates contemporary art as a cultural domain suspended between fiction and hyperreality. It further investigates the metaphysical and ethical consequences of the erosion of representation, asking how this rupture unsettles aesthetic theories grounded in mimesis (mimēsis) and contemplative distance. By foregrounding aesthetics as the domain of the sensible (aisthēsis), the locus where artwork and spectator converge, the paper reframes the critique of representation as a critique of fractured perception. Wilde and Virilio are approached not as antagonistic but as complementary figures: Wilde affirms the imaginative lie as the precondition of aesthetic experience, while Virilio laments the collapse of perception into immediacy. Through this interdisciplinary dialogue, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in the philosophy and theory of art concerning the status of representation, the crisis of meaning in contemporary aesthetics, and the ethical stakes of artistic expression in the contemporary culture.

Keywords: *aesthetics, representation, immediacy, Oscar Wilde, Paul Virilio*

Introduction

What happens when art no longer mirrors the world but starts to produce it? This paper examines the shifting metaphysical and ethical orientations of art from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary moment. Through Oscar Wilde's ironic defense of "lying" in art and Paul Virilio's critique of the aesthetics of immediacy, it asks: how has the relation between art and reality been reconfigured by the advent of modernity, the acceleration of technological progress, and the ensuing crisis of representation in postmodern culture? And what are the implications of abandoning *mimesis* as an aesthetic principle?

The inquiry unfolds within the philosophical domain of aesthetics, while drawing upon art history and cultural theory. Its method is interpretative and rhetorical: a juxtaposition of two thinkers from distinct epochs to trace the philosophical logic of aesthetic transformation across modernity and postmodernity. Aesthetics is here conceived as the sensible field in which art and life intersect, the site where perception itself is formed, unsettled, and contested.

Wilde and Virilio are brought together not *despite* their differences, but because their thought illuminates the aesthetic field from opposing yet convergent perspectives. Wilde's nineteenth-century aestheticism, with its paradoxical defense of fiction as *truth*, reclaims imagination as the vital ground not only of aesthetic experience but of *reality*

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itself. Virilio, writing within a media-saturated contemporary culture, exposes how the technological collapse of distance between artwork and spectator destabilizes the very experience of the *real*. Their juxtaposition underscores the fragility of the aesthetic as both the medium of expression and the site in which reality is constituted.

In his 1891 essay *The Decay of Lying*, presented as a Socratic dialogue between the fictional characters Vivian and Cyril, Oscar Wilde inverts the traditional relationship between art and reality, proposing a new aesthetics: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. [..] Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction."[1] Although framed as a satirical late-Romantic speculation, Wilde's aesthetics offer a provocative perspective on European art history and the metaphysical relationship between art and reality, or *life*. He presents art not as a reflection of the world but as its creative source, proclaiming that in arts "as a method, realism is a complete failure."[2] According to Wilde, when art begins to mimic reality, it loses its vitality and becomes sterile – trapped within the confines of "poor, probable, uninteresting human life."[3] For Wilde, the capacity to create reality *via* fiction is the highest expression of human imagination – an act he equates with *life* itself. The decline of lying "as an art, a science, and a social pleasure,"[4] he says, led to the deterioration of modern art and literature, which in his time had embraced realism and the pursuit of accurate representation.

Contemporary art no longer merely draws upon reality as its source; it increasingly blurs the boundaries between fiction and fact, illusion and experience, most notably through what has come to be described as *anti-representationalism*[5].

Art practices today pursue this blurring in multidimensional ways—interrogating authorship, presence, and the very constitution of reality and perception. Notable examples include the immersive "*Stalinist Truman Show*" of the DAU project[6],

1. Wilde, Oscar. 1905 [1891]), "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 25.

3. Ibid., p. 29.

4. Ibid., p. 8.

5. Anti-representation in art refers to a retreat from, or rejection of, traditional modes of depiction and representation. Artists and aesthetic theorists who adopt an anti-representational approach seek alternatives to the direct portrayal of reality, challenging the notion that art should serve as a mirror of the visible world. Practices of anti-representation in art include, for example, conceptual art, minimalism, performance and installation art, as well as the deconstruction of traditional media. See. Verstegen, Ian (2016) "The anti-sign: anti-representationalism in contemporary art theory", *Culture, Theory and Critique*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 215–227, Taylor & Francis. Also, Rancière, Jacques (2007) *The Future of the Image,* tr. G. Elliott, London: Verso.

6. DAU is a 2019 Russian film project directed by Ilya Khrzhanovsky. DAU is an ongoing experiment, evolving from a biopic about a Soviet physicist into a large-scale project - part cinematic cycle, part behavioral experiment - involving hundreds of participants from around the world. Combining elements of film, theatre, science, psychology, architecture, visual arts and performance, it has created a complex and absorbing world that has to be lived as much as seen. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1728616/

Marina Abramović's mixed reality performance *The Life*[7], and the AI-generated portrait *Edmond de Belamy* created by the Paris-based collective Obvious[8], which raises provocative questions about authorship, creativity, and machine agency. These works do not represent reality in a classical sense but rather simulate, distort, or co-produce it. Similarly, relational aesthetics (as theorized by *Nicolas Bourriaud*[9]) and immersive installations by artists like Bill Viola and James Turrell prioritize sensory affect, spatial experience, and direct interaction, further challenging traditional representational frameworks. Yet with the emergence of AI-generated art, new ontological and ethical dilemmas come into view: the effacement of the artist's hand, the opacity of algorithmic processes, and the increasing indistinguishability between the original and the synthetic as sites of aesthetic experience.

These developments propel the anti-representational trajectory into a new phase—one in which perception itself becomes unstable, and the boundaries between artistic vision and machinic production are not merely blurred but increasingly undecidable. What happens when *anti-representationalism*— emerging as the paradoxical offspring of modern realism— dissolves not only the traditional separations between artwork and spectator, artistic expression and political action, creative participation and direct involvement, artist and art, but ultimately effaces the very distinction between art and life itself?

What if this convergence lends credence to Wilde's *tongue-in-cheek* claim that *life imitates art?* What if, in concealing truth within fiction, Wilde gestures toward a deeper reality? And what if lived reality itself is, at its core, a construct of the imagination—an imagination as fundamentally human as it is generative of life? If so, what are the philosophical consequences?

To take a brief historical detour, it is worth recalling that, not long after the publication of Wilde's essay, the Western European artistic tradition underwent a revolutionary transformation that redefined the relationship between representation and human reality. The visual arts began to abandon established modes of depiction, striving instead for more immediate and unmediated forms of expression. This shift was propelled both by evolving aesthetic canons and by the advent of new technologies, which opened previously unimagined terrains of experimentation. In consequence, the formal criteria as well as the conceptual foundations of art were profoundly reconfigured.

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7. Written and performed by Marina Abramović, *The Life* works exclusively in Mixed Reality, and captured by 4D Views with devices provided by Magic Leap. Marina Abramović ventures into Mixed Reality to explore this notion further and map new territory at the intersection of technology and performance. https://www.widewalls.ch/ma rina-abramovic-serpentine-galleries/

8. Edmond de Belamy is a generative adversarial network portrait painting constructed in 2018 by Paris-based arts-collective Obvious. It was the first artwork created using Artificial Intelligence and was featured in a Christie's auction. It was sold for $432,500. https://obvious -art.com/ portfolio/edmond-de-belamy/

9. Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics.* Tr. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.

The twentieth century in the West began with great hopes for human liberation, yet it ultimately became the century that proclaimed the end of history,[10] the end of philosophy,[11] the end of art,[12] and the death of God[13] — the very foundations upon which the Europe had once rested. The World Wars erupted as catastrophic events that came to define the twentieth century while the Holocaust — an unprecedented escalation and mechanization of terror—continues to serve as a central reference point in contemporary discussions of politics, ethics, and cultural memory. The very dream of technological and scientific progress—once imagined as the path to human emancipation—had instead fueled the war machine, while at the same time reshaping society and transforming collective modes of perception, that is, culture itself. These traumas bound art ever more closely to political discourse. Confronted with the disintegration of reality and the erosion of human dignity, the arts sought new strategies of survival within a cultural landscape haunted by latent terror, pervasive fear, and existential emptiness.

Walter Benjamin[14] observed that the reproducibility of images through photography and film fundamentally altered the conditions of perception, while Arthur Danto later argued that the breakdown of conventional representation marked the philosophical "end" of art as it had been traditionally conceived. Both diagnoses point to revolutionary aesthetic movements propelled by a utopian impulse—and at times by explicit programs—to envision and enact a radically transformed future. The boundary between art and *life* began to erode, as the artist's role expanded beyond aesthetic creation to encompass social, political, and existential engagement – artists no longer merely represented revolution – they sought to embody it.

Russian Constructivists such as Rodchenko sought to integrate art with politics and industry, while Dadaists like Hannah Höch employed collage to critique war and social norms. Movements such as Futurism and the Bauhaus embraced urbanization and technology, whereas Abstract Expressionists like Pollock pursued authentic individuality through expressive, non-representational forms. These trajectories promised not only progress, but a total reconfiguration of human existence. In this process, the boundaries between artistic expression, ideological critique, and political activism became increasingly entangled. Artists often responded by transgressing

10. Fukuyama, Francis. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, NY: Free Press.

11. Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" (1964) in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1977), 427–449.

12. Danto, Arthur. (2005 [1986]), "The End of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, p. 81–116.

13. Nietzsche. Friedrich. (2001 [1882]) *The Gay Science,* trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

14. Benjamin, Walter. (2008) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations,* ed. by Hannah Arendt, tr. by Harry Zohn. London: Penguin.

the remaining taboos and sacralities, attempting to pierce through the unbearable weight of reality, and as observes Paul Virilio,[15] becoming *pitiless*[16].

Today's art world has expanded dramatically, and with the disintegration of modernity's master narratives, it has fractured into a multiplicity of experimental practices that resist unification within any coherent discourse. Since the rise of Pop Art, no single dominant style has prevailed; instead, contemporary art reflects a broader cultural shift toward fragmentation, pluralism, and stylistic hybridity—phenomena further intensified by the growing integration of entertainment, mass media, and commercial culture into artistic production. Yet despite the fragmentation of contemporary practice and the pulverization of tradition, art continues to uphold the ideal of originality and to assert its capacity for offering new perspectives on the world. Increasingly, it engages with popular culture, entertainment, design, and fashion—blurring the boundary between high and popular art[17] more than ever before.

As Wilde astutely observed, "A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher."[18] This observation could aptly describe contemporary art's entanglement with the globalized market, where it functions as a creative force within the culture and entertainment industries.

Today's art functions as an experimental laboratory – challenging tradition, questioning taboos, and destabilizing established meanings. It seeks to subvert symbols and dissolve social, cultural, religious, and political boundaries in the pursuit of continual innovation and radical originality. In this process, it produces alternative realities, imagined utopias, and confronts social bias and conflicts, thereby contributing to broader debates about the futures of global society. As Nicolas Bourriaud has argued[19], contemporary art frequently abandons the object in favor of interaction, proposing new modes of being-together in a fragmented world. In times of political, social, and economic crisis, art emerges as one of the last bastions of expressive freedom – raising urgent, often controversial questions

15. Virilio, Paul. (2010) *A Pitiless Art: Conversations with Sylvère Lotringer.* New York: Semiotext(e).

16. Examples of this "pitiless" dimension in contemporary art include: Viennese Actionism (e.g., Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*), which used ritualistic violence and animal blood to confront existential horror; Santiago Sierra's socially charged performances that reduce labor and marginalization to spectacle; Harun Farocki's *Serious Games*, revealing the simulated aesthetics of military violence; Luc Delahaye's large-format war photography, presenting conflict with chilling formal elegance; and Damien Hirst's works like *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, which commodify mortality into visceral spectacle. These works embody the aesthetics of immediacy, rupture, and hyper-reality that Virilio associates with the collapse of traditional representation and the disappearance of ethical distance in contemporary visual culture.

17. Bourdieu, Pierre. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Tr. by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

18. Oscar Wilde, (1905 [1891]), "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p. 32.

19. Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics.* Tr. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.

about what is culturally acceptable, valuable, or beautiful, and even challenging the very foundations of what it means to be human.

Classical aesthetic theories and philosophies of art often falter when confronted with today's pulverized traditions, emergent mythologies, and the fluid, contested criteria of what qualifies as art. Within a landscape defined by fragmentation and hybridity, art engages with reality—and with human life—more directly and urgently than ever before. Yet this engagement can no longer be grasped solely at the level of artistic practice; after the proclaimed "end of art," it belongs more fundamentally to the domain of aesthetics, where the very conditions of perception and meaning are constituted, contested, and reconfigured. In this regard, Jacques Rancière contends that aesthetics is inherently political, as it reconfigures the "distribution of the sensible"[20] – the field via which we perceive and make sense of what is *real*.

In this light, contemporary art's capacity to *reimagine* perception of *what is* may be key not only to redefining art, but also to reclaiming a shared sense of reality/humanity. The arts can provide existential perspectives that increasingly intersect with cultural and political life, and even clinical psychology and therapeutic practices[21]. As a vehicle for critique, activism, and even healing, the expanding role of the artistic field raises a pressing question: can it contribute to restoring the image of the human in an age marked by disinformation, fragmentation, and "post-truth"[22], of a deep collapse of reality itself? In a world increasingly described as post-historical[23], post-cultural[24], post-Christian[25] and even post-human[26], the stakes of artistic expression have grown even more complex. Art practices today often offer a space for shared meanings and new narratives in openness, new sensible territories. Yet must we take this claim seriously in an era in which, within art, everything is permitted—where no boundary remains inviolable—or does such boundless permissiveness conceal a more fatal loss, one in which meaning, depth, and perhaps even *life* itself quietly slip away?

In his essay *A Pitiless Art*, Paul Virilio investigates the roots of contemporary cultural brutality, revealing how modern aesthetics have come to absorb and mirror the violence and desensitization that pervade modern life. For Virilio, this "pitiless" dimension of art is not simply a representation of trauma, but rather a

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20. Rancière, Jacques. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.* Tr. by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.

21. Russo, Rebecca. 2012. *Videoinsight®: Healing with Contemporary Art.* Bologna: Damiani Editore.

22. Lee C. McIntyre. (2018) *Post-Truth*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

23. Vilém Flusser. (2013) *Post-History. Thinking Possibilities for Freedom in a Programmed World,* trans. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, Univocal Publishing.

24. Steiner, George. (1973) *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

25. Vattimo, Gianni. (2002) *After Christianity.* Tr. by Luca D'Isanto and David Webb. New York: Columbia University Press.

26. Posthumanism critiques the universalist posture of the idea of "Man" as the alleged "measure of all things." This theory is prevalent in contemporary art discussions and explored in depth by such authors as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Povinelli.

manifestation of a deeper crisis in perception – one in which the traditional boundaries of representation collapse, and immediacy overtakes reflection. Virilio provocatively asks, "Did the Nazi terror lose the war but, in the end, win the peace?"[27] – suggesting that the aesthetic and perceptual strategies born of totalitarian violence have, in subtle ways, permeated postwar culture, shaping the visual language and psychological conditions of contemporary life. He cites philosopher Jacqueline Lichtenstein[28], who, after visiting the Auschwitz Museum in 1997, reflects with unsettling clarity: "In the museum, I suddenly had the impression I was in a museum of contemporary art. I took the train back, telling myself that they had won! They had won since they'd produced forms of perception that are all of a piece within the mode of destruction, they made their own."[29] For Lichtenstein – as for Virilio – this moment signals a chilling continuity: the perceptual frameworks born in the machinery of destruction have migrated into the aesthetic language of contemporary art. The museum, meant to memorialize atrocity, mirrors the formal and affective codes – forms of expression – in a pitiless cultural present.

In Virilio's view, "pitiless art" is not merely symbolic – it is a multidimensional and direct manifestation of destruction, reflecting a contemporary cultural perception shaped by a deeply distorted collective mentality. Unpacking the aesthetic, political, and technological dynamics that underlie this shift, Virilio poses a critical question: *"Contemporary art, sure, but contemporary with what?"*[30] This challenge calls into question the foundations of our present aesthetic paradigm, where immediacy replaces reflection, and violence is often no longer represented but enacted via form and perception – performed as present, here and now as *real*.

For Virilio, contemporary art is marked by the collapse of traditional representation and its perceptual frameworks, replaced by a regime of *immediacy* – a direct presentation of experience in which the boundaries between the real and the virtual dissolve. In this context, art becomes increasingly entangled with advanced technologies, new media, and what he calls "hyper-abstraction"[31] – aesthetic strategies that intensify rather than mediate perception. These developments generate a distorted sensory field, leading Virilio to question whether it is still possible for art to resist denying or destroying our capacity to grasp reality. Instead of fostering critical distance or contemplative insight, such art risks overwhelming the viewer with presence, sensation, and data. In this regard, even Theodor Adorno's famous assertion about "the impossibility of writing a

27. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 28.

28. Jacqueline Lichtenstein (1947) is a French philosopher, art historian, and professor of aesthetics and the philosophy of art at the University of Paris IV – Paris-Sorbonne. A central theme of Lichtenstein's work is the reception of colour by various disciplines, such as philosophy, art, sociology and ethics. A focal point for her analysis is the antagonistic relationship between colour and the notion of the design or plan of a work.

29. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 28.

30. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 27.

31. Ibid., p. 14.

poem after Auschwitz" [32] has dissipated in what he terms the "aesthetics of disappearance" [33] – a condition marked by the vanishing of the horizon, the medium, critical distance, and ultimately, the human itself. In this perceptual regime, art no longer bears witness or reflects; it dissolves into immediacy, erasing the space necessary for reflection, memory, or empathy.

There is no definitive answer as to what caused the rupture in the art historical tradition of representation – arguably the foundational expressive mode of visual art – which was gradually abandoned in favor of radical presence. In his essay *The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense*, Arthur Danto speculates: "Perhaps the challenge came from photography and moving pictures. Perhaps it came from a complex loss of cultural faith in Western values." [34] For Virilio, however, these two aspects – technological and ethical – are not separate but deeply intertwined. He sees them as complementary dimensions of a broader transformation rooted in the scientific worldview of modernity (a worldview that had already begun to shape aesthetic ideals in the time of Oscar Wilde). This shift undermined the symbolic and reflective dimensions of art, replacing them with mechanisms of immediacy and control.

Philosophically, a major intellectual shift in nineteenth-century Europe was the rise of a scientific worldview, accompanied by new theories of mind that sought to reduce human consciousness to empirical data, sensory inputs, and material substrates—atoms, neurons, convolutions, and lobes—thus beginning to redefine what it meant to be human. As philosopher William Barrett argues in *The Death of the Soul*,[35] this transformation marked the displacement of inwardness and existential meaning by technical rationality and mechanistic thought. These developments were sustained by an accompanying ideology: scientism[36] – the conviction that science alone provides the ultimate pathway to truth and mastery over nature. Scientific materialism, in its drive for control and objectivity, increasingly disregarded the non-instrumental, qualitative aspects of human existence. This mechanistic ideal of modernity had, in fact, been anticipated much earlier. As Francis Bacon declared in the preface to *The New Organon*: "There remains one hope of salvation [...] that the entire work of the mind be started over again [...] by machines."[37]

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32. "The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today." Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (London: MIT Press, 1997), 34.

33. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 1991).

34. Arthur Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37, no. 4, (1998): 127-143.

35. Barrett, William. 1986. *The Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer.* New York: Anchor Books.

36. Ibid., p. xv.

37. Francis Bacon. (2000 [1620]) *The New Organon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 30.

For Virilio the emergence of a new scientific mode of perception[38] – one that privileged objectivity, control, and detachment – was the same mindset that enabled the development of anesthetic drugs and "allowed the doctor or surgeon to diagnose illness due to the ability to repress the emotion – pity."[39] This perceptual shift was visually articulated in the anatomical art of the nineteenth century, which exposed the hidden interiors of the human body with clinical precision, and in dramatic war paintings that rendered violence with stark immediacy.[40]

Virilio, in what he calls "scientific propaganda,"[41] identifies an ideological framework that demanded immediate access to reality and the elimination of interpretive distance—an impulse that has continued to shape modern European culture, aesthetics, and epistemology to this day. This epistemic shift helped to cultivate the "pitiless" aesthetics of modernity: an aesthetic sensibility stripped of empathy and defined by exposure, immediacy, and technological vision. Thus, the notion of *pity* for Virilio functions not only as an ethical reminder but also as a lost perceptual and even existential category – signaling the emotive and sensitive dimension of experience that modern science and culture have systematically suppressed or explained away through empirical evidence.

The aesthetic ideal of *immediacy* in visual art is not a modern invention; since Antiquity, painters have sought to depict reality as directly and convincingly as possible. One of the earliest legends of illusionistic power concerns the Greek painter Zeuxis, who was said to have rendered grapes so lifelike that birds attempted to peck at them—an anecdote that testifies to the ancient fascination with realism and the mimetic power of art. Yet classical realism operated within the framework of Aristotelian representation, or *mediation*: it did not abolish the distance between viewer and image, but rather staged a reflective encounter across that distance. This form of *illusionism* was not merely about visual accuracy but about evoking recognition, meaning, and emotional response.

The contemplative space it opened enabled the viewer to perceive not only the subject but also the *act* of representation itself, and thereby to comprehend, reflect, and learn. The artist's gaze, gesture, and technique—visible in brushstrokes, form, and composition—inscribed into the work a living, interpretive, and contemplative dimension. *Immediacy*, therefore, even in its ancient forms, was always mediated by artistic creation and by an implicit ontology of looking. With the advent of photography, however, this tradition of representational realism gave way to radically new level of

38. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 28.

39. Ibid., p. 40.

40. Historical examples include the anatomical drawings of Andreas Vesalius and Jean-Baptiste Marc Bourgery, whose detailed illustrations of the human body reflect the clinical gaze shaped by scientific rationalism. In the realm of painting, Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) offers a harrowing depiction of human suffering with stark realism, while works by Francisco Goya, such as *The Disasters of War* (1810–20), portray scenes of violence and atrocity with unflinching immediacy. These visual practices exemplify how the scientific and aesthetic impulse toward exposure, immediacy, and control began to override traditional ideals of representation, reflection, and emotional resonance.

41. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 50.

immediacy – one that redefined the very cultural understanding of what an image *is. Reality*, once opposed to the illusionistic skill of rendering appearances, was now mechanically produced; accordingly, realism, once defined by the artist's capacity for illusion, had itself become a function of the machine. For Virilio, photography became a technology of *mirror, light, and speed* – one that attained illusion by "'shooting' reality in its direct presence," as Walter Benjamin described, ""opening up the clear field where all intimacy yields to the clarification of details." This *clear field* is the primary promotional field of propaganda and marketing, of the technological syncretism within which the witness's least resistance to the phatic image is developed." [42] In this shift, the image ceased to be a surface of reflection and became a document of impact, compressing time, perception, and interpretation into a single act of exposure.

Aesthetically, both as representation and as medium, the image—through its technological and aesthetic potential—was pushed to its very limits. With the advent of photography, it was literally inverted through the "negative" and mirrored back as a direct imprint of presence. For Oscar Wilde, such mechanical precision would likely have marked the culmination of artistic stagnation: the ultimate point of boredom, the apogee of dreary realism. Yet it was precisely at this historical juncture that the visual arts faced a profound creative dilemma: whether to preserve figurative, creative, and representational forms of perception, or to "go through the mirror" – abandoning mimetic fidelity in pursuit of unbounded expression. This latter path led to an aesthetic of overexposure[43], dissolving the frame of representation and revealing the dimensions of perception and experience previously inaccessible, though at the cost of dismantling the symbolic and reflective distance that had long defined artistic experience.

Impressionism, as the *pioneer*, sought to apprehend reality through momentary perceptions of light, still striving to preserve a delicate equilibrium between form and intensity—before, as Virilio suggests, "the nihilism of contemporary technology wiped it out once and for all."[44] As the image shifted from a representational form to a mode of perception, it became a field of exploration, experiment, and manipulation. The ensuing twentieth-century movements—Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, among others—each in their own way challenged and dismantled the perceptual structures of representation in pursuit of immediacy, rupture, and abstraction. For Virilio, this metaphorical inversion and negation of representation amounts to nothing less than a war on art itself—a process he sees as masked, to varying degrees, by nearly all contemporary movements. From Cubism onward, modern art became defined by the disintegration of form and the abandonment of figurative technique—signaling not merely a stylistic evolution but a profound transformation in the cultural logic of perception. As Virilio observes, "if so-called old-master art remained 'demonstrative' right up until the nineteenth century with Impressionism, the art of the twentieth century

42. Virilio, Paul. (1994) *The Vision Machine.* Translated by Julie Rose. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 23.

43. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 38.

44. Ibid, p. 48.

became 'monstrative',"[45] whereby representation gave way to a "presentative" aesthetic dominated by immediacy, direct stimulus, sensationalism, and violence. For Virilio, this development does not constitute a liberatory rupture but rather the rise of a pitiless aesthetic sensibility—one that corrodes the contemplative and humane dimensions of art.

The story, the message, the body, the frame, the self, and other forms of perception and expression now became site of radical experimentation. Surrealism submitted the self to unconscious impulses and fantasies, while Viennese Actionism transformed the scientific experiment into a violent and destructive assault on the body. Anti-art inverted symbolic meaning, laying bare its raw, constituent materials. In negating classical forms of representation, these movements transgressed the traditional dualities of aesthetic experience – artist and audience, space and time, mind and matter, reality and abstraction. Transgression itself emerged as the principal measure of value, as aesthetic experience was redefined through immediacy, rupture, and intensity.

Virilio, in his critique of this transformation, describes how contemporary art increasingly abandoned demonstrative distance in favor of "monstrative"[46] immediacy — a spectacle of presence that displaces reflection with confrontation, and representation with raw exposure. In this shift, the aesthetic no longer seeks to deepen understanding, but rather to overwhelm the senses, destabilizing meaning. Virilio, following Walter Benjamin, demonstrates how new conditions of experience and collective perception have been profoundly shaped by technologies such as instantaneous photography, cinematographic newsreels, live coverage, and other interactive visual media. These mechanisms reconfigure perception by collapsing the distance between image and viewer and by replacing contemplation with immediacy. Within this horizon, art itself becomes a ritual of direct involvement, where destruction and transgression are no longer exceptions but constitutive elements of the creative act.

For Virilio, the issue is not merely that the arts have embraced science and technology, but that they have internalized the alienated, instrumental gaze — adopting experiment as a methodology and unveiling the *naked reality* as both aesthetic goal and epistemic truth. In this process, art forfeits its symbolic and poetic dimensions, surrendering its creative and imaginative capacities to the logic of exposure and immediacy. Science, he argues, "desires to be the metaphor of the world, while envisioning itself as a revolution of consciousness,"[47] displacing the creative, ontological and metaphysical registers through which human beings create meaning and orient themselves in the world.

Within aesthetic experience, the artwork cannot be disentangled from the form through which it is expressed; its representational mode is constitutive of its very meaning.[48] The medium is not merely a vehicle for content but a perceptual

45. Ibid., p. 35.

46 Latin verb *monstrare* — show; point out; *demonstrare* — show; demonstrate. Noun *monstro* — "monster," "monstrosity."

47. Paul Virilio. (1991) *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, p. 42.

48. "The medium is the message" — a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it conveys, creating a symbiotic relationship

framework through which meaning is constituted. Since Aristotle, representation has been understood not only as an aesthetic category but as a fundamental activity of the human psyche – "imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learn his earliest lessons."[49]

And in *Poetics* (335 BC), Aristotle presents imitation (*mimesis*) as more than a means of representing the world as it *is*; for poets, it serves to elicit recognition and emotional engagement from the spectator. As he writes, "the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he' ,"[50] a process that potentially evokes "fear and *pity*."[51] In this sense, *mimesis* functions as a condition of human existence, linking aesthetic experience to the very constitution of humanness, for in the mirror of the other, we encounter a reflection of ourselves.

The rejection of representation inaugurates a radically transformed relationship between artwork and viewer, between art and *reality*, or indeed – between art and *life*. No longer functioning as a site of conscious reflection or imaginative inspiration, art is recast as a field of sensory and psychological stimuli, to which the viewer is passively, and often helplessly, subjected.

It becomes *too real* – or, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, *hyperreal*[52] – a simulation that substitutes for, and ultimately displaces, the *real* itself. In its attempt to escape the ennui of realism by negating the medium, art embraces immediacy and presence, transforming into something virtually real. In this process, often it forfeits its poetic and creative capacities, yielding instead to immersive spectacle, visceral intensity, intellectual abstraction, or ideological critique. As Virilio argues, this aesthetic shift from representative to the "presentative" art signifies the collapse of distance — an art that is "monstrative," overwhelming the viewer rather than engaging them. Such art can no longer be contemplated in the traditional sense; it must be directly absorbed, virtually consumed, or analytically decoded – yet rarely does it deepen our understanding of the world and *life* itself.

Art that takes the fractured present – the disrupted *here and now* – as both its subject and medium reverses the traditional logic of representation, virtually transmuting *reality* into fiction. This inversion undermines the reflective distance that once defined aesthetic experience, collapsing the boundary between artwork and world, art and life, also – artist and art.

Yet even in this reversal, contemporary humans cannot fully escape what Aristotle identified as the natural order of imitation—a fundamental mode of perception rooted in the human psyche. As he observes in *Poetics*, imitation shapes our earliest acts of understanding. Oscar Wilde recognized this enduring mimetic

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by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.

49 Aristotle. (1999) *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Transl. S.H. Butcher. Project Gutenberg, p. 16.

50. Aristotle. (1999) *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Transl. S.H. Butcher. Project Gutenberg, p. 16.

51 Ibid., p. 43.

52. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981.

structure when he wrote of the Greeks: "Hence came their objection to realism. They disliked it on purely social grounds. They felt that it inevitably makes people ugly, and they were perfectly right." [53] In Wilde's view, realism fails precisely because it abandons the imaginative and expressive function of art in favor of dull replication, severing the vital link between perception and creative transformation, the beauty that is *behind* the obvious, as he writes – "Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil."[54]

Though speaking from different centuries, cultures, and perspectives, both Oscar Wilde and Paul Virilio articulate a profound awareness of the metaphysical, ontological, and ethical dimensions that underlie the nature and function of art. For Virilio, aesthetics and ethics are inextricably bound – embedded in the very structure of representation, even when we attempt to treat them as distinct or conceptually distinct. Wilde, by contrast, subverts the conventional hierarchy between art and reality, insisting that art does not mirror life but that life mirrors art. In this inversion, he exposes what is truly at stake in modernity's conquest by realism: nothing less than *life* itself. For him, realism confines the imagination within the narrow bounds of the "what is," producing its reality that is often dull, sterile, and ultimately pitiless—a mere repetition of surface appearances, stripped of creative transformation or ontological meaning.

Virilio, in this regard, pointedly asks: "How can we ultimately fail to twig that the apparent impiety of contemporary art is only ever the inverted image of sacred art, the reversal of the creator's initial question: why is there something instead of nothing?"[55] For him, the transgressive gestures of contemporary art do not constitute a liberation from tradition but rather its dark mirror—a desecrated echo of the sacred impulse at the heart of artistic creation.

Wilde, conversely, affirms that "the basis of life — the energy of life […] is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. Think of what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe to the imitation of Cæsar."[56] In art, life mirrors its dreams, mythologies, and cosmologies; here imagination reflects and reshapes existence. Yet when life itself becomes both the material and the medium of art, the space for *catharsis* dissolves—for no longer mediated through form or fiction, the poetics of the tragic turns literal. The mirror is shattered, and tragedy is no longer staged: it is *real*.

Conclusion

In my view, the aesthetic and ethical upheavals discussed by Wilde and Virilio highlight a central paradox in the evolution of art. As art sought to liberate itself from the representational order of reality, it increasingly came to mirror reality directly – stripped of poetic distance, spiritual resonance, and reflective power. Wilde's ironic proposition

53. Wilde, Oscar. 1905 [1891]), "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p.33.
54. Ibid.
55. Virilio, Paul. (2003) "A Pitiless Art", *Art and Fear,* London: Continuum, p. 45
56. Wilde, Oscar. (1905 [1891]) "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions*, New York, NY: Brentano, p. 40.

that *life imitates art* enigmatically anticipates the rise of anti-representational, immersive, and often hyperreal cultural forms. Virilio, in turn, shows how the same technological and perceptual shifts have transformed art into a site of immediacy and, at times, pitiless confrontation. The rejection of *mimesis* has opened new expressive freedoms but also risks the loss of art's ontological and humanizing dimension. If art becomes indistinguishable from life—or worse, from raw information—it may no longer provide *catharsis*, contemplation, or lead to transcendence. The *broken mirror* thus symbolizes not fragmentation alone, but a call to restore the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of the aesthetic—dimensions that bear a sacral resonance inseparable from what is most deeply human. In this light, the future of art depends not on rejecting reality, but on reimagining how we mediate it through form, fiction, and reflection. Aesthetics, understood as the domain of the sensible, must be reclaimed as the field where aesthetic experience and ethical reflection converge—that is, where ontology, metaphysics, and ethics meet in the constitution of human existence, i.e., *life*.

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