Broken Mirror. Reflection on Art

In the essay 'The Decay of Lying', a 'Socratic dialogue' between the fictional characters Vivian and Cyril, Oscar Wilde, reverses traditionally accepted mimetic order between art and reality and presents 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 written as a satirical late-Romantic speculation, Wilde's aesthetical views may provide a new perspective to look on the European art history, and maybe even on the metaphysical relationships of art and life today. Being part of the late nineteenth century debate between Romanticism and Realism, Wild opposes Realism, claiming that once art starts to mimic reality, it becomes sterile and suffocating, caught by poor, probable, uninteresting human life'.[2] Thus, the ability to create reality from fiction is the expression of a human being's imagination — this creative power is life itself, and the decay of *lying* 'as an art, a science, and a social pleasure' was responsible for a decline of modern art and literature, which had embraced realism and accuracy of representation.

What we call contemporary art today, not only takes reality as its source, but in a multidimensional way strives to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, or even illusion and reality. What if contemporary art and culture, becoming increasingly merged with the social, political, psychological and mundane, approves Wilde's 'tongue in cheek' claim, depraving life of the creative source? What if, hiding behind the veil of fiction, Wilde reveals truth – what if our reality *is* the creation of the imagination, and what if this imagination, essentially creative, essentially human, is disappearing?

Shortly after the publication of Wilde's essay, a revolutionary liberation in Western European art took place, initiating new artistic freedoms that challenged and explored the relationships between art and human reality. The visual arts radically discarded representational order, and strived for more direct, immediate ways to approach reality and process of creation itself. Changing aesthetic canons and new technological means opened new territories for experiments, eventually changing the formal criteria and conceptual conditions of what art *is*. These revolutionary movements usually came with a certain hope – and in some cases, a program – for the realization of a utopian future, often merging the artist's life and his creative oeuvre. Art engaged in life, and the artist's role was changed, as it embraced other realms of endeavor to realize social, political and individual revolutions, ultimately embodying the revolution itself. These movements paralleled the master narratives of Modernity – secularization, urbanization, industrial development, scientific and technological progress, free and authentic individuality, control over nature, innovation, and a total revolution of the life of human beings.

[1]Wilde, O. (1891) *The Decay of Lying* Available online at: http://virgil.org/dswo/courses/novel/wilde-lying.pdf
[2]Wilde, O. (1891) *The Decay of Lying.*

Today, the field of art, along with these master narratives, has expanded and disintegrated into innumerable experimental movements and individualistic practices, as since Pop Art, that embraced entertainment and commercial culture, no substantial style or movement has not emerged, no longer can be viewed in a coherent discourse. However, art still embodies the epitome of originality and claims to present new perspectives to *see* the world.

'A great artist invents a type', says Wilde, 'and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher'.[3] Couldn't it be said today as art, engaged with pop-culture, entertainment, design and fashion has become a part of the global market, fostered through the culture and entertainment industry? This experimental laboratory allows us to challenge dogmas, stereotypes and taboos, to liquify meanings, subvert symbols, erase social, cultural, religious and political borders and challenge age-old biases with an aim to solve social conflicts, adding to the contemporary discussions of the global future. In times of political, social and economic crises, it seems to be one of the last bastions of freedom, raising sensitive and controversial questions and challenging what we experience as culturally acceptable, valuable or beautiful, even reversing or erasing the core ideas of what is being accepted as human. Classical aesthetic theories and philosophy of art stumble in the face of pulverized tradition and shifting criteria of what we call art today. Art engages with reality, with human life, like never before, offering new cultural, political and existential perspectives. It has even been integrated with clinical psychology for medical treatments.[4] Being so powerful a tool, can it restore the image of the human in the age proclaimed as post-truth[5], post-historical[6], post-cultural[7] and post-human[8]? Or could it be that in times when 'everything is possible', something is necessarily lost?

The twentieth century in the West came with great hopes of human liberation, but turned out to be the century that proclaimed the end of history[9], the end of philosophy[10], the end of art[11], and the death of God[12] – all the dreams that European society was built on. The World Wars became the catastrophic events that defined the age and the Holocaust, the escalation and mechanization of terror, has still remained one of the main reference points in the contemporary discussions of politics and ethics, as well as the subject of many artistic and cultural practices. During the twentieth century art has become entangled with politics as the technological and scientific advancements that fed the political war machine in Europe changed the structure of society and collective perception of

[3]Wilde, O. (1891) *The Decay of Lying* Available online at: http://virgil.org/dswo/courses/novel/wilde-lying.pdf

[4]Russo, R. L. (2011) *Videoinsight®: Healing with Contemporary Art,* Silvana.

[5]McIntyre, L.C. (2018) *Post-Truth* (MIT Press Essential Knowledge series).

[6]Flusser, V. (2013) *Post-History. Thinking possibilities for freedom in a programmed world.*

[7]Steiner, G. (1973) *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture.*

[8]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, Elizabeth Povinelli, etc.

[9]Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man.*

[10]Heidegger, M. (1964) *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking.*

[11]Danto, A. (1986) *The End of Art.*

[12]Nietzsche, F.(1882) *The Gay Science.*

reality. Reacting to the disintegration of values and the loss of humanness, arts developed new ways of surviving in the environment of fear and emptiness, often ruthlessly transgressing the remaining taboos and sacralities to get *beyond* the unbearable reality. Paul Virilio in his essay 'A Pitiless Art' (2000) looks for the roots of the horrifying, 'pitiless' side of our culture. Virilio asks: 'Did the Nazi terror lose the war but, in the end, win the peace?'[13] He refers to philosopher Jacqueline Lichtenstein,[14] remembering her visit to the Museum at Auschwitz:

> *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.*[15]

In Virilio's view, the 'pitiless art' is multidimensional, direct manifestation of this destruction in terms of the new contemporary cultural perception that is the result of the distorted collective mentality. Virilio illuminates contemporary art's underlying aesthetic, political and technological dynamics and forms, asking: 'Contemporary art, sure, but contemporary with what?'[16] For him contemporary art is characterized by a collapse of the representational forms of perception that are replaced by the immediacy[17] – a direct presentation of experience, where the real and the virtual coincide. Regarding arts entanglement with technologies and media, contemporary techniques of 'hyper-abstraction'[18] and the distorted perceptive field they maintain, he questions the possibility of art that would not deny or destroy natural, human gaze of reality. I this regard Virilio's 'aesthetics of disappearance'[19] means disappearance of the horizon, of the medium, of the distance, and, after all, of the human itself in the pitiless abstraction.

There is no clear answer as to what caused the fracture in art history tradition of representation – arguably, the fundamental expressive form in visual arts – that was abolished for the sake of radical presence. Arthur Danto's guess is that 'perhaps the challenge came from photography and moving pictures. Perhaps it came from a complex loss of cultural faith in Western values.'[20] For Virilio these two reasons – technological and ethical – are not so distinct, but complementary and indirectly rooted in the scientific worldview of Modernity that fed the aesthetic ideal already in the lifetime of Oscar Wilde. The new scientific mode of

[13]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear,* Continuum, London, p.28.
[14]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 color by various disciplines, such as philosophy, art, sociology, and ethics. A focal point for her analysis is the antagonistic relationship between color and the notion of the design or plan of a work.
[15]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London, p. 28.
[16]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London, p. 27.
[17]The quality of bringing one into direct and instant involvement with something, giving rise to a sense of urgency or excitement.- https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/immediacy
[18]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London, p. 14.
[19]Virilio, P (1991) *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, Los Angeles.
[20]Danto, A. (1998) 'The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense', *History and Theory*, No. 4 Issue 37, pp. 127-143.

perception[21] was the same that caused the invention of anesthetic drugs that 'allowed the doctor or surgeon to diagnose illness due to the ability to repress the emotion – pity'.[22] The new sciences could not be introduced and developed without an appropriate ideology – a scientism which craved an immediate control over nature, and which has remained the basis of modern European culture to the present day. Nineteenth-century scientism altered the European understanding of the human and gave rise to new theories of mind, reducing it to its experiential content, empirical data or material substrate (atoms, stems, convolutions, lobes, and so on). This ideal of Modernity is stated by Francis Bacon in his preface of 'The New Organon' (1620): 'There remains one hope of salvation [...] that the entire work of the mind be started over again [...] by machines'.[23] This attitude is present already in the nineteenth-century anatomist's art, exposing the invisible parts of the body, or the dramatic paintings of war scenes, presenting events with the utmost precision and immediacy. Scientific materialism lost sight of the non-instrumental qualities of the living human being and the New Science helped produce the 'pitiless' aesthetics that feeds the culture of alienation still today. For Virilio, the term 'pity' allows to remember the emotive and sensitive dimension lost three centuries ago that we are still looking for in reality, often subjected to experiment and explained away by evidence.

'Immediacy' as an aesthetic form in the visual arts is nothing new, painters have strived to represent reality directly "as it is" since Ancient Greeks and famous Zeuxis' *Grapes*. Illusionistic Realist painting in representational forms mediates the world of the artwork and the world of the viewer and offers reflexive aesthetic experience that can be contemplated. This aesthetic experience is inscribed in the very process of creation – the duration of the artist's gaze, the gesture, the brush-strokes and paint – holds and expresses alive, human dimension of the artwork. However, with the advent of photography representational realism opened the visual field to immediate and direct exploration, and changed the view of what an image is. In photography, a specific technology of light and speed the realistic illusion was attained, mechanically '"shooting" reality in its direct presence', as Walter Benjamin saw, 'opening up the clear field where all intimacy yields to the clarification of details'.[24] The image as a representation and medium in its technological and aesthetic possibilities was pushed to its limits, literally inverted through its 'negative' and mirrored back in a direct presence. For Oscar Wilde this would probably mean the achievement of the ultimate point of boredom, the apogee of dreary realism. However, this is where the visual arts were presented with a creative choice – to preserve the figurative and representational forms of perception or 'to go through the mirror' leading to overexposure[25] of reality, revealing dimensions inaccessible before. Changing forms of expression inevitably changed the forms of perception and, obviously, led to the radical exploration of

[21]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London.
[22]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London.
[23]Bacon, F. (2000), *The New Organon*, Cambridge University Press, p. 30.
[24]Walter Benjamin, cited in Virilio, P. *The Vision Machine* (1994) British Film Institute, London, p. 23.
[25]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London, p. 38.

reality in new artforms. Image as a form of representation and form of perception became a field for exploration, experiment and manipulation.

Ensuing twentieth-century art movements, each in their own way, challenged and negated other perceptive dimensions of representation for the sake of immediacy. For Virilio, this metaphorical inversion and negation of representation signifies a war on art which is masked by almost all art movements and ideas of contemporary art which is characterized by disintegration of form and figurative techniques – the story, the message, the body, the frame, the self, and other forms of perception now were open to be experimented with. The pioneer, Impressionism, grasping reality in a momentary perception of light, still tried to celebrate a subtle equilibrium between the form and intensity, 'before the nihilism of contemporary technology wiped it out once and for all'.[26] Surrealism submitted the self to unconscious impulses and fantasies. In Viennese Actionism, the scientific experiment as an artistic means became destructive and violent towards the body. Anti-art inverted the symbolic dimension and laid bare its raw, constituent parts. Negating the classical forms of representation, visual artists transgressed the traditional dualities of the aesthetic experience itself – those of artist-audience, space-time, mind-matter, reality-abstraction. Intensity of the transgression becoming the main measure of evaluation, the aesthetic experience itself was also transformed. Virilio follows Walter Benjamin as he demonstrates that these new conditions of experience and collective perception of reality have been fostered and generated by instantaneous photography, cinematographic newsreels, live coverage and other interactive experiences. Art has increasingly become a ritual of direct involvement, where destruction and transgression are often treated – in contemporary art, as in contemporary life – as a creative process. For Virilio the problem is not the fact that the arts use technologies and scientific discourse *as such,* but that art has embraced the alienated gaze and experiment as a *method* and the *way* to expose the naked reality, as a governing principle of life. Science 'desires to be the metaphor of the world, while envisioning itself as a revolution of consciousness',[27] thus losing the creative and poetic dimension that shapes the way we experience life, create and recognize values and orientate in the world.

In the classical mimetic order, aesthetic experience the artwork cannot be separated from the way it is expressed – the manner of representation[28]. The medium is itself a form of perception through which the meaning is created. Since Aristotle, representation has been not only a category of aesthetics, but also a definitive activity of the human psyche: '[..] imitating is co-natural with human beings from childhood, [...] because they are the most imitative and produce their

[26]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London, p. 48.

[27]Virilio, P (1991), *The Aesthetics of Disappearance,* Semiotext(e) / Foreign Agents, Los Angeles, p.42.

[28]*"The medium is the message"* - a phrase coined by a philosopher and one of the first media theoreticians Marshall McLuhan meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it conveys, creating a symbiotic relationship 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.

first acts of understanding by means of imitation'.[29] Imitation or mimesis in 'Poetics' (335 BC) is deployed by poets not only as an instrument to represent the world as it is, but to invoke recognition and identification in the spectator: 'Thus 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"'.[30] This means to awaken pity, as in the mirror of the other we see a reflection of ourself. Rejection of representational forms in art and cultural experience marks a completely new relationship between the artwork and the viewer, between *art* and *life*, because art ceases to be a source of conscious reflection and inspiration and becomes a field of unconscious stimuli the viewer is subjected to. It becomes too 'real' – or, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, *hyperreal.* Trying to escape the boredom of realism by negating the medium, art in its presence and directedness becomes *virtually real* and loses its poetic, fictional and creative dimension for the sake of direct immersion, intense experience, intellectual pleasure or ideological critique. Accordingly, this art cannot be contemplated, but instead directly absorbed, virtually experienced or intellectually interpreted; in short, it does not deepen our understanding of life and the world, but offers its own world and perspective. As Virilio describes it: 'If so-called old-master art remained "demonstrative" right up until the nineteenth century with Impressionism, the art of the twentieth century became "monstrative"'.

However, even the contemporary art cannot escape the order of imitation recognized already by Aristotle, as it is a natural form of perception, deeply embedded in the very core of our psyche. Wilde apparently saw it, referring to 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. [..] Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil.'[31] Despite talking from different centuries, cultures and perspectives, both Oscar Wilde and Paul Virilio are conscious about the metaphysical, spiritual and ethical origin and function of art. Virilio shows that the aesthetic and ethical are essentially tied together in the very nature of the representation, regardless of how conceptually isolated we would like it to appear. Wilde, reversing the traditional relationships of art and reality, makes apparent that what is at stake in Modernity's triumph of realism (and contemporary hyper-realism) is life itself, as it cages the imagination in the "what is", replicating flabby, boring and often pitiless reality. Virilio in this regard rhetorically 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?'[32], whereas Wilde adds: 'Scientifically speaking, the basis of life – the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it – 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'.[33] Art creates

[29]Aristotle, (2006) *Poetics*, Focus Philosophical Library, p.22.
[30]Aristotle, (2006) *Poetics*, Focus Philosophical Library, p. 23.
[31]Wilde, O (1891) *'The Decay of Lying'.*
[32]Virilio, P. (2003) *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London p. 45.
[33] Wilde, O (1891) *'The Decay of Lying'.*

mythologies, cosmologies and imaginaries towards which ‘Life holds the mirror’, which is being broken – as *Life itself* has become the material and the medium of art, catharsis is no longer possible and the tragedy is *real*.