

MATERIAL LIVE THRESHOLDS IN HUMAN'S PATH:
THE MOON IS A MIRROR.
A MULTIDISCIPLINARY REVIEW OF SCOTT HESSELS' DIGITAL
ARTWORK

Stella-Alkistis Moysidou

Modern Greek Studies,
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München,
GERMANY

st.moysidou@campus.lmu.de

Abstract. This paper examines "Art, History and Digitality" in their interrelation by showcasing the technological and cultural dynamics of the mirror as artwork and the phenomenon of mirroring.

In the Introduction, we interrogate definitions of digital art as part of art history to be launched in the age of art democratisation and media–archaeology.

In the main part, I focus on the case of the digital artwork *The Moon is A Mirror* (2014) by Scott Hessels by venturing a multidisciplinary interpretation and analysis via ancient Greek aesthetics drawn upon Parmenides' "Heliophotism", Lucian's *Moon as a Mirror* and Plato's *The Cave Myth*, digital archaeology, as well as Gustav Klimt's art of painting in the *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.

Instead of a conclusion, I reflect on the contemporariness of Nature and its physical materials transformed into the new socio-economic essentials in the newly built world.

Keywords: Hessels, media-archaeology, moon-mirror, Plato, cave-myth, Klimt, nature

INTRODUCTION. DIGITAL ART - DEFINITIONS

Digital Art emanates from Computer Art, Multimedia Art and Cyber Art (mainly from the 1960s through the 1990s). Digital Art and New Media Art terms appeared at the end of the 20th century (Paul 2016, 1).

Digital Art and New Media Art converge in their meaning and applications but, sometimes, New Media Art functions as a

“subcategory of a larger field of digital art that comprises all art using digital technologies at some point in the process of its creation, storage or distribution”. Digital Art made by digital technologies, is exploiting its key tools as a medium.

Computer and Digital Art constantly drew scientists’ concern between the 1950s and the 1960s. Going back to the second half of the 19th century, photography was highly used by experts who struggled to be creative and productive through technology. At the beginning of the 20th century, cubism in art considered time and space in an unconditional way. Then Futurism, Cubo-Futurism, Constructivism and Suprematism existed as the predecessors of Computer Art.

Digital Art is linked to the traditional one and adopts several of its characteristics. For instance, the historic genealogy that correlates Digital Art with kinetics and the optical artworks which use movement, light etc. appeared for the first time during the 1960s and the 1970s. Digital Art became widely known during the 1990s. Predecessors of Digital Art such as Dada, Fluxus, and Conceptual Art examine Art in its interrelation with the audience; the concept and its aspects in opposition to the view of Art as an *Entity* cover all the artistic preoccupations of humankind that prevailed also during the *fin de siècle* (Paul 2016, 6). Later, in the 1970s and the 1980s, Post-Media in the Post Digital Era exploits material objects (sometimes natural) in terms of a digital representation or the opposite: the real material world is re-born through digital technologies in a way that materiality and digitality co-exist interchangeably within the digital world (Paul 2016, 3). In 1948, Norbert Wiener introduced the word ‘cybernetics’ (deriving from the Greek word *κυβερνήτης*) to discuss Control, Communication and Feedback and their importance in people’s lives. In the 1990s, artists worked within academia due to the low demand and popularity of Digital Art in the market. In 2005, social media celebrated individuality giving way to the rise of common non-expertised people dealing with software moderation and administration (Paul 2016, 6).

DECIPHERING THE DIGITAL ARTWORK “*THE MOON IS A MIRROR*”

In Hessels’ artwork, titled “The Moon is a Mirror” there are five LED door- windows constructed by organic elements switched on with natural power. It is about five different embossed surfaces natural in origin that are conceptualised in a digital environment. The artwork mediates between the use of nature’s ingredients and their exploitation in computing. Translucency is achieved technically over the moving scene. A human figure passes back and forth to each of these five thresholds. His movement elucidates every single surface while he walks across it. The moving scene is recurrent. The artist admits that he draws on sustainable cinema to give his artwork a natural moving sense via sustainable organic materials instead of artificial media equipment. The latter makes the artwork disruptive in terms of traditional modes of representation. We can see here an oxymoron: the traditional modes here pertain to New Media mediums. In opposition to a post-digital era where we do not conceive digital creatures after their birth - in that case, the creatures are inherently digital in a way of a new form of materiality- since the innovation occurs from the introduction of physical elements in an evolution process of the digital form. In this context, the new digitality retrospects to antiquity to convey a new perception of reality via technology.

It is worth noting that the title of the artwork is not mentioned by the artist in his artwork description. The term ‘Mirror’ can be justified by the translucency of these organic materials under the LED lights. ‘The Moon’ is a hidden term. One can presumably think of the patterns on the surfaces as tiny moon figures that are entwined in million grids over the entity.

THE DEMOCRATISATION

The digital era promotes scenes instead of words, and cinema instead of philology. This way, it contributes to the democratisation

of art while it increases public involvement. It's easier for common people to react to a scene than to a text. Then, cinema through scenes and moving images expands creativity because it is easier to make a series of pictures than to write an extended text in words. On the other hand, people can barely react to a text even in terms of viewership or spectatorship. Scenes encourage people to engage and participate in their description, decoding, deciphering, and interpreting or re-creating them because scenes and moving images imitate life's pace. Sustainable cinema can revive community structures, make people find their inner - selves in their contact with natural elements and get inspiration from what they see and how these are played and organized. *The Moon is A Mirror* is an artwork that reflects all these principles being satisfied via the democratisation process and intrigues people's fantasy to conceive their digital creations after nature.

The artwork affects the dynamics of the relationships among various stakeholders in the art world. It contemplates the field of Sustainable Cinema, Installation Art and Media Archaeology. (Kelly 2008, 6).

POSING THE QUESTION "WHAT IS MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY?"

Media archaeology has its origins in twentieth-century intellectuals Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin and, then, the New Film History in the 1980s and other research capabilities built during the 1990s. Media Archaeology, according to the latest review, searches for its potential in Modernity, Cinema and New Media. Modernity recommends a new perception of history, trying to launch the literary and artistic aesthetics of the past with a new sight. Cinema explores the findings of "archival work and discovery of new films and material as well as the cinema theories concerning spectatorship, power and gender as well as psychoanalysis theories". Nowadays, Erkki Huhtamo's and Siegfried Zielinski's works examine the new thinking in media by questioning its diversity. Huhtamo introduces

the idea of *topoi* as areas of media culture that are recurring phenomena and discourses. Zielinski deals with the new quality of media by introducing what he defines as *psychopathia medialis*, supporting pluralism and the hybrid through the concept of *variantology*. Zielinski does not favour a linear passage of time. He asserts a non-temporal perception of media where there is not a connection between the past and the present (Parikka, 2012, 5 – 12).

THE NON-TEMPORAL PASSAGE OF TIME AND THE PHYSICAL ELEMENTS AS
MOON – MIRRORS

Hessels in this work seems to promote an analogous non-temporal passage of time where there is not an explicit mention of the seasonal change. One can claim that some elements resemble the winter while others resemble the summer season or the autumn. In fact, there is not a direct correlation to these motives while the marbled door windows are five. It might be assumed that the warm or the cold silver tones are related to the different emotional stances that the walking persona faces every time he walks across each of these five thresholds. The persona does not change his body stance during his walk even if he finds different colours and lower or more intense transparency passing by different materials. One can suggest that he is not influenced by these elements. He seems that he does not meet them in his path either. Or that he is set in a non-temporal universe where there is no interactivity or real life to feel happy or apologise. The persona adopts his own way without being interrupted by the virtual environment of the physical elements that are placed immobile in a parallel universe. One could say that these marbled door windows are just a setting, but they are not. While the persona moves towards them, they change their transparency so that they react to the moving body.

As physical elements are static, the persona in motion provides them with new qualities. The motion of the persona switches on their illumination – the physical elements are brought into life every

time the persona passes by each other and then they hibernate again when he leaves. The persona signifies life change through motion. Motion cannot be reproduced through the physical elements. As Maria Gerolemou argues:

In antiquity “motion rather points to the constancy of the body’s natural transformation and to metabolic change in general. This becomes obvious shortly thereafter, when Apuleius, who desires a commemorative medium to capture his image, chooses a mirror image instead of an immobile statue or a painting based on the assumption that other artistic materials affect, or rather limit, the mimetic procedure and its outcome (clay, bronze, stone, wax, paint)”. (Gerolemou 2020, 160).

Only the persona can be in motion. He provides their qualities in a different sense, that of lightness and translucency while his appearance illuminates them, but he still appears as a shadow to the viewer. The persona interacts with the physical elements which give him the form of a shadow as a reflection. In a symbolic view, physical elements resemble moon mirrors. Like the sun that illuminates the moon and appears through the latter as a shadow to the viewer on Earth, the persona appears as a shadow to the external viewer through his mirroring on the physical elements that function like the moon.

INTERDISCIPLINARY PARMENIDES’ *HELIOPHOTISM*, LUCIAN’S *MOON AS A MIRROR*, GUSTAV KLIMT’S DRAWING *FISHBLUT* AND PLATO’S *THE CAVE MYTH*

The aesthetics promoting the idea that the Moon reflects light from the Sun derives from Antiquity and Parmenides who defined this phenomenon as “heliophotism” (Mheallaigh, 2020, 167). Then the Moon is compared to the mirror-like water (Mheallaigh, 2020, 168). In Classical Athens, the Moon was already observed as a symbol since the “circle of the Moon is curved - round just like mirrors” (Mheallaigh, 2020, 167). In the same bibliographical source, one can read about the magical trick by magicians in the imperial period that

transforms the Moon to appear indoors (Mheallaigh, 2020, 167).

With the author of *True Stories*, Lucian, one can see the mirroring of the world over a well (Mheallaigh 2020, 165-174). The well due to their physical qualities intensifies sound. The physical elements in the digital artwork “The Moon is a Mirror” function like the well and disperse the sound to the space. This way, Mirroring turns to be endowed with one more sense, that of acoustics.

Another interdisciplinary approach has to do with “The Cave Myth” of Plato. Socrates calls his interlocutor, Glafkon, to draw a picture in his mind: In a cave, there are people prisoners, tied with chains. They can only turn their heads right and left while they cannot see behind them. There is a light that bathes the objects other people carry. Prisoners can see only the shadows of these objects, considering them as real. “An uncanny picture”, Glafkon observes, as “uncanny are and the prisoners”. “They look familiar to us”, Socrates answers and extends the narrative, setting free a prisoner. To stare at the light does not give him any pleasure. The light is painful to his eyes, and he starts to realise that what he thought was real, is not. The prisoner gets out of the cave. He observes the things around him. Then, he looks at the sun, and the pain in his eyes gets more intense. Then, he realises that the sun is the reason for all he sees around. He now does not want to go back while all his life he was a prisoner. “If”, Socrates asks, “this man wanted to go back, how would other people consider him?” The allegory of the cave for many centuries was open to many interpretations and analyses. The myth is always a modern one. In this case, the persona can only see his shadow through the transparency of the five-door windows as he walks by and thinks of himself as that. The moon patterns of the physical elements are like mirrors to his figure. He can only see that and consider that as real. The Moon is a Mirror that makes him feel like the prisoner in the cave, as in Plato’s allegory (The *Cave Myth* of Plato as described in Greek at: <http://www.philenews.com/f-me-apopsi/paremvaseis-ston-f/article/626810/platon-o-mythos-toy-spilaioy>).

One can also find potential interdisciplinary aesthetics by looking

back to late 19th-century Vienna. During that period, Sigmund Freud was working on the *Interpretation of Dreams* as a doctor and Gustav Klimt was in a similar situation as an artistic researcher. (Schorske 1980,208). Between 1895 - 1900, the protracted political crisis in Vienna highly drew Freud's attention. During these last five years of the 19th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire seemed to live its socio-political disintegration that was foretelling Europe's future (Schorske 1980, 184, 185). In his works, Klimt depicts the atmosphere of the same socio-political situation in which the psychoanalysis of Freud emerged (Schorske 1980, 209).

He was the leader of the *Secession* in modern art (the Austrian counterpart of *Art Nouveau*), a movement which declared the lifestyle of the modern man (Schorske 1980, 209), where ancient Greek aesthetics were proved noticeable. In a series of paintings, Klimt tried to capture the sense of femininity. In the painting *Musik* he tries to accumulate and record the aesthetic of *Ecstasy*, a major feature in European Aestheticism.

In his drawing *Fishblut* (1897-1898), Klimt celebrates feminine sexuality more actively. The happy iconic creatures are set free to the water and follow their fatal path in a sealed aquatic environment. We can see here the main preoccupation of Klimt – the one that he shares jointly with other artists of *art nouveau*: the female hair. The curly locks intervene with the bodies in the powerful flow of the water. The women of Klimt feel at home in an aquatic world, where men have no power. The threat of these seductive mermaids is imminent. Men cannot resist and finally drown (Schorske 1980, 220-224).

We can now see, in parallel, the artwork “The Moon is A Mirror” by trying to conceive the physical elements (stone, marbles, fibres, wood, skins) of the door- windows as paintings. The natural materials resemble this drawing of Gustav Klimt. They also resemble the *water serpents* as depicted in the paintings of Gustav Klimt. These elements imbued with natural power are imbued with a sense of femininity. Earth is the Terra-mater. Thus, the physical elements of Earth and its products are the basic elements of the

universe and retain the Earth's life and its balance. Human figure intervenes in this cycle by giving them a new scheme and aesthetics in contemporary life. He connects Earth and her elements to the new groundwork of humankind, to Digitality. Due to their female nature, these elements are never gone. They re-birth, are recycled and re-produced as versatile creatures of Nature. The physical elements never die, and the process is never-ending. This fact justifies the recurrent passage of the persona across these five natural door windows. The procedure adds to them a sense of paganism. The title of the artwork "The Moon is a Mirror" reflects religiosity. The physical elements tend to resemble the 'Moon' and its transparency while it moves forward the sun to get its lightness. Thus, these five elements are the Moon - made and their transparency makes them a 'Mirror'. The passing persona is mirroring through them and introduces the Moon-like virtual images to the material world.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

The culmination of Digitality with the use of new technologies acquires a new face through the exploitation of natural resources. The electric grid follows now a non-directional flow of energy. We have the smart use of metering and other smart grids. Transparency and her exploitation are the future of Digitality while the image prevails against the word to finally subjugate it. The sense of Being is cultivated through image, which tends to absorb all the other criteria of the Senses and Aesthetics. With the image, we can now observe, perceive, feel, and live our experiences in an increasingly visualised world. Transparency, then, becomes a palimpsest where all the traditional norms of artistic expression are recorded to be implemented in the digital era. The physical materials conserve their vividness via their visualisation in the digital world. The financial benefits are multiplied and open new bridges for the promotion of natural materials through their adjustment with digital means. The

new digital era does not abolish Nature but puts her at the centre of the Technological Evolution Process, as a lever of economic and cultural development in contemporary cities. Smart societies put Nature at the centre of their preoccupations and define their role anew in the newly built world.

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