

The Death of Art by COVID-19

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Initially, I thought of setting this article as a reflection on the most suitable films to represent the situation we are experiencing because of COVID-19. I had chosen to call it “Welcome back to the desert of the real” to highlight that, in addition to the catastrophic films on viruses and pandemics, for example the undervalued *Contagion* (2011), it is important to consider also those computer-science fiction films such as *The Matrix* (1999), which contrasts a deserted real space with an artificial space in which life seems to flourish. It is the well-known choice between the blue pill and the red pill, which, however, for us, now, has conditions different from those on which Morpheus and Neo were reasoning. The red pill would mean venturing into the deserted streets jeopardizing our and others’ health. Thus, the choice of the blue pill seems more sensible. We are keen to favor the artificial space in which we have transferred various activities that we previously carried out in the real space not yet deserted.

However, in thinking about which pill to choose, I ended up focusing on a particular activity that in this period also seems to have migrated from the real space to the artificial one, namely, art. The expression ‘lockdown’ is at to express a situation that involves both social isolation and production block. This duplicity of the term ‘lockdown’ allows us to clearly formulate the quite paradoxical condition that art is undergoing. On the one hand, the lockdown, understood as social isolation, has increased the time available for experiences of appreciation of art, especially music, literature and film. On the other hand, the lockdown understood as a production block has reduced artistic production to a minimum. We lived in a society where much more art was produced than it was consumed, but in the last few months art has been consumed more than ever and, at the same time, it has been produced less than ever.

In this unprecedented situation, as a very little compensation of the moral anguish concerning the unjust death of many innocent people, I feel a sense of aesthetic relief in not having to chase the latest news in any artistic domain, in not having to keep up with the times anymore. In the void created by the collapse of the artistic production, I can start reading novels that I had never found the time to read, listen to records I hadn’t listened to for too much time, and I can finally see those films whose vision I had always postponed. It is a fact that a whole life is not enough to appreciate all the works of art that one would like appreciate and that would deserve appreciation. But then, why should we continue to create new works of art? Wouldn’t it be better to focus our limited energies on that endless amount of works that is already available? Isn’t the lockdown revealing to us a less anxious, more rewarding, more appropriate way to live our relationship with art?

I would be tempted to respond positively if it wasn't that there is something unbearably dismal in this perspective. Hegel spoke of the death of art in the sense of an overcoming of artistic activity in the direction of higher forms of knowledge such as religion and philosophy, and Danto offered a twentieth-century variation on the Hegelian theme speaking of an overcoming of art in the direction of a reflection on art itself. Now, the death of art by COVID-19 is not exactly what Hegel or Danto had in mind, but the idea remains of an overcoming of art, understood as the creation of works, in the direction of a new cognitive attitude: the exploration of an immense repertoire of works, finally removed from the flow of becoming.

The problem is that this repertoire resembles a cemetery, and this makes the expression "the death of art" especially salient. Or, if you prefer, this repertoire resembles a paradise, which is however the lugubrious and inhospitable one sung by the Talking Heads: "Heaven / Heaven is a place / A place where nothing / Nothing ever happens". The problem, out of metaphor, is that art cannot be reduced to the dimension, albeit gratifying, of aesthetic experience. Art is above all a historical phenomenon; paraphrasing another famous Hegelian phrase, it is one's own time apprehended in images. So the art paradise that lockdown seems to offer us, however tempting it may seem, is no longer art, because it has lost its essential connection with history. To keep existing as such, art must continuously produce new works, keeping pace with historical events.

In his book *La fidanzata automatica (The Automatic Sweetheart, 2007)*, Maurizio Ferraris rightly pointed out that works of art are "things that look like persons". In times of lockdown, our relationship with works of art changes just like that with persons. There are no more opportunities for new meetings and new friends, but the overabundance of time and the telematic resources give us long conversations in videoconference with the friends of a lifetime, even those that we have not been able to contact since months if not since years. Fair enough, but here too I see something excessively artificial and ultimately mournful. Friendship, like art, cannot be conjugated only in the past tense: it needs present and future tenses as well, it needs to keep up with history.

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