
THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN DIGITAL ART

THE TEMPTATION OF PERFECTION

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Abstract

The paper aims to discuss in a critical manner aspects regarding the meaning of the beauty concept in digital art. Which are the beauty's attributes in digital art? Where resides the aesthetic value in digital art? Has beauty totally disappeared from digital artistic creation? We shall show that beauty in digital art is still an important aesthetic value, with extremely flexible and mobile meanings in comparison to traditional and canonical views on the same aesthetic category.

Keywords: digital art, beauty, digital culture, aesthetic value, perfection

1. Introduction

From a structural point of view, the paper consists of three parts, each of them analyzing a particular aspect regarding the concept of beauty in digital art. The first part contextually approaches the aesthetic principles of digital art, by referring to the specifics of digital culture. The second part concerns the specifics of the aesthetic category of beauty in digital art, focusing on one hand, on the meanings seen as perfection, on the other, discussing the ratio between beauty value and the extra-aesthetic values. In the final part of the paper we expose a few conclusive appreciations regarding the general meanings of beauty specific for digital art creations. We do insist on mentioning, that for a cultural standpoint, the relevance of the approached theme is asserted by numerous factors: first of all, by the aesthetic impact of digital art over the receiving audience, secondly, by the complex forms of configuration in digital creation beauty. Thirdly, we can mention the fact that one of the aesthetic functions of digital in its virtual or non-virtual versions is to generate special forms of inter-human communication, which, hermeneutically considered, are characterized by multiculturalism and hyper-symbolic stylistic eclecticism.

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2. Aesthetic principles of digital art

In the digital age, we are witnessing a change of the visions regarding the aesthetic value of beauty and the confirmation of new standards in the artistic creation. Recent theories in the aesthetic field [1] assert the fact that in the digital culture, the mutations in the beauty concept meanings determine deep seeded changes on the configuration of the artwork and in the reception and appreciation of such artistic creations. We can invoke various aspects, not disparate from each other, that influence these mutations: the pre-eminence of extremely flexible aesthetic principles regarding beauty; accepting extra-aesthetic values in the artistic field, for instance ethical values (responsibility, tolerance; cultural values: diversity, multiculturalism), spiritual values, political values; and finally yet important, the aesthetic education level of the audience. All these, although there are more than five decades since the first manifestations and forms of digital art have surfaced, still raise contemporary debates voiced by the receiving audience, hovering over the subject, leading to certain confusions regarding this kind of art, often questioning its aesthetic value. Thus, looking at the digital art, we might submit into discussion its functional dimension, meaning its exclusive usage of technology (being prevalent in decorative aspects), its lack of notion concept or context, the incoherence of the transmitted message, or the high level of conceptualizing the form and the continuum aspects, which are inaccessible to the wide audience. Furthermore, some theorists have fervently brought critic when discussing this artistic manifestation in its full swing in the super-technological age, underlining the fact that it could lack the originality, that it could be a product of mass culture and is subjected to the demands of the financial market [2].

These critics are, on one hand, due to the afflux of equivocal concepts and flexible terminology specific for this kind of art, on the other hand, to the lack aesthetic education of the non-specialized audience's (mainstream). Even if the terminology used in digital art still has an undetermined and imprecise content, the artistic language or the expression forms in digital art can themselves become means of content or utterance of the specific, if we approach digital art as signs system. The composition of artistic language, the specific of its expression, consists of the ability to entail a potential field of meanings in digital art and to communicate these meanings. When investigating the receiving audience, we often find that it is in the impossible state of distinguishing between the wide and narrow sense of digital art, between digital art per se and digital technique, between digital art as a medium (interactive, immersive in virtual space) and digital art as a tool (that utilizes digital processing techniques as means of producing traditionally sustained works, for example, sculptures, photography, prints), between digital art works and digital design, between conceptual and decorative, between involved art and applied or decorative art.

In a narrow sense, digital art is associated with the computer art, multimedia art and new media art, the produced works of art and the artistic practice using digital technology as essential part of the creation and presentation process. Digital technology is applied in different artistic genres, from sculpture, painting, music, to design, graphics, photography and cinematography. Digital artists create unique, original works (images, sounds, texts), impossible to accomplish through traditional methods. As subgenres of digital art in a narrow sense, we could mention: digital painting, cyber art, digital photography, dynamic painting, electronic music, evolutionary art, fractal art, trans-digital art, interactive art, immersion (virtual reality), via art, ASCH art, pixel art, ANSI art, demo-scenes, demos, digital poetry, hypertext literature, etc. Digital art, in the narrow sense, must be distinguished from the wide sense of digital art, the later being associated with aesthetic forms generated by using digital mass-media techniques and methods. Digital art techniques are used on a large scale by the mainstream mass-media, for example, the visual effects from commercials and cinemas. If in a narrow sense, digital art is represented by non-utilitarian and non-functional aesthetic forms, in the wide sense we find as priority standardized utilitarian and functional aspects, meant for the wide audience.

In its present form, digital art cannot be discussed and understood outside of the new media art context, joined by video installations, mixed media and hypermedia interactive performances [3]. As background for these artistic practices, we find digital art specific values, as interaction [4], random, virtual, immersion, open script, where we could add conceptual art specific values, as: experimental, performance and conceptual. In this context, we notice the dual aspect of digital art - it is figurative and non-figurative, concrete and abstract, emphasizes the subjective element but also represents the objective one. Digital art is also characterized through analytical fragmentation or synthetic fusion of stylistic elements (abstract non-expressionism, trans-avant-garde, etc.), or furthermore through the prevalence of colour, but also chromatic minimalism or non-colour. We might say that the most expressive aspect of digital art are the tridimensional or multidimensional graphics, where potentiating effects of reality are being rolled out on the highest level, generating multiple space-time reference or self-reference fields. We must not overlook that the general theme in digital art is mainly critical, continuously targeting a content regarding social, cultural and politic issues, specific for the digital culture [5].

Following this line of thought, we can observe that, thematically speaking, digital art is situated in the proximity of the non-canonical and protest artistic trends of the 20th century, taking over and re-signifying certain philosophical, cultural and social presuppositions. Regarding composition, we find a strong hold over the following points: deforming, reconfiguring, rejecting closed shapes, mélange of shapes, stylistic diversity, virtual representation, compositional freedom, the prevalence of idea and conceptuality. Digital art is thus capable to maintain a critical and protesting dimension, engaging the reaction of the audience. At the same time, digital art presents, what

composition is concerned, elements which are meant to shock the receiving audience, arousing reactions like irony, criticism and finally being rejected because of its spectacular valences, or, exactly the opposite, being appreciated especially because it contains these aspects. Digital art is no longer only about imitating but creating a new vision of the world, as a manner of aesthetic knowledge – adding to the pre-existing image from Science and Philosophy. Akin to abstract art, being built on its lingering impressions and influence, digital art is non-imitating, focusing upon colour, shape and compositional structure.

3. Beauty aspects in digital art

When appreciating digital art, is often made the confusion between the technological process of digital creation and the representation of beauty itself. Beauty is not technologized itself. It is not production, engineering, waste product, or superficial remodelling, as it is often stated when negatively appreciating digital art. In digital art, beauty is the conceptual expression of the artist's aesthetic attitude, by the more or less precise assimilation of classic aesthetic categories and criteria: harmony, proportion, symmetry and so on. We surely also find other aesthetic categories – with positive or negative connotation - for instance: the sublime, the tragic, the grotesque absurdity and the unsightly, but they remain, essentially, alterations or versions of beauty as a pure aesthetic category, meaning, exclusively aesthetic, all the other categories stemming from extra-aesthetic sources as moral, social, religious. The specific of beauty in digital art is represented by the fact that conceptually speaking, digital art is extremely open and mobile. Thus, beauty has not disappeared from digital art, but is present in new and unlimited expression forms, valences and possibilities. Digital technology allows the artist to reach out far beyond the classical branches of art, to experiment, to create new and complex artistic forms, to reconfigure the visible and the ideal in non-canonical, unconventional, supra-symbolic and hyper-coded forms. Beauty in digital art is the mirror of the digital age: post-conceptual, hyper-stylised, flexible, complex, divers, with an open semantics, emphasizing the contemporary changes and fluctuations.

Digital art, influenced by the perspectives of cultural globalization, is oriented towards representing contemporary world and local reality dynamics, beauty as aesthetic category being original, ambiguous, open semantically. The artwork becomes thus, the result of a collective practice, of a interconnected social entity, every single artistic experience being unique due to the many interaction possibilities between art, work and receptor. The digital artist does not conceive a virtual or material object, but social aesthetic moulds, in accordance with the model of cultural hyper-connections, references, resonance, closeness, having as a result a work of art gifted with the “biomorphic flux of life” [6].

Concerning the shape and content of digital art creations, we can identify three versions of beauty: *beauty as perfection*, *eco (bio) beauty* and *eclectic beauty*. Beauty as perfection of the expression of artwork is most relevantly characterized by formal and compositional excellence: solid, coherent, organized, colour, shade and shape quality. Eco or bio beauty is closely connected to the contemporary environmental concerns and aims to aesthetically rediscover and re-evaluate nature and natural beauty. When it comes to composition, we mention current issues like environmental decay and changes, long time effects, the fleeting, etc. When investigating the formal, we find, either geometrically, mathematically, structurally constructed order, or random, unstructured organic systems – played out in chromatic scales in full accordance with nature attributes. Eclectic beauty must not be understood as being void of aesthetic criteria, but, as being multi-identity and supra-symbolic, the compositional perspectives being presented from a critical angle, non-compliant (gender, race, body, identity, alterity), trying to rehabilitate the connection to the past, blending different styles as neo-impressionism, neo-pop, neo-informal, post-avant-garde, trans-avant-garde.

All three aspects of beauty can be found in other artistic genres, perfection for instance is prevalent in classical art, eclectic beauty and eco-beauty in art nouveau. As expression or formal aspects go, representing beauty in digital art subscribes to the artistic language and particularities of the artists, digital technologies allowing them to create not only expressive elements but also original ones. As continuum, the meaning of the object, the theme or idea of every one of the three types of beauty is correlated with the represented world, with the extra-aesthetic values that convey the ideal, spiritual and social significations intended by the artists. In this context, creativity and usage of digital technology are expressions of artistic languages, of creativity, but also a personal self of the artist into an entirely controlled reference system – so that, far from being abandoned - beauty is reclaimed in a new artistic vision.

Where does the aesthetic value of digital art reside? We can contour an answer to the question heading off from the aesthetic precept according to which art symbolically represent “its own reality” [7], saying that the fundamental function of art is to create a specific reality, meaning the aesthetic reality where the human being has the possibility to recognize its own image. Art materializes a transfigured image, with a symbolic meaning type continuum, or even a supra-symbolic one, containing a plenitude of potential significations. Beyond all the other extra-aesthetic functions as communication, knowledge, religion, ludic, therapy, etc., art, mainly aims to make its aesthetic subject be receipted in a specific manner – aesthetic, existing. Thus, art’s ration of being resides in its aesthetic finality, being human kind’s window into reality, at the same time determining this individual to modify aesthetically the mould of his existence. In other words, its ration of existence is possible only if it participates in the aesthetic transformation of the individual and humanity. From this perspective, digital art expresses a complex articulation between single and multiple, being not only an “open work” [8], but also an involving one, an

interactive one. We are facing a hard concept of participation, meaning at the same time that we complete the suggested work, filling the semantic gaps, choosing the possible significations and reacting to the received message, aesthetic pleasure becomes a unique feeling, unrepeated, justifying the value of the aesthetic experience in digital art. As in avant-garde and post-avant-garde art, in digital art we confront an “opening of the second degree” [8, p. 127]. Digital creations are deliberately constructed to be ambiguous, as to make the receptor an active participating content in deciphering the latent meanings of the work of art. The aesthetic perception of digital art activates the entire experience of its receptor, encouraged to add individually, reflectively and creatively to the already suggested meanings or the work. Digital art is capable to entertain multiple possible interpretations, depending on the aesthetic experience and the expectations of the receptors, betting on the effects of the creation process where the audience can participate as an actor. The aesthetic perception of digital art specific beauty entails a complete approach by the onlooker, an emotional-affective but also reflexive interpretation, idea association or interpretation being open subjects.

4. Conclusions

Beauty has not vanished from artistic creation, but in its digital version, has transformed into unlimited creativity and artistic innovation. The meaning of beauty in digital art must be regarded from a form and continuum standpoint of objective materiality regarding the image and the ideal orientation of the message, and must not be limited by the technological creation delivery medium perspective. We are thus facing a relative crisis of beauty, relativity defined as such only by paralleling to the fact that beauty is not one-dimensional, isolated and canonized, but is an act of specific complexity, multi-perspective, flexible, hyper-coded and hyper-stylised. Thus, digital art stands for more than the simple usage of different computer technologies [9]. It remains an open device with infinite creative possibilities, where we also find the stem of the artist’s intent to create pieces under the imperative of formal or compositional perfection.

More than 100 years ago, Hegel has postulated a thesis over the “end of art” [10] through Science and technology expansion and pragmatic thinking. Even if this might be true, we do notice the diversification of aesthetic values and artistic practice. Human life is infused with aesthetic elements, the technological progress and digital art being key players in this process. Aesthetic values, more exactly beauty, still maintain a definite place in human existence, the expansion of the aesthetic, digital diversity of aesthetic forms and activities with human interaction are meant to prevent the one-dimensionalizing issues. Today, because of digital technology, we notice a stressed tendency to prolong art in the mundane and re-aestheticize the living conditions. Thus, the lifestyle is becoming an aesthetic value infused by environment elements. Digital art does nothing more than to hasten this aesthetic process. Its undefined character does

not target the message coherence or the aesthetic value associated with beauty. It targets the type of experimental art that – starting on from the principle of randomness and open script attitude, as well as from a relational aesthetics, where the stress is to be found in the ideas of bond, empathy, participation – offers to the audiences the freedom to proximately add to the artistic act. The temptation of perfection regarding beauty is thus specific to a type of art where reality can in an instance become virtual and virtuality can be transformed into pure and utter reality. Digitalizing and virtualizing beauty requires a reshaping of our receptive apparatus, a reorienting of aesthetic sensibility and mentality to perceive the novel instances of digital art and assimilate them in an individualized manner.

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