

## The Postmedia Condition



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### I (*techné* - *epistemé*)

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (384-322 BC), son of a Macedonian doctor and teacher of Alexander the Great, made his well known distinction between *techné* (practical skills, craft and art) and *epistemé* (cognition, knowledge). Knowledge in its various forms comprised rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, dialectics, grammar and music theory. These were reserved for the community of free citizens. Technical knowledge was a matter for the unliberated, for wage labourers and craftsmen (*technites* or *banausos*).

Aristotle made no attempt to disguise his contempt of craftwork. He regarded the status of craftsmen as one bordering on slavery. For this reason it was impossible to consider craftsmen as true citizens. Aristotle expounded the view that the sons of 'free' citizens should refrain from taking too great a part in useful activities which could drag them down to the level of the *banausos* because craftwork impeded the state of mind and common sense that free citizens required in order to exercise and apply virtue. In his opinion, the arts and crafts had a detrimental effect on the body's physical condition and robbed the mind of the respite it required for sound reasoning. Useful things ought to be taught only to the extent that they formed the basis for higher things. Music was to be listened to for pleasure by free adults, not to be played by them, for music-making had a hint of the lowly arts and crafts about it (*banauson*) and was therefore an undignified activity for a free man. In other words, society required people who would master a craft or trade (*techné*) as wage labourers or slaves, but only in the service of others – to help the latter experience pleasure, for example, or to allow them to carry out more sublime activities.

To understand this hierarchy of different forms of knowledge, it must be remembered that Aristotle was an advocate of *cuMarc* rule rather than democracy. In his opinion, the rule of an individual (the monarchy), the rule of a few (the aristocracy) or the rule of the many (the polity) were superior organisations of government which served the common good. 'Misguided forms of government arise when tyranny replaces the monarchy, oligarchy the aristocracy and democracy the polity. For tyranny is an autocracy, an exclusive form of rule which is for the benefit of the sovereign, oligarchy a form of rule for

the benefit of the rich and democracy one for the benefit of the poor. Yet no-one thinks of the benefit of all...' By proposing a mixture of polity and aristocracy, he attempted to neutralise the dangers of the two extremes (democracy and oligarchy). Hence Aristotle produced a commensurability of the aesthetic and social order. The hierarchy of the cuMarc society served as the foundation for the hierarchy of the arts and sciences. The sciences (*epistemé*) ranging from arithmetic to rhetoric were for free citizens. The arts (*techné*) ranging from architecture and agriculture to painting and sculpture were for the unliberated.

## II (*artes liberales* - *artes mechanicae*)

The Romans adopted Aristotle's distinction but added one significant shift to it. Instead of distinguishing between forms of knowledge and craft, between cognition and general knowledge or between the experts and the *banausos*, they now placed the Aristotelian distinction in the notion of the arts themselves. The distinction between *epistemé* and *techné* was replaced by the distinction between the *artes liberales* and the *artes mechanicae*. The forms of knowledge ranging from arithmetic to rhetoric became the *artes liberales*. The forms of craft that ranged from architecture to agriculture became the *artes mechanicae*. The commensurability of the aesthetic and social order continued to form the foundation of a hierarchy of the arts and artistic skills. What we know today as the sciences formed the *artes liberales* of the past, and the arts as we understand them today remained within the horizons of the *techné*.

In Roman times the study of the *artes liberales* formed the subject matter of a non-vocational higher education which befitted the free citizen. This is why we speak of the liberal arts for the free citizen. The seven liberal arts (grammar, dialectics, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music theory and astronomy) also formed the curriculum of the monastic and convent schools, and, from the 13th century, of the universities. The *artes mechanicae* (architecture, painting, sculpture, agriculture) continued to be derided as *banausoi technai* or *artes vulgares et sordidae* for the unliberated, for wage labourers and slaves.

## III (The contest between the arts)

It was not until the emergence and rise of the middle cuMarces or bourgeoisie that painting, architecture and sculpture were finally promoted to the ranks of the liberal arts. Around 1500, architecture, sculpture and painting had an equal share in the emancipation of the fine arts or *artes mechanicae* as they were known at the time. The term 'paragone' in art history refers to the 'contest between the arts' which developed in the modern age. Soon the debate on the order of precedence of the arts began. Above all, painting and sculpture found themselves in direct competition with each other, as we see firstly in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci, who argued explicitly in favour of painting. While painting advanced its merits in terms of its illusionist qualities, its inventiveness and the possibilities it held for imitating nature through the means of

perspective and colour, sculpture referred to its multiple dimensionality, its haptic qualities and materiality. Painting, in the latter view, dealt merely with appearance, whereas sculpture actually embodied reality. The sculptor Turbolo expressed the argument most succinctly in a letter to Benedetto Varchi: 'A me mi pare la scultura sia la casa proprio, la pittura sia la bugia' (It seems to me that sculpture is how things actually are and that painting is a lie). Painting for its part derided sculpture as a dusty metier of the craftsman which did not even come close to the intellectual achievement of painting. Thus painters used the old craftwork argument to disparage sculptors.

The old *artes liberales*, once the sciences, today have become painting, sculpture and architecture, and in place of the old *artes mechanicae* we now have applied art and media art. Theory and science used to form the arts of the free citizens. The 'mechanical' arts of the craftsman used to be the arts of the unliberated, the waged labourer and slave. This aesthetic division, which corresponds to the Greek segregation of the *cuMarces*, has been translated into the value judgements we have of the 'arts' and the 'media arts' today. We devalue media artists by regarding them as mere exponents of technical reproducibility limited to the horizons of a machine and by assigning primacy to painting as an anthropomorphic principle and/or form of production.

The scant regard accorded to productive crafts and trades in ancient times is now directed at automation and the machine. The place of the mechanical arts has been taken by the media. We no longer notice the intellectual contribution involved in an act of artistic creation which lies behind the seemingly autonomy of an artefact produced by man and by machine. In principle, the difference between the *artes liberales* and the *artes mechanicae* resulted from the assumption that the one was regarded as an activity of the mind and the other as an activity of the body. Today's division is regarded as the intuition and originality of the artist versus the forces of calculating reason and mechanical production. The contempt felt for the work of the craftsman has been replaced by the contempt for machine- and media-generated production.

As a form of production generated by the human hand and guided by artistic intuition, painting nowadays has been assigned precedence over artworks which are produced or reproduced using technical means. Whereas original works of painting are in the service of the upper *cuMarces*, the lower *cuMarces* are fobbed off with photographic reproductions, prints and postcards, etc., of the famous originals. Even today, the ostracising of the *artes mechanicae* continues to be felt in the case of artworks produced with the aid of the electronic media.

A glance through contemporary books on art history reveals that the media arts continue to be held in contempt. Right up to today, they have been unable to shake off completely the stigma attached to their origins from being associated with the practices of the unliberated and with the mechanical arts.

Hence the liberation of the so-called lower orders can be gauged from the processes of transformation which the arts themselves underwent. However, the lower orders owed their emancipation less to the arts than to the natural sciences and the spirit of the Enlightenment which wanted to release people

from the forces of social coercion, i.e. from the chains of disempowerment which had been forged by the nobility and the church, and from the power of nature. The natural sciences allied themselves with the mechanical arts (*techné*) in order to, with the help of instruments, devices, laboratories, technical skills, knowledge and expertise, discover the laws of nature and to speed up the development of mechanisms that could master the forces of nature. While one artistic movement such as Romanticism was opposed to the Enlightenment, others joined forces with it to improve *la condition humaine*. We are in a similar position once more today. The intention is for our fields of knowledge to be extended and driven forward through an alliance of the mechanical media arts with the natural sciences, and hence for platforms and practices of democratic processes to be created with the aid of new technologies and methods. In reality, the 'liberal' artist who became emancipated from the 'mechanical' craftsman during the Renaissance was not really liberated from his dependence on aristocratic patronage. His art still served chiefly to glorify the ruling class. In the meantime, the church, nobles, bishops and princes which once populated this class have been replaced by today's corporations, joint stock companies and CEOs. Though derided by the liberal arts of today, it is the mechanical arts which actually serve a purely artistic purpose with works capable of revealing the commensurability of the aesthetic and social order. It is the primarily 'computational arts' (Heidegger) that continue to be mocked by the aristocracy of the liberal arts in the feature pages which attempt to push for emancipation and equal rights of the unprivileged.

The rise of technical art and its struggle for recognition mirrors the rise of the class of workers and slaves and its struggle for political recognition. In his two books *La rebelión de las masas* (The Rebellion of the Masses, 1930) and *La deshumanización del arte* (The Dehumanization of Art, 1925) José Ortega y Gasset described the context and dialectics of these processes of transformation, even though he did so from a conservative perspective. In the ascendancy of the technical arts he saw the dehumanisation of all art and linked this development to the apparently dehumanising rise of the masses.

#### **IV (*speculum artium*)**

The distinction between the *artes liberales* and *artes mechanicae*, which still applies *grosso modo* today, mirrors the social class system that has prevailed from the times of Ancient Greece right up to the present day. We are able to gauge the emancipation of slaves and waged labourers in the upgrading of the *artes mechanicae* with regard to the *artes liberales* and in the struggle of the media arts to achieve equality alongside the class liberal arts such as painting or sculpture. Consequently, we can chart the struggle of previously repressed groups for participation and a share in the whole of society. In other words there is a highly sophisticated relationship between art and politics which can be expressed as the *speculum artium*, or the mirror of art. Hence we can justifiably posit that the development of participatory practices in the arts has its counterpart in the advancement of a participatory democracy and that these processes have a mutual effect on each other, just as the emergence of Greek

sculpture was closely linked to the emergence of Greek democracy at that time. Since then, art has been an indispensable condition for a functioning democracy. We can, therefore, easily see that political systems with an ambivalent relationship to art also have an ambivalent relationship to democracy and that artists who uphold the values of democracy are disliked by many rulers for that very reason. Art's mirroring of social relations is of course not as simple as an optical reflection. It is neither a question of isomorphy or simple bijection, nor for that matter a back-to-front or anamorphotically distorted reflection: instead, it deals with more complex processes of transformation and interdependencies.

## V (The doctrine of the *Encyclopédie*)

From 1751 to 1780 Denis Diderot and his collaborator Jean le Rond D'Alembert published the 35 volumes of the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, the most significant editorial undertaking of the French Enlightenment, the 'opening chapter of the revolution' (Robespierre), which was officially condemned by Pope Clemens XIII after the publication of Volume 7. The cream of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire, Rousseau, Condorcet and Montesquieu, gave the *Encyclopédie* its anti-clerical and anti-absolutist character, the centrepiece of the democratic revolution.

D'Alembert (1717-1783) wrote the *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie* in 1751. He did so in the wake of Bacon, Newton and Locke. For him, mathematics and physics formed the foundation of all knowledge, including the theory of society. Neither religion nor biological organisms constituted a basis for models of community life; instead, the spheres of *ratio* – reason – and the natural sciences served as a foil for the spheres of politics and art.

But above all the *Encyclopédie* was the great service of Diderot, who focused his attention on the *arts mécaniciens*, the crafts, and on technology as the *langue des arts*. The sections Diderot wrote about the mechanical arts account for the largest part of the *Encyclopédie*. In his search for a systematic understanding of the mechanical arts he called for a debate on the arts and the integration of the mechanical arts into the liberal arts and sciences. Diderot wanted to abolish the distinction between the *artes liberales* and *artes mechanicae* as a device of feudal society; he wanted to change society by emancipating the mechanical arts. By improving the mechanical arts he wanted to improve the social status of the citizen. In his opinion, the distinction between the free and the mechanical arts had degraded mankind. He was all for extending the field of the social protagonists, for a wide distribution of knowledge and for the development of tools, machines, models and instruments in the interests of progress. He published the findings of his research in the *Encyclopédie* in order to bring about a social transformation. Above all, he pinned his hopes for changing and improving society on the dissemination of knowledge about the mechanical arts. Technology, he believed, would help to restructure society. So it was not from the arts of painting and sculpture that he expected to see substantial contributions to the development of a free society, but from the mechanical arts.

Knowledge of the mechanical arts would lead to a rational and fair society, just as we hope to find the same kind of society today in modern media arts and technologies such as the Internet. Experimental politics and experimental media art are supposed to support each other: in Diderot and in the agenda of the Enlightenment we find an interest in integrating the separate representational fields of science, art (the mechanical arts) and politics. The Enlightenment and Diderot regarded the mechanical arts, technology and science as the foundation for enlightened politics.

## **VI (The equality of materials and media)**

A 'culture of material' emerged in the 1920s, especially in Russia where it revolved around Vladimir Tatlin. Tatlin linked the application of pieces of wood and paper in the Cubist pictures of Braque and Picasso to the tradition of materials used in Russian icons. Kurt Schwitters and the Bauhaus movement added both abstraction as a language of form and new materials to the field of painting. Consequently, the manifestoes of the time called for the equality of all materials. This is why the most outstanding representatives of the avant-garde in the 1920s worked simultaneously as painters, sculptors, photographers, film-makers, designers and architects. They developed a visual language which could be applied in universal contexts from panel paintings to architecture or from a two-dimensional surface to a three-dimensional space. By doing so they laid the foundations for an end to the contest between the arts and the start of equality among each of the artistic genres.

Hence the first phase of media art centred on achieving the same artistic recognition for the media of photography and film as was enjoyed by the traditional media of painting and sculpture. In particular, much of the work during this phase was directed at exploring the idiosyncratic media-specific worlds of the respective medium. In the case of photography at least, the battle for recognition as an artistic medium was won some 150 years after it had been invented. The same contest between the arts has also taken place with the new media of video and digital art, because media works are attracting more attention than ever before at major international exhibitions. So tentatively at least, we can speak of equality among all the media and genres.

## **VII (The post-media condition)**

Just like the case of the old technical media of photography and film, the pivotal successes of the new technical media consisting of video and computer are not just that they launched new movements in art and created new media for expression but that they also exerted a decisive influence on historical media such as painting and sculpture. To this extent the new media were not only a new branch on the tree of art but actually transformed the tree of art itself. Here we have to distinguish between old technological media (photography and film) and new technological media (video and computers) on the one hand and the

arts of painting and sculpture on the other. Until now, the latter were not considered to be media at all. Under the influence of the media, however, they came to be regarded as such, i.e. as non-technological old media. With the experiences of the new media we can afford to take a new look at the old media. With the practices of the new technological media we can also embark on a fresh evaluation of the practices of the old non-technological media. In fact we might even go so far as to say that the intrinsic success of the new media resides less in the fact that they have developed new forms and possibilities of art, but that they have enabled us to establish new approaches to the old media of art and above all have kept the latter alive by forcing them to undergo a process of radical transformation.

After photography, for example, emerged to rival the production of paintings which faithfully depict reality in line with our perceptions, and even had the audacity to promise - quite legitimately as it turned out - that what it depicted was far closer to reality, painting was eventually obliged to retreat from the representation of the world of objects after a 50-year long struggle and to concentrate on depicting its own idiosyncratic world (i.e. surface, form, colour and the properties of materials and technical devices from the frame to the canvas). Its triumph in doing so is evidenced in the abstract painting of the first half of the 20th century. The fact that painting went back once more to creating pictures of the world of objects in the second half of the century (from Pop Art to Photo-realism) was a development that referred directly to photography. If, in the world prior to photography, painting was based directly and immediately on representing the world of objects, then object-based painting after the invention of photography came to refer solely to the world of objects as it was depicted by photography, i.e. to object-based and figurative photography. But it is not just the experiences with film and photography which have led to an exchange with painting: digital 'Paint' programs and the experience of working directly on the computer and the screen have given an unmistakably fresh impetus to painting. Significantly enough, they have also kicked off a new form of computer-derived abstraction in painting. Yet it is not just the western programme of visual images which has changed through the influence of the technological media: the programme of sculptures has obviously been transformed, too. We can recognise the dominating influence of computer algorithms and 3-D programs right down to the field of architecture. We could therefore be tempted to ask whether the effects of the new media on the old media have actually been more successful than the works of the new media themselves. The central *movens* and the central agendas of 20th century art: the crisis of representation, the dissolution of the traditional notion of artwork and the disappearance of the author - all these factors are due to the emergence of the new media. The radical turn towards the culture of reception which occurred in the 20th century, the explosion of the visual in art and science, the *pictorial turn*, are all consequences of the new media.

All of the artistic disciplines have been transformed by the media. The impact of the media is universal. The media paradigm embraces all of the arts. The computer's claim to be a universal machine, as Alan Turing called his computer model in 'On Computable Numbers', a paper he wrote in 1937, is being fulfilled by the media. Just as many scientists today dream of a computerised model of

the universe, of a perfect presentation of the universe based on digital computations, artists today also dream of a computerised model of art, of a kind of art which can be completely created through digital computations. This computational way of thinking, the impacts and successes of which have already captured the entire world - for airports, factories, railway stations, shopping centres or hospitals, etc., would be helpless without computers or calculators - is now complemented by the parallel emergence of the computational arts whose aim it also is to capture the entire world. And indeed, the impacts and successes of the computational arts which we can observe follow precisely in the tradition we have just described: they, too, are transforming all of the practices and forms of art. The computer, as it were, can simulate not only all forms and laws of the universe, not only the natural laws; it can also simulate the laws of form, and the forms and laws of the world of art. Creativity itself is a transfer program, an algorithm. From literature to architecture, from art to music we are beginning to see more and more computer-aided transfer programs and instructions, control mechanisms and guidelines for actions. The impact of the media is universal and for that reason all art is already post-media art. Moreover, the universal machine, the computer, claims to be able to simulate all of the media. Therefore all art is post-media art.

This post-media condition, however, does not render the idiosyncratic worlds in the world of devices or the intrinsic properties of the media world superfluous. On the contrary, the specificity and idiosyncratic worlds of the media are becoming increasingly differentiated. Total availability of specific media or of specific properties of the media, from painting to film, is only possible in the post-media condition. For example, the computer is better at simulating and defining a particular degree of granulation on a reel of 16mm film than a real film could ever achieve itself. The digital simulation of the notes of a flute sounds more like a flute than the notes a flute player could ever coax out of a real flute. Likewise, the computer is even better at simulating the flickering of the writing if there is a tattered perforation on the reel of film than reality itself, and the same goes for the notes of a prepared piano. It is only thanks to the post-media computer, the universal machine, that we can realise the abundance of possibilities which resides in the specificity of the media.

Nowadays all of art practice keeps to the script of the media and the rules of the media. This notion of the media comprises not only the old and new technical media, from photography to computers, but also the old analogue media such as painting and sculpture which have been transformed and influenced under the pressure of the technical media. This explains why we can rightly say that all of art practice keeps to the script of the media.

The art of the technical media, i.e. art which has been produced with the aid of a device, constitutes the core of our media experience. This media experience has become the norm for all aesthetic experience. Hence in art there is no longer anything beyond the media. No-one can escape from the media. There is no longer any painting outside and beyond the media experience. There is no longer any sculpture outside and beyond the media experience. There is no longer any photography outside and beyond the media experience. It is precisely the photographers who submit photographs to the digital media and manipulate

or enhance images on the computer screen which were originally taken by the camera that provide the most convincing and astounding photographic portraits; they are the most convincing and quintessential of all photographers. The photography of model and miniature worlds is a kind of physical modelling, a digital simulation technique.

The physical modelling of acousmatic music, i.e. the computer-based representation of notes in a simulated concrete place enables us to simulate one and the same note in all kinds of locations from the church to the staircase.

This post-media condition is defined by two phases:

1. the equivalence of the media and
2. the mixing of the media.

The first phase was about achieving equivalence of the media, about establishing the same artistic recognition for the New Media - photography, film, video, digital art - as has been enjoyed by the traditional media - painting and sculpture. During this phase all of the media, including painting and photography, made a special effort to explore the media-specific idiosyncratic worlds of the respective medium.

Painting has demonstrated the intrinsic value of paint, of flowing, dribbling and trickling. Photography has demonstrated its ability to portray objects realistically. Film has demonstrated its narrative capability. Video has demonstrated its critical subversion of the mass medium of television. Digital art has demonstrated its powers of imagination in virtual worlds.

As far as its epistemological and artistic value is concerned, this phase is more or less over. Fortunately, media specificity and media criticality have prevailed absolutely and completely. The equivalence of the media, meaning its artistic equivalence and equal validity, has prevailed after successful attempt to chart the media-specific idiosyncratic worlds of the respective medium ranging from painting to video.

In an artistic and epistemological sense, the new second phase is about mixing the media-specific idiosyncratic worlds of the media.

Video, for example, triumphs with the narrative imagination of film by using multiple projections instead of one screen and telling a story from many perspectives at the same time rather than just from one perspective. With the availability of new large digital cameras and graphics programs, photography is inventing unseen, virtual worlds. Sculpture can consist of a photo or a video tape. An event captured in a photograph can be a sculpture, a text or a picture.

The behaviour of an object and of a person captured on a video or in a photograph can be a sculpture. Language can be a sculpture. Language on LED screens can be a painting, a book and a sculpture. Video and computer installations can be a piece of literature, architecture or a sculpture. Photography and video art, originally confined to two dimensions, receive spatial and sculptural dimensions in installations. Painting refers to photography or digital graphics programs and uses both. The graphics programs are called paint programs because they refer to painting. Film is proving to be increasingly dominant in a documentary realism which takes its critique of the mass media from video. The web supplies dialogues and texts for all of the media in its chat rooms. The entire reservoir of texts on the web can be used for the automatic control of texts, for the self-generative production of language worlds. But the web can also produce self-generative picture worlds and the texts on the web can serve as a foil for the script of actors in films and speakers in radio plays or for texts by poets or amateur writers. With Ipod everyone can make their own radio programme: podcasting instead of broadcasting. With videocasting everyone can make their own TV programme. VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) and IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) provide materials for everyone to create their own textual, aural and visual installations using a choice of media such as photography, video or computer. The results can in turn be output as films, pieces of music or as architecture.

This mixing of the media has led to extraordinarily major innovations in each of the media and in art. Hence painting has come to life not by virtue of itself, but through its referencing of other media. Video lives from film, film lives from literature, and sculpture lives from photography and video. They all live from digital, technical innovations. The secret code behind all these forms of art is the binary code of the computer and the secret aesthetics consist of algorithmic rules and programs.

Consequently, this state of current art practice is best referred to as the post-media condition, because no single medium is dominant any longer; instead, all of the different media influence and determine each other. The set of all media forms a universal self-contained medium. This is the post-media condition of the world of the media in the practice of the arts today.

The ultimate effect of all this is to emancipate the observer, visitor and user. In the post-media condition we experience the equality of the lay public, of the amateur, the philistine, the slave and the subject. The very terms 'user innovation' or 'consumer generated content' bear witness to the birth of a new kind of democratic art in which everyone can participate. The platform for this participation is the Internet, where everyone can post his or her texts, photos or videos. For the first time in history there is an 'institution', a 'space' and a 'place' where the lay public can offer their works to others with the aid of media art, without the guardians of the criteria. Until now, of course, these were all censored. There were only museums and other state-owned or private control zones where only legitimised art was allowed to be exhibited. Now the way is finally clear for illegitimate art. The contest of the arts is over, but the contest returns to its origins, to the relations between theory, science and practise, art. Art loses its picture monopoly and image power, thanks to the image-generating

procedures in the sciences.