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GAZING AT THE INVISIBLE

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SENSE OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY
INITIATED BY COVID-19?**

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HOW CAN AESTHETIC THEORY HELP MAKE SENSE OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY INITIATED BY COVID-19?

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What can aesthetic theory reveal about the COVID-19 era? What questions can it help to ask? Can it help us in the future when similar situations occur?

It is no news that memories, flashbacks and experiences of catastrophe films and science fiction affect our perception. Many books call for a rereading. In Guido Morselli's 1977 novel *Dissipatio*, humankind disappears. Only the protagonist remains and wanders the deserted cities of Northern Italy and Switzerland.¹ In 1983 Jean Baudrillard asked in *Les stratégies fatales* why science fiction accentuated speed. Where was inertia and slowness?² These books, the first one artistically, the second one philosophically, reflected on key features of our current state of crisis.

Fighting the virus is also a fight against an abstraction, as Albert Camus writes in *The Plague* (1947).³ Camus' book is now again read as a concrete description, and not just an allegory. And the virus is *real* and we need to catch it with our imagination. In a sense, this imaginative work is aesthetic, like the standstill and inertia described by Morselli and Baudrillard. There is an official visualization of the virus, but it doesn't fit our everyday battles. We are fighting the invisible.

However, it is not all about halting, disappearing and crashing. New phenomena emerge and become visible. It is already obvious that artists, producers and audiences are going through more than a laboratory experience of how to do things differently; they are suffering from a growing economic crisis. We can also imagine that some of the newly found alternatives, such as internet concerts and online theater could continue to thrive after COVID-19, and a new economy will certainly be built upon these measures. We also know that the coronavirus has increased computer gaming, one of today's main art forms.

What is notable is the speed at which the change has invaded our lives. We have been imprisoned at home (in widely varying degrees from country to country) and dramatically

separated from our daily routines. Nobody needs to catch a bus, train, or metro. Meetings are canceled or postponed. Goals, outputs and achievements are re-considered. The change was fast but now our lives are slow. Public spaces are empty but our homes are full. Families and couples must stay together. Singles are more single. Yet private space is more open to the public. Our colleagues enter our homes through Skype/Zoom/Teams. Students follow lectures from their living room couches. Evenings are dedicated to online parties and chatting about the situation.

But beyond that, what can a scholarly look at the current situation offer? We have found at least 8 perspectives worth considering.

1

The new visual phenomena have led us astray. At first and nearly everywhere, the walls of toilet paper we had become used to in shops suddenly disappeared, leaving behind a gaping space that raised anxiety. Toilet paper packages are big and their disappearance is much more noticeable than the absence of cans of beans. In fact, retailers never said that they were the most sold article. The eye produced a false interpretation of sales. What will we see in different catastrophes and what kind of false interpretations do these visual findings produce? What kind of a phenomenological reduction does one need to have for epidemics and the like?

2

Although our media-oriented colleagues have long lived a media-driven existence, for most people, digitalization has taken a giant leap. Many of us have seen our colleagues' dogs through Skype already in the 2000s. But as many seem to be experiencing this now for the first time. The current era really seems to mark a digital revolution. Not even in our circles have Skype/Zoom/Teams meetings been commonplace until just recently. The dream of the interconnectedness through media has become a reality.

3

For many years, Far East Asians have been an object of (partly racist) laughter on the Western side of the Globe due to their use of facemasks that became normalized after the bird flu. In many countries however, they are now commonplace or even a must if you go outside. If and when we are able to take down COVID-19, the masks will be commonplace in the West too. As always, when masks are used, something changes inside us. The COVID-19 mask does not represent an animal or god/goddess. It is impersonal. Smiles are not visible. The means of communication by a person whose face is hidden, such as (mostly) women in some parts of the world (including the new taboo of the handshake), have come to an unexpected place. Will identity be less connected to the face, at least slightly? Can this lead to something?

4

During COVID-19 things are more subordinated to function, than usual. The focus on appearance has declined. What kind of experience is this? A relief? What traces will it leave? Function overshadows aesthetics. And this brings a new kind of aesthetic. Where will its echoes lead? The situation stimulates new aesthetic reactions and new aesthetic agencies.

5

Many thinkers have written about the subtle ways in which aesthetics rule our everyday practices, from attempts to run processes harmoniously to the small ways of beautification that make everyday life more rewarding.⁴ How will they change? For a short period of time or permanently? One cannot stand too close to other people and faces are averted. Nobody stops on the street. Neighbors share their views from a safe distance. Community life is shaped by a new type of fear and omnipresent protection. For the time being at least, some natural parts of our culture are no longer very natural. The microsemiotics⁵ of everyday life change the longer this period continues. What are the new potentials of this change? What can we lose if we fail to seriously consider the speed at which people learn new habits? There must be something to gain from the situation. There always is.

6

COVID-19 has halted and shunted to the side the intensive, ever accelerating experience (lament and care) about Global warming, greedy capitalism and what has been coined the neoliberal, while slowing the consumerism of travel and other pastimes to an extent never experienced by the younger generations. Only corona exists. From Walter Benjamin (through Teresa de Lauretis) to Paul Virilio, scholars have accentuated how the speed/rhythm of life, the fragmentation of experience and the sensual outreach of our mediated consciousness have increased. This is the first standstill in most people's lifetime.

7

The outbreak of the virus has definitely produced a new atmosphere. Thinking about theories of atmosphere, this atmosphere is somehow anti-emotional and neutralizing. Tonino Griffiero refers to atmospheres as half-things. If someone asks you to show your passport once a week, it produces a certain atmosphere to your life.⁶ This half-thing stays with you. Is there anything to learn about atmospheres here? How much do they affect what people do? It is like and yet unlike Christmas or Easter. The negative version of a festive season. How to approach this?

8

As scholars of experience, we know that people will get used to this, and it will become the new normal, as they say – and in the end, people will, if they feel safe, see the beauty in it. What kind of beauty? Will it affect us permanently? Will it become the object of desire for some? Who? Is it dangerous? If COVID-19 ultimately remains a problem only in areas outside the West / Global North, will it become ignored like malaria?

¹ Guido Morselli, *Dissipatio* (Milano: Adelphi, 1977).

² Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1983).

³ Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

⁴ See e.g. Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and the Environment, Themes and Variations on Art and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) and Elisabetta Di Stefano, *Che cos'è l'estetica quotidiana* (Roma: Carocci, 2018).

⁵ Eero Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁶ On Griffero's work, see *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).