

## Under the Skin: Notes on the Aesthetics of Distance and Visual Culture

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**Abstract:** *Distance has from time to time been discussed in aesthetics, e.g. as a necessary component in the experience of the sublime (Kant) and the aura (Benjamin). It looks like photographs/films are able to cut distance physically and time-wise, but that this does not necessarily lead to emphatic engagement (Sontag, Butler). Thinking about the amount of news images we see, it is interesting how little we discuss this phenomenon. Artists sometimes aspire to cut this distance by searching for new ways of representing e.g. war. In my text I will try to analyze distance as an aesthetic topic. I also discuss Anssi Pulkkinen's project Streetview (Reassembled), where a ruined house was imported from Syria to Europe, to make the war more comprehensible. I believe reflecting on distance could have both aesthetic and political significance.*

**Keywords:** *ethics, aesthetics, war, visual culture.*

Although Walter Benjamin (2008) was enthusiastic about the way photographs cut distance to objects both place-wise and time-wise, we mostly keep our moral and emphatic distance when we see things happening faraway through the media of photography and/or documentary film footage. How otherwise could we who view catastrophes only through media survive seeing war footage and continue living our lives, as if nothing had happened?

To get to grips with this topic, I will take a small leap into the history of the philosophy of art. I will take a look at the thoughts of Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin on distance, and will then continue by discussing everyday media from this perspective. I will discuss Anssi Pulkkinen's art work *Streetview (Reassembled)*, a work based on an appropriation of a ruin in Syria, which was exhibited in a variety of exhibition spaces in Northern Europe—and how it cut distance also experience-wise.

It seems that most visual culture, even when we know that we do not encounter fictional reality, stays morally and emphatically distanced for us. On the other hand, when you move horrifying physical remains from war zones to e.g. Helsinki Finland, like in the case of *Streetview (Reassembled)*, this presence of a distant catastrophe can make things more concrete and cut distance in surprising ways.

## 1. Kant, Benjamin and Some Philosophical Remarks on Distance

In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, the second book of *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), and in particular in its passage on the dynamically sublime, Immanuel Kant embraces impressive but hard-to-grasp encounters with nature.

Kant spent his whole life in (probably boring) Königsberg and its environs. We have no reason to believe that he was doing anything else other than just imagining what it means to see “volcanoes” and “high waterfalls,” based on what he read and on depictions of nature, but it is highly probable that he had experienced “threatening rocks,” “thunderclouds” and (relatively) “mighty rivers.” (Kant 1952, 110)

*Provided our own position is secure, their [i.e. encounters with impressive natural entities] aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.* (Kant 1952, 110-111)

It is not hard to imagine how in the end (Kant does not go into detail here), one does not just have to be far enough away to feel safe, but one must also be close enough to be impressed by these natural entities. Although we are sometimes able to imagine how an impressive natural site or object could look threatening when looked at from the right distance, it remains merely an analytic fact if we do not perceive it correctly.

Imagine that you are heading toward a small waterfall. Although it does not show any impressive features as you are approaching it, when you are at the site it suddenly strikes you with its massive aquatic nature and the rocks surrounding it. But when you are too close, you cannot grasp the whole.

Sometimes we actually need not to be too close, as is the case with mountains: seen at the site they do not show their contours. Mountains are impressive when you are able to see their shapes and/or silhouettes, but when you are on the mountain itself, you encounter just small rocks, bushes and trails.

Kant writes: “Nature considered is an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us, is dynamically sublime.” (Kant 1952, 109) He emphasizes how even if we are talking about frightful issues, one cannot himself/herself be frightened when one reflects upon the sublime. Fear is central, yet we cannot be afraid of what we see. (Kant 1952, 109-110)

If we think about the problematics of right distance, and also of Kant’s most classical example of beauty in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, the second part of *The Critique of Judgement*, the rose looks interesting. In Kant’s analytic of the beautiful, the rose (or any other beautiful object) is an object of “taste” and of “restful contemplation”. (Kant 1952, 94) Although Kant does not say it, when enjoying a rose there is a certain amount of distance we need to have. My intuition is that our distance from the rose should be from a little less than one feet to maximum of three feet, otherwise we are somewhat gazing at a landscape with a rose in it.

Again, in the text on the dynamically sublime (which is something we do not use our taste for, but to which we simply react), Kant himself is aware of the problematics of rationality and

perception. Visual perception, in the experience of the sublime, becomes overwhelmed by the hard-to-digest size and the formally hard-to-grab nature of the event which we perceive as sublime—or, to be precise, the reflection of it, as the aesthetic is not “presupposing either a judgment of sense or one logically determinant, but one of reflection.” (Ibid.)

Kant and Benjamin, two German classics which discuss distance, have interestingly a very different touch on the topic. As Benjamin mainly discusses cutting distance as an issue of aesthetic de-sacralization, Kant’s conception of the sublime is about fear.

The 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001 accumulated reflection on Kant’s philosophy of the sublime by philosophers and journalists, when hundreds of millions of people watched the apocalyptic theater of terror which took over Manhattan, where skyscrapers melted and a titanic cloud of smoke veiled the city.

In the analyses of the sublime in both philosophy and the press, what stood out was simply the scale of the events (and their seductive appearance), although once again distance was a key for experiencing the sublime. Hearing bystanders’ experiences, it all seemed to be far from visual, but those of us who gazed at the event from our couches, and who did not have close-up experiences at the site, were visually shocked, following our safety (distance from the event) and the disturbingly breath-taking views offered by TV, which showed footage from helicopters.

Samuel Weber’s (2013) essay “Clouds: On a Possible Relation of Terror and Terrorism to Aesthetics” (2013), shows how even the inhabitants of New York enjoyed the content of their lunch-boxes while watching the event, just far enough on the other side of Hudson River that they could feel safe, though visually and geographically (one could say geopolitically) surprisingly close to the terrifying things happening on the other side of the water.

If you did not have a friend or family member in the area of the Twin Towers, you, together with the visual distance, went through an aestheticizing process: sometimes, even if you did not want to, you just enjoyed the moving images, which passed in front of you by way of the TV. Those of us with no reality connection to the seen, would have needed close-ups of the horrors in order to lose at least some moral / emphatic distance, which kept the images safely away. For those who had a close-up experience at the site or a relative living in houses nearby, the aesthetics of terrorism crept under the skin. For the rest of us, it often felt embarrassing or just ethically and aesthetically problematic. Watching it all, I sometimes forgot what I really was watching, and I felt embarrassed when I ‘woke up’ to the fact that I was enjoying it like a film, while real people were dying. But how would we survive global news coverage, if all images touched us?

Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (written 1936), emphasizes how a photograph or film bridges both the temporal and geographical distance to the photographed / filmed subject. Interpretations of this seminal work underscore how reproduction erodes the aura of unique artifacts and places, but in the text itself, the philosopher also pondered how our relationship to distances changes through reproduction. The examples in the text range from distant mountains to classical architecture (Benjamin 2008). As artworks were suddenly not just in a place, which one needed to travel to, but were also accessible through reproduction, Benjamin thought that this cutting of distance would destroy their auratic nature.

Benjamin thought of a metaphysical change in our relationship to (besides historical, also) distant (and original) art objects. One can ask, if one wants to think side by side with him, if media cuts distances, but at the same time keeps them ethically distant? Maybe the aura, the glow of the classics (for Benjamin, a glow that was both negative and theological) was broken following modern reproduction techniques, and while our interest was sometimes raised by

someone in a photograph, who touched us, mostly—this is something which might have become more and more of a reality after the increased repetition and overflow of images in which we live—people in pictures are not that meaningful for us.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not one wants to go into Benjamin's famous conception of the aura, Mona Lisa surely lost something when she became easier to access through pictorial representation. But a corpse lying on the ground on a street in Iraq did not gain much presence in the lives of us who were not there by coming closer to us through the images shown during the Second Gulf War.

I believe Benjamin might have been right about early photography. Maybe people felt that it was incredible to see a picture, which was a decade older or to witness a place they had never visited. But the number of images, their repetition and our need to become immune to them has exceeded all possibilities of staying in close touch with most of them. The repetition and the amount of images we see today is devastating to the meaning and weight of images.

It is interesting that we see things happening somewhere far away through images, which cut the distance, and yet at the same time keep things far away enough to not let them get under our skin. A typical example of this is fresh documentary footage on a particular war, where we see horrible things happening, but are able to keep fear, heavy empathy and engagement from leaking into our experience, if not on a level which could be close to watching fiction, at least on a level where one is detached and attached at the same time. It is just that here one is not enjoying the same kind of control as a viewer of fiction, as the viewer of war footage 'knows' (or believes) that s/he has access to reality through the image, at least in some way.

In the following, I will discuss this tension, not just through analyzing these relationships, but also through discussing art, which erodes distance. I will start with some concrete examples from the media to make the point clear. In a way, this is an essay where, after laying out some of the problematic contours of the topic, I offer another way of thinking about the topic, a way, which stresses in what ways the arts can in the end disturb the geographically and time-wise anti-distancing but emotionally and ethically distancing power of images, through finding new ways of coping with distance.

## 2. Media, Art, and Distance

I calculated how many people I come across through media. The amount was a couple of hundred per day—fifty just by reading the morning paper—and close to 100 000 per year, and counted in millions during a decade. What did these mediated people do? Besides playing tennis, driving cars, making love and cooking—some of them fictional, some not—I also witnessed "real" (or rather images of real) victims of wars and catastrophes.

How amazing it is that I have this surface connection to all these people. And how amazing it is that we see people from faraway places in danger and bad situations, and that we are able to continue our lives as if nothing has happened to us.

Like in the case of the viewers of 911 imagery who had a concrete attachment to the event (a friend living in Manhattan, etc.), sometimes we cannot stand everyday images which are about issues which connect to us. I cannot but think about our systematic mistreatment of animals. We hug dogs, and if we see a wounded bird, we are expected to save it, but at the same time we have an incredibly cruel system of producing meat, dairy products and fur. The images produced

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<sup>1</sup> Here one should maybe mention Kendall Walton's thoughts on the transparency of photographs. Walton's point is that we can see through them, i.e. that we, in a way, see the original objects (it is so just a technical matter that we are watching an image). Walton does not touch our reactions to the images, but just the way we still feel we are watching the objects themselves. See Walton 2008.

at the sites of meat and dairy production are images people do not want to see. To be able to continue not caring, people do not want to see documentaries about animal mistreatment.

Of course the material produced by organizations for animal rights is edited to really disturb us, and not just to package a relatively challenging TV dinner for us, which is mostly the case with documentaries. Newspaper photo editors and the editors of documentaries (and sometimes also their producers) take away those images which are too much for us, thus producing a safe texture of pictures and moving images, which make it possible for us to experience a little horror, but which in the end neither hurts us, nor gets under our skin. (I will never forget the pictures one of my students, a photo editor of a large newspaper, showed me from one of Africa's recent wars: those she decided were too much and which consequently were never published.) The people who produce animal rights material attempt to do the opposite, to wake us up ethically, so they really go over the boundary of what we can take. And we resist the images which would creep under our skin.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes even 'relatively soft' (visually symbolic) news images can actually touch us, of course, as we know from the case of autumn of 2015, when we saw the body of a small boy, lying dead, washed ashore in Turkey, his face turned against the sand; or in the autumn of 2016, when the video of the little boy, Omran Daqneesh, wiping dirt and dried blood from his face in a hospital in Aleppo spread like wildfire through social media and raised a wave of responses. These images shared an experience of a crisis of humanity and helplessness, weirdly so through their nearly kitsch nature, if one can use the word here by stressing the style of the images.

In the 1990s, there were many public discussions on the way people were able to watch footage of wars without drowning in empathy.<sup>3</sup> The Rwanda War raised some of them, the footage raising our comfort zone a little higher than it had been in the 1980s. But on the other hand, it is also natural that people protect themselves, and we might have not just the right, but the duty to do that, to keep ourselves in mental shape. If we were not able to detach ourselves from what we see, it would be impossible to pair modern media with a healthy life. The whole world would be a mental wreck. The number of people on sick leave would become incredibly high every time a war broke out which our media was interested in showing to us.

From depictions of war, we learn that empathy is not present when one has to focus on mere survival: many emotions and attitudes are hard to keep up when one's life is at stake. From a safe distance, people can then later construe what they are experiencing. (This is what I know myself from my two car accidents, which gained experiential maturity only afterwards.)

In literature, Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929), which takes place during the First World War, exemplifies the nature of this oscillation. During the war, the rare moments when the going gets tough are somewhat emotionless for the protagonists, while in the trenches, and even more in hospitals and back home, there is time and emotional space for reflection. This is the classic theme where the young boys of war books and movies return home, and are then suddenly more traumatized than they ever were at the site of the horrors. (Timely distance is a huge factor in how we experience things.)

Judith Butler writes in her *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) about precarious lives, and the way they sometimes do and sometimes do not touch the Americans who see them "framed" (presented) by media. As America's own wars have produced a lot of suffering, it looks,

<sup>2</sup> I express my gratitude here to Pinja Mustajoki, who's doctoral thesis I am advising. As her doctoral work is about the animal mistreatment images nobody wants to see, I have learned a lot about defensive attitudes towards documentary images.

<sup>3</sup> This boundary is of course broken once in a while, and published images have become more raw with time. To what extent will they keep leaning in an increasingly shocking direction?

like Butler shows, like there would be a nearly systematic selection of what to grieve. Cases like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo (see e.g. p. 64–65) show the political interest to regulate the visual field and the work done by the US government to contextualize what Americans see in the ‘proper’ political manner. While Butler’s book, which mainly focuses on the media audiences of the US, a country which seems to endlessly produce new wars, does not really in the end touch upon the aesthetic process of distancing, it shows how aesthetics can easily be overshadowed by politics. While the book’s message is not in the focus of this aesthetic inquiry it is a good reminder that images are also manipulated (or as Butler says ‘framed’) politically.

Also Susan Sontag has come close to Butler’s position (Butler actually often works on her heritage) by discussing our relationship to the sufferings of others. In her *Regarding the Pains of Others* (2003), a follow-up to her work on photography, Sontag accentuates the need to have images on the painful life of others, although she points out that if one has not experienced what the people in the images have lived through, one cannot in the end really understand the experiences at stake. The book is about ethical relationships, but interestingly, neither Sontag really works on an aesthetic framework on how things happen when we see e.g. images of war.

Armies are well aware of the potential and problems of distance. Aki Mauri Huhtinen’s book *Keinosota (Artificial War, 2004)*, a book published by Finland’s National Defence University, is a depiction of contemporary technological warfare which deals with the modern possibilities of detaching soldiers from their victims. The book discusses how computerization and observing events through monitors makes it emotionally less disturbing to carry out strikes, as empathy grows, along with a decrease in the distance to the experience. Visual and spatial distance is intentionally increased so it becomes easier for people to follow orders, to fire a missile into an unknown village, for instance, when one does it through a computerized image (and not at the site). One can note in Huhtinen’s book that this relationship to visibility is becoming methodological, as there are so many notes on how to create a fruitful distance to war through media.<sup>4</sup>

Could the closing up of visually digestible but ethically problematic distances in fact be the most significant thing that can be done through images, art in general or media, from a political point of view? Can art tear people out of their personal safety nets, and bring humanity closer to us? Could some practices even make us see images differently? And do we want that?

Mira Kallio-Tavin (2013) has pointed out how ethically present a person’s face is when it is given respectful space, allowing it to come close to the viewer. Only then can we truly encounter another individual through an image. Giving a real face to someone, a face that is close, and human and touching (this can also be done to an animal), can break much ice from the relationship between us and the objects of photography or painting.

Encountering otherness visually or even artistically is not an uncomplicated task, of course, and many projects that aim to reduce the ethical distance between viewers and images have been criticized as being social pornography. It is also quite common to portray the problems of some group defined as fragile by making up representations of them on stage, instead of finding a way of giving them a voice of their own.

I was involved in the process of presenting a special kind of art work, Anssi Pulkkinen’s *Street View (Reassembled)* (2017), to a Finnish audience, after the work had already toured various countries in Central Europe. The idea of the work was simple: the artist took a destroyed house from Syria, and recreated it on a truck, which, like the refugees of the late 2010s, traveled around

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<sup>4</sup> The book features, for example, ideas on how to scare people with noise.

Europe. As money for public sculpture usually goes for celebrating dead national male heroes and national wars, it was hard, from this point of view, to be critical of the use of money in this alternative way, as the “sculpture” won the Mobile Home competition for sculptural work.<sup>5</sup>

I could have felt uneasy with the way the sculpture could have been seen as abusing real war for artistic purposes (some people did interpret it in this way), but I started leaning in another direction as I noticed that Syrian intellectuals, such as Issa Touma, were positive about the work. I also heard that the people living in the area had commented on it being a good idea to bring it to Europe so that people would understand what the war was about.

In addition, my refugee godson, whom I semi-adopted with my wife two years ago when he came to Finland as a refugee from Afganistan, thought this was a good idea, and in the end I did not have the conviction that I (a middle aged European man) should have the last word here.<sup>6</sup>

In an old text on how to keep messages alive, Umberto Eco reminds the reader about the fact that it is not particularly effective always to have the same sign about the dangers of putting one’s head out of the train window. It would be more effective to, for example, tell the story of what happened to someone who did stick their head out of the window.<sup>7</sup> (As Mr. Johnson last week put his head out from the train, a branch...)

This is exactly what art does when it follows one of its main traits in modern culture. It searches for unseen ways of discussing, taking care and analyzing issues. It goes without saying that Anssi Pulkkinen’s *Street View (Reassembled)* strikes at the very core of this ethos by building a material bridge to a war that would otherwise only be present to us as a flat media spectacle, but the main thing about it was that the artist created a new form of expression in which the issue could come close to us. In a way this readymade, the appropriation of a ruin, challenged the idea of (2D) documentation.

There the walls were: partly bombed, possible to sense, smell and feel, so rendering them material, but not just that. They were rendered somatic for us. Like the stones of the Australian indigenous people to whom the tribe tell their secrets, and our gravestones that we experience as being a little alive and that stand out from other stone material, the ruins of a real war spoke to our whole bodies, based on our knowledge of the walls being real, and not reproductions.

By creating new practices of presentation, *Street View (Reassembled)* forced us to see something differently through its novel approach. If projects like these were the norm, their effect would soon lose their power and become like news footage, but what we are dealing with here is one of the age-old tasks of art, to find new ways for expression, to recycle the sensory—the ways in which we experience and interpret things. It can help us stay alert so that the true essence of things will not be overshadowed by practices that increase experiential distance.

And there are other pieces like this. In the early 2000s, Amel Ibrahimovic beautifully exhibited a jacket he got from his best friend before he ran over a bridge and was never seen again as the Yugoslavian war broke out the next day.<sup>8</sup> Gazing at the jacket, the story and life crept under my skin. Jake and Dinos Chapman bought Hitler’s paintings (2008) and “pimped” them,

5 More on the work and its commissioning (last visited May 24, 2019): <http://www.mobilehome2017.com/fi/>.

6 We wrote with Issa Touma for the same publication. See Aleksi Malmberg and Annukka Vähäsöyrinki, eds., *Home Re-assembled: On Art, Destruction & Belonging* (Rotterdam: Jap Sam Books, 2017). I have used the text for the book as the base for writing this article, which is far more philosophical, and less polemical. I am very thankful for the editors for the call and the right to not worry about every sentence in this rewriting of the sketchy first version of the text.

7 This is one of the main examples of Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), in chapter one.

8 The work is presented on Ibrahimovic’s home page (last visited May 24, 2019): <http://amelibrahimovic.net/Works/My-Refugee-Shoes-And-My-Refugee-Clothes>.

playing around with their mere horrifying existence, and the fact that they were Hitler's real products.<sup>9</sup> The 'real' is out there, and art sometimes makes good use of it. Sometimes it helps to bring them closer, so close that they creep under our skin.

While artists originally put statues on pedestals and cast ritualistic events on stage in order to build (aestheticized, reflective, dramatized) distance, its role has also always included bringing different phenomena close at different times. New media and means of communication have often been expected to "connect people", but so far the interaction between mediatized people has not led to any notable increase in empathy. As we can conclude from the examples of war, it is rather that media has created a collectivity that requires less and less commitment, which in turn has grown hand in hand with the expansion of our sense of where we belong (the globe). In this cultural situation, the potentials of art have not yet been fully discussed and tested, and to do that, one should maybe at least, for the sake of discussion, go through the theoretical problems hidden in the topic, something I tried to sketchily begin here in my article.

Monuments, memorials, nationalistic symbols and depictions of "great men" and (pathetically rarely) women, have been a financially lucrative territory for which sculptors have often, regrettably, settled. But on the other hand, it is partly because of this that the sensory and philosophical recycling is so effective in Pulkkinen's work. The mere thought of Pulkkinen's mobile ruins touches a chord, if one firstly just accepts ethically the act of exhibiting a destroyed house from a real war.

The ruin used in *Street View (Reassembled)* was transported to Europe through Turkey. It travelled from door to door, reminding us Europeans of the arms trade carried out by Europeans, the irresponsible foreign policy of leading Western countries, and what, in the case of one house and family, globalization means at the micro-level. From my point of view, in Pulkkinen's piece reality really made a visit.

## Epilogue

Our philosophical stroll through art, visual culture and philosophy of distance has ended, and I feel there have been no major surprises. But I think that going through these themes with care has perhaps made clearer how images work, what their role (or lack of role) in politics is, and how art at least sometimes, whether we like its working strategies or not, can affect our relationship to distant problems where "normal" images cannot 'help'. It looks like these excessive (extreme), kitschy and sometimes maybe even other types of reproductions can creep under our skin, but that mostly reproductive documentations do not do that. Mostly visual culture cuts distance only time-wise and place-wise, not morally and/or emphatically. As artists seeks to find new ways of coping with reality, bringing the real body of a distant reality for a visit might be something we could find rewarding even at length in a world where the stream of popular images mostly leaves us untouched.

Going back to Kant, whose strolls were totally non-surprising, always starting and ending at the same time, if he read about (natural) catastrophes from books, it is interesting to think about how seldom it was that he had moments when those issues he wrote about could really make their way under his skin. His body did not tremble with fear when he discussed waterfalls, as he was just sitting in an armchair. It makes me feel that the way we take for granted that we understand issues while not really experiencing them, touching them or in any way engaging with them, is

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<sup>9</sup> See Mark Brown, "Hitler Gets Chapman Treatment as Hell Rises from the Ashes," *Guardian*, May 30, 2008, Art (last visited May 24, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/may/30/art>.



a far older and broader tradition and convention than we realize when we discuss media and its effects. Art might be able to remove us from this distancing practice at least occasionally without traumatizing us with the wrong kind of intimacy. But even if images are an easy target to think about, our ways of keeping up the distance—at the same time as we easily think we manage and understand the world where we live in—are a much broader and deeper problem of culture, of which we can just begin to see the basic contours.

Art alone cannot bridge us to the world, of course. And neither can philosophy. But there is certainly work to be done and rewards to be gained from this path, and I hope this text could be one drop in a growing river, which in the end could turn out to be a whole waterfall of new approaches to what it means to experience globally and ethically in a future world. A key to understanding the problematics might also mean that we need to accept the role of the “body” of a work of art, and its importance—here even the “body” of a piece of architecture and the everyday of a war zone. The presence of this body could often be a success-factor in understanding issues, which are distant. The “somaesthetics” of architecture here might be that our example connects our organic bodies to the architectural body of the war zone, and feeling this makes a difference to the world of popular images. We need to get more connected, not just to people, but to the bodies of e.g. buildings and clothes (Ibrahimovic’s jacket).

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