

**Virtual culture vs. real culture.
The new reality for arts in Greece during the COVID-19 crisis**

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that Greece has a long-standing tradition of cultural history and that its tourism relies, to a large extent, on showcasing ancient art, as well as byzantine art, whose specimens can be found in a multitude of museums all over the country. Masterpieces from antiquity, famous architectural works that are part of the world's cultural heritage, and works of art of considerable aesthetic value have been a magnet for expert scientists, art aficionados, and the wider public from all over the world who want to feel the “vibes” emitted from the works of art and feel, through their senses, the “aesthetic pleasure”, as the privilege and “talent” inherent to all human beings. The COVID-19 pandemic which emerged in most countries of the world in the past three months (from March to June 2020), together with the lockdown consequently imposed by most governments, has given rise to unprecedented situations not only in matters of health, the economy, and people's interpersonal relationships, but also in terms of the reception of culture during such period. In Greece, for the first time, the most important and most popular museums in the country have implemented schemes allowing for virtual presentation of exhibits to such an extent that traffic on the relevant websites has skyrocketed as compared to the past. Online platforms, which in other cases had only been used for research purposes, have been sought in order to promote the “product”. All of a sudden, works of art were treated more like a consumer product, and this resulted in the citizens not feeling the charm of direct contact and personal emotion and functioning without any provocation of the senses. On the other hand, online visitors have been able to access cultural sites without any obligation whatsoever to reward the efforts of the many people involved and the cultural institutions themselves. The new situation has given rise to many questions, among which the most important relates to the concepts of “virtual” and “real” which are mostly under the current new state of affairs.

Keywords: *Pandemic, COVID-19, Art and Culture, Virtual Reality, Museum Visiting, Aesthetic Pleasure, Cultural Policy.*

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Introduction:

Digitalisation of museum collections and display of such collections on the Web through modern methods for applying new technologies has now become a common practice for most museums and art galleries all over the world, aiming at introducing online visitors to the contents of such collections and create particular conditions for perceiving material and immaterial objects of cultural heritage. Attracting visitors to a museum or an art gallery is among the top priorities of policy makers either for reinforcing the brand name of particular collections and disseminating them to a wider circle of persons or for increasing the frequency and numbers of visitors, aside from the fact that disseminating knowledge is a supreme humanitarian value with multiple aspects (historical, philosophical, educational, as well as national). In addition, one should not overlook the fact that in times of economic crisis it is absolutely necessary to transform a museum into a modern cultural industry, the ultimate objective being cultural sustainability.

Virtual tours of artistic collections allow visitors (both those visiting the particular website from a distance and those visiting the museum in person) to become acquainted with and admire the exhibits through interactive multimedia applications, and to form an *ex ante* opinion on the quality of the works exhibited. Undoubtedly, new technologies have contributed in the proper management of collections and have increased the possibilities for interpreting and exploiting them in the interests of society as a whole.

The role of the Internet in managing cultural heritage consists not only in offering the possibility of very fast access to remote information but predominantly in revealing the multitude of relationships between objects and human beings. The Internet has provided museums with an unheard-of extroversion, offering them global exposure, direct and timeless presentation of exhibitions or exhibits, online access to the museum's shop, and online acceptance of visitors either through the possibility of purchasing e-tickets or through social media networking. This is an unprecedented “democratization” of cultural products and cultural information [1]; [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic period, set to last for an indefinite period of time within 2020, has created “survival-mode” conditions in many sectors of human activity, starting from life itself and extending to sectors such as culture, to allow people to remain in constant contact with art, drawing from it the life-giving qualities that will help preserve the values of human history and culture, including democracy itself and social cohesion, on the basis of the theory that the life of human beings is not only about the economy.

From the first days of the lockdowns imposed in all Western countries, a significant increase has been observed in continuous streaming popular culture programmes such as Netflix and YouTube, to the point that their providers have had to announce that they would slow down the speed and reduce the resolution of their programmes in order to prevent an overload of their networks. At the same time, there have been increasing concerns about whether continuous streaming popular culture programmes have transformed the standards of cultural consumption and entail the risk of becoming the sole source of cultural production [3]; [4].

Everywhere in the so-called “civilised” world, concerns about culture have been voiced, and making use of the new applications and the new media for promoting culture has been the objective of both States and private individuals. However, receiving art through virtual reality, perfectly directed with the help of technology, has created new relationships between the object of art and the public, based on illusion and the lack of conditions for, on the one hand, understanding human artistic creativity and, on the other hand, reinforcing the creative character of cultural industries. In its White Paper on “Breaking out of the COVID-19 Crisis”, the “European Creative Business Network” has pointed out that digitalisation is the only way to prevent the collapse of the cultural and creative industries [5].

In the past two decades, museums and cultural organisations have embraced the so-called “digital revolution”, and terms such as “digital sustainability” have become part of their vocabulary [6]. Common practices have included digitalising the museums’ collections, creating multimedia applications especially for educational needs in the museum premises, establishing dynamic websites offering virtual tours, and ensuring publicity through social media as well as the more recent applications for mobile devices, but now museums have found themselves confronted with the need of ensuring their promotion through a single medium: the Internet. Indeed, they acted having in mind the fact that physical visits would have to be replaced with virtual visits, and this for an indefinite period of time.

Nevertheless, culture is not only a pillar of economic sustainability and acquisition of knowledge about history, but also a medium for provoking “aesthetic pleasure”, which may essentially be achieved only through the actual contact of human beings with the object of art. The concept of aesthetic pleasure dates back to ancient times, it has been addressed by both aesthetics and philosophy, it has been linked to the ideal of “beauty”, and it has been related to the development of morphology and style within the context of “aesthetics of taste”. However, contemporary art has modified the terms of the concept of “aesthetic pleasure”, associating it with other concepts, relating to “knowledge”, the “social surroundings”, the definition of “truth”, as well as aspects of contemporary philosophical reflection about the understanding and the interpretation of works of art. Human knowledge, which is linked to aesthetic pleasure, is “acquired by creating concepts, and this enables the brain to form its own reality”, according also to neurophysiologists, who, furthermore, in agreement with ancient philosophers, acknowledge that art is actually perceived in a conditioned manner, on the basis of the human being’s innate synthetic ability [7].

Therefore, the individual’s direct contact with objects of culture has to be a necessary condition, given that the functioning of all senses, together with other innate qualities of the human being, such as understanding, intuition, empathy, synaesthesia, socialising, internal and external discourse, as well as other unspoken and innermost qualities, make the visitor of a museum a “complementary” chapter in the understanding of art and culture.

Every cloud has a silver lining: COVID-19 as a challenge for Greek museums

For the most part, Greek museums had not organised their collections based on an online experience, i.e. by digitalising collections, providing online tours, and organising the space of museums on the level of the Web, distance learning, interactive behaviours, accessibility of museums to persons with disabilities, e-ticketing, and other actions, widely available today with the help of the new media and the world of online technology. At the outset of the COVID-19 outbreak, in order to protect public health, the Greek government like most governments all over the worlds, declared a lockdown, which lasted for approximately four months. This new reality has been unprecedented, it has been characterised as a rare occurrence in the history of humanity, and it has affected the lives of millions of people, in addition to the adverse effects it has had on the economy.

However, the people’s need for learning and education, as well as acquisition of cultural knowledge, is a necessary condition, and cultural institutions have committed to continue satisfying this need by keeping the closed museums “open” to the public of the entire world. At the initiative of the Ministry of Culture, famous collectors of works of art, and important private foundations, such as the Onassis and Niarchos Foundations, steps were taken to quickly adapt cultural sites to the new situation, for example by increasing cultural sponsorships, promoting the understanding about the survival of creative (cultural) industries, promptly digitalising the country’s cultural reserve, and providing online links between museums and their public, and, generally speaking, by taking actions aimed at orienting cultural sites toward the outside.

Indeed, at the initiative of the collector and founder of the Cultural Organisation NEON, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, an exhibition/installation of contemporary art works by British sculptor Antony Gormley was held at the archaeological site of Delos, followed by other similar events [8].

During this period of time, plans that had been lying dormant with the competent authorities have been implemented, and online tools were taken advantage of in record time, offering the possibility for multiples use of art, interlinking the ancient and the contemporary world, promoting artists through special sites, and increasing the online traffic of museums. Cultural heritage found a safe and effective forum for promoting itself on terms that are now based on “enjoying” specific works in conditions of exclusively individual reflection, enabling nevertheless visitors to explore an incredibly large amount of works which they would not, under different circumstances, have had the possibility to explore.

Under the new circumstances, many Greek museums have accelerated the digitalisation process of their collections, their classification, recording, and digital display, following the practices of museologists. During the pandemic, the country’s theatrical venues, under the motto “opera and theatre at home” have been very successful, with an impressive online attendance when broadcasting recorded plays at a predetermined time. A characteristic example has been Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, performed by the National Theatre, whose first broadcasting “was enjoyed online by 23 500 viewers”, according to a news item in newspaper *I Kathimerini* on April 4, 2020 (*Kathimerini.gr*).

The collaboration between the Ministries of Culture and Digital Government has led to many interventions in matters of culture, aimed at accelerating, through sponsorships and ad hoc financing, the development of cultural material that may be accessed online. In this context, on 20 March 2020, the Ministry of Culture launched a special tender aimed at supporting projects contributing to the development and promotion of high quality **contemporary Greek digital culture**. Digital culture includes cultural and artistic productions or expressions relating to digital technology, new media, and sectors of the creative economy (design, gaming, etc.).

The strategic objectives of this tender include:

- Developing original cultural material, accessible by the public online, with or without charge.
- Converting in digital form existing privately-owned cultural material in order to make it accessible online with or without charge.
- Further developing existing digital cultural structures, as well as structures that allow jointly putting in place digital cultural actions.
- Developing educational material of a cultural nature, accessible online with or without charge.
- Reinforcing the cultural and creative economy and identifying innovative means for cultural expression free of any space limitations.
- Developing digital cultural material also accessible by people with disabilities (see *Culture.gov.gr*).

There can be no doubt that the pandemic has been for Greece the best opportunity for introducing museums and cultural venues into the world of digital technology and for putting in place the conditions for highlighting both the ancient and the contemporary cultural heritage.

Virtual and real museum. A dialogue with technology and art

It is widely admitted that a well-organised museum with a perfect digital profile may achieve a multitude of targets and, first and foremost, increase its traffic to incredibly high numbers and enhance its brand name and renown worldwide, making distance non-existent, while implementing, at the same time, educational, learning, and cultural policies, guided by its collections. The virtual reality achieved and the directed “image” displayed online give the impression of a unique “spectacle” and a narrative that are capable of carrying the visitor/viewer to dreamlike and imaginary worlds, just like Art itself can actually do. The final product is attractive, intended to have a multiplying effect in terms of attracting visitors and transmitting messages of all kinds, from informational and historical to national, so as to transform museums into the main cultural centre within the context of the institutional bodies that cities and states have.

On the other hand, online visitors may also have the unique opportunity to obtain, through the online tour, a full picture of the collections, to the extent that these are provided in digitalised form, and to enrich their knowledge both generally and in more specific fields. Indeed, visitors may “enjoy” works of art and museum objects in great numbers within a short period of time, something that would have required a lot of time and special arrangements, should they had wished to explore the premises of any museum in person.

As an example, the British Museum saw its online traffic increase during the pandemic by 120%, as compared to the previous year, and this has led the museum’s managers to the decision to upload on the Internet 300,000 additional

images so as to further increase the museum's online traffic. This has also offered visitors the possibility to see and observe details in works of art in high resolution, details which cannot be seen by the naked eye, and which they would never see inside the museum. According to the Director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer, "we are delighted to be able to unveil this major revamp early, and hope that these important objects can provide inspiration, reflection, or even just quiet moments of distraction during this difficult time" (*elculture.gr*).

Nonetheless, a virtual tour cannot substitute for a visit in person to a museum or a collection. "Digital tools have a complementary role to play and they cannot substitute for the visitor's direct contact with the works exhibited in a museum", said the Greek Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, when launching a new policy for digitalised culture in Greece on the occasion of the COVID-19 pandemic [8].

It is true that a visit in person to a museum is an irreplaceable experience which has not changed for centuries now, in spite of technological developments and the change in attitudes towards the role of museums today. Visiting a museum is a *methexis*, a form of group sharing, and for many it can be likened to a visit to the "temple of the muses", as per the etymology of the word. It cannot be denied that a visit in person activates all human senses, as well as the innermost qualities of any human being, such as perception, empathy, synaesthesia, imagination, etc., that relate to the visitor's knowledge, experience, and psychology. It represents "aesthetic pleasure", to the extent that this is recognised as an activation of the mind and feelings, as beauty, as truth, or, in general, as anything one may like, as knowledge, as special concept and idea, or as expression of the spirit of the times.

Of course, visiting a museum in person and touring it virtually are the two sides of the same coin, the difference being that the latter complements the former, actually providing particular information which would not have been objectively available under different circumstances. Exploiting the possibilities of the digitalised images and the online visits are among the main traits of modern life showing that the use of electronic media has become inevitable.

Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc in many countries in all continents and many people have lost their lives. The lockdown was a drastic measure implemented by most countries, in order to contain its spread. The personal lives of people have thoroughly changed, countries are facing financial hardship, and several people have lost their jobs. The social life of individuals has been abruptly interrupted and, within the context of compulsory confinement, culture has probably been the only way out. Theatres, conservatories, and museums all over the world have implemented special programmes in order to provide creative pastimes. In Greece, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a good opportunity for accelerating the establishment of the "Digital State", as proclaimed by the competent Ministry. Therefore, Greek museums of ancient and contemporary art, which had significantly delayed their entry into the contemporary digital world, also became involved in this challenge of "fast adaptation". As a result of this new situation, they have received sponsorships and ad hoc subsidies, whereas initiatives for digitalising collections through the use of the new media have originated from the entire spectrum of museums and art galleries throughout the country. Within a four-month period, many cultural institutions have responded to the need to increase their online friends, by implementing special programmes providing access to their works and collections. Of course, in spite of the positive aspects of being able to tour cultural masterpieces in the calm of one's own home, this is no substitute for a visit in person to theatres, conservatories, or museums, where activation of all the senses of the human being is the main prerequisite for feeling the aesthetic pleasure caused by the work of art.

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