

**FaR 2021**  
**International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”**

## **MEDIA REALITY OF THE DIGITAL AGE: CHALLENGES OF VISUALITY**

Elena I. Kuznetsova (a)\*  
\*Corresponding author

(a) Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 31A, Minina Str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603155, Russia,  
tvelena@mail.ru

### **Abstract**

The relevance of the study of the phenomenon of visual culture in the modern world is determined by the rapid development of innovative forms of media communication, the increase in platforms for presenting an audiovisual product. Any innovation in the field of "new media" causes multiple changes in the contours of the social environment, the formation of new socio-cultural phenomena, which requires its understanding from the standpoint of social philosophy. The subject of the research is the screen media reality as a transforming system of technogenic visual media reality of the digital age. The theoretical and methodological basis for the analysis of the visual complex of media reality as a transforming socio-cultural phenomenon is the concept of "challenge and response" by English philosopher A. Toynbee. The comparative-historical method is used to analyze the screen media reality in its historical forms. At the same time, the "challenge and response" formula itself reflects the principles of complementarity and synthesis of opposites as the basis of the dialectical approach. The general and individual features in the development of screen media reality are revealed, the general communicative nature and continuity of symbolic mechanisms for building a picture of the world are substantiated. It is proved that all historical forms of screen media reality are a symbolic environment filled with mutual interweaving, constantly forming a dialectical contradiction of "challenge and response".

2357-1330 © 2022 Published by European Publisher.

*Keywords:* Digital reality, media reality, cinematic reality, augmented reality, “challenge and response”, visual imagery



## 1. Introduction

Visual forms of representation of social meanings began to be recognized as the key problems of philosophical research in the middle of the twentieth century, which was reflected in the metaphor of the iconic turn that marked the priority of depiction in epistemological processes. Visualization of communicative practices has become one of the dominant world cultural processes. Technogenic digital visual media reality is one of the leading subjects of modern social and humanitarian research. Its relevance is explained by the increasing role of visuality in the formation of the cultural foundations of modern social practices.

As an object of reflection, the visual image finds its place in the philosophical problems of man and the world in the era of antiquity, in the context of understanding the role of visual sensations in the complex of sensory perception, vision as the dominant of cognition. For centuries, the problem of visuality has been highlighted in various theories and concepts of Western European thinking in order to usher in a visual or iconic turn in the twentieth century. In the new era, the questions of the phenomenology of perception will be raised (Merleau-Ponty, 1992, 1999), the desire to "look the visible in the face" will be formulated (Marion, 2010, p. 7), the iconic text will be presented in the simulation model as moving from the sphere of the ontological to the conventional (Baudrillard, 2000). At the same time, the most urgent is the assertion of the triumph of technogenic visuality in the first third of the twentieth century by Benjamin (2007), who laid the foundations for a critical analysis of technogenic media reality.

The research literature expands the discursive field formed by the reflection of the problems generated by the rapid growth of digital technologies in the modern world. Cultural changes generated by media technologies receive the status of the most important areas of research in socio-humanitarian knowledge (Krotz & Hepp, 2013; Nowak-Teter, 2019). The problems of preserving and broadcasting the "core" of culture under the influence of informatization of cultural space, new cultural fields that are the basis for the formation of digital culture are subjected to philosophical analysis (Prokudin & Sokolov, 2013). In these processes, the visual nature of communications is recognized as one of the most significant factors of social change, a new form of expression of the symbolic world (Drozdova, 2015; Simakova, 2020; Zharkova, 2018). Digital visual images are an actual subject of interdisciplinary study, while emphasizing the importance of the visual in building a picture of the real or unreal, the immediacy of experience that visual images carry (Gamson et al., 2003). The role of social networks as visual platforms is emphasized (Manor & Crilley, 2018), where methods of analyzing visual frameworks for creating relevant political content are in demand, for example, approaches to visualizing conflicts, military operations and humanitarian crises in international media (Dhanesh & Rahman, 2021). Researchers note the active use of visual images of the media environment in situations of growing polarization of society, including for political mobilization in electoral processes (Doerr, 2017). The problem of constructing images of reality through visual structures related to the interests of various social institutions is being developed (Massari, 2021). Modern digital media are becoming the subject of study in the context of thinking about the future, which is the main value of cultural forms and mythologies on which our daily life is built today (Demaria & Piluso, 2020).

At the same time, the technogenic visuality of the XXI century appears in new cultural dimensions, giving rise to acute social problems that require critical reflection. In this regard, the visual nature of digital media reality requires further reflection in the perspective of the challenges that the complex of innovative telecommunications technologies presents to modern society in its exponential development.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Digital media reality is determined by the multiplicity of cultural forms, meanings, and ways of expressing them, born of a new period of development of the technogenic era, which require a philosophical approach to further understanding the concept of media reality. Arnold Toynbee's law of "challenge and response" (Toynbee & Huntington, 2016) is chosen as a theoretical tool on this research path – a regularity that, according to the British historian and philosopher, determines the development of civilization. Within the framework of this concept, the development of society depends on the choice of a solution to the challenges of historical events and situations or natural factors. Technogenic epochs create a new type of challenges that are determined by the explosive nature of digital information technologies. Following Toynbee's statement, the stronger the challenge, the stronger the incentives should be in the search for an answer. The peculiarity of the challenge of visual technologies of digital media reality at the present stage of cultural development is the comprehensive influence of the new visual on all social spheres: at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels.

The entire cultural experience of mankind grows on the basis of mediality, the symbolic mediation of various semiotic systems. Any creation of culture creates a new reality of a conventional nature, which is constituted as an artificial reality in a complex interaction of multilevel mediation, in the specificity of certain medial forms. Throughout the entire course of civilizational development, a kind of accommodation of public perception of various socio-cultural phenomena took place, based on the cultural experience of understanding traditional intermediaries – words, facial expressions, gestures, images. Each of the symbolic systems was a kind of cultural challenge to its era, changing social norms and patterns of behavior. With the advent of man-made visual technologies based on the dominance of visual imagery, which brought the dramatization of all spheres of life, the need for social responses increases many times.

## **3. Research Questions**

- Is the phenomenon of digital reality a unique challenge, or did the previous models of technogenic media reality already pose to humanity the questions that arise in their new forms at the new technological turn?
- Since the origin and formation of media reality is associated with the development of technogenic visual imagery, is it possible to distinguish the screen visual image as the dominant characteristic of media reality and what are its ontological boundaries in different historical epochs?
- Is it possible to talk about a gap between traditional and innovative forms of media reality, or is digital media reality a new stage in the development of screen symbolic space?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the article is to study the phenomenon of on-screen media reality as a socio-cultural phenomenon in its historical development; to identify visuality as the dominant characteristic of media reality and the dialectic of its technological and socio-cultural development.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The methodology of the article is determined by the socio-philosophical reflection of the media reality of the digital era as a kind of technogenic symbolic social reality, the nature of which is expressed in various forms of historical forms. The analysis is based on the understanding of visuality as a socio-cultural phenomenon in its historical development; a comparative historical analysis of visual imagery of various technogenic nature, as well as an understanding of the role of the phenomenon of visuality in the systemic transformations of all spheres of life. The methodological tool is the concept of "challenge and response" by the English philosopher A. Toynbee. At the same time, the "challenge and response" formula itself reflects the principles of complementarity and synthesis of opposites that underlie the dialectical approach.

#### **6. Findings**

Digital media reality is a rapidly developing environment of the visual culture of the modern world, one of the types of technogenic reality that arises at the turn of the XIX–XX century. It is possible to understand its revolutionary character by referring to the history of media reality as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The problem of the genesis of media reality is closely connected not only with the question of the semiotic role of technogenic visuality in the structure of media reality, but also with its functional capabilities to create the illusion of real reality. In the spectrum of many debatable concepts about the time of the appearance of media reality, the point of view of F. Hartmann's theory seems to be the most well-reasoned. The Austrian researcher of media communication connects the origin of the phenomenon of media reality with the appearance in the middle of the XIX century of new ways of recording information—photography and phonograph, which allowed reproducing knowledge not only through text, but also with the help of technical images and technical forms of recording and reproducing sound (Hartmann, 2008). Indeed, the common innovation of these technical forms was their concrete sensory perception, opposed to the conceptual nature of the text; nevertheless, it was in the medium of photography that they saw a radical change in the forms of reference, new criteria for visual imagery, aesthetic autonomy from the subject.

The reality displayed in the photo by the very fixation of the stopped movement of life has created a powerful aesthetic tension, a new symbolic frame of reality. Nevertheless, the photo can rather be considered a prototype of the on-screen media reality. She did not involve a person in her world; he remained a passive observer. Taken separately, the technical phenomena of photography and sound recording did not create media reality as a single symbolic space. Rather, we can say that it is these technical innovations, primarily photography, that have become a technological challenge to the old communicative

symbolic order. It consisted in opening the space of technogenic documentary visual aesthetics and gave rise to new processes in artistic creativity in response, changing the vector of the artist's view from reality to the subjectivity of the creator. In fact, the whole path of the development of technogenic media reality is a dialectic of the growth of contradiction at one stage and its removal in the future. In this process, the process of perception of the semiotic originality of symbolic reality is also important.

At the end of the XIX century, technogenic visuality was developed in the screen symbolic cinema reality. The dynamic image became a visible challenge to the cultural experience of mankind: the Lumiere brothers' train changed the principles of identifying the screen image with the familiar reality. The invented principle of cinematic movement was a technological and cultural response to the limitations of the visual photographic image, the inability to overcome the real estate of its events and plots. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of the "great mute" itself was technologically imperfect in depicting reality, the effect of the new visual imagery was so strong that the technical invention of ways to transmit sounds was perceived skeptically. The way of understanding the aesthetic meaning of audiovisual synthesis was very dramatic. It was necessary not only to master a new technology, but also to give birth to the idea of a new art (Balash, 1968). Cinema has historically become the first screen media reality, which, involving the viewer in its symbolic world, and having only the illusion of creating the present time, at the same time taught him the language of new aesthetic conventions.

The challenge that forced us to search for an ontological correspondence of the screen reality to the living reality was overcome in the form of an electronic audiovisual television media reality, which presented an illusory synthesis of the communication of "remoteness" and the communication of "presence". At the same time, television technology has made the development of new conventions and the acquisition of new communicative experience a necessary condition for the audience's reception. Television reality was reflected in the metaphor of a collage of equivalent and simultaneously existing phenomena stitched together, at the same time, the absence of restrictions for the perception of visual images allowed experiencing a media spectacle with "increased intensity" (Gamson et al., 2003). For television reality, time was correlated with the translational property acquired by the screen by the present time. At the same time, simultaneity as a result of translationality already had an aesthetic nature: the possibility of simultaneous transmission of a message and its reception created the effect of the referent's reliability, on the one hand, and an idea of the scale of the audience.

Digital media reality is a symbolic space of a new visuality constructed by computer technologies based on digital binary coding. Being a continuation of traditional technogenic symbolic environments, digital media reality is a process and the result of the increasing formative influence of digital media communications on all aspects of society's life – at the macro, meso and micro levels. The factors determining changes in social reality can be considered as technogenic challenges and in the context of the task of studying visual imagery at these three levels.

A distinctive characteristic of digital media reality is the convergent nature of the technologies that create it, which leads to the opacity of the means and structures that act as intermediaries in various social communications. At first glance, the property of screen quality makes digital media reality related to television media reality. At the same time, the technological difference is that the first reality is created by digital binary code, the second by analog technologies. Unlike the television media reality of one stationary

screen, digital media reality is a mobile reality, the reality of four screens: desktop, laptop, tablet, phone. We should agree with a certain concern of researchers who believe that this "screen" transformation occurred without the full intellectual analysis that it deserves (Chateau & Moure, 2016). Indeed, digital media reality as an object of research actualizes both spatial and temporal aspects of its study: what are the coordinates of its symbolic configuration, what is the specificity of the category of time for different screen reality in different communicative situations? There is a problem of reception of the visual content of digital reality. Its basis was interactivity. The perception of the symbolic world of digital media reality creates its "present time" using streaming technology, while the consumer (as opposed to the viewer) character of its perception presents it as a service that can be postponed and returned to. The subjectivity of screen time has changed: it has become owned by the user. Television media reality preserved for a person an insurmountable border "screen – the real world", in digital media reality this border becomes indistinguishable (Kuznetsova, 2018).

The question arises as to how much the parameters of the frame – the main configuration of the visual space of media reality – change the nature of media influence in the process of content reception? Is it possible to compare the degree of mediatization in the process of perception of visual images created by the mass media on the smartphone screen and on a large plasma screen?

One of the most significant challenge of digital Internet technologies was at the meso level: the traditional screen environment of the media industry acutely felt the need to transform the media consumption familiar to the mass audience. The digital Internet space has offered users a wide variety of media products on various platforms, but the most important thing is information exchange, self-created communication. The industrial response to such a rapid conquest of the media space by new non-institutional actors was the transition of broadcast television to technologies for the production of an individual product. It should be noted that the principle of targeted audience segmentation with the formal declaration of maximum differentiation of content by television structures in practice led to an increase in its standardization (Castels, 2017).

The change in the ontology of screen visualness of the digital era is taking place not only at the social meso – level-within the boundaries of the media industry. Today, various screens have become a significant tool in different spheres of society's life, mediated the professional functioning of all social institutions. Screens have become part of the urban environment, reconfiguring the space itself. Moreover, screens, viewers and spaces are mutually transforming each other, changing the role of art and technology in public space (Verhoeff et al., 2019). The most innovative and "explosive" technologies of screen digital culture have become its varieties: "augmented reality" (AR) and "mixed reality" (MR), built on visual effects arising from the combination of real and virtual environments. This is a case of challenges that A. Toynbee referred to as powerful: the blurring of the usual boundaries of the social world that separate the real from the virtual, the emergence of hybrid forms of reality that the culture of mankind has not yet known. The new visuality is used not only in its game forms, but also in those spheres of human activity where social training techniques, simulation methods of teaching work in difficult conditions that recreate the effects of reality are in demand. In the category of chances that the phenomenon of augmented reality gives, it is possible to include the possibility of creating a qualitatively new information and educational environment as a basis for the development and improvement of the education system. Mixed reality is

accompanied by immeasurable opportunities to change the ways of interaction and communication of people with the world around them.

## 7. Conclusion

In the XXI century, in the scenarios of the globalized development of the world, mediatization becomes a "challenge" factor for all spheres of life of modern society, and then the dominant principle of structuring socio-cultural forms.

The visualization of communicative practices, the predominance of spectacular forms in the formation of a picture of the human world determined the changes in all social spheres in the symbolic coordinates of digital media reality.

At the same time, the phenomenon of digital media reality is not the first historical form of technogenic symbolic reality based on visual imagery. The main results of the assimilation of new symbolic forms by the cultural experience of mankind – a technogenic visual image, a synthetic form of audiovisual cinematic imagery, simultaneity in the transmission and perception of an electronic signal of television reality – have already been achieved in previous historical models. At all stages, media reality was formed as a symbolic reality on the screen, and the visual image was its dominant characteristic, common to all historical models. All historical forms of screen media reality are constructive in nature and represent models of representation of the social world.

The uniqueness of digital media reality lies in its technological status, on the basis of which a convergent model arises, pushing the ontological boundaries of a single screen, creating a multi-screen reality.

This is not only an innovative stage in the development of screen symbolic space, but also a new challenge to all spheres of human activity. Mixed reality is accompanied by immeasurable possibilities for changing the ways of interaction and communication of people with the surrounding world, gives every subject a chance to enter the boundaries of creativity, new opportunities for cognition.

The whole path of the origin and formation of media reality is a process of dialectical development of a contradiction at one stage and its removal in the future. Despite the technological differences in the principles of visual image formation, digital media reality in the socio-cultural aspect is a continuation of traditional technogenic visual environments. We can talk about a single historically changing technogenic symbolic space, which is a symbolic environment filled with mutual interlacing and articulations, which is in a dialectical contradiction of “challenge and response”.

## References

- Balash, B. (1968). *Cinema: the formation and essence of new art*. Progress.
- Baudrillard, J. (2000). *Symbolic exchange and death*. Dobrosvet.
- Benjamin, W. (2007). *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Suhrkamp.
- Castels, M. (2017). *Power of communication*. Publishing house of Higher School of Economics.
- Chateau, D., & Moure, J. (2016). *Screens: From materiality to spectatorship – a historical and theoretical reassessment*. University Press.
- Demaria, C., & Piluso, F. (2020). Imagine in advance. The future and consumption of the present in serial plots. *Versus, Notebooks for semiotic studies*, 2, 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.14.649/99090>

- Dhanesh, G., & Rahman, N. (2021). Visual communication and public relations: Visual frame building strategies in war and conflict stories. *Public Relations Review*, 47, 102003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.102003>
- Doerr, N. (2017). Bridging language barriers, bonding against immigrants: A visual case study of transnational network publics created by far-right activists in Europe. *Discourse & Society*, 28, 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516676689>
- Drozdova, A. V. (2015). The specificity of visual research in modern humanitarian knowledge. *Yaroslavl Pedagogical Bulletin*, 3, 254–259.
- Gamson, W., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W., & Sasson, Th. (2003). Media Images and Social Construction of Reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18, 373–393. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.18.080192.002105>
- Hartmann, F. (2008). *Multimedia*. Facultas. wuv.
- Krotz, F., & Hepp, A. (2013). A concretization of mediatization: How mediatization works and why ‘mediatized worlds’ are a helpful concept for empirical mediatization research. *Empedocles. European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, 3(2), 119–134.
- Kuznetsova, E. I. (2018). Social constructivism as a philosophical principle of the study of technogenic symbolic realities. *Intelligence. Innovations. Investments*, 1, 42–45.
- Manor, I., & Crilley, R. (2018). Visually framing the Gaza War of 2014: The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter. *Media, War & Conflict*, 11(4), 369–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635218780564>
- Marion, J. -L. (2010). *The crosshairs of the visible*. Progress-Tradition.
- Massari, A. (2021). A Visual Approach. In: *Visual Securitization. IMISCOE Research Series*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71143-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71143-6_3)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1992). *The Eye and the Spirit*. Art.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1999). *Phenomenology of perception*. Juventa; Science.
- Nowak-Teter, E. (2019). Mediatization: Conceptual developments and research domain. *Sociology Compass*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12672>
- Prokudin, D. E., & Sokolov, E. G. (2013). “Digital culture” vs “analog culture”. *Bulletin of St. Petersburg University. Philosophy and conflictology*, 17(4), 83–91.
- Simakova, S. I. (2020). Visual image – the basis of the formation of the visual language of communication. *Sign: problematic field of media education*, 3(37), 89–94.
- Toynbee, A., & Huntington, S. (2016). *Challenges and Responses. As Civilizations Die*. Algorithm.
- Verhoeff, N., Merx, S., & de Lange, M. (2019). Urban Interfaces: Media, Art, and Performance in Public Spaces. *Special Issue for Leonardo Electronic Almanac (MIT Press)*, 22(4). <https://www.leoalmanac.org/urban-interfaces>
- Zharkova, E. A. (2018). Development of visual media communications: problems and prospects. *Sign: problematic field of media education*, 1(27), 111–115.