Entering the Imaginary Museum:

Comparing André Malraux's Theory of Aesthetics with the Google Arts & Culture online Platform

Milena Andersson
Matrikelnummer: 38197
Avhandling pro gradu i konstvetenskap
Handledare: Fred Andersson
Bihandledare: Mikael Andersson
Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi
Åbo Akademi 2021

The French art historian, author, and politician André Malraux (1901–1976) wrote about "a museum without walls" – *Le Musée imaginaire* – decades before the invention of the internet and the virtual space. What Malraux described was a limitless, metaphysical space free from the laws of physics where we would be free to indulge in eternal and timeless art. This imaginary museum comes with Malraux's theory of aesthetics, which shines an alternative light on questions regarding virtual museums, virtual art, and digital art history. The technological development over the last decades has allowed us to experience things previously thought impossible and simultaneously opened up several new research fields. One of these is virtual and augmented reality, which led to the development of the virtual art museum. Although technology is constantly developing, many tech companies have launched successful virtual art museum spaces: Google's Art and Culture project launched in early 2011. Even though technological advancements allow us to enter and experience art through these virtual limitless spaces there are still very few theoretical tools available to investigate them.

The thesis aims to investigate Malraux's aesthetic theory with Google Arts & Culture online virtual museums and other features, and determine if any of the theory's key concepts have come to be realized in the online platform. Using the comparative method, key components of Malraux's theory of aesthetics are analyzed, allowing similarities and differences to be observed in Google Art & Culture's software. Further questions of interest include whether the virtual museum deserves a prominent spot in the academic field of Art history and, if so, whether Malraux's theory could be a useful way to approach this subject.

The Google Arts and Culture software accessed for free at freeartsandculture.google.com was used as a first-hand source for the comparative part of the paper. The essential literature consists of André Malraux's translated original books, mainly *The Voices of Silence* (1951). In particular, the first part of the book, entitled "Museum without Walls", addresses many of the key concepts of this thesis. Another helpful book has been *Art and the Human Adventure – André Malraux's Theory of Art* (2009) by Derek Allan, being the only published book that summarises and explains Malraux's theory of aesthetics in depth. Finally, for further knowledge about the historical context of virtual museums, several articles included in *Museums in a digital age* (2010), edited by Ross Perry, were of great use.

This thesis shows that the virtual museum operated by Google Art & Culture does realize many concepts and ideas of Malraux's theory of aesthetics, but not all. It furthermore showcases Malraux's theory of art as an effective means to approach inquiries regarding virtual museums, virtual art, and virtual art history. Finally, Malraux's theory also helps us give the virtual museum its place within the academic field of art history.

List of contents

1. INTRODUCTION

André Malraux (1901–1976) was a French left-wing author, politician, adventurer, and art theorist. During his lifetime, Malraux managed to become one of France's most controversial and famous cultural figures. He wrote about many different subjects during his life, but a recurring theme in his written work is life and art and how these two are connected. In addition, he developed his very own theory of aesthetics, including the concept of the imaginary museum, *Le musée imaginaire*. Malraux's theory of aesthetics has yet to find a steady footing outside of France but may in several ways be linked to the development of virtual museums and virtual art.

When writing this thesis in early 2021, the world is still amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced new restrictions to be implemented in several countries for varying periods. Due to the pandemic, the situation has greatly limited peoples' opportunities to view physical artworks, as many art museums globally remain closed. The restrictions sparked an essential discussion regarding our ability to access art in other ways than physical ones, as interest in and visits to virtual art museums grew substantially.

The pandemic has forced us to reflect upon different ways in which people can view art and how the virtual experience affects both the viewer and the artwork itself. These questions are another reason why I chose to write about Malraux's aesthetic theory, as his theory, in many ways, may help us answer these very questions. In addition, these questions have always been relevant to individuals who cannot visit physical museums due to disability or illness, constituting an important group to be taken into consideration when discussing virtual landscapes and virtual art.

The introductory part of this thesis includes a discussion about the general themes of the study. These include the purpose, problems and delimitations, definitions, material, and methods used in the analysis part of the study. Lastly, previous research on the topic is presented, as well as the disposition of the thesis.

1.1 Purpose, research question, and delimitations

The purpose of the thesis is to investigate Malraux's aesthetic theory, focusing on a few key concepts:

- The concept of art as a parallel world
- The theory of metamorphosis
- The concept of *Le musée imaginaire*

These will be investigated in relation to Google Art and Culture's online virtual museums, Google Art and Culture's mobile application, and Google's online platform as a whole. By doing so, I aim to determine if these critical concepts have come to be realized by the development of the virtual museum. This is the central question of interest for the thesis. Further questions of interest include whether the virtual museum deserves a prominent spot in the academic field of Art history, and if Malraux's theory could be a helpful way to approach the subject.

The limitations for this thesis are set by solely focusing on the Google Arts & Culture website and mobile application, disregarding several similar programs and software that work on equivalent principles. One could very well analyze any of these with Malraux's theory. Some of these similar programs are briefly addressed in chapter 3, "The Modern Museum Experience." However, as mentioned, the main focus for the thesis is the Google Arts & Culture online platform. The reason for choosing Google's platform is its accessibility as well as its popularity.

1.2 Definitions

The definitions below are vital for understanding the content and context of the thesis. Please note that some of these definitions will not be discussed prior to the analysis in chapter 4," Analysis," and the reader is recommended to return to these when reading said chapter. First, the definitions relating to Malraux are explored, and these are followed by the definitions pertaining to technological and visual aspects of the thesis.

1.2.1 Definitions relating to Malraux's theory of aesthetics

Metaphysics and ontology: Metaphysics is the science of philosophy dealing with abstract questions regarding the first principle of things, such as being, knowing, identity, time, and space.[1] In this thesis, metaphysics is discussed in the context of Malraux's aesthetic theory, regarding concepts that go beyond human physical experience, entering the metaphysical. Metaphysics is relevant to several aspects of Malraux's theory of aesthetics, which are discussed further in the upcoming chapters.

Ontology is the branch of metaphysics closest to what Malraux's theory can be categorized as; it is a complex philosophical field that ultimately attempts to answer questions regarding the existence of universals or equivalents—in other words, answering the question if something exists. This" something" could, for example, be a god (Christian or other) or some other spiritual guide. In addition, ontology aims to encompass questions regarding the very foundation of things that do exist, ("what is there?", "what exists?"), and secondly, what the general features and relations of these things are. Finally, ontology is relevant to Malraux's theory of aesthetics because it highlights different perspectives on the reality of things, most importantly art, and the world of art.[2]

Phenomenology: According to Dr. Dermot Moran, phenomenology is best understood as a radical and non-traditional way of philosophising. The goal of phenomenology, in broad terms, is to get to the truth of matters and to explain the manifestation of" phenomena" to a person experiencing said phenomena. How phenomenologists go about this is by attempting to avoid all forms of presuppositions imposed on experiences in advance. Examples of such are cultural traditions or religion, or even everyday common sense. The core aim is to free oneself of the boundaries of encrusted traditions, including the rejection of externally imposed methods. Most founding figures of the field, such as Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sarte, advocated a renewal of philosophy as

---

[1] Peter van Invagen, "Metaphysics", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, last modified October 31, 2014, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/.
[2] Thomas Hofweber, "Logic and Ontology", *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, last modified October 11, 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/.

a radical inquiry not bound to historical traditions, implying the rejection of all dogmatisms. Many phenomenologists further believe that the" real" existential question about the existence of everything is not to be that we need to find justification for our natural belief in this world, but rather how and why such a worry could have arisen at all. It is about carefully describing things as they appear to our consciousness.[3]

Metamorphosis: A change of form or nature of anything, or of a person into something different. In this thesis, the concept is discussed concerning Malraux's theory of metamorphosis as part of his aesthetic theory. In Malraux's theory of aesthetics, metamorphosis describes the change of meaning to a piece of art over time, which is explained further in the upcoming chapters.[4]

Malraux's concept of the "World of Art": Malraux's concept of the world of art is not to be confused with the more broadly known notion of the term" art world," which encompasses all people involved with the production, preserving, judging, commissioning, buying, and selling of art. In another standard definition of this term," Artworld" refers to the elite level of globalized fine art.[5] Instead, Malraux's definition refers to a more literal world of art, parallel to our physical reality, that serves to combat the hardships of arbitrary existence.[6] This concept is explained further in chapter two: The Museum without Walls.

1.2.2 Definitions relating to virtual art, visual studies, and the internet

Virtual reality and virtual space: Virtual reality is a computer-generated simulation of an image or an environment that can be accessed using software or gadgets, simulating real physical experience (for example, virtual goggles such as the Oculus Rift).[7] A

---

[3] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4–5.
[4] "Metamorphosis," *Collins English Dictionary*, Collins, accessed December 3, 2020, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/metamorphosis.
[5] Ben Eastham, "What is the ArtWorld?," *ArtReview* November 30, 2020, https://artreview.com/what-is-the-artworld/.
[6] Derek Allan, *Art and the Human Adventure: André Malraux's Theory of Art* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 50.
[7] Joe Bardi, "What is Virtual Reality?," *Marxent*, last modified September 21, 2020, https://www.marxentlabs.com/what-is-virtual-reality/.

virtual space is a simulation comparable to real space, although not" life-like" (as it does not include gadgets that shut off the real world.)

The theory of affordances: Affordances were first observed by psychologist James J. Gibson in his 1977 article "The Theory of Affordances." In his writing, Gibson established the idea that affordances were the properties allowing an object to function. According to the theory of affordances, physical environmental clues that indicate possibilities for action are perceived directly with no sensory processing. Examples of this could be knobs for turning and buttons for pushing. In summary: Gibson's Affordance theory states that the world is perceived in terms of shapes and spatial relationships of objects and objects' possibilities for action (affordances) — perception drives action.[8] The theories of Gibson can be found summarized in Colin Wares's 2013 book *Information of Visualization: Perception for Design.*

Software: a set of instructions or programs informing a computer to perform specific tasks. Software is a generic term used to describe computer programs on PCs, mobile phones, tablets, or other devices.

Hypertext (also called hyperlinking): a structure of nodes and links that, by means of electronic connections, relate sections of information to each other in a non-linear manner, thus allowing easy access between said sections. A hypertext element is usually a word that can be clicked, leading to further information about the word or concept. For example, a text mentioning the city of London might offer the possibility to click on the word" London" to access information about the city. The hypertext link is often highlighted in a different color, indicating that it is a hyperlink. Hypertext is used extensively both online and in other digital media.[9]

---

[8] Colin Ware, *Information Visualization: Perception for Design*, 3rd ed., (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2013), 17.
[9] "Hyperlink.," *Encyclopædia Britannica.* Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., last modified June 3, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/technology/hypertext.

1.3 Material and method

The primary material used in this thesis consists of André Malraux's translated original books, primarily *The Voices of Silence* (1951), most prominently the first part of the book, entitled "Museum without Walls", as well as the second part, "The Metamorphosis of Apollo", where many of the key concepts of this thesis are addressed. Another helpful book has been *Art and the human adventure – André Malraux's Theory of Art* (2009) by Derek Allan, the only printed book summarising and explaining Malraux's theory of aesthetics in depth. An additional book of great importance has been *The book on the Floor: André Malraux and the Imaginary Museum* (2016) by Walter Grasskamp, which takes a closer look at the concept and interpretations of the *Musée imaginaire*. When researching the historical context of virtual museums, several articles included in *Museums in a digital age* (2010), edited by Ross Perry, were of great use. Google's Arts and Culture software accessed for free at artsandculture.google.com was used as the primary source for the comparative part of the paper.

In this thesis, Malraux's aesthetic theory is analyzed with regard to Google Arts & Culture from a comparative perspective. Critical concepts of Malraux's theory are compared to different aspects of the Google Arts & Culture website and mobile application, including the virtual museum tours. The key concepts of Malraux's theory, including the concept of art as a parallel world, metamorphosis, and the imaginary museum, are also analyzed in relation to the Google software. When analyzing the user experience in Google's virtual museums, methods derived from *Information Visualization: Perception for Design* (2013) by Colin Ware are used.

1.4 Previous research and literature review

Much research has been done on virtual museums and virtual spaces in general, and many important articles on this subject can be found in the book *Museums in the digital age* (2010). In the book, Finnish media archaeologist and historian Erkki Huhtamo essentially defined the conditions for further debates pertaining to the nature of the virtual museum. However, many existing academic and popular papers and articles deal

with virtual spaces' technological, visual, and psychological aspects, less so with their role and meaning for art history and aesthetics as a field of research.

Little has been written about André Malraux with regard to the virtual museum. One example is the article" From Malraux's imaginary museum to the virtual museum" (2010) by Antonio M. Battro: in this article Battro makes comparisons between virtual museums and Malraux's ideas, but it lacks some further development and in-depth analysis.[10] Furthermore, Battro does not relate his arguments to specific examples, and his article was written before Google Arts & Culture was released in 2011.

Derek Allan is the author behind the main part of the scholarly work about Malraux's theory of art outside of France. He has also written some shorter articles, and held public presentations about how Malraux's theory relates to virtual museums. One example of this occurred during a symposium held in 2010 where Allan, just like M. Battro, drew a parallel between Malraux's concept of the imaginary museum and that of the virtual museum.[11]

Another shorter article on this topic is "Has André Malraux's imaginary museum come into its own?" (2020), also by Allan. However, there is a lack of references to examples of practical application in all of these studies and articles, and most of them could also (with the notable exception of Allan's 2020 article) be regarded as outdated, in consideration of the swift technological developments of virtual art in the last decade.[12] Regarding the manner of addressing, in the present study, issues pertaining to virtual art and virtual museum spaces, it is appropriate to bring up the field of digital art history. This research field has emerged during the last two decades as a reaction to the potentially transformative effects that digital technologies may have on art history. One

---

[10] Antonio M. Battro, "From Malraux's Imaginary Museum to the Virtual Museum. Museums in a Digital Age," in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2010), 136.
[11] Derek Allan, "André Malraux, the art museum, and the digital musée imaginaire," Symposium at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra, July 15–17, 2010, text version accessed November 20, 2020,
http://www.home.netspeed.com.au/derek.allan/musee%20imaginaire.htm.
[12] Derek Allan, "Has André Malraux's imaginary museum come into its own?," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*, April 2, 2020, https://www.apollo-magazine.com/andre-malraux-museum-without-walls/.

of the most frequently used notions within digital art history is the one of the "post-digital," which refers to visual culture conceptually and practically shaped by the Internet and digital processes.[13]

1.5 Disposition

The thesis consists of six chapters in total. The second chapter, "The Museum Without Walls," focuses on André Malraux, his importance as a cultural figure during the 20th century, and the aesthetic and philosophical theories he developed during his lifetime. Important concepts are introduced and discussed, such as Malraux's view on art and time, the theory of metamorphosis, and the concept of the imaginary museum (*Le Musée imaginaire*).

The third chapter," The modern museum experience," focuses on how the contemporary virtual museum relates to experiential expectations that have been associated with European museums during their institutional formation. Therefore, the chapter deals with the historical context and development of the museum as a cultural institution. Lastly, the historical development of the virtual museum is discussed along with the specific conditions of the target of analysis: the Google Arts & Culture webpage and mobile application.

Chapter four is the analysis: The components discussed in previous chapters are compared to the Google Arts & Culture website and mobile application. The analysis itself is divided into three key segments; the concept of art as a parallel world, the concept of metamorphosis, and the concept of the imaginary museum. The fifth chapter consists of a discussion as well as conclusions. The final chapter is the summary, in which the content and findings of the present thesis are presented in a shortened manner. A summary in Swedish follows.

---

[13] Christiane Paul, "Digital Art Now: Histories of (Im)Materialties," *International Journal for Digital Art History* 5 (2020), 3–10.

2. THE MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

This chapter focuses on André Malraux, his theory of aesthetics, and the concept of the imaginary museum or, as Malraux named it originally, *Le Musée imaginaire*. It begins with a short biography of André Malraux. It continues with the general concepts regarding his theory of art and aesthetics, as well as his view on art and time and the theory of metamorphosis. Lastly, Malraux's concept of the *Musée imaginaire* (The museum without walls) is presented and discussed.

2.1. André Malraux and his ideas

Author, adventurer, art historian, and cultural minister of France during 1958 – 1969, André Malraux (1901– 1976) was born into a wealthy Parisian family and was mainly brought up by his mother and grandmother. Malraux suffered from Tourette's syndrome from childhood, giving him distinctive facial tics, which became a famous characteristic for him his whole life.

Malraux spent his early 20s working abroad, notably in China during the 1920s. During this time, he published his first book *La Tentation de l'Occident (1926),* which explores the cultural differences between China and Europe. Malraux spent many years traveling and seeking adventures in both Asia and Africa. In 1933 he gained international recognition with his novel *La Condition Humaine* (1933, Man's Fate), which depicts a Communist uprising in Shanghai, following the lives of revolutionaries he admired. Many of Malraux's books also deal with death, and life's futility, which becomes relevant later in the chapter regarding his theory of aesthetics.[14]

Malraux did not start writing about art and aesthetics until the 1940s and 1950s, arguably his most famous work in this section being *Les Voix du silence* (1951, The voices of silence). In 1948 Malraux married Marie-Madeleine Lioux, and in 1959, he

---

[14] Petri Liukkunen, "André (Georges) Malraux (1901–1976)," *Authors Calendar*, accessed November 11, 2020, http://authorscalendar.info/malraux.htm.

became Minister of State for Cultural Affairs under de Gaulle's government, a position he held for ten years.

Furthermore, Malraux was an outspoken anti-fascist and liberal who backed several anti-fascist groups during the 1930s. He also served the French army during the second world war and participated in the Spanish civil war of 1936. Malraux experienced a substantial amount of tragedy and death in his life, dealing with his father's suicide in 1930 and losing his two sons in an accident in 1961. Malraux was a very private person, rarely talking about his personal life, which added to his sense of mystery.[15]

Malraux is regarded as one of France's most important and controversial cultural figures during the 20th century. He achieved massive notoriety during his lifetime and is a well-established figure in French cultural history thanks to his novels, his adventures, his stance as an outspoken anti-fascist, and his time in politics. The starting point for Malraux's venture into philosophical art theory began with a terrifying experience in 1934: Malraux and his aviator friend all but escaped death after an electrical storm hit their plane over Tunisia, causing panic and chaos onboard.

Following a safe landing, back in the peaceful reality he had left before the flight as if nothing had happened, Malraux invented a term for this phenomenon, calling it "the return to the earth" (*le Retour sur la Terre*). This idea became a recurring theme in his life and his theory of aesthetics, by extension.[16] However, Malraux made clear that an altering experience does not have to be as dramatic as his own, speaking about it at a memorial of Pablo Picasso in 1973:

> Anyone who has glimpsed the shores of death has, upon his return, experienced the depth of that feeling. Most of us have felt it, dramatically, when confronted with other cultures: it makes even familiar ones seem exotic. It is, undoubtedly, inseparable from the passing of time; a simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the ephemeral.[17]

---

[15] Liukkunen, "André (Georges) Malraux …"
[16] Allan, *Art and …*, 48.
[17] André Malraux, "Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght," in *OEuvres complètes* (III), ed. Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Claude-Larrat, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 880–896, 885.

The 1934 incident transformed Malraux's view on many things, one being the notion of humanity, specifically what humanity entails (what is man?) and the idea of art (what is art?). At this point, Malraux's theory of aesthetics starts to part with the mainstream aesthetics developed during the 18th century.

A brief summary of the key points in classical aesthetics is the emphasis on the concept of beauty and aesthetic pleasure, which was subject to many debates among the likes of David Hume and Immanuel Kant during the height of the enlightenment. An essential observation to stress is that mainstream aesthetics avoid questions past the essentially psychological and epistemological. In contrast to this, Malraux opens to the possible significance of the metaphysical in art, regarding questions surrounding the core purpose of human life and its meaning.[18]

Although the 19th century saw essential developments in aesthetics thanks to Marxist and Hegelian theory, effectively linking art to its historical context and time, there are still, to this day, very close ties to the aesthetics developed during the enlightenment. Malraux connects art to metaphysical questions regarding the foundation of human existence, which radically diverges from classical aesthetics.[19]

2.2 Defying death: Art as a parallel world

So, what then is the role of art, according to Malraux? To him, art is a means for humanity to control the chaos and unpredictability of human life. Malraux referred to the world we live in as a "chaos of appearances," implying that we experience and observe a magnitude of things in our everyday life that ultimately mean nothing. He talked about what he referred to as "the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, starting with his own,"[20] which further is a means of explaining the feeling of arbitrariness many experience during their life.

---

[18] Allan, *Art and …*, 50.
[19] Allan, *Art and …*, 50.
[20] Malraux, "Discours prononcé …," 880–896, 885.

To further expand this rather gloomy picture we, humankind, ultimately have little control over our death and suffering, which Malraux referred to as destiny (*Destin*). In this context, "destiny" does not refer to the idea of predetermined fate. Instead, it embodies the inescapable arbitrariness of human life and the already mentioned concept of unavoidable death. Thus, we as humans cope through creating the world of art, a parallel unified world in which we are rulers instead of subjects.

Art is a way of reaching a sense of the absolute: a more noble world. Another method of achieving this throughout history has been through religion, but Malraux believed that "Man" during the 20th century had forsaken God and instead created his own absolute; that he, before the horrors and mindless killings of the first world war, believed that he could be the ruler of the universe because of his developed reason and his scientific findings:

> The whole of the nineteenth century is driven by an impetus which, on account of its power and its amplitude, can only be compared to a religion. It is expressed primarily by an extreme enthusiasm, a sort of passion for Man who becomes his own replacement for God.[21]

However, it is important to note that Malraux never claims the world of art to be the same as the absolute: As described by Malraux, art is a world that speaks only for itself and not of the underlying mysteries of everything religion does. Malraux describes the world of art as "Anti-destiny" (*anti-Destin*), using his definition of the word to describe a place free from the involuntary arbitrariness, chaos, and death we experience in our natural world. A place where we are free to set all rules and take much-needed control.[22]

Bearing in mind Malraux's definition of "destiny," it makes sense that he referred to art as "Anti-destiny" because we as humans have power over it. Art is, in a sense, a way to fight the feeling of meaninglessness, which is why it holds a metaphysical significance. It is a world, in Malraux's own words "scaled to man's measure."[23] According to

---

[21] Geoffrey T. Harris, *André Malraux: A Reassessment* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 37.
[22] Allan, *Art and* …, 63.
[23] André Malraux, "De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême-Orient," in *Ecrits sur l'Art (I)*, ed. André Malraux et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004)*,* 933.

Malraux, art defies the biological destiny of death, which actively makes it an affirmation of human freedom.[24]

This view of art as an alternative world to our own extends to Malraux's thoughts about different types of artworks. He firmly rejects the idea of art as a form of representation because this is merely a reflection of the chaos of appearances. Instead, reality, or nature, is explained as a mere dictionary for the artist to use to create something new: something belonging to the man-made world of art.[25] All art stands in unity because it is all part of the same world, a shield against the destiny of our natural world. This all being said, it's worth noting that art is intended not as a form of escapism or denial of our reality, but as a means to take back control over it.

2.3. Theory of metamorphosis and the importance of the museum

Metamorphosis is not an accident; it is the very law of life in the world of art.[26]

The art museum is of great importance to Malraux's theory of aesthetics, and it is worth noting that he claimed the art museum as we know it today to be a modern invention of only about 200 years. This notion is important because it is closely linked to Malraux's view of the art museum, notably how fundamental it is to art itself. This idea is discussed later in the chapter.

 Malraux also reminds us that the art museum gave the "art title" to many historical objects that we today call art, such as African masks and ancient Egyptian sculptures, and that this happened not too long ago. In fact, when created, these objects harboured tremendously different functions, such as fetishes or icons of ancestors, gods and goddesses.[27]

---

[24] Douglas Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed space? The Imaginary in Post-War France (Sartre, Malraux, Merleau-Ponty, Blanchot)," *Paragraph* 27, no. 3 (2004), 68–81.
[25] Allan, *Art and …*, 81–82.
[26] Allan, *Art and …*, 174.
[27] André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954), 13–16.

As mentioned, Malraux argued that the natural place for these and other kinds of pieces of art is the art museum. To link this claim to his theory of art, we note that he believed that contemporary people are less concerned about the details of artworks, or the "content," but more interested in the "style" of the artwork; the very expressive means exercised by the artist in order to create the piece, and how these have been used. In Malraux's opinion, the best and most powerful way to see the specific style of an artist is to encounter other artworks simultaneously.[28]

The possibilities for multiple combined art encounters started with the modern art museum. We can compare a rococo painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard to a Chinese Sung painting, for example. According to Malraux's theory of aesthetics, this is why the art museum is so essential for all types of artworks. The ability to make this comparison creates Malraux's notion of the art world. The artworks we compare can be vastly different, yet they still belong to the same world of art. Malraux emphasized that the 20th-century perception of art was more inclusive than ever before; it had become possible to compare 18th-century French paintings with Ming dynasty vases from China, for example. Pieces that before were highly unlikely to be seen together could now be studied side by side – the dialogue had gotten a broader scope.[29]

This shift shaped a previously impossible natural dialog between works of art. Malraux argues that this dialogue happens spontaneously as we walk through an art museum. According to Malraux, it is this dialogue that truly brings the artwork to life. To put it in his own words:

> The role of museums in our relationship with works of art is so great that we have difficulty in thinking of museums as non-existent in those places where modern European civilization is, or was, unknown. This relationship has existed for us for scarcely two centuries. The nineteenth century lived off it and we continue to live off it, but we forget that museums have imposed on the viewer an absolutely new relationship with respect to the work of art.[30]

The notion of what we refer to as art has changed radically over the last century; however, this change has gradually taken place over a long time, thus often going

---

[28] Allan, *Art and …*, 210–212.
[29] Allan, *Art and …*, 212.
[30] Malraux, *The Voices …*, 13.

unnoticed. Malraux refers to the outcome of this transformation as "the first universal world of art." He indeed means "first" in the literal sense of the word, as this change was something that had never previously taken place in history. Ever.

However, the critical issue regarding the importance of the art museum is that the modern art museum allows for pieces of art to acquire new significance. The viewer only sees the end result, the work of art, which in essence is how the context of each artwork can go through metamorphosis; change. Art that is placed within a museum acquires new life because it is shared with others.[31]

A substantial part of Malraux's theory of aesthetics is dedicated to the relationship between art and time. Regarding this subject, Malraux's view differs from most of his contemporaries among scholars. Malraux rejects both the notion of art as eternal and art as a creation of history, which primarily is the position many art historians and modern aestheticians hold, although arguably somewhat adulterated. Take, for example, Marxist theories arguing that art, like everything else, is part of humanity's historical experience, and that, for that reason, it reflects historical change.[32] To further illustrate this point, we hear about how a good piece of art has the power to "endure the test of time" or "go down in history." How can something remain immune to time, yet simultaneously exist as an active participant in the world of historical change?[33]

Malraux answers this dilemma and gives an alternative, contrasting view. He describes an artwork's process as a metamorphosis: a transformation from one meaning to another. In Malraux's opinion, this metamorphosis happened to the ancient African ancestor fetishes (or any other object whose purpose has changed over time) that enter the universal world of art and can be placed next to, for example, a French rococo painting in an art museum.

The critical part to focus on is the concept of transformation: Art has the ability to go through a metamorphosis where its entire meaning or context can change. Malraux

---

[31] Battro, "From Malraux's …," 137.
[32] Allan, *Art and …*, 163.
[33] Allan, *Art and …*, 200.

claims that metamorphosis is the underlying force of the world of art, implying that art by its very nature is a world of change, never fixed or final.

This notion would mean there is no set place for a piece of art; it can go through historical changes, through centuries (or millennia!) of obscurity, yet the chance of rebirth or resurrection remains intact because of metamorphosis. But, unfortunately, predicting when and how these resurrections will occur is impossible, simply due to the impossibility of clairvoyance. So, while art is not eternal, it can still" live again" in a new context, through new eyes.

All this means that the notion of art as we perceive it today is prone to metamorphosis as well, in the same way as for the ancient fetishes, for example. It is not humanity's quite newfound notion of art that is fundamental and overly significant, but the ongoing notion of escaping the chaos of appearances, something that is indeed eternal.

As we have seen, the baseline for Malraux's argument is essentially a response to the "fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life." Although his theory differs from more conventional aesthetical notions, it is a fully formed theory embodying all components needed for analysis: These being the notion that art holds a metaphysical significance, the view of the art world as a parallel world to our own, and the theory of metamorphosis, answering questions about art and time. To quote Derek Allan:

> In fact, as the preceding chapters have sought to show, all the key elements of Malraux's thinking proceed directly and naturally from the basic propositions on which it is founded, and his theory of art is wholly systematic and perfectly susceptible to analysis in terms of its interlocking, component parts – even if demonstrating this requires a certain dismantling of elements that Malraux, for reasons explained earlier, often strives to keep together.[34]

Malraux's theory of aesthetics is vital as it offers answers to previously unresolved questions in aesthetics, namely the claim that art does not answer only epistemological, psychological, and historical questions but metaphysical ones as well. The basic questions for this being, summarised by Allan once again:

> Does art play a part in responding to humanity's fundamental sense of the arbitrariness and mutability of all things? Does it merely acquiesce to a scheme of things which seems implacably

---

[34]Allan*, Art and …*, 268.

indifferent to man's presence, or does it in some way deny this insistent sense of subjection and futility, and affirm man's significance?[35]

In essence, art is understood as more than aesthetic and/or intellectual pleasure, although this certainly can be part of a work of art. Malraux further rejects the notion that the human response to art is a form of judgment, another claim made by classic aesthetics. He claims instead that it is the artwork that can exert a hold and fascination upon the viewer (and artist).

This notion, however, does not suggest that people often make judgments *post facto*. We, for example, may decide to buy a painting if we like it or watch a movie again if we enjoyed it, and so on. However, the main issue is that the underlying psychology behind the response is not, as mainstream aesthetics have claimed, a type of judgment.

2.4. The imaginary museum

> Nowadays an art student can examine color reproductions of most of the world's great paintings, can make acquaintance with a host of second-rank pictures, archaic arts, Indian, Chinese and Pre-Columbian sculpture of the best periods, Romanesque frescoes, Negro and 'folk' art, a fair quantity of Byzantine art... Hitherto the connoisseur duly visited the Louvre and some subsidiary galleries, and memorized what he saw, as best he could. We, however, have far more great works available to refresh our memories than those which even the greatest of museums could bring together. For a "Museum Without Walls" (musée imaginaire) is coming into being, and (now that the plastic arts have produced their printing press) it will carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art, limited perforce, which the "real" museums offer us within our walls.[36]

As mentioned, Malraux held the firm belief of the art museum as the best place for all pieces of art, as the visitor can compare different artworks of varying styles within the museum space. Malraux further claimed it to be through this comparison that each piece's specific nature and quality come to light, which is of importance and will be discussed later in this chapter.[37] However, this inclusion of art brought with it some problems, as all art museums have their physical limitations. There simply is insufficient space for all Art that Malraux would wish to see in one place at one time.

---

[35] Allan, *Art and …*, 269.
[36] Malraux, *The Voices …*, 16.
[37] Battro, "From Malraux's …," 136–147.

This dilemma led Malraux to the idea of *Le musée imaginaire*, directly translated as the imaginary museum, but more commonly referred to as "Museum without walls."[38] This concept demonstrates a collection of all significant artworks in one place. These would naturally change depending on the viewer as taste is subjective, but the principle remains. So, what are the underlying theory and core concepts of the imaginary museum, *Le musée imaginaire*? In line with the rest of Malraux's aesthetic theory, the Museum without Walls represents a form of existential humanism. According to Malraux, *Le Musée imaginare* fits in with the rest of the concepts discussed in previous chapters in that it reveals a fundamental impulse to affirm the human capability to defy death through art and artistic creation.[39]

In fact, Malraux envisioned the imaginary museum as a successor to the physical museum, a virtual photographic archive of all the art of all civilizations. This means the imaginary museum is essentially a form of collection, just like the traditional physical museum and the virtual museum. The realization of the imaginary museum could, according to Malraux, be achieved through three developments: The first being access to non-Western cultures enabled by imperialism and globalization, the second being an "aesthetic rehabilitation" of non-Western art through the aid of modern art as a form of mediator between the two. The third development is related to technological progress. Malraux mentions the advancements in photography but could not (obviously) foresee the upcoming possibilities of the internet.[40]

By its very nature, this imaginary museum has a substantially larger capacity than the physical counterpart limited by the laws of nature. During Malraux's lifetime, the only way to approach fulfilment or recreation of this idea of the museum without walls was through the photographic image.[41] Malraux created and published his own museums without walls through the means of photography, for example, in his book *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture Mondial (1954)*; a photographic collection of his own *Musée imaginaire*, which also is linked to a famous photograph depicting Malraux in his living

---

38 Battro, "From Malraux's …," 136–147.
39 Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed Space?," 72.
40 Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed Space?," 73.
41 Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed Space?," 73.

room planning the layout of his upcoming book – pictures of artworks scattered around the floor.

It is important to note that Malraux in no way was the first to introduce the concept of a book with art reproductions, only the importance of it. Malraux was heavily inspired by the *Encyclopédie photographique de l'art* (1935) by photographer André Vigneau when creating his trilogy *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale.* Malraux himself failed to recognize the source for his inspiration.[42] However, the difference in Malraux's case is that he presented the reproductions in this form as part of his aesthetic theory, while Vigneau did not.

Another writer depicting mechanical reproductions and their impact on the art world during the same historical era was a German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, most notably in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," published in 1936. In his article, Benjamin perceives both benefits and drawbacks from the technological developments and their subsequent mechanical art reproductions. Benjamin perceives art as having what he refers to as an "aura"; an atmosphere of detached and transcendent beauty and power supporting cultic societies. Furthermore, this aura includes the legitimacy accorded to the object by a lengthy historical existence, and this, according to Benjamin, is lost with mechanical reproduction. However, he also criticizes traditional aesthetic values, linking them to the bourgeois, capitalist, and even fascist ideologies.[43]

According to Benjamin, reproductions of art strips the traditional cultural institutions of these values as well as of their power and authority. He states that artworks in the past served a magical or mystical role as objects of detached authority, which he links to the mentioned concept of "aura." Like Malraux, Benjamin acknowledges the new and revolutionary ways to experience art that mechanical reproduction introduced and the changing social conditions reflected in the circulation of millions of mechanical reproductions where the once sacred and culturally powerful institutions have lost their

---

[42] Walter Grasskamp and Fiona Elliott, *The Book on the Floor: André Malraux and the Imaginary Museum* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016), 51.
[43] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008), 48–70.

grip on the people. According to Benjamin, mechanical reproduction made possible a rejection of the bourgeois and elitist mindset that dominated the art world up to this point.[44]

Benjamin's thoughts can be linked to Malraux in that both reject bourgeois artistic authority. They advocate a new way to experience art free from former expectations and rules of times past. Malraux was not alive to witness the technological revolution of the late 20th century and early 21st century, which has provided the world with multiple new ways to access and process information, perhaps most notably through the invention of the internet. This development, in many ways, offers a basis for this thesis.

Malraux states that art reproduction allows for what he calls "fictitious arts," as reproduction by photography falsifies the scale of objects and artworks. Reproductions of minor works may also shine a light on great styles of the past or styles that "might have been." Furthermore, reproductions may accentuate a minor detail in a piece, depending on the lighting and angle of the reproduction.[45]

It is now time to link the concept of *Le Musée imaginare* with Malraux's theory of aesthetics. This concept is, on par with Malraux's theory as a whole, a form of existential or tragic humanism. Malraux argues that the idea of *Le Musée imaginare* itself can be linked both to the notion of art as a parallel world to our own and his theory of metamorphosis. When a piece of art is reproduced, it undeniably loses something. Yet, the question is: What if the replicated artwork gains a new value instead of losing some of its original one? Malraux argued photographic reproduction to allow, although in a limited sense, for further details to be examined in works of art, especially when compared to other reproductions.[46]

Malraux insists that when photographs of works of art are compared, this action enriches the artworks, allowing new perspectives and visions to come to light. This action invites the viewer to find unexpected relations in works of art that would

[44] Benjamin, *The Work of Art …*, 48–70.
[45] Malraux, "*The Voices …*," 24–25.
[46] Allan, *Art and …*, 232.

otherwise have gone unnoticed. Style is the main subject of interest for Malraux, and the style goes beyond form and matter when viewed in this way. In the words of Malraux

> The art of the steppes was a subject for specialists, but when the bronze or gold plaques are shown on the same page above a roman bas-relief, they become bas-reliefs as well. Photographic reproduction frees them from the servitude of belonging to minor art.[47]

The museum without walls is furthermore closely tied with the concept of art as a parallel world in the sense that it literally is an agency to build your personalized world of art, implementing all pieces you personally wish to see. It is a metaphysical response to Malraux's previously mentioned concept of "the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life" – the arbitrariness of life. This notion will be brought up further in the comparative part of this thesis when compared to the Google Art & Culture application and program.

Another important note is that Malraux admitted that architectural structures do not work well for reproduction when simply photographed, as you inevitably lose the wide scope of the building, as well as the three-dimensional spatiality. Arguably, digital three-dimensional interactive landscapes of today work better in this regard, although Malraux is not alive to witness this.

Finally, it might be appropriate to point out some criticisms of the concept of *Le Musée imaginare,* as well as of other parts of Malraux's theoretical framework. Two of Malraux's biggest critics are the art historian Georges Duthuit and the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Duthuit made his opinion on Malraux's theory clear in his three-part book *Le Musée inimaginable* (a mocking reference to Malraux) published in 1956, where he accuses Malraux of nothing less than ignorance and fraud.[48] Duthuit raises two main issues with Malraux's concept; firstly that the imaginary museum decontextualizes artifacts when removing them from their cultural and historical context. And secondly, Duthuit claims the removal of art from its context to be a neo-imperialist act of violence. Duthuit's critique is fundamentally anthropological.[49]

---

[47] Malraux, *The voices …*, 17.
[48] Allan, *Art and …*, 17.
[49] Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed Space?," 68–81.

Derek Allan disqualifies these criticisms in his 2010 book *Art and the Human Adventure*, claiming that Duthuit has misunderstood Malraux on a principal level and hence oversimplified Malraux's arguments. Malraux rejects the notion of conflicting influences in art, as art to him begins exactly where influences cease to exist; it is the metamorphosis of art that allows it to "break free." It is not a question of struggles between conflicting traditions like Duthuit claims.[50]

Merleau-Ponty's issues with Malraux's writings on aesthetics are of a similar nature. They are essentially boiled down to two propositions: First, the imaginary museum decontextualizes human culture, and second, it disembodies human culture by removing art from the embodied consciousness engaged with the world.[51] Due to Malraux's at times dramatic (and emotionally charged) language, as well as the unorthodox nature of his theory, it is not strange that he received criticism. Potentially Malraux can be seen as ahead of his time; many issues brought forward by the mentioned critics had more merit in a time of pre-digital art. It is my personal belief that much of Malraux's "mystical" and grand concepts work better in today's world where the Internet exists, a great unknown full of possibilities created by man.

2.4.1 The historical context of the idea and Malraux's phenomenology

It is also appropriate to recognize how the historical context explains why Malraux took an interest in the concept of the *Musée imaginaire* at the time that he did. The world had recently lived through the second world war when Malraux published his book *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale (*Freely translated to "The imaginary Museum of World Sculpture"). The consequences of the war took a toll on France and several other countries, leaving behind widespread and devastating destruction. A shadow of destruction was also left on the world of art and architecture. The Nazis destroyed much art deemed "degenerate" both in Germany and the invaded countries. There are examples of war-damaged museums that lost priceless art pieces, such as the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin. Several paintings, including works by Van Gogh

---

[50] Allan, *Art and …*, 153.
[51] Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed Space?," 74.

and Caravaggio, perished. However, that is just one example of damaged and destroyed art during the war; the scale of destruction was immense, and invading forces also stole much art, never to be found again.[52]

Taking into consideration that Malraux himself fought in the French army at the beginning of the second world war, and earlier took part in the Spanish civil war in 1936, it is highly likely that experiencing the horrors of war first-hand did affect his view on the importance of finding ways to make reproductions of artworks. Malraux even wrote and published one of his earliest works depicting Nazi concentration camps and an underground resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany in the early 1930s in his book *Le Temps du mepris (*1935)*,* which translates to Days of wrath or Days of contempt. This book established Malraux as one of the leading intellectual opponents against fascism in France.[53]

It is arguably an equal driving force to protect the art by making reproductions that we have seen amid the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 with the rise of interest in digital and virtual versions of artworks, as that which fuelled Malraux in the 1930s. Malraux was not alone in his ideas of material and cultural reconstruction. Post-war France was a breeding ground for big phenomenological debates regarding the concept of the imaginary.[54] Most of this public debate relied on the pre-war work of Jean-Paul Sarte. He defined the imaginary in phenomenological terms as the negation of the real, the work of an intentional consciousness that creates an "unreal" (*irréel*). To Sarte, these "unreal" qualities appeared in the performing arts as well as mechanical reproductions. But, just as in the case of Kant, Sarte believed that the artwork is an embodiment of freedom, art for its own sake.[55]

Although Malraux makes no mention of Sarte in any of his published *Musée imaginaire* collections*,* there is some overlap in their ideas. Both Sartre and Malraux share the

---

[52] David Williams, "A Brief History of Museum Computerization," in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2010), 15–22.
[53] Harris, *André Malraux …*, 7.
[54] The French term *imaginaire* has no clear definition, but is commonly used to describe a repertory of images or cultural stereotypes.
[55] Smith, "(Un)Reconstructed Space," 68–81.

notion that art denies reality; in Sartre's study, in his claim that art is independent of its material support, because works of art have eidetic qualities[56], this encourages freedom both for the artist and the audience. In the case of Malraux, he states that art denies the imitation of life and instead draws from prior art.[57]

---

[56] Relating to or denoting mental images having unusual vividness and detail, as if actually visible.
[57] Smith, 68–81.

3. THE MODERN MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

The chapter focuses on the current-day virtual museum experience, starting with a brief discussion about the art museum as an historical institution. This is followed by the historical development of the virtual museum and an overview of the Google Arts and Culture project.

3.1. Context of the Art Museum

> The Middle Ages were as unaware of what we mean by the word "art" as were Greece and Egypt, who had no word for it. For this concept to come into being, works of art needed to be isolated from their function.[58]

To understand and discuss the historical context of virtual museums, a discussion regarding the Art Museum as a cultural institution is needed. What is its historical purpose, and why? The idea of art being something worth collecting emerged during the renaissance era with the creation of a new aesthetic discourse that favoured form, pictorial conceit, and authorship over function.[59]

Museum was also the name of the first "university" in the West: The Museum of Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy I Soter, and by Greek philosopher Demetrius Phalerius (345–293 B.C.), a student of Theophrastus, the great disciple of Aristoteles at the Lyceum in Athens.[60] This development later led to the foundation of art academies and theories of art and art history.

The practice of collecting and displaying "curious" objects began, as mentioned, during the renaissance, and most notably in northern Italy – Florence and Milan – as well as in Germany. These collections mainly were without exception, governed by the noble

---

[58] Malraux, *The Voices …*, 53.
[59] Andrew McClellan, "A Brief History of the Museum Public," in *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millenium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell publishing Ltd, 2003), 7.

[60] Battro, "From Malraux …", 139.

ruling class, and filled a purpose of social prestige. It was typical that many different objects, art, stones, bones, wooden statues, crystals, and gemstones would be displayed together. In central Europe, these types of curiosa cabinets often went under the name *Kunstkammer*.[61]

Art collection became popular with the European nobility. By the eighteenth century, we had what is considered the "art world": A global network of art dealers, critics, artists, and art collectors alike. Not anyone could enter this world, as it required a certain societal class and a deep knowledge of art history and its terminology.[62]

 The origin of what we might consider the modern public museum is another question up for debate. Historian Tony Bennet claims that the first cultural institutes displaying core principles of today's museums started appearing in the first half of the 19th century. In his book *The birth of the museum,* Bennet brings up three principles that he regards as unique to the modern public museum: These include the museum's relationship to the public, the nature of the institution's internal organization, and thirdly, its placement in relation to similar institutions – both ancient and modern – to which it is most likely to be compared.[63]

Michael Foucault acknowledges the beginning of the modern museum as a sign of a shift of what he terms *episteme* in society and culture during the 19th century. In his book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970), Foucault theorizes about the existence of three different epistemes: renaissance episteme, classical episteme, and modern episteme.[64]

---

[61] A. Aimi, V. de Michele and A. Morandotti, "Towards a history of collecting in Milan in the late Renaissance and Baroque periods," in *the Origins of Museums*, ed. O. Impey and A. MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.), 24–28.

[62] Battro, "From Malraux …",140.

[63] Tony Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2005), 95.

[64] Foucault used the term episteme to describe the total set of relations that unite a given period. The episteme is the condition of possibility of discourse in a given period; it is an *a priori* set of rules of formation that allow discourses to function, that allow different objects and different themes to be spoken at one time but not at another.

According to Foucault, a major part of the renaissance episteme was to discover hidden meanings and connections in pieces of art; thus, the art collections were often presented in a way to show "the ancient hierarchies of the world and the resemblances that drew the things of the world together."[65] The renaissance art collection also held an important role as a miniature recreation of the world with its leading figure in its centre, a local royalty or even divinity. This spectacle was done to visually symbolize the domination of the leaders over the world or kingdom.[66] This art collection also provided a place for elite's – emperors, popes, nobles, bankers, cardinals – daily dose of beauty; A venue for conversations and "sensual and intellectual delight."[67]

Foucault suggests this renaissance episteme weakened during the 18th century, giving way to the classical episteme, which was dominated by principles of classification. This shift would also come to affect art collections: now, the emphasis began to be placed on the physical differences between museum objects rather than the esoteric differences. Objects were now to be arranged in series instead of individually as unique curious bodies. Bennet, however, argues this was not where the most critical shift took place. Instead, he deems the more crucial change to be that from the classical episteme to the modern. During this shift, collections became less about arranging objects in strict taxonomic tables. Instead, all objects started to be organized depending on their historical and societal time. This arrangement is (most often) what we see in museums in this day of age.[68]

The birth of the modern museum is parallel with the spring of several new sciences, or at least the scientific recognition of these, including geology, biology, archaeology, anthropology, history in the modern sense, as well as the modern form of art history. All of these started following the modern episteme of organizing objects, items, or artworks.[69]

---

[65] Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 96.
[66] Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 95.
[67] Battro, "From Malraux …," 138.
[68] Battro, "From Malraux …," 95.
[69] Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 96.

It is, however, worth noting that even though early public museums changed their principles in theory, the museum space was still highly influenced by the leading social ideologies of the 19th century: sexist in its depiction of women and its lack of displayed female artists, racist in how it depicted, as an example, aboriginal people to be less intelligent and a predecessor of the "more advanced" white man, as well as bourgeois in the sense that the museum mainly catered to the bourgeois ideals. The aim of the museum, although not always successful, was, however, to serve the public and not a divinity or some other ruling force, as was the case during the renaissance episteme.

The museum changed its function by opening up to a wider public, inclusive to experts and amateurs alike.[70] As this thesis focuses on the art museum specifically, I would like to discuss the beginnings of the Western modern art museum briefly. Bennet refers to Douglas Crimp, who regards the *Altes museum* located in Berlin to be the paradigm of the early art museum. According to Crimp, the *Altes museum* was the first art institution that stood for a Hegelian art theory. This museum was, in fact, constructed by Hegel's good friend Karl August Schinkel and was based on Hegel's philosophy of art, which many regards to be one of the basic philosophies for modern art history.[71]

Another vital distinction separating the modern museum from its pre-modern predecessors is its focus on the artists themselves. Today the artist is strongly linked to their artwork; for example, are people visiting the Louvre to see *The Mona Lisa* or a piece by Leonardo da Vinci? It is obvious that the subject once used to be of more importance than the artist, which can be seen in a catalogue from 1619 in which Sébastien Zamet, who was superintendent of the royal palace in Paris, listed item 78 (The Mona Lisa) simply as "*une joconde*" with no mention of the painter. The modern museum changed this and, by effect, produced a radical change in the history of art.[72]

---

[70] Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 97.
[71] Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 95.
[72] Battro, "From Malraux …", 138.

3.2 Heterotopias: the question of space

In the context of different museum spaces – physical and virtual – it is also relevant to bring up Michael Foucault's thoughts on space itself. In his essay *Des Espace Autres* (1984, in English as *Of other Spaces* in 2004), based on a lecture he gave in 1967, Foucault challenges the linear concept of time in relation to space and claims that our perception of space has changed over time. Foucault describes hierarchical thought as much more prominent in spatiality in medieval times; some spaces were more important than others. Galileo's heliocentric model theory challenged this idea as it would make earth unexceptional; just another planet drifting in the vastness of space, and this idea was perceived as a real threat to religion.[73]

Foucault argues that today's world has a different perspective of space: emplacement, a type of site produced by human deduction. In summary: The collective performances of emplacement are as necessary to places as the architects themselves. Foucault explains this rather complicated notion with two concepts: utopia and heterotopia. Utopias are spaces that do not exist for real, showcasing the world as it should be rather than what it is not. In contrast to the utopia is the heterotopia; these are places that exist, but they are places that in different ways enable possibilities that are not available in everyday life.[74]

Foucault argues that heterotopias follow six principles, the first of which being that all cultures produce heterotopias. These are furthermore divided into two groups: heterotopia of crisis and heterotopia of deviation. The former refers to places where "turning points" in people's lives happen, but these can be managed separately from the rest of society. This could, for example, be a boarding school where pupils go through puberty (a significant change) whilst concealed from the public eye. Heterotopia of deviation refers to spaces in which people who are causing troubles for the rest of society are confined, such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals, or just a place to handle "otherness." It can also be a place of escapism to release tension, such as an amusement

---

[73] Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), 22–27.
[74] Foucault and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," 22–27.

park.[75] Even though Foucault's ideas of spaces differ from Malraux's, it is evident that the question of places, existence, and space is essential for both.

3.3 Brief history of virtual museums

The history of the virtual museum can be seen as a natural progression to the already established museum as an institution and goes back to before the invention of the Internet, in the form of CD-ROM or special computers. However, the theoretical foundations for organizing information in this manner goes back even further.

Belgian author and librarian Paul Otlet (1868-1944) wrote about what he referred to as "a mechanical, collective brain" capable of producing copies, retrieving and manipulating information, and transforming speech into text, already in the early 20th century.[76] Otlet also created what he called the "Mundaneum", an analogue search engine located in Brussels, consisting of 16 million index cards put into boxes and filed in physical cabinets. The Mundaneum project began in 1919 after funding and space were granted by the Belgian government. The Mundaneum used an archival system developed by Otlet himself. It utilized a series of numbers on each index card in order to access information about the filed book in question, and to link it to similar works.[77]

Many scholars acknowledge this as essentially an early form of the hypertext that is broadly used on the internet for retrieval of information. Otlet's vision was to archive all books ever published and to interlink them with the aid of his archival system. To access this colossal search engine, clients would send their inquiries by mail or telegram. After this, a member of staff would find the answers by hand, which sometimes took weeks.[78]

---

[75] Foucault and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," 22–27.
[76] Werner Schweibenz, "The Virtual Museum: an overview of its origins, concepts, and terminology," *The Museum Review* 14, No. 1 (2019), 9.
[77] Alex Wright, *Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 176.
[78] Wright, *Cataloging the World*, 175.

It's easy to see the comparison between Paul Otlet's invention and modern-day Google (as well as other online search engines), which is why Paul Otlet is an essential figure in the history of the internet, and by extension, online virtual museums. During the 1940s, at the same time as Malraux developed his aesthetic theory, American Vannevar Bush theorized about something he called the Memex, a nonlinear system of storing and retrieving data. The Memex was later acknowledged as the earliest model of hypertext. As far as it is known, the concept of the Memex never reached Malraux during his lifetime. The first realized hypertext software, "Xandu," was developed in the 1960s by Ted Nelson.[79] It was also not until the same decade that the term "electronic museum" was invented by the curator Allon Schoener, then as a medium for distributing information in a museum exhibition.[80]

The virtual space, and by extension the virtual museum, started to become easier to create following the development of hypertext software, such as the HyperCard and multimedia software. In addition, the early 1990s saw a significant upswing in the use of interactive media in museums, for example through information points and standalone computers, where the visitor could navigate on a screen, look at images and read information about the exhibition.

The CD-ROM was also a tool well used by museums during the 1990s as an effective way to share their content, combining audio, text, and sound interactively. These tools, however, were somewhat limiting, especially in comparison with today's standard. Apple Computers launched one project implementing the CD-ROM, simply titled "Virtual museum." This program lets the user interactively explore a three-dimensional simulation displaying three different fictional museum spaces, one of which being a very "normal" looking gallery space.[81]The rising interest in this developing technology occasioned several series of conferences that featured leading professionals in the field.[82] These included (but not exclusively) the Electronic Visualisation and the Arts conferences (EVA, since 1990), the International Conference on Hypermedia &

---

[79] Erkki Huhtamo, "On the Origins of the Virtual Museum," in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London; Routledge, 2010), 121–135.
[80] Schweibenz, "The Virtual Museum," 9.
[81] Huhtamo, "On the Origins …," 121–135.
[82] Schweibenz, "The Virtual Museum," 9.

Interactivity in Museums (ICHIM, since 1991), and Museums and the Web (since 1997).[83]

It probably comes as no surprise that the invention of the Internet became the definitive turning point for the development of the virtual museum. When the web was made accessible to the general public, it soon started to be utilized as a means to view museum objects and art. One of the earliest examples of an online museum was created in 1994 by French student Nicolas Pioch; the independent museum named WebLouvre (later changed to WebMuseum for legal reasons) is a collection of famous works of art from different historical eras. The project was made as a protest against the monopolization of art and culture and an instrument to make cultural content accessible to all.[84]

The internet quickly became the preferred medium for museums, creating new problems mostly relating to copyright and data quality. The task at hand became defining a virtual museum and differentiating the virtual museum from other types of online museum content. This debate was primarily led by art historian Erkki Huhtamo, who questioned if elementary museum websites can be categorized as virtual museums or if these instead are digital collections.[85]

In his article "On the origins of the virtual museum," Huhtamo examines what a virtual museum is and how it could be defined. However, he does note that the common denominator for "the virtual museum" seems to be that it entails some variety of collected material, supposedly of historical or cultural value, that has been published online for anyone to display. This statement is arguably quite vague, yet nevertheless true.[86]

Huhtamo further speculates on the origins of the virtual museum and what helped lead the way towards its development. In addition to the straightforward technical advances discussed earlier in this chapter, Huhtamo touches on how the changing view of the

---

[83] Schweibenz, "The Virtual Museum," 10.
[84] Schweibenz, "The Virtual Museum," 11.
[85] Huhtamo, "On the Origins …," 121–135.
[86] Huhtamo, "On the Origins …," 121–135.

gallery and museum as a space during the 20th century could have played a role in this struggle. More specifically, Huhtamo mentions the European futurists and dadaist movements of the 1920s that radically challenged most established aspects of their contemporary art world. This was also a time when much new technology emerged, paving the way for new aesthetic forms such as photomontage, video installations, light displays, and readymades.[87] The visionaries of the avant-garde movement felt that these new media were changing the ways of perceiving and conveying art, and more importantly, in this context, the methods of displaying art.[88]

One famous example of this was the Armory show held in New York in 1913, where the gallery walls were filled to the brim with paintings while free-standing sculptures were placed within the gallery space. The gallery was treated as a background for the art, and not vice versa. Many Dadaists (in particular) abandoned the gallery altogether.

This development led, according to Huhtamo, towards the incorporation of galleries in art shows themselves, often using the visitors as active participants in the art. The space itself became dynamic with the art. One early example of this change can be seen in El Lissitzky's art show titled *Abstraktes Kabinett* in Hannover 1927-28. This was an interactive exhibition where the visitors got to turn wheels or pull strings to reveal paintings. If not physically manipulated, the paintings were hidden, to be revealed by said actions. Another example is the early multimedia exhibition *Raum der Gegenwart* held in 1930 by the Hungarian artist and Bauhaus professor Lázló Moholy-Nagy (again, in Hannover). This show displayed visual technologies such as photography, film, theatre design, and a light installation, which could be manipulated with buttons pushed by the visitors.[89]

Huhtamo considers these innovations as examples of alterations of museum space that may have primed the way for virtual museums. Such alterations involved, for example, viewing the museum as a navigable non-linear database, stressing the user's active interaction with the exhibition, and providing a mix of different media.[90] Although

---

[87] Artworks made from manufactured objects; the term was first used by artist Marcel Duchamp.
[88] Huhtamo, "On the Origins …," 121–135.
[89] Huhtamo, "On the Origins …," 121–135.
[90] Huhtamo, "On the Origins …," 121–135.

Huhtamo does not suggest definitive answers to what a virtual museum exactly is, he does define the conditions and historically based challenges for creators of virtual museums. Some of these include whether the virtual museum should be public or private (accessible to all, or just to museum visitors), how to make a distinction between a museum exhibit and an entertainment application (should it be a replica of something existing or unique?), and how the user interaction should operate.

As of writing this thesis in 2021, Huhtamo's article is 11 years old, and there are no definitive answers to these questions up to this day. There are still several terms used to describe the virtual museum – "online museum" and "digital museum" being the most common ones after "virtual museum." In many ways, the virtual museum remains a work under construction. However, this does not mean that technological development has been stalled, as we shall see in the case of Google discussed next, which perhaps is all the more reason to tackle the questions at hand and get an official definition of what a virtual museum entails.

3.4 The Google Arts and Culture project

A natural progression of the virtual museum projects of the 1990s and 2000s led to the development of The Google Art project, later renamed Google Arts & Culture.
This project was launched online in February 2011, and later also as an "app" for iPhone and Android in 2016. The Google Arts & Culture project is a cooperation-based project between Google and several cultural institutes (over 300 in 2020). The museum or institution allows their works of art to be distributed by Google online in high definition for free. On Google Art & Culture's webpage, in the section "frequently asked questions," the question of copyright is discussed:

> The high-resolution imagery of artworks featured on the platform site is owned by the museums, and these images may be subject to copyright laws around the world. The Street View imagery is owned by Google. All of the imagery on this site is provided for the sole purpose of enabling you to use and enjoy the benefit of the platform site, in the manner permitted by Google's Terms of Service. The normal Google Terms of Service apply to your use of the entire site.[91]

---

[91] "Frequently Asked Questions," Google Art & Culture, accessed October 13, 2020, https://about.artsandculture.google.com/.

The Google Art project started as a part- time project within Google in 2010, directed by Amit Sood and with a collaboration between Google and 17 cultural institutes.

This non-profit design allows the user to virtually enter a great number of physically existing museums globally, using a 360-degree camera capture technique (the same technology used for the Google Street view), permitting the visitor to interactively "walk" through a chosen museum, using arrows as indicators to explore the space. In addition, the user can interact with most of the art pieces on display, getting access to a high-resolution picture of a chosen work, as well as textual information about said work. The artwork itself can then be added to the user's "personal gallery," where unlimited pieces can be displayed at once – this is an essential aspect which will be dealt with in the analysis part of this thesis. The visitor may also share this personalized gallery with others through social media or individual messaging. The features, as mentioned above, are also available in the mobile application version of this software; hence anyone with a smartphone can access this personal gallery.

Another interesting feature available solely on the mobile application version of Google Arts & Culture is the pocket gallery. This augmented reality software allows the user to access a virtual gallery placed in their own environment through their smartphone camera. The user may then choose from various exhibitions showcasing famous artworks and "enter" selected galleries. When the user gets close to an art piece, its title and the name of the artist appears on the phone screen. The difference between this pocket gallery and other virtual tours accessed on the website is that these are not based on existing places, but are virtually created.[92]

Although this thesis focuses on Google Arts and Culture because of the great scope of the software, there are a few similar programs that in a similar fashion give access to virtual art online. One of these is WikiArt, or visual art encyclopaedia (wikiart.com), which, similarly to Google, provides users with access to thousands of high-resolution artworks of different styles and historical eras. The user might also search for artworks

---

[92] "Frequently Asked Questions," Google Art & Culture, accessed October 13, 2020, https://about.artsandculture.google.com/.

or artists using a search function. While WikiArt does not offer virtual tours of museums or galleries, a few other websites do. One of these is a web page called Vitouroso, which offers virtual tours of about 20 museums and historic sites. These are also captured using a 360-degree camera comparable to that of Google.

However, none of these offer the same vast possibilities as Google, some of which are vital when connecting the virtual museum to Malraux's theory of aesthetics.[93]

---

[93] "WikiArt", WikiArt, accessed December 4, 2020, https://www.wikiart.org/.

4. ANALYSIS

This chapter will use the concepts discussed in previous chapters and see how they compare to the Google Arts & Culture website (including the virtual museums) and mobile application. I will also investigate how Malraux's concepts can be used when analyzing the Google Arts & Culture program and its features. Firstly, I will discuss the technical aspects of Google's programs. After this, a comparative analysis of three key concepts from Malraux's aesthetic theory is done, in relation to the virtual museums of Google, as well as other features that the Google Arts & Culture platform offers its visitors. The three concepts involved are: art as a parallel world, the theory of metamorphosis, and the concept of the *Musée imaginaire*. Finally, to determine and judge the user experience of Google's virtual museums first-hand, some concepts from the field of visualization will be applied. These all fall within Gibson's theory of affordances.

4.1 Surface comparison of Malraux's imaginary museum theory and the Google arts and culture virtual museum

Even though Malraux's aesthetic theory is presented as a metaphysical one, there is no indication that its implications are limited to metaphysical ones, especially when looking at Malraux's interest in developing technologies of his lifetime, which led him to produce his own imaginary museum using photography. Let's consider that the concept of *Le Musée imaginaire* started as an idea of metaphysical aesthetics, and from there transcended into actual physical versions produced by Malraux. During Malraux's lifetime, no sensible way existed to approach the other concepts of his theory physically. However, this is no longer the case today.

The Google Arts & Culture application and website allow the user to swiftly access thousands of museums and specific pieces of art simply by using the search function. The user can then add these to their personal gallery if they so wish. Malraux's concept and executed version of the *Musée imaginaire* consisted of his own collection of photographic replicas of art pieces, which together made up his imaginary museum.

You can find many of the ideas and philosophies of the imaginary museum in the Google software, which is discussed further on in this chapter.

4.1.1 The technology behind Google's virtual museums

This section of the thesis will, in greater detail, examine the technical aspects of the Google Arts and culture software, referring to both the website interface and the mobile application. A layout of the elements of visualization used in this interface and application will also be presented for a better understanding of the visual effects and the user experience. The technology used to make these virtual replicas possible is rather simple as such: using the same devices as the Google street view, a 360-degree camera takes multiple high-resolution snapshots as it slowly moves across the scenery, effectively capturing a panoramic view of its surroundings.[94]

During a virtual visit, the user can browse this environment by right-clicking their mouse and moving it around. This experience does not support walking simulation[95] as a navigation metaphor[96], as the user instead gets teleported from one place to the next by clicking, which would be closer to an eyeball-in hand metaphor.[97] One aspect that adds a layer of augmented reality to the experience is the pop-ups that appear when approaching a famous piece of art. You are then presented with the option to click the pop-up if you wish, which will take you to a separate webpage with information about the artwork.

As this virtual environment is created from actual photographs, the virtual experience is not made up of computer-generated three-dimensional images. Therefore, objects in the environment are frozen and cannot be moved or altered. Virtual tours are also accessible in Virtual reality by using a Virtual reality headset; for example, Google's own

---

[94] "Google Arts," Google Arts & Culture, accessed December 15, 2020, https://artsandculture.google.com/.

[95] Free flowing walking emulating real life walking. Very often used in first-person video games.

[96] "How" the user moves around in a virtual environment.

[97] The hands guide the rest of the body in a virtual environment.

relatively affordable "Google Cardboard," which, as the name suggests, is fabricated from cardboard.[98]

It is worth noting that all virtual museums operated by Google use the same technology. They are, as stated, not uniquely created spaces per se, as they are composed of 360-degree photography, which offers the illusion of a third dimension. However, the general experience is close to that of a "point and click" video game.

4.2 Applying the concept of art as a parallel world to Google Arts & Culture

As already stated, art, according to Malraux, has a tremendous metaphysical significance. It is one of the strategies with which man guards himself against "the chaos of appearances" and denies his nothingness by entering a world where he is ruler.[99]

In theory, this philosophical notion could be applied to a virtual landscape, a landscape created to experience something that the user controls, beyond our physical world. The question is, however, under which conditions the fiction becomes believable. In this context, the study of user experience becomes relevant. The aspect of user experience is appropriate to the concept of art as a parallel world. It can determine whether the users feels that they genuinely can immerse themselves in a virtual environment – in other words, does it feel like another reality, as real as our own?

There are many ways to examine user experience. For this analysis, however, I have chosen to apply Gibson's Affordance theory, as it, in this case, relates to questions about both tasks and navigation. Next follows an analysis of the user experience in one of the many virtual galleries operated under Google Arts & Culture, a replica of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. This choice of gallery merely reflects my personal preferences, as all virtual galleries included in the Google Arts & Culture platform use the same technology; any of these would have sufficed as an example.

---

[98] "Google AR&VR," Google inc., accessed December 15, 2020, https://arvr.google.com.
[99] Allan, *Art and …*, 50.

One of the most crucial questions regarding tasks in user interaction is whether the action possibilities when navigating a virtual space are clear or not. In other words, is it easy to move around and navigate correctly? Examining user experience is vital for determining how immersive virtual galleries are and to what extent they can be linked to Malraux's concept of art as a parallel world.

In my experience of navigating the Uffizi Gallery, I found clear affordances for action, these being an arrow on the ground following the computer cursor, effectively showing what I can click. (fig. 1) This function also relates to the affordances of the virtual environment for navigation, as the same arrow also shows where the user can go, shrinking in size as one moves further away, to simulate depth perception (fig. 2). In my experience, the use of affordances in the virtual environment worked very well; I was not once confused about where to go and how to go about doing so.[100]

For the next part, I will focus on questions regarding natural engagement, how close the experience is to the real world. Although Google uses a first-person view for this experience, the virtual environment does not process the natural movements in an egocentric frame of reference, such as the head and shoulders. As mentioned before, this is not a walking simulation in any shape or form.[101]

Another problem regarding naturalness is, as also mentioned before, the user's inability to move or physically interact with objects, which furthermore breaks the illusion of the space being "real." The virtual space also has some issues with simulating focus. The perceptual qualities (such as sharpness and contrast) of the virtual environment do not change, regardless of whether you are looking at a wide room or taking a closer look at a statue, for example. Images instead become pixelated and blurry when trying to look at the finer details of a piece. (fig. 3) One real-world aspect that does work in the virtual environment is the simulated virtual angle or "perspective"; things further away in pictorial space are perceived as smaller (i.e. with a smaller retinal size). This effect is further enhanced by the wide angle "fisheye" lens used for the virtual experience.

100 Ware, *Information Visualization*, 18.
101 Ware, *Information Visualization*, 329.

A more philosophical issue concerns the application of aesthetic concepts in the design of an illusionistic virtual space. If the design creates an illusion which is experienced to be "too real" in relation to the real world, it would, in Malraux's mind, simply portray the "chaos of appearances" and be of no benefit to humankind in an artistic sense. However, the design can provide users with options that make it possible to decide what kind of art we want to access and in which ways we want to use it. This kind of virtual design is also a technologically generated "world" that can be altered in any way we like, in condition that we are equipped with sufficient tools and computer skills. This is a way to access art, any art we wish, and by extension: the world of art.

It is also relevant to consider Gibson's ecological optics in the context of the virtual landscape of Google's virtual museums. Ecological optics is a broad framework for research in perceptual psychology, developed by J.J Gibson, with the primary purpose of describing the visual environment. This framework focuses on the perception of surfaces, unlike the previous traditional approach to space perception that focused on the classic projective geometry of points, lines and planes, and the picture on the retina.[102] In essence, Gibson claims that the properties of surfaces are vital to understanding the potential for interaction.[103]

An essential concept in the field of ecological optics is the ambient optical array. It refers to how a light source (for example, the sun) interacts with an environment and its objects. Unfortunately, the experience that these complex optical patterns create is not possible to fully replicate on a digital screen, ad it only renders a disembodied one-point perspective: as all the light-rays are reproduced as arriving at one single point in both space and time.

---

[102] The retina is a thin layer of tissue that lines the back of the eye. The purpose of it is to receive light that the lens has focused.
[103] In other words: how we read the information of the surroundings to know how and if we can interact with it.

4.3 Applying the concept of metamorphosis to Google Arts & Culture

> *"A romanesque crucifix was not originally a sculpture, Cimabue's Madonna was not a picture, nor was Phidias's Pallas Athena a statue."*[104]

The concept of metamorphosis is, as we have seen, closely linked to both the concept of "art" and the concept of time. Both of these should therefore be considered when applying the concept of metamorphosis to the Google Arts & Culture website and app. Malraux argued that all works of art are prone to metamorphosis, a change that all works of art go through, in which the meaning and the context of the work changes. This would, for example, be what happened to ancient statues of divinities, when they changed from being perceived as holy objects into being seen as ancient art.

Furthermore, as mentioned in previous chapters, Malraux regarded the reproductions of art that he encountered during his lifetime, mainly in the form of black and white photographs, to be not simply replicas of the works, but wholly new versions of them. According to this view, the replica acquires qualities that are new, thereby transcending its two-dimensional limitations and its standard greyscale colour scheme. After comparing this notion of metamorphosis to the digitally reproduced artworks distributed by Google, I would argue that similar claims can be made about the latter, because they result from processes of mediation that follow a similar reproductive logic.

A virtual artwork distributed by Google is not the same as its original counterpart, nor is it the same as a photo of said original. The virtual replica exists in its own right as a version of the art- piece. When a piece of art is captured by a 360-degree camera and placed in a virtual museum, its context undeniably changes. The work is perceived differently through a monitor compared to direct perception, especially when the perspective is warped as the result of the use of wide angle or "fisheye" lenses, as in the Google streetview interface solution.

A piece of art may gain new qualities because of the limitations mentioned above; in the Google Arts and Culture virtual museums, it is possible to use the zoom function and

---

[104] Malraux, *The voices* …, 10.

close in on a painting or a sculpture in a fashion that, for both perceptual reasons and reasons of visitor restrictions, remain impossible in the physical museum. Consequently, the zoom function allows for the possibility to see details otherwise invisible. For example, we can easily analyse the brush strokes in a painting by magnifying details in zoom mode, and even by having several tabs open at once, showcasing other details of a particular painting or of other works of art.

It can further be argued that a forgotten piece of art might be "resurrected" when accessed online, as a far wider audience will have access to it, leading to more exposure. The concept of rebirth is central to Malraux's theory of aesthetics, as explained in previous chapters. This rebirth is possible when the art piece gains new "life" or context. One must remember how easy and quick it is to "walk" through these virtual galleries or to look at the catalogues of your museum of choice; just like with photographs of artworks put in a book, the context of a piece of art changes when put into a virtual landscape. These are all concepts and ideas based on Malraux's theory of aesthetics, which without a doubt can be applied to the virtual museums created by Google Arts.

4.4 Applying the concept of *Le musée imaginaire* onto Google Arts & Culture

When preparing to apply the concept of the imaginary museum onto the Google Arts & Culture software, a brief summary of Malraux's idea of this concept is in order. The basis of this concept sprouts from the philosophical notion that art and art history arise from the dialogue between different works of art, which is why reproductions of works are needed. Malraux imagined the museum without walls as an ideal concept, in which every person could create their own imaginary museum consisting of their favourite artworks, regardless of the historical era or location. Viewers would then be able to "enter" the museum at wish and compare the works.

As mentioned in previous chapters, Malraux achieved this by using photographic reproductions during his lifetime. However, the principle of mechanic reproduction remains unchanged in the media systems of today, and it is part of Malraux's concept of art as a parallel world. Thus, in whatever way we see fit, we can use the imaginary

museum to cope with the arbitrariness of life. Considering these criteria as a basis for Malraux's idea of the imaginary museum, it facilitates drawing comparisons between the imaginary museum and the Google Arts & Culture website and mobile application. However, what caught my interest regarding the concept of *Le musée imaginaire*, is the relatively straightforward "Gallery" function which is accessible both on the webpage and in the mobile application.

This function allows the user to add works of art (either spotted while visiting a particular virtual museum, or found by browsing the online catalogue of any other museum on the Google website or in the mobile app) into their own personal gallery, and to showcase the pieces side by side in the website view. The gallery page is automatically saved and connected to the user's Google account (if they have one). It is thus always accessible on the Google Arts & Culture web page or the app version. The user can also create smaller collections using pieces that they have placed in their gallery. These may additionally be named, as well as shared, on social media platforms or with Google contacts (fig.4).

Compared to Malraux's concept of an imaginary museum, the gallery feature not only possesses but also realises many of the principles developed by Malraux. The feature entitles the user to select their favourite pieces, see them next to other art pieces of their choice, and then access them anytime they wish – even on their smartphone. This ability to easily compare works of art allows for the different qualities of all compared pieces to come to light. Thus, the viewer can focus on the style of artworks compared to other works of art, which is another crucial concept in Malraux's theory of aesthetics: style transcends form and matter through comparison.[105]

Another aspect for consideration is how different 360-degree virtual architectural replicas appear on Google Arts and Culture. We no longer have to stay satisfied with the two dimensions of an ordinary photographic image. Even with the 3D effect we are, however, offered with something which is different from the "real thing." Perspectives get distorted through a computer screen, and a sense of scale is lost. Experiencing such

---

[105] Battro, "From Malraux …," 142.

replicas in a Virtual Reality setting might bring back some sense of scale, but that is a question for another paper. However, the important lesson is that virtual art creates a new form and a different context for viewing art.

The fact that Google Arts and Culture is a public free-of-charge software and website further brings it closer to the concept of *Le musée imaginaire*, as Malraux intended the museum without walls to be accessible to all. However, a person needs a computer and access to the internet as well as some basic skills to navigate the web and to visit this site, which should be considered. Age might also be a factor for consideration, as it is more likely for younger people to be interested in phenomena and things relating to technology and the internet.

4.5 Arguments PRO et CONTRA

This section will, in chronological order, go through Malraux's three main concepts used for the analysis and give forth arguments for and against (*pro et contra*) these concepts being applicable to the sphere of digital culture that Google Arts and Culture takes part in.

Beginning with the case of art as a parallel world, one can argue that Google Arts and Culture does incorporate some of the criteria for this concept of a parallel world of art, though not extensively. One main issue regarding the application is the virtual space itself. The virtual space is not a form of creation but a simulation of the real world. The user cannot "create" a space (hence no "escaping" into a physical version of the art world – as in Malraux's original concept). Although the user experience is fairly solid, it is in no way interchangeable with the complete worldly experience of walking through a gallery. The mechanics and affordances of the screen-based interface work differently from the real world, in which no big arrows and pop-ups are needed for affordances.

In addition, this type of virtual space fails to imitate real-life ecological optics, which further lessens the viewer's experience of "really being" within the environment. As for a *pro* argument, Google's virtual museums and galleries allow users to browse- and select from a vast catalogue of virtual museums. There is still much freedom given to

the visitor. On a basic level, virtual space is also a world created by man through technology, which gives mankind power over its *destin*.[106] Therefore, virtual spaces are by definition *Anti-destin*.[107]

As for the theory of metamorphosis, I would argue, based on my research, that virtual art in a virtual space undeniably goes through metamorphosis. Digital art is an entirely new context for art in the grand scheme of things if we consider the internet and even computers being reasonably modern inventions, unthinkable 100 years ago. When showcased online, the art piece's ability to gain new qualities showcases Malraux's claim that art embodies the power of repeated resurrection through metamorphosis. A piece could theoretically be "lost" online for decades (or longer), only to be discovered later in a different societal context. Unlike physical art, you cannot destroy digital art unless it is deleted permanently. Even today, it is quite hard to delete online data, and it is rarely done.[108]

The discussions, both in academia and popular culture, surrounding digital art is in itself proof enough that a piece of art in some way or another transcends earlier limitations when showcased in a digital landscape. This claim was especially evident during the heightened interest in digital art during the global Covid-19 pandemic, as mentioned in the Introduction, chapter 1. Equally to the case of traditional photographic reproductions in books, pieces of art lose something when reproduced on these digital platforms. However, this loss or alteration is of little consequence if viewing virtual art, not as exact replicas of – and rivalling versions to – originals, but instead as products of metamorphosis and as creative works in their own right. This notion is perhaps what should be focused on when moving forward.

Regarding the concept of *Le musée imaginaire,* it is essential to differentiate between different features of Google Arts and Culture that have been used for analysis in this thesis. If we compare the virtual galleries to the concept of the imaginary museum, we encounter the same faults and problems as when we view the virtual space as a parallel

---

[106] English translation: Destiny.
[107] English translation: Anti-destiny.
[108] Fertik, Michael, "Why Your Data Will Never Be Deleted," *Forbes,* June 9, 2015, https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelfertik/2015/06/09/why-your-data-will-never-be-deleted/.

world of art. This is the case because these spaces are not the visitors' own creation but one of the Google programmers. The main takeaway from the concept of an imaginary museum, according to Malraux, is that it is yours and yours alone; you design your world of art, as explained in chapter 2: The Museum without Walls. Having this in mind, it is clear that in this respect the medium of Google's virtual galleries goes heavily against Malraux's concept of *Le musée imaginaire* and that it can, at this level, hardly be regarded as compatible with his thinking. This dilemma is one of the most significant problems when comparing Malraux's theory and Google's virtual tours.

All this being said, the concept seems to be more applicable to the use of the gallery feature on the website or app. The simple idea of creating a personalized space with the art of your choice comes much closer to Malraux's concept of *Le musée imaginaire*. However, this type of gallery feature is highly unlikely to be any sort of successor to traditional ways of viewing art, as Malraux had predicted. Instead, it will more likely work as a tool which expands the possibilities and scope of experiencing and interacting with art. This conclusion would, for clarification, be true of all virtual museums featuring the option of having a personal "gallery" online, and not only or specifically of Google's version.

4.6 Conclusions and answers to questions of interest

So, what does all this tell us? As recognized, parts of Malraux's aesthetic theory seem to be applicable to digital platforms, such as Google Arts and Culture, while others are not. We cannot research more metaphysical concepts regarding every individual's world of art through created virtual spaces. They go beyond what humans can physically create and remain an inaccessible part of their life experience. On the other hand, some concepts in Malraux's theory are well suited for studying virtual art and virtual art spaces. That is especially true concerning the theory of metamorphosis, where art is given a new context in a virtual space. It is also evident that the gallery feature in Google Arts and Culture encapsulates the idea of an imaginary museum and can be seen as a modern-day version of Malraux's idea.

Analysing virtual art through these parts of Malraux's theory of aesthetics is relevant in today's digital world. This analysis showcases the virtual art piece as a work of art in its own right (it is not the original, nor should it aim to be). This notion is the most crucial revelation regarding digital art if following Malraux's theory of aesthetics: virtual visits are to be regarded as independent from physical experiences, as the context as well as the art itself is altered. Thus, virtual art is not a competitor to worldly, bodily art, following Malraux's theory, but another version of art. It is also an effective tool to analyse how the viewing of art changes when pieces from different eras are installed in one space, in this case being the gallery feature on the Google software.

Going by Malraux's theory, virtual museums can therefore surpass their perceived role as an extension to existing museums: virtual museums can be researched as their own kind of entity.

Virtual art and virtual art history are quickly developing fields that demand new theories and perspectives, as traditional art historical methods and approaches are often non-applicable to these "foreign" digitally reconstructed bodies of art. For this reason, I find the exploration of alternative theories vital for this purpose. This exploration should be done not to deem traditional art history irrelevant but to acknowledge issues of importance regarding the future of art history as a field of research.

Another denouement is that the virtual museum and gallery, like traditional museums, is a form of collection, following a tradition going back hundreds of years, determining the primary purpose for museums. There are, however, significant differences in the historical and ideological context of these two museum spaces. Traditional museums are constituted as historical and cultural institutions with societal power related to class and cultural capital, whereas virtual museums (or virtual collections) do not. The shift might come to have consequences for the traditional institutions, positive- or negative, depending on who you ask.

4.7 Discussion and recommendation for further research

I believe it is vital to open for discussions regarding the development of art history as a field of research, taking on inquiries that will be of great importance in the years to

come. Whether one likes it or not, our world is becoming increasingly digitized, subsequently affecting the academic world and the humanities. This body of work is only an initial toe-dip into murky waters that hopefully will clear as time progresses. Many more themes are yet to be explored regarding the combination of classical art history and digital forms of art and art collections.

One question which one could research further is how virtual art museums challenge old power structures held by cultural institutions. It would also be interesting to explore additional "older" (pre-internet) theories to see how well-suited these would be if applied to researching digital cultures and landscapes. In my research, I attempted reaching out to personnel working for Google Arts and Culture, however unsuccessfully.

It would be interesting to hear Google's staff-member's perspectives on these matters and how they view the rise of virtual art on a more general level. There is also a need for further research regarding the definition of "the virtual museum" to define exactly what it is and its place in the future of art history.

5. SUMMARY

Next follows a summary of the main elements of this thesis, as well as questions raised, analysis, and final conclusions:

This thesis investigates André Malraux's theory of aesthetics in regard of the online platform and webpage Google Arts and Culture, more specifically their virtual museums and virtual art collections. Questions of interest include; if three key concepts in Malraux's aesthetic theory apply to Google Arts and Culture and if any of these have come to be realized by the development of Google's virtual museums. The concepts in question are the concept of the imaginary museum (*Le musée imaginaire),* the concept of art as a parallel world, and the theory of metamorphosis.

Limitations are kept by solely focusing on the Google Arts and Culture software. The theory is analysed using the comparative method, where stated key concepts of the theory are compared to different aspects of the Google Arts & Culture website and mobile application. My interest in virtual art spaces surfaced during the Covid-19 pandemic when access to physical museums was, and still (as of writing this at the end of 2021) continues to be limited or entirely prohibited.

There has been quite extensive research done on virtual spaces, yet much of the earlier research focuses solely on the technological parts of the experience of visiting virtual places, leaving a lack of theoretical research in the field of virtual art. Most of what has been written about Malraux's theory of aesthetics outside of France is by American professor Derek Allan.

André Malraux (1901-1976) was a notoriously outspoken French left-wing writer and cultural celebrity who started to write about aesthetics in the 1940s. He is one of the most important and controversial figures in French cultural history during the 20th century. Malraux's theory of aesthetics is based on the idea that humans, through art, are coping with the unpredictability and chaos of ordinary life, or as he called it, "the chaos of appearances." This notion is, in essence, a phenomenological as well as metaphysical argument. His theory can be divided into three key concepts: the theory of

art as a parallel world, the theory of metamorphosis, and the concept of the imaginary museum.

The concept of art as a parallel world is based upon the idea that the world of art is a creation made by man to transcend the arbitrariness of human life and inescapable death: An aid to reaching a more noble world in which man may be ruler, not subject. Malraux refers to the world of art as "Anti-destiny": because of man's control over this world, it is an affirmation of human freedom. As Malraux views art as a parallel world to our own, he rejects the idea of art as a form of representation, as this is just an imitation of the "ordinary" world, or as he calls it: "the chaos of appearances."

The theory of metamorphosis is based on the idea of the ability of artworks to transcend from one set of time-bound conditions to another – to reincarnate or resurrect through shifts of context and time. This phenomenon is what Malraux claims happened to (for example) ancient divine statues that went from being sacred icon/symbols into entering existence as "art" in the modern sense of the word. For this reason, Malraux highlights the importance of the art museum, as all art can come together as a collection, and more importantly, be viewed as such.

Realized as printed photographic reproductions, with the technology available during Malraux's lifetime, the concept of the imaginary museum essentially aims at a collection of all the major artworks in one place. As this aim is impossible to reach at a specific physical location or in one single book, Malraux proposed the idea of an "infinite imaginary museum." Like other formerly discussed concepts in Malraux's theory, the primary purpose of the imaginary museum is to aid the human urge to defy death through art. Consequently, this concept can be seen as a form of existential humanism. Malraux envisioned the imaginary museum to be the successor of the traditional museum, something that would be achievable through technology. Unfortunately, Malraux died before the invention of the internet, so we can only speculate on what he might have thought about such a thing concerning his concept of the imaginary museum.

Others who wrote about the rise of mechanical reproductions of art during the same era include Walter Benjamin and André Vigneau. The context of Malraux's invention of his

imaginary museum is interesting, as this occurred right after the second world war. The war was devastating for museums and art; many irreplaceable pieces were destroyed, stolen, or lost. The timing begs the question if Malraux viewed the imaginary museum as a way to keep art safe, even if it, during his own lifetime, only meant publishing collections of photographic reproductions.

The physical museum has a long history, but the tradition of collecting "curious" items for display started during the renaissance era, notably in Florence and Germany. These first collections were preserved for the aristocracy and were associated with the highest levels of social and cultural status. The start of what we might call the modern museum, where ordinary people might enter and view art collections, is debatable. Foucault, for example, argues that the museum went through three "epistemes," of which the last one occurred during the 19th century, which is a well-respected claim.

One of the most important foundations of what was to become the virtual museum started with Paul Otlet's (1864-1944) concept of a "mechanical collective brain," which prefigured the idea of the modern-day online search engine. It was not, however, until the invention of the HyperCard type software in the 1990s that actual virtual spaces could successfully be created, and some museums started to use interactive CD-ROMs as an addition to, or feature in, their exhibitions.

The invention of the internet all but completed the creation of virtual art spaces. The most crucial question, arguably, is how to define a virtual museum. This issue is brought up mainly by Erkki Huhtamo in his 2010 article "On the origins of the Museum." Broadly speaking, a virtual museum can be defined as a digitized collection of material, likely of cultural or historical value. There is, however, still much work to be done to define a virtual museum or gallery better. Huhtamo further theorizes that the view of the gallery space changed dramatically during the 20th century. Visitors more often became active participants, engaging with the art, which helped pave the way for the interactive virtual museum as a concept.

This thesis examines Google Arts and Culture (launched in 2011), with Malraux's aesthetic theory, as Google is to date the most well-known and accessible software which allows for virtual museum tours. Google Arts are accessible both as a web page

and a smartphone application, with some minor differences between these two platforms. These virtual tours are created through 360-degree photography and enable visitors to "walk-around" in their gallery of choice, navigating themselves with the aid of arrows on their screen. They may also click on artworks to view a detailed version or save it to their "personal gallery." The gallery feature allows visitors to make their personal art collections that can be accessed or shared on their Google account. The tours can also be accessed using virtual reality (VR) headsets, allowing for a more immersive experience.

My analysis consists of taking the concepts of art as a parallel world, metamorphosis, and the imaginary museum and individually applying these onto Google Arts. To better comprise the results of these application attempts, my *pro et contra* (for and against) arguments are discussed next, without going into too much detail on the specific findings of each segment. This analysis concluded that some parts of Malraux's theory, such as the theory of metamorphosis and idea of the imaginary museum, fit well into digital cultural phenomena such as Google Arts. Some aspects, however, do not work, as the concept of art as a parallel world.

The philosophical notion of art as a parallel world could most likely be applied in theory, but that would require a compelling virtual environment. For this reason the user experience is essential when answering this question. For this segment, notions taken from Colin Ware's book *Information Visualization* (2013) are applied, namely Gibson's Affordance theory. After the analysis of the user experience of the virtual gallery tours, it is concluded that anomalies in the representation of physical environments prevent the full immersive experience of actually "being" in the virtual space.

These anomalies include, for example, the lack of certain qualities that characterize the direct perception of the ambient optical array. Furthermore, virtual movements fail to simulate real-life walking. Another important limitation is that the Google virtual gallery is created not by the user but by someone else (a programmer). In that sense, it cannot be regarded as something actively created or altered by the user, and consequently not as equivalent to how individual conceptions of parallel "worlds" are described in Malraux's theory. This fact is one of the main problems with the notion of the virtual space as a parallel world. However, some aspects are more appropriately

suited: There is, after all, much freedom given to the visitor in the catalogue of galleries that the platform offers. In this more restricted sense, the virtual museum could still be regarded as a non-physical art world created by man, which he has control over, and this conforms to the general features of Malraux's theory.

The theory of metamorphosis is more straightforward in that it is undeniable that a piece of art is put into a new context when exhibited online. This phenomenon is in many ways an extension of Malraux's ideas regarding mechanical reproductions, but with the means of modern-day technology. An exhibited piece also generates a different response when put in a virtual landscape, as some qualities and aspects of the original work are lost, while others are enhanced. This process also invites us to view the piece as something different from the original: a digital piece of art in its own right and not merely a copy of the original. The concept of the imaginary museum is not realized in the virtual gallery features. Still, it is instead fully embodied through the gallery feature accessible on the Google Arts webpage and application. This type of digital culture is probably not the heir to the traditional Museum, as Malraux speculated, but instead a new and exciting way to experience art.

The biggest revelation when using Malraux's theory is the notion of viewing digital art as art in its own right, of recognizing that a virtual piece of art is more than an imitation of its original counterpart. Furthermore, there is no power-struggle between the two; they can both be valid pieces of art. Another conclusion is that the virtual museum holds the same primary purpose as the traditional art museum, in that it encapsulates a collection in some form. However, the virtual museum does not harbour the same cultural context and historical background as traditional cultural institutions derived from bourgeois ideologies. Examining this dynamic would be interesting for future research. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see if one could apply other aesthetic theories or theories of art to digital cultures. These types of issues will become more relevant in years to come, as more and more of the humanities are moving towards different kinds of digitalization.

6. SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING - SWEDISH SUMMARY

Detta är den svenska sammanfattningen av pro gradu-avhandlingen "Entering the Imaginary Museum: Analysing André Malraux's theory of Aesthetics in a Digitalized world" (Inträde i det imaginära muséet: analys av André Malraux estetiska teori i en digitaliserad värld).

Syftet med avhandlingen är att undersöka André Malraux (Frankrike 1901–1977) estetiska teori i relation till det digitala landskapet Google Arts and Culture, med fokusering på plattformens virtuella muséer och digitala konstsamlingar. Den huvudsakliga frågeställningen är ifall de centrala koncepten i Malraux estetiska teori är applicerbara på digitala kulturer såsom Google Arts & Culture och ifall de har förverkligats i och med det virtuella muséets utveckling. Dessa består av idén om *Le Musée imaginaire* (det imaginära muséet), teorin om konst som en parallell värld, samt teorin om konstens metamorfos. Avhandlingens avgränsning är Google Arts program och mjukvaror, trots att Malraux teori i princip skulle kunna testas på flera liknande samtida program. För analysen används komparativ metod, där den estetiska teorins nyckelkoncept jämförs med diverse aspekter av Google Arts & Culture-hemsidan och mobilapplikationen.

Mitt personliga intresse för virtuell konst och virtuella kulturer tog språng i och med den världsomskakande covid-19-pandemin, där tillgängligheten till fysiska muséer varit allt annat än självklar. Detta väckte en global diskussion angående konstens tillgänglighet och det traditionella konstmuseets "bräcklighet". Detta skrivs i slutet av år 2021, då restriktioner fortfarande starkt reglerar tillgången till fysisk konst lokalt och globalt.

Relativt mycket forskning har gjorts på virtuella rum, men mycket av denna fokuserar enbart på de tekniska aspekterna av upplevelsen. Det saknas teoretisk forskning kring det virtuella konstutrymmet. Angående forskning kring Malraux estetiska teori har amerikanen Derek Allan gått i bräschen, åtminstone då det gäller forskning utanför Frankrikes gränser. Allan är den första som publicerat en sammanfattning av Malraux teori på engelska i boken *Art and the human Adventure: Malraux's theory of Art,* publicerad 2009. Detta är en av de viktigaste källorna i min forskning, i kombination med Malraux översatta originalverk *The Museum without Walls (Le musée imaginaire)*,

en del av boken *The Voices of Silence (Les voix du silence),* publicerad i fransk originalversion 1951.

Författaren, äventyraren, vänsterpolitikern och konstvetaren André Malraux var en av Frankrikes mest berömda och kontroversiella kulturella figurer under 1900-talet. Han började utveckla sin estetiska teori på 1940-talet, men hade innan dess redan en etablerad karriär som skönlitterär författare i sitt hemland. Malraux estetiska teori baserar sig på tanken att människan genom konst har möjligheten att ta kontrollen (eller vinna) över vardagens kaos och oförutsägbarhet, något han kallar "skenets kaos" (*chaos d'apparences*). Teorin är alltså i grund och botten såväl av metafysisk som fenomenologisk natur. Teorins tre huvudsegment är teorin om konst som en parallell värld, teorin om konstens metamorfos och teorin om det imaginära muséet.

Konceptet om konst som en parallell värld baserar sig på idén att konstvärlden är någonting skapat av människan för att ta tillbaka kontrollen över sitt liv, då den "verkliga" världen inte kan kontrolleras utan är oförutsägbar, kaotisk och avslutas med varje persons död. I den parallella konstvärlden besitter människan makten, och hon kan genom den uppnå en högre existens. Malraux menar att all konst som skapas i grunden är ett sätt för människan att ta tillbaka kontrollen över sina liv: en bekräftelse på människans frihet. Eftersom Malraux anser konst som en parallell värld till vår egen anser han inte att konst är en form av representation, då detta bara skulle vara en imitation av "skenets kaos".

Teorin om konstens metamorfos är idén om att konstverket besitter förmågan att genomgå en metamorfos, en förändring från en sak till något annat. Att kunna "leva igen" i en annan tid och annan kontext. Det är enligt Malraux vad som skett exempelvis med antika gudastatyer; de har skapats i en kontext men har genom metamorfos blivit vad vi idag kallar "konst". På grund av detta understryker Malraux vikten av det moderna konstmuséets väsentliga funktion i samhället. Där har all typ av konst möjligheten att komma samman, och således jämföras med varandra.

Konceptet om det imaginära muséet illustrerar i grund och botten en samling av alla de viktigaste konstverken i världen, utgående från varje individs individuella preferenser. Detta är naturligtvis omöjligt att förverkliga i ett fysiskt galleriutrymme. Det ledde

Malraux vidare till idén om ett "oändligt imaginärt museum". Under sin samtid kom Malraux närmare konceptet med hjälp av samlade fotografiska reproduktioner av konstverk. Såsom resten av Malraux teori är konceptet ett exempel på människans vilja att undkomma sin dödlighet och sitt vardagliga kaos, och det representerar en form av existentiell humanism. Malraux var övertygad om att det imaginära muséet på ett eller annat sätt, i och med teknologisk utveckling, kommer att bli det fysiska muséets efterträdare. Själv dog Malraux innan internet uppkom, så det går endast att spekulera i vad han skulle ha haft för åsikt om nutidens digitala framfart. Som regel var Malraux dock positivt inställd till teknologi under sin livstid. Andra som skrivit om den mekaniska reproduktionens plats inom konsten under samma tid är Walter Benjamin och André Vigneau, dock inte i relation till någon metafysisk konstteori.

Kontexten kring varför Malraux kom på konceptet om det imaginära muséet precis då han gjorde det, är intressant. Världen hade just genomlidit andra världskriget, vilket var katastrofala år för konst och konstmuseer. Otaliga ovärderliga konstverk världen över försvann, förstördes eller blev stulna under krigets lopp. Om denna tragedi påverkade Malraux tankar om mekaniska reproduktioner av konstverk går inte att säga med säkerhet, men är mycket troligt utgående från den historiska kontexten.

Den historiska kontexten och syftet med konstmuséer är viktiga aspekter för förståelsen av detta arbete. Konstmuseet som kulturellt fenomen har en lång historia. Traditionen av att samla på "kuriositeter" – "kuriösa" objekt avsedda att visas upp – har sina rötter i renässansen, geografiskt sett främst i Florens och dagens Tyskland. Dessa samlingar var tillgängliga endast för samhällets elit och fyllde en viktig roll som tecken på status och prestige. Det sattes heller inte någon stor vikt på konstnären bakom verken eller objekten. Forskare är inte helt ense om när det moderna konstmuseet dök upp som idé och institution, men det viktiga kriteriet att ta fasta på är att konstsamlingarna började öppnas för allmänheten eller i alla fall för fler än de absolut högsta samhällsklasserna. Många anser att detta skifte skedde under 1800-talet i Europa.

Någon som kan kallas internets och det virtuella muséets förfader är bibliotekarien Paul Otlet (1864–1944) i och med hans idé om en "mekanisk kollektiv hjärna", vilket illustrerar idén om en hypereffektiv sökmotor (*search engine*). En sådan förverkligade han också till en viss grad genom sitt 1920-talsprojekt "Mondaleum", ett enormt

utrymme med arkiverade böcker sorterade efter ett specifikt system. Systemet kopplade alla verken till varandra genom kod. Det kan argumenteras för att detta var den första versionen av hypertext. Sedan 1960-talet har de flesta museer haft digitala arkivsamlingar av sina verk på databaser. Det dröjde dock fram till 1990-talets uppfinning av programvaror som Apples *HyperCard* innan kulturella institut på allvar kunde börja inkorporera virtuella konstverk och utställningar, vilka ofta realiserades som interaktiva CD-ROM-produktioner som ingick i en utställning. Virtuella turer genom muséer på CD-ROM blev också en populär souvenir att inhandla från muséers butiker. Internets framfart hade dock störst påverkan på utvecklingen av virtuella rum och virtuell konst.

Ett av de huvudsakliga spörsmålen är ändå hur man ska definiera ett virtuellt museum. Frågan tacklades av konstvetaren Erkki Huhtamo i artikeln "On the Origins of the Museum", publicerad 2010. I breda termer kan det virtuella muséet definieras som en digital samling, ofta med kulturhistoriskt innehåll. Det finns dock fortfarande en lång väg att gå i definierandet av konceptet. Huhtamo tar i sin text en tillbakablick på vilka förändringar under 1900-talet som kan ha bidragit till att sparka igång det virtuella muséet som koncept. Enligt Huhtamo förändrades besökarens roll i museet från passiv åskådare till aktiv deltagare, och att detta banade vägen för de interaktiva aspekterna vi ser i virtuella konstlandskap.

Denna avhandling analyserar Google Arts and Culture (lanserat online 2011) i relation till Malraux estetiska teori, eftersom Google i dagens läge är den absolut största och kändaste plattformen som hyser virtuella museivandringar. Google Arts & Culture är tillgängligt både på dess hemsida och genom en applikation för smarta telefoner med små skillnader mellan de två versionerna. De virtuella vandringarna är skapade genom 360 graders fototeknik och ger besökaren illusionen av att "gå runt" i galleriet de valt. Navigeringen sker genom pilar på skärmen. Besökaren har också möjlighet att klicka på konstverk för att få en pop-up med information om verket samt en högdefinierad bild. Verket kan sedan läggas i besökarens "personliga galleri-funktion." Denna funktion tillåter besökaren att fritt skapa sina egna konstsamlingar som sparas automatiskt på användarens Google konto. Samlingarna kan också delas med andra.

Analysen innefattar koncepten om konst som en parallell värld, teorin om metamorfos och konceptet om det imaginära muséet och appliceringen av dessa på Google Arts & Culture. Till näst följer en genomgång av vad som fungerade samt vad som fungerade mindre bra. Slutsatsen av analysen påvisade att vissa, men inte alla, delar av Malraux estetiska teori går att applicera på digitala kulturer så som Google Arts.

Den filosofiska tanken om konst som en parallell värld skulle högst troligt kunna appliceras på digitala landskap i teorin, men problemet ligger i att ett landskap då borde vara mycket verklighetstroget för att tillåta besökaren att helt och hållet sjunka in i upplevelsen. Detta är varför användarupplevelsen testades för detta segment. Som metod användes psykologen James J. Gibsons teori om *affordances* (handlingspotentialer), tagen från Colin Wares bok *Information Visualization* från 2013. Genom analysen kunde det konstateras att det finns aspekter som aktivt "stör" upplevelsen av perceptuell immersion. Dit hör exempelvis bristen på naturliga fenomen såsom fenomenet *ambient optical array* (omgivande optiskt flöde). Vidare simulerar gränssnittets *walkthrough feature* inte en verklighetstrogen transport genom fysisk mänsklig rörelse. Ett annat problem är att det virtuella galleriet inte skapats av användaren själv, utan av en programmerare. Det representerar alltså inte användarens självskapade värld, till skillnad från hur den parallella världen beskrivs i Malraux teori. Trots det finns det aspekter som passar in i teorin – man måste minnas att det finns ett enormt utbud av valbara gallerier på plattformen, vilket i sig innebär ett slags frihet. Det är också utan tvekan en icke fysisk värld skapad av människan, som hon har full kontroll över. Detta stämmer in på Malraux estetiska teori.

Teorin om metamorfos har definitivt mindre problem, det är ett obestridligt faktum att ett konstverk sätts i en ny kontext då det publiceras online. Det är på många vis en klar förlängning av Malraux idéer angående konstens mekaniska reproduktion. Ett verk förses med nya egenskaper då det uppvisas digitalt, då vissa aspekter från originalet försvinner medan andra tillkommer eller har förstärkts. Förutom detta erbjuder det möjligheten att se på verket som någonting unikt, ett digitalt verk i sin egen rätt och inte enbart som en kopia av originalet. Konceptet om det imaginära muséet förverkligas inte i de virtuella gallerifunktionerna, men förverkligas till fullo genom den nämnda gallerifunktionen tillgänglig genom hemsidan och mobilapplikationen. Detta är troligen

inte det fysiska muséets ersättare såsom Malraux spekulerade, men är däremot ett nytt och intressant sätt att uppleva konst.

Den största insikten vid appliceringen av Malraux teori är idén om att bemöta digital konst som konst i sin egen rätt, att uppmärksamma att det är fråga om någonting mer än bara en imitation. Detta indikerar inte heller någon konflikt mellan originalet och det digitala konstverket, de kan båda vara legitima konstverk på samma gång. En annan slutsats är att det virtuella muséet innefattar samma grundläggande ändamål som det traditionella konstmuseet i att de hyser någon form av samling för beskådning. Det virtuella muséet har dock inte samma kulturella kontext och historiska bakgrund som kulturella institutioner, som uppkommit från borgerliga och elitistiska ideologier. En forskning av dynamiken mellan dessa skulle vara mycket intressant fortsatt forskning. Det skulle vidare vara intressant att undersöka andra konstvetenskapliga teorier i relation till digitala landskap och kulturer. Jag tror att detta kommer att bli allt mera relevant i och med den ökande digitaliseringen av humanistiska ämnen på det akademiska fältet.

LIST OF SOURCES

1. Unprinted Sources

Electronically published sources

Allan, Derek. "André Malraux, the Art Museum, and the Digital *Musée imaginaire*". Symposium at Imaging Identity, at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra July 15–17, 2010. http://home.netspeed.com.au/derek.allan/musee%20imaginaire.htm.

Bardi, Joe. "What Is Virtual Reality? [Definition and Examples]." *Marxent*. Last modified September 21, 2020. https://www.marxentlabs.com/what-is-virtual-reality/.

Caines, Matthew. The Guardian: "Interview – Arts head: Amit Sood, director, Google Cultural Institute." Last modified December 3, 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/dec/03/amit-sood-google-cultural-institute-art-project.

Eastham, Ben. "What Is 'the Artworld'?" ArtReview inc. Accessed November 9, 2021. https://artreview.com/what-is-the-artworld/.

Fertik, Michael, "Why Your Data Will Never Be Deleted." *Forbes*, June 9 2015. URL: https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelfertik/2015/06/09/why-your-data-will-never-be-deleted/?sh=1c8138792371. (Last read August 4 2021).
.
Hofweber, Thomas. "Logic and Ontology." In *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, forthcoming. Accessed August 2, 2021. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/logic-ontology/.

" Hypertext." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Last modified March 15, 2016. Accessed January 2, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/technology/hypertext.

Williams, Holly. "The art hidden from Nazi bombs." For *BBC Culture*. Last modified April 16, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180413-the-art-hidden-from-nazi-bombs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Unprinted literature

Martin, Courtney J. "Art World, Network and Other Alloway Keywords." In *Tate Papers*, no. 16. Accessed 8 November 2020. https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/16/art-world-network-and-other-alloway-keywords.

Udell, Megan K. *The museum of the infinite scroll: Assessing the effectiveness of Google Arts and culture as a virtual Tool for museum accessibility*. PhD dissertation (University of San Francisco, 2019).

2. Printed literature

Aimi, A, V. de Michele and A. Morandotti. "Towards a history of collecting in Milan in the late Renaissance and Baroque periods." In *The Origins of Museums*, edited by O. Impey and A. MacGregor, 24–28. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

Allan, Derek. "André Malraux and the Challenge to Aesthetics." *Journal of European Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003): 23–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047244103033001003.

Allan, Derek. *Art and the Human Adventure: André Malraux's Theory of Art*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.

Allan, Derek. "Has André Malraux's imaginary museum come into its own?" *Apollo: The International Art Magazine* (April 2, 2020).

Battro, Antonio M. "From Malraux's Imaginary Museum to the Virtual Museum." In *Museums in a Digital Age*, edited by Ross Parry, 136–148. London: Routledge, 2010.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Translated by J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin, 2008.

Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22. http://doi.org/10.2307/464648.

Giaccardi, Elisa. "Collective Storytelling and Social Creativity in the Virtual Museum: A Case Study." *Design Issues* 22, no. 3 (2006): 29–41. https://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2006.22.3.29.

Grasskamp, Walter, and Fiona Elliott. *The Book on the Floor: André Malraux and the Imaginary Museum*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016.

Harris, Geoffrey T.. *André Malraux: A Reassessment.* New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Huhtamo, Erkki. "On the Origins of the Virtual Museum". In *Museums in a Digital Age*, edited by Ross Parry, 121–136. London: Routledge, 2010.

Impey, O. and A. MacGregor. *The origins of museums*. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, 2017.

Levy, Pierre. *Building a universal digital memory. Museums in a digital age.* In *Museums in a Digital Age*, edited by Ross Parry, 107–117. London: Routledge, 2010.

Malraux, André, *The Voices of Silence*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. London: Secker & Warburg, 1954.

Malraux, André. "Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght." In *Oeuvres complètes (III)*, edited by Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Claude-Larrat, and François Trécourt: 880–896. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.

Malraux, André, Jean-Yves Tadié, Adrien Goetz, Christiane Moatti, and Francois de Saint-Cheron. *Ecrits sur l'art (I)*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

McClellan, Andrew, ed. *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millenium*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003.

Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Parry, Ross, ed. *Museums in a Digital Age.* London: Routledge, 2010.

Paul, Christiane. "Digital Art Now: Histories of (Im)Materialities." *International Journal for Digital Art History* 5. (2020): 3–10.

Pine, Joseph B., and James H. Gilmore. "Welcome to the Experience Economy." *Harvard Business Review* 76 (1998): 97–105.

Smith, Douglas. " (Un)Reconstructed Space? The Imaginary in Post-War France (Sartre, Malraux, Merleau-Ponty, Blanchot)." *Paragraph* 27, no. 3 (2004): 68–81.

Schweibenz, Werner. "The virtual museum: an overview of its origins, concepts, and terminology".*The Museum Review* Vol. 4. Number 1, 2019.

Williams, David. *"A Brief History of Museum Computerization."* In *Museums in a Digital Age*, edited by Ross Parry, 15–22. London: Routledge, 2010.

Ware, Colin. *Information Visualization: Perception for Design.* Third edition. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2013.

Wright, Alex. *Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
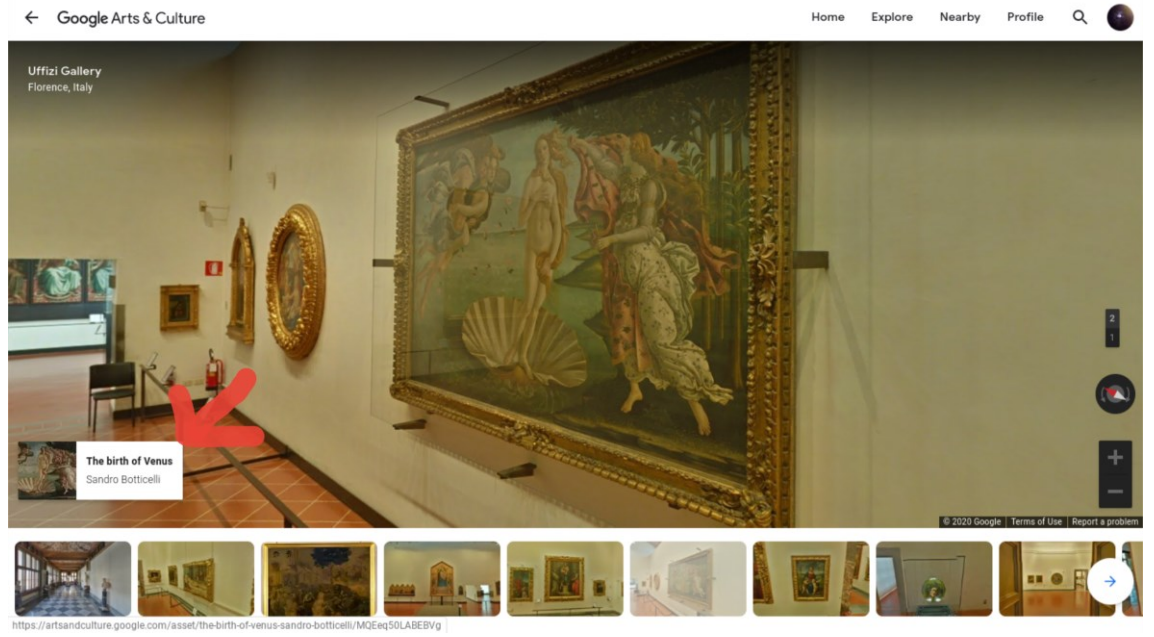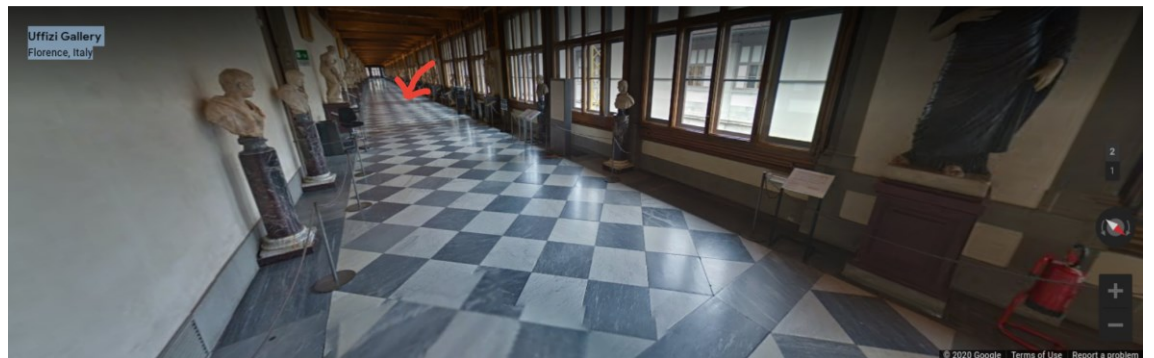
ATTACHMENT 1. Figures.
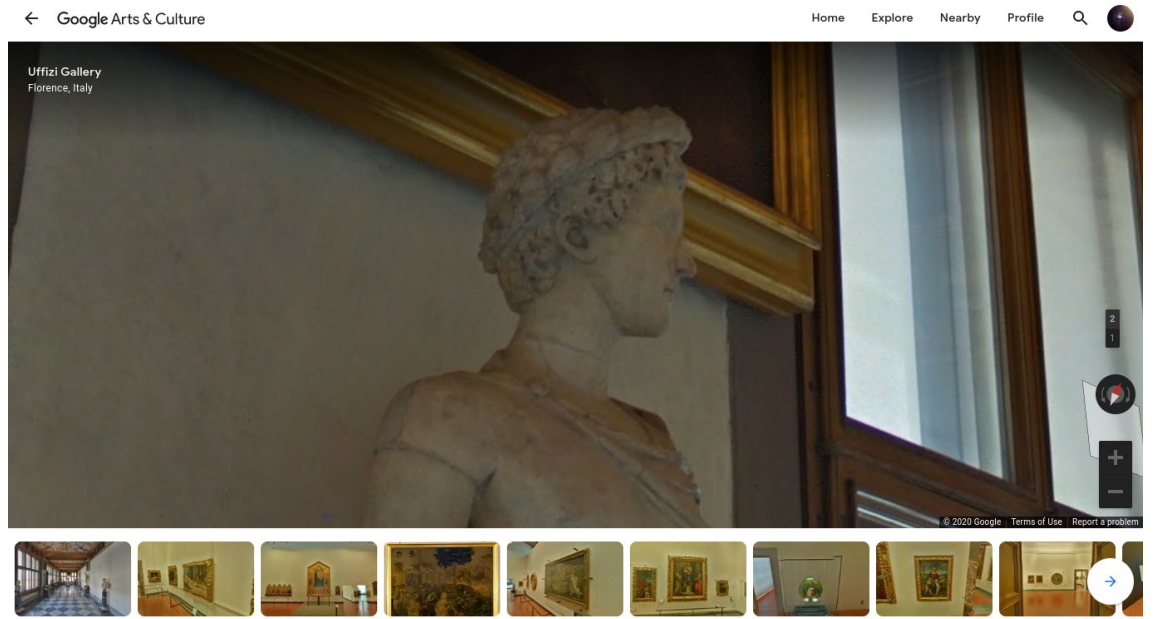
Fig. 1.

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4
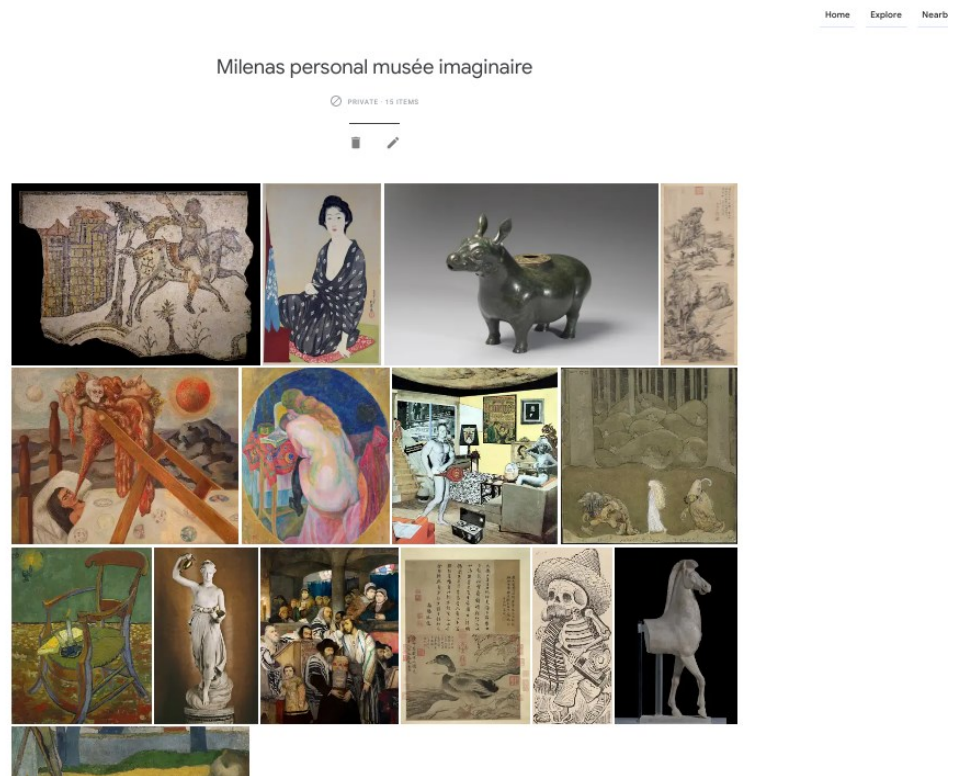
LIST OF FIGURES WITH DESCRIPTIONS.

FIG. 1: Cover picture: © Wellcome Collection gallery (https://wellcomecollection.org/). Title: "Twenty-two African statues, effegies". Via Wikimedia commons. Several black and white photographs of ancient African statues.

FIG. 2: © Google. Screenshot taken by the author from the virtual version of the Uffizi Gallery, Italy. View of a room in an art gallery, with a pop-up on the screen. Red arrow pointing out the pop-up.

FIG. 3: © Google. Screenshot taken by the author from the virtual version of the Uffizi Gallery, Italy. Hallway showing simulated depth perception. Red arrow pointing out said phenomenon.

FIG. 4: © Google. Screenshot taken by the author from the virtual version of the Uffizi Gallery, Italy. Close up of a sculpture depicting a man.

FIG. 5: © Google. Screenshot taken by the author from Google Arts personalized gallery feature. A number of different minimized artworks are displayed next to each other on a page.