



The Algorithmic Aesthetic: Psychopower, Attention, and the Crisis of the Public Sphere

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Abstract

This article argues that the contemporary crisis of the public sphere is fundamentally aesthetic. Beyond disinformation or declining trust, the transformation of publicity in digital capitalism involves a reorganisation of the sensible that reshapes how communication is felt, perceived, and shared. Drawing on John Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics and Byung-Chul Han’s critique of psychopower, the analysis interprets algorithmic mediation as an aesthetic regime that converts attention and affect into value, fragmenting the experiential basis of democratic life. The article conceptualises this process as *aesthetic colonisation* – the absorption of perception into metrics of visibility – and proposes an alternative model of *reflective publicity* grounded in Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience as shared meaning and Han’s defence of negativity as a space for reflection. Through this dialogue, the article develops a critical framework for understanding how digital environments transform the formation of publics and argues that democratic regeneration requires an *aesthetics of formation*. This entails fostering communicative practices that sustain continuity, empathy, and deliberation within the algorithmic public sphere.

Keywords

public sphere, reflective publicity, algorithmic mediation, aesthetic colonisation, aesthetic democracy

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Introduction

This article begins from a clear perception: the digital public sphere has profoundly transformed the way societies experience the common world. This transformation is, above all, aesthetic – it redefines how we feel, perceive, and share experience. As Jürgen Habermas recognises in his recent work (2023), the digitalisation of interaction and the platformisation of communication configure a new structural transformation of the public sphere – a profound reorganisation of the conditions under which opinion and collective will are formed. Habermas observes that digital networks dissolve the institutional framework of liberal publicity by replacing the shared space of deliberation with multiple arenas of visibility governed by algorithmic logics. This ‘loss of centre’ in the public sphere coincides with the discursive fragmentation analysed in this article. I argue that the contemporary crisis of public deliberation results from a sensory reorganisation of communication, in which visibility and acceleration replace reflection and continuity. This process may be described as the aesthetic colonisation of the public sphere: a transformation in which the technical logics of visibility, speed, and affective capture become the main operators of communicative experience. The sensible is colonised by devices of attention and performance that shape collective feeling and thinking, turning the aesthetic form of communication into an instrument of power. Because the role of speed in this process may appear less intuitive than that of visibility or affect, a brief conceptual clarification helps reveal its aesthetic dimension. Acceleration can be understood as a mode of sensory organisation that shapes perception, attention, and the rhythms of experience. Virilio characterises modernity as the emergence of the ‘aesthetics of the transport engine’, in which speed becomes ‘a pure idea without content’ and reconfigures the conditions of appearance (Virilio, 2006, 68). What is at stake is a dynamic that compresses duration, reduces intervals, and generates continuous flows of stimuli that orient communication towards immediacy and reaction.

Contemporary theories of social acceleration go beyond this insight by showing that speed reorganises not only perception but also the temporal structures that shape collective life. Rosa (2013) describes late-modern societies as constellations of heterogeneous temporalities marked by intensified pressures of synchronisation across domains as diverse as politics, the economy, education, and everyday life. Acceleration produces what he calls the ‘nonsimultaneity of the simultaneous’, a condition in which social systems operate with divergent temporal rhythms that profoundly shape experience and communicability (Rosa, 2013, 260–261). Along these lines, Scheuerman (2009) shows that acceleration affects democratic life by shortening the effective lifespan of norms and decisions, influencing both the forms of participation and the temporal horizons within which public deliberation can unfold. Seen from this perspective, acceleration functions as an aesthetic principle: it structures the sensory field through urgency, compression, and the reduction of the intervals available for interpretation. It organises the conditions under which the common becomes perceptible and shareable, thereby shaping the temporal textures of public experience. This aesthetic dimension of speed helps explain why contemporary forms of communication increasingly reflect rhythms marked by immediacy, pressure, and accelerated circulation.

This transformation is interpreted here through two complementary philosophical matrices: John Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics and Byung-Chul Han's critique of psychopower (Dewey, 1934; Han, 2017a). For Dewey, aesthetic experience is the integrating force of democratic life: a mode of experience uniting emotion, thought, and action, which confers intelligibility and shared meaning upon the common world. Han, by contrast, describes contemporary aesthetics as a power of positivity and performance, in which freedom becomes exhibition and the sensible becomes an affective commodity.

Digital platforms intensify this logic. By combining the *attention economy* (Beller, 2003; Citton, 2014) with the *aesthetics of positivity* (Han, 2017a), the digital environment institutes a regime of experience governed by metrics of visibility. The algorithm ceases to be a mere technical instrument and becomes an aesthetic and political mediator: it defines what appears, regulates the rhythm of the gaze, and transforms attention and emotion into capital (Beller, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The digital public sphere thus becomes a field of stimuli, where intensity replaces reflection and emotional engagement becomes economic value.

A long critical tradition of the twentieth century anticipated this development. Walter Benjamin (1992) observed that the technical reproducibility of artworks provoked a deep transformation in the way we experience the world: cumulative and shared experience (*Erfahrung*) gave way to fragmented and immediate experiences (*Erlebnisse*). This shift, he argued, marked the beginning of aesthetic modernity, defined by discontinuous and dispersed perception. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), in turn, showed how the culture industry standardises feeling and neutralises the critical negativity of art, turning it into commodity and entertainment. John Dewey (1934) had, years earlier, offered a convergent diagnosis from a different perspective: a philosophy of integration in which art and communication are forms of reconstructing experience – and, therefore, of renewing democracy itself.

Today, digital aesthetization reconfigures this entire debate. Platforms, by modulating attention and emotion, produce a type of sensibility compatible with data extraction and behavioural predictability (Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Splichal, 2022). Disinformation emerges as a symptom of this aesthetic regime: more than a simple cognitive distortion, it is the effect of a communicative experience oriented toward performance and acceleration. The public becomes a measurable audience, and dialogue, a circulation of stimuli. A joint reading of Dewey and Han allows for a deeper understanding of this contemporary condition. Dewey conceives of aesthetics as an essential dimension of freedom – a form of integrated experience capable of renewing perception and sustaining democratic life. Han, by contrast, exposes how aesthetics has become an instrument of conformity, subjecting the sensible to the logic of exposure, performance, and efficiency. Both, however, share a fundamental premise: the sensible is political, and the vitality of democracy depends on how we organise experience.

This transformation aligns with what Slavko Splichal (2022) identifies as a fundamental shift from the *expression* to the *extraction* of public opinion, where opinion is no longer primarily formed through discursive exchange but mined as behavioural data. Such datafication reduces communicative action to measurable engagement, a logic whose institutional form is powerfully illustrated by what Vânia Baldi (2024) terms *algotocracy*. In this regime, algorithmic governance extends Weberian instrumental rationality into the

domain of the sensible, optimising public experience for predictability and control (Baldi, 2024, 86–87). This confluence of extraction and algocracy synthesises Han’s psychopower and Dewey’s aesthetics: where Dewey envisioned the aesthetic as the integrative force of common life, the algorithmic infrastructure enacts its technical reversal, turning deliberation into a performance metric. Understood in this sense, the *aesthetic colonisation of the public sphere*, operationalised through these very mechanisms, obstructs the emergence of a Deweyan public. As Buck-Morss (1992) reminds us, ‘the crisis of experience is also the crisis of political sensibility’, for without a sensible body there can be no democratic imagination.

To develop this thesis, the argument proceeds by first reconstructing Dewey’s aesthetics as a foundation for democratic experience, then turning to Han’s theory of psychopower as a critique of its neoliberal reversal. On this basis, the analysis synthesises the concept of an aesthetic colonisation of the digital public sphere, culminating in a defence of a politics of the sensible and aesthetic literacy as paths to democratic regeneration. The renewal of the public sphere, it is argued, ultimately depends on restoring to experience its formative, reflective, and shared power – a task that unites the aesthetic and the political.

Methodological Approach

This study adopts a theoretical–conceptual approach with a hermeneutic orientation, proceeding from the conviction that philosophical concepts are not merely descriptive but productive. They reveal the structures that organise communicative experience and generate new meaning through critical and comparative interpretation. The aim is to construct an integrated understanding of the relations between aesthetics, communication, and power from the categories of key thinkers.

Central to this interpretive work is a cross-reading between John Dewey’s aesthetic pragmatism and Byung-Chul Han’s critique of positivity, placed in dialogue with contemporary analyses of digital culture (Fuchs, 2016; Splichal, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). Such dialogue provides the theoretical framework for analysing the digital public sphere as a phenomenon that is irreducibly both aesthetic and political.

Guided by a reconstructive logic, this inquiry treats philosophical reflection as a mode of unveiling. It seeks to expose the principles that configure the sensible and determine the aesthetic conditions of democratic deliberation. By emphasising the experiential dimension of communication, the study affirms philosophy’s role in critically reconstructing the public sphere, restoring to thought its capacity to illuminate and transform the common world.

Dewey and the Aesthetics of Democratic Communicability

John Dewey’s philosophy represents one of the most original attempts to rethink the relationship between experience, aesthetics, and democracy. His work belongs to the North American pragmatist tradition but stands apart in its conviction that art and communication are not separate spheres of social life; rather, they express a common formative principle. For Dewey, aesthetics is not an ornament of culture but the very mode

through which human beings organise experience meaningfully. It is also the *condition of possibility* of democracy as a form of life, not merely as a political system.

Experience as an Aesthetic and Political Unity

In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey proposes an epistemological and sensory shift: art should be understood as the culmination of everyday human experiences, not as a separate or superior domain. He describes the aesthetic experience as one in which ‘the materials of experience are unified and consummated in such a way that each part contributes to the realisation of the whole’ (Dewey, 1934, 36). This unification stands in opposition to fragmentation: it is the moment when sensation, thought, and action are articulated in full continuity. This principle is both epistemological and ethical. Dewey rejects the dualisms between form and content, art and life, reason and emotion. The aesthetic experience, in his formulation, is ‘the organisation of energy, of emotion, and of intelligence into an expressive whole’ (Dewey, 1934, 73). The aesthetic thus becomes the paradigm of integrated human experience and, by extension, the model of democratic communication itself.

In this sense, the aesthetic experience has a formative dimension. Dewey argues that contact with expressive forms awakens attention, imagination, and empathy – capacities essential to public deliberation. ‘The end of art is the enhancement of life, not escape from reality’ (Dewey, 1934, 355). Aesthetic education is therefore civic education: it is through *learning to feel*, not merely to know, that the democratic subject is formed.

Communication as Public Art

In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey extends this reflection to the political field. The public, for him, is not a pre-existing entity but a form of association that *emerges through communication*. Society becomes democratic when those affected by the indirect consequences of actions recognise those consequences as shared and make them the object of collective deliberation. ‘The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions, to the extent that it is deemed necessary to have these consequences systematically cared for’ (Dewey, 1927, 126).

Communication, therefore, has an ontological function: it *creates* the public by making the common visible. Its formative power, however, depends on the aesthetic quality of that communication – its ability to organise experience in a meaningful and shareable form. As Dewey explains, ‘Communication is not only the transmission of information but the conversion of a private experience into a shared experience’ (Dewey, 1934, 244). Such conversion requires rhythm, continuity, and form: the same qualities that define art.

From this relation arises the concept of aesthetic communication: a practice of expression that transcends mere data transmission and aims at the creation of common meaning. Democratic communication, from this perspective, is a form of *public art*. It demands not only information but *sensible intelligibility*: forms that awaken collective attention and imagination. ‘Art breaks through the crust of routine and conventionalized consciousness’ (Dewey, 1927, 204), he writes, emphasising that it is precisely this capacity to disrupt perceptual automatism that renews the fabric of public life. The strength

of aesthetics, in Dewey, lies in its power to reorganise sensory experience and to connect the individual to the collective sphere. Aesthetics is political because it creates continuity between personal experiences and shared problems. As Crick (2004) aptly notes, ‘Dewey understands aesthetics as the communicative form through which private experience becomes public’ (p. 307). In this sense, art and journalism, education and politics, participate in a single formative movement: all produce the conditions of sensitivity and intelligibility that sustain life in common.

This Deweyan conception of aesthetic and formative communication contrasts sharply with the operational and reductive definitions that dominate prevailing discourses on the digital public sphere. As Slavko Splichal (2022) observes, this conceptual rupture has a specific genealogy: the translation of the German *Öffentlichkeit* into the English *public sphere* entailed a semantic impoverishment, excluding the crucial dimensions of *publicness* – the normative principle of publicity – and *the public* – the collective actor itself. The result was a spatialised and instrumental notion of the public sphere, easily reduced to a communication infrastructure. Similarly, Habermas (2023) describes the replacement of editorial mediation by automatic filtering mechanisms as an erosion of the rational structures of publicity: public visibility now depends on algorithmic amplification rather than deliberative processes. By conflating the technical infrastructure (*public sphere as network*) with the substantive communicative experience (*Öffentlichkeit* as sphere of public life), the algorithmic notion of the public sphere suppresses precisely the experiential and reflective dimension that Dewey considered indispensable, and that the original German concept preserved. However, whereas Splichal (2024) approaches this problem primarily in sociological and normative terms – stressing the erosion of public autonomy through *communification* and contractual control – the present analysis focuses on the aesthetic and affective dimension of this transformation. From the standpoint of the *algorithmic aesthetic*, *psychopower* operates not through contracts alone but through the modulation of perception and attention, transforming sensibility itself into an instrument of governance. The colonisation of the sensible thus precedes and sustains the contractualisation of communication described by Splichal.

In this light, to reclaim a Deweyan public sphere means to fight for the restoration of this shared experiential dimension, against its reduction to mere performance data and algorithmic metrics.

Aesthetic Education and the Crisis of Experience

Dewey wrote at a time of rapid technological transformation (radio, cinema, advertising) that already anticipated the dynamics of contemporary media culture. He recognised that technological progress, by itself, does not ensure democratic growth: the machine can serve as a means of life or as its despotic master. The decisive factor, for Dewey, is aesthetic: the capacity to integrate technology creatively and reflectively into common life. As he warned, ‘When the machine age has perfected its machinery, it will serve as the means of life and not as its despotic master’ (Dewey, 1927, 204).

That warning resonates with remarkable clarity today. The ‘despotic master’ of the present is the algorithm, which mediates perception and organises attention. What Dewey saw as the fragmentation of experience through specialisation and routine has been

intensified by the digital logic of acceleration and performance. The aesthetic function of communication – its ability to shape experience into meaningful form – has been replaced by an aesthetics of stimuli that disperses, automates, and exhausts.

Dewey thus anticipates the diagnosis later formulated by Walter Benjamin: when experience loses continuity, the ability to generate shared meaning collapses. Benjamin (1992) describes this transformation as the shift from *Erfahrung* (accumulated, narratable experience) to *Erlebnis*, a series of immediate and disconnected impressions. Dewey expresses this same crisis in pedagogical and political terms: ‘Life becomes inchoate when communication is reduced to the mere sending of signals rather than the sharing of meanings’ (Dewey, 1934, 242).

Aesthetics, for Dewey, is therefore a democratic practice: it repairs the disarticulation of experience by giving form to the sensory relations among individuals. It organises perception, restoring coherence to the world of experience. As Alexander (2013) notes, ‘Dewey’s aesthetics is a politics of attention—a way of restoring coherence to experience in a culture of distraction’ (p. 29). Aesthetic experience thus becomes the antidote to sensory dispersion and communicative emptiness: a means of returning collective intelligence to the body of experience. This integrative function is also educational. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey defines education not as the transmission of information but as the cultivation of habits of attention, curiosity, and cooperation. ‘Education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living’ (Dewey, 1916, 47). In *Art as Experience*, he extends this principle to the aesthetic field: ‘Art educates because it evokes the power to perceive and to imagine’ (Dewey, 1934, 328). Through aesthetic experience, individuals learn to participate consciously in the creation of meaning.

This is also the foundation of democratic citizenship. Deliberation requires more than information: it requires imagination and empathy. As Frega (2019) observes, ‘Aesthetics is the invisible grammar of democracy in Dewey; it is the way in which citizens learn to feel together’ (p. 55). Aesthetic education thus fosters the capacity to inhabit the perspectives of others, transforming perception into understanding. From this viewpoint, journalism, public art, and education are not separate domains but convergent practices of aesthetic formation. Each organises experience to produce shared meaning and sensitivity. The political value of aesthetics lies in this capacity to reintroduce depth, rhythm, and continuity into a fragmented world. By cultivating attention and imagination, aesthetic communication transforms perception into reflection and emotion into public action.

The Relevance of Dewey in the Digital Age

The continuing relevance of Dewey’s thought stems from his refusal to oppose technology and sensibility. For him, technical mediation is inevitable, but its function depends on how it is appropriated aesthetically and socially. This perspective anticipates contemporary debates on algorithms, platforms, and media literacy. As Hickman (2001) observes, ‘Dewey understood technology as instrumental art: the problem is not the machine but the lack of imagination in its use’ (p. 112).

Transposed to the digital context, this intuition reframes the question: the challenge is not the existence of algorithms but the *aesthetic form they take*. If, as Dewey maintains, ‘Communication is the great instrument of individualisation and socialisation’ (1927,

184), then the algorithmic architecture of platforms is also a *political architecture of the sensible*. Their forms (feed, like, share, recommendation) define what can be felt, thought, and said. Digital aesthetics, by regulating attention, redefines public experience. Thus, Dewey's framework offers a powerful normative lens for thinking about the contemporary public sphere. It reveals that democratic renewal depends on the *aesthetic reconstruction of communication*. The central problem lies not only in the truth of messages but in the *sensible form of mediation*. Without aesthetic continuity, there can be no democratic community. In Deweyan terms, democracy lives (and dies) in the quality of communicative experience.

From this foundation, the article moves to the analysis of Byung-Chul Han, whose theory of psychopower describes the contemporary mutation of aesthetics into a mechanism of control. If Dewey conceives aesthetics as a form of integration, Han shows how neoliberalism transforms it into a technique of acceleration and self-exploitation. The next section examines this shift, revealing how the 'aesthetics of positivity' undermines the sensory conditions of the Deweyan public sphere.

Psychopower and Performativity: Byung-Chul Han and the Aesthetics of Positivity

Any analysis of the digital public sphere must address not only its technical or informational dynamics but also the *aesthetic form of power* that operates within it. Byung-Chul Han offers a profoundly philosophical reading of this transformation: neoliberalism, far from being merely an economic system, constitutes an *aesthetics of the visible*: a sensory and affective reorganisation of collective experience. Across works such as *The Transparency Society* (2015), *Psychopolitics* (2017a), and *In the Swarm* (2017c), Han describes the passage from Foucault's *biopower*, centred on the discipline of bodies, to *psychopower*, a regime of seduction and positivity that captures freedom through performance and exposure.

Psychopower and the Aesthetic Regime of Positivity

Byung-Chul Han's analysis of digital modernity begins with an ontological inversion of power. Whereas the twentieth century was dominated by coercion and prohibition, the twenty-first is ruled by an economy of freedom. Power no longer represses but seduces; it no longer imposes limits but exceeds them. 'Today, everyone is an auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise. People are now master and slave in one' (Han 2017a, 5). Self-management replaces obedience with self-exploitation, producing subjects who believe themselves free precisely when they reproduce the imperatives of productivity and exposure.

This new regime is aesthetic in nature. Neoliberalism governs not only behaviour but perception: it reorganises the sensible according to the logic of positivity. The world becomes a smooth, frictionless surface, without negativity, opacity, or resistance, where everything must be visible, communicable, and consumable. In *The Transparency Society* (2015), Han laments the loss of secrecy and interiority, arguing that an 'excess of positivity' proliferates precisely because of a 'lacking negativity'. In this regime,

'hyperinformation and hypercommunication attest to lack of truth', failing to illuminate the whole and instead amplifying its fundamental lack of clarity (p. 9). Positivity, he argues, functions as aesthetic anaesthesia. Silence, opacity, and interval – conditions of reflection – are replaced by an aesthetics of circulation in which every image must please and every interaction must affirm.

The algorithm is the technical operator of this aesthetics. It rewards what is likeable, accelerates what is emotionally appealing, and penalises friction. The public sphere becomes an economy of approval, where visibility equates to value. In this sense, the digital attention economy embodies what [Habermas \(2023\)](#) calls a 'new colonisation of the lifeworld': the systemic capture of communicative energies by profit-oriented and surveillance-driven platforms. The formation of public opinion gives way to the algorithmic management of visibility.

Han's critique resonates with Walter [Benjamin's \(1992\)](#) analysis of the aestheticization of politics, yet transposed to a regime of self-aestheticization. While Benjamin saw the manipulation of the masses by fascist spectacle, Han identifies subjects who voluntarily aestheticize themselves. The achievement subject 'exposes and exhausts itself in its own positivity', becoming both spectacle and product in one. This figure of the 'entrepreneur of the self' performs visibility as proof of existence, a phenomenon [Han \(2017a\)](#) incisively captures by metaphorising the smartphone as 'not just an effective surveillance apparatus; it is also a mobile confessional. Facebook is the church - the global synagogue (literally, "assembly") of the Digital' (p. 12). Such transformation culminates in what [Han \(2017a\)](#) conceptualises as psychopolitics: a form of power that targets the psyche rather than the body, co-opting freedom itself into a mechanism of control. Within this framework, the algorithmic dispositive converts attention into economic value, transmuting the public sphere into an arena of performative competition. Every gesture, emotion, and pause is measured, archived, and repurposed as predictive data. This quantification of feeling constitutes the core of psychopower, rendering interiority itself capitalisable.

In this economy of attention, affect becomes currency. As Christian [Fuchs \(2014\)](#) notes, it is a 'colonisation of communicative space by the logic of capital' (p. 65). Han adds a phenomenological layer: power operates through pleasure. The pursuit of constant stimulation, what Bernard [Stiegler \(2010\)](#) calls the 'proletarianisation of attention', expropriates the very capacity for contemplation – the foundation of aesthetic experience. The subject is not merely dominated but complicit. This complicity finds its ultimate expression in what [Han \(2017a\)](#) terms the 'absolute slave': a subject that, 'deeming itself free... willingly exploits itself without a master' (p. 2). Within this paradigm, Jonathan Beller's dictum – 'to look is to labour' ([Beller, 2003](#), 92) – becomes the operational logic. Capitalism thus no longer commands through fear, but through the 'like', transforming performativity into a new form of voluntary servitude ([Beller, 2017](#)).

In *The Agony of Eros* ([2017b](#)), Han interprets this logic as the erosion of *Eros* – the relation to the Other. He argues that love is now 'positivized into sexuality' and subjected to a 'commandment to perform', where sex becomes achievement and the body a commodity with 'display value'. This process, Han contends, sexualises the Other into a mere object for arousal, stripping it of its otherness. 'When otherness is stripped from the Other, one cannot love—one can only consume', reducing the person to a collection of 'sexual part-objects' (p. 10). The aesthetics of positivity thus produces a connected

solitude: hyperactivity without encounter, communication without communion. Social networks simulate community while promoting reversible, affective bonds, perfectly reflecting this consumption of the Other. As Bauman (2000) observed of liquid modernity, connection becomes flow and presence becomes perpetual update. This transformation of the sensible also reconfigures temporality. Han's *In the Swarm* (2017c) posits that digital culture replaces narrative with calculation, where the 'counting finger' of digital logic supersedes historical recounting. This creates a communicative environment dominated by a 'totalizing addition' of countable metrics, reducing even affection to 'likes' and causing the 'narrative dimension [to lose] meaning on a massive scale' (p. 35). The infinite scroll embodies this regime, presenting an endless sequence of micro-stimuli that reward immediacy over reflection. In this environment, where resonance gives way to reaction and digital communication knows no silence; it is 'pure noise' (Han, 2017c, 19), value is measured by impact rather than duration.

Consequently, Dewey's art of attentive experience yields to a digital aesthetic of distraction. This regime of positivity is, ultimately, a crisis of experience. The aesthetic of performativity destroys the very conditions of aesthetic experience (attention, rhythm, and form) and replaces them with algorithmic feedback loops. Power aestheticizes itself as transparency, and the subject internalises this power as self-expression. The result is an *anti-aesthetic of democracy*: the sensory field becomes homogenised, and the public sphere transforms into a marketplace of emotions where communication serves visibility rather than understanding.

Psychopower as Anti-Aesthetics of Democracy

By describing psychopolitics as a regime of transparency and positivity, Han provides a critical grammar for understanding the contemporary crisis of the public sphere. He argues that 'the excess of positivity that dominates contemporary society shows that it has lost its connection to narrativity' (Han, 2015, 32). This loss is the engine of a new form of power, which operates not by censorship but by *excess*: it no longer represses speech but multiplies it to the point of saturation. This formulation encapsulates the essence of the aesthetic crisis: an abundance of non-narrative expression neutralises meaning, replacing shared stories with a cacophony of isolated signals. The consequence is the impossibility of deliberation. Public discourse, regulated by algorithms that privilege emotion and polarisation, becomes a space of affective stimuli. Debate is replaced by reaction. The aesthetics of positivity, by eliminating negativity, also eliminates critique. As Berardi (2012) observes, 'Informational acceleration destroys empathy and, with it, social solidarity' (p. 14). In this framework, psychopower may be interpreted as the *antithesis of Deweyan aesthetics*. Whereas Dewey conceived art as the integration of emotion, thought, and action, Han describes a regime that separates these elements to exploit them economically. Experience ceases to be integrative and becomes reactive. The aesthetics of psychopower is therefore an *anti-aesthetics of democracy*: it suppresses the possibility of forming shared meanings and prevents the emergence of a public capable of *feeling together*.

This reading allows us to reinterpret Han's diagnosis through Dewey: the contemporary problem is not merely *disinformation* but the *aesthetic disarticulation of*

experience. The algorithm, as mediator of the sensible, transforms the public sphere into a stage of individual performances, where the common dissolves into the calculus of visibility. If, for Dewey, ‘communication is the cement of community’ (1927, 184), for Han, digital communication is its solvent. This growing automatised of communicative decisions expresses what Habermas (2023) describes as the *technocratisation of the public sphere*: the displacement of discursive power by systems of calculation that produce political effects without being subject to public critique. The algorithm, as invisible mediator, acts upon the social world without responding to criteria of validity or justification – it replaces public debate with processes of ordering and prediction. In this new configuration, power assumes a technical form, and politics witnesses the eclipse of its communicative dimension.

Yet Han’s critique does not end with denunciation. By insisting on the importance of negativity, he implicitly suggests a path of aesthetic resistance: the return to interval, silence, and contemplation. This resistance is directed against a system that, in his words, seeks to eliminate all ‘impediments to unbounded communication’ (such as ‘secrets, foreignness and otherness’) in the name of transparency. This process, Han (2017a) argues, involves ‘stripping people of interiority’, an emptying-out that occurs not through violence but through ‘voluntary self-exposure’, transforming the true ‘negativity of otherness’ into the consumable positivity of ‘diversity’ (p. 9). This critique restores an essential dimension of modern aesthetics: the capacity to resist immediate assimilation. Negativity, in this sense, is the space in which authentic experience becomes possible again.

The Aesthetic Colonisation of the Public Sphere: Synthesis and Implications

The convergence between John Dewey and Byung-Chul Han, though unlikely at first sight, proves extraordinarily productive for understanding the current sensory regime of communication. Both theorise aesthetics as a form of power: for Dewey, it is the formative power of experience, capable of integrating emotion, thought, and action; for Han, it is the performative power of positivity, which converts freedom into exhibition and communication into an affective commodity. Between these conceptions one can trace the historical path of a profound mutation: the passage from aesthetics as a medium of emancipation to aesthetics as a technique of control.

The Algorithmic Aesthetic: From Experience to Fragmentation

Dewey and Han share a fundamental premise: aesthetics organises experience. For Dewey (1934), art expresses an intensified form of life: an experience ‘in which the parts interpenetrate in such a way as to form a whole in which each part contributes to the fulfilment of the whole’ (p. 35). Aesthetic experience reconciles feeling and thought, the individual and the collective, and thus sustains the continuity on which democratic life depends. In the digital ecosystem, however, the organisation of the sensible has been inverted. Platforms structure perception through fragmentation and acceleration. Their sensory architecture, guided by engagement metrics, enacts what Splichal (2022) calls an

‘extraction of opinion’: expression becomes data, and communication becomes attention capital. Reflection gives way to predictability. TikTok’s *For You* algorithm, for instance, curates affects rather than ideas, privileging immediacy and intensity over continuity. Scalvini (2023) terms this ‘algorithmic pluralism’: an apparent diversity masking structural homogenisation. Dissent becomes variation within a harmony of predictable affects.

The public sphere thus takes shape as an emotional marketplace, where individual performance defines symbolic value. Fuchs (2014) interprets this as a commodification of communication: attention and emotion function as commodities, and the sensible itself becomes the infrastructure of capital. Beer (2016) similarly describes algorithms as cultural devices that structure visibility, orient attention, and legitimise authority. As Jernej Kaluža (2022) showed, algorithmic personalisation erodes the democratic public sphere not primarily through informational isolation but through habitual adaptation: a recursive feedback between users and technologies that stabilises affective and behavioural patterns. This ‘habitual colonisation’ of perception complements Splichal’s diagnosis of contractual publics and reinforces the aesthetic dimension of communicative power explored here. The transformations outlined indicate not merely a technological but an aesthetic reconfiguration of communicative experience. Splichal (2024) argues in *The Rise of Contractual Publics* that the contemporary crisis of the public sphere stems from the ‘tech-driven siege of publicness’ and the rise of contractual relations governing communication. The transition from publics grounded in habits and reflexive discourse to ‘contractual publics’ dominated by algorithms and platform logics exemplifies a new phase of communicative colonisation. This diagnosis resonates with the perspective advanced here: both recognise that digital architectures have reconfigured not only the normative but also the experiential foundations of publicity. Yet while Splichal analyses this transformation primarily in sociological and normative terms, the present argument focuses on its aesthetic implications: on how psychopolitical regimes of attention reshape sensibility itself as a medium of power and, consequently, of possible emancipation. Through these mediations, the logic of *psychopower* (Han, 2017a) emerges: power operates through the subject’s own desire for recognition, transforming the public sphere into a process of collective self-aestheticization.

This dynamic extends the aesthetic diagnosis inaugurated by Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Benjamin (1992) identified in technical reproducibility the loss of aura (the singularity of the artwork) and the substitution of deep experience (*Erfahrung*) by fragmentary livedness (*Erlebnis*). Buck-Morss (1992) later showed that this fragmentation is also corporeal: the saturation of stimuli anaesthetises perception, producing subjects habituated to shock. For Benjamin, such anaesthesia underpinned the ‘aestheticization of politics’ in fascism: a delirium of visibility without ethics. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, generalised this logic to mass culture: the culture industry standardises feeling and neutralises the critical negativity of art, turning it into commodity and entertainment. Digital culture realises this prophecy: the algorithm becomes a personalised ‘machine of distraction’ that transforms emotional consumption into economic productivity.

In Beller’s (2003, 2017) terms, computational capitalism turns perception into labour: ‘to look is to labour’ (2003, 92). The aesthetic colonisation of experience is thus also the

labour colonisation of sensibility. Metrics replace meaning, visibility substitutes reflection, and aesthetic experience, once integrative in Dewey's sense, becomes a mechanism of dispersion and control. The algorithmic aesthetic completes the modern trajectory from Benjamin's *Erlebnis* to Han's psychopower: from the shock of the crowd to the performance of the self. What began as a critique of mechanical reproducibility culminates in an economy of continuous reproduction – of emotions, gestures, and desires. Against this backdrop, the challenge of democracy today lies in recovering the integrative power of aesthetics: to restore continuity, depth, and reflexivity within a regime that thrives on immediacy and fragmentation.

Eagleton offers one of the most influential critiques of the aesthetic as a bourgeois strategy of legitimation. For him, the modern aesthetic emerges when social life becomes reified and the actualities of social experience can 'no longer serve to offer an adequate starting-point for discourses of value' (Eagleton 1990, 382). In this situation, value is displaced into a sphere of affect, intuition, or inwardness, producing what he calls an 'aestheticization of value' (p. 382), in which desires, beliefs, and commitments appear self-grounding and withdraw from rational scrutiny. The aesthetic thus functions as a quasi-transcendental domain – a space of self-validating immediacy that substitutes sensibility for critique.

At first sight, this critique might appear to challenge the concept of aesthetic colonisation proposed in this article. Yet the framework developed here points in a different direction. Aesthetic colonisation does not locate value in an intuitive or self-authorising domain; nor does it elevate sensibility to a transcendental register. Instead, it designates the historical and technical appropriation of sensibility by algorithmic infrastructures. What Eagleton identifies as the ideological function of the aesthetic – its tendency to 'float loose into [its] own idealist space' (p. 382) – is precisely what the contemporary digital environment dismantles. Far from providing a refuge from critique, the aesthetic is now thoroughly operationalised: it becomes a medium of capture, modulation, and extraction, structured by metrics, visibility logics, and economic imperatives.

In this sense, the argument developed here situates Eagleton's critique within a broader historical trajectory and extends it into the contemporary digital environment. Aesthetic colonisation shows how the aesthetic becomes embedded in the operational logic of platform capitalism, where sensibility is shaped, formatted, and mobilised as a productive force. The concept identifies a shift from the aesthetic as a bourgeois transcendentalism of value to the aesthetic as an infrastructural field structured by metrics, visibility regimes, and the governance of attention. By tracing this transformation, the analysis foregrounds the aesthetic as a terrain of political organisation, one in which the sensory field can be reconfigured toward critical engagement, shared experience, and democratic sensibility.

The Aesthetic Colonisation of the Public Sphere

The most visible consequence of algorithmic mediation is the transformation of the public sphere into an environment of affective consumption and sensory saturation. Platform logics privilege content that provokes immediate emotional responses – indignation, tenderness, desire, anger – because intensity generates visibility, and visibility generates value. Deliberation yields to the economy of affect, where immediacy substitutes

argumentation and communication becomes a theatre of synchronised but non-dialogical emotions.

Within this dynamic, the Deweyan ideal of a public built through the exchange of integrated experiences becomes nearly unattainable. As Kornbluh (2023) observes, digital culture establishes a ‘style of immediacy that denies mediation and privileges absorption and identification’ (p. 30). The aesthetics of instantaneity destroys the distance necessary for reflection. Digital aesthetics repeats this mechanism on a massive scale: users believe themselves free even as they reproduce algorithmic patterns of visibility and engagement. This process represents an aesthetic colonisation of the public sphere, not merely through advertising but through the sensory architecture of digital communication itself. Algorithms act as curators of collective feeling, deciding what deserves attention. Visibility becomes synonymous with existence; what is not seen does not count. Yet this colonisation does not operate by censorship but by saturation. As Han (2015) notes, ‘the digital wind of communication penetrates everything and makes it see-through’ (p. 34). The more communication proliferates, the less experience it sustains.

Buck-Morss (1992) described this condition as the anaesthetization of politics: subjects exposed to incessant stimuli lose the ability to discern and to dwell. The aesthetics of transparency, by eliminating secrecy and opacity, abolishes the symbolic space where experience can sediment into thought. The disappearance of negativity – in Dewey the creative tension of experience, in Han the space of resistance – marks the deepest symptom of this colonisation. Without negativity there is no difference, no mediation, and hence no public sphere. The absence of negativity translates into the hollowing out of political experience. The citizen becomes spectator, the spectator becomes data producer, and participation is confused with exposure. Deliberation is replaced by feedback. ‘Platforms become the new universal intermediaries, defining the terms of social and political interaction’ (Smicek, 2017, 38). The aesthetic power of platforms is thus constitutive: it shapes what it means to be public.

Empirical research confirms this aesthetic diagnosis. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) describe the emergence of the *algorithmized self*: a subjectivity shaped by the metrics of visibility and feedback, performing for and through the algorithm in a continuous negotiation between recognition and exposure. Scalvini (2023), from a semi-ethical perspective, interprets this condition as ‘algorithmic pluralism’ – an apparent diversity masking structural homogenisation, a ‘harmony without alterity’ that erases dissent and converts difference into data. His call for a semiotic ethics of responsibility converges with what is here termed a *politics of the sensible*: restoring openness to otherness and negativity as preconditions of democratic life. Finally, Obreja (2024) shows how users legitimise algorithmic content through moral and institutional narratives that reconstruct both the meaning of the algorithm and their own agency. This negotiation confirms that algorithmic aesthetization is not merely a transformation of the gaze, but of language and of social experience itself.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical insights depict a public sphere redefined as an aesthetic and institutional field in which experience is administered by the logic of predictability. The sensible is colonised by a technical rationality that converts communication into visibility and alterity into redundancy – revealing the urgency of an ethical and aesthetic reconstruction of common experience.

Between Deweyan Aesthetics and Han's Aesthetics: Paths to Regeneration

Despite the critical diagnosis, the dialogue between Dewey and Han also suggests possibilities for regeneration. Han himself, in reclaiming the value of negativity, pause, and contemplation, approaches Dewey, who saw in aesthetic experience an opportunity to reintegrate a fragmented life. Both recognise that sensibility is the core of freedom: to educate feeling is to form the citizen. In this sense, the response to aesthetic colonisation cannot be merely normative or technological; it must be aesthetic and educational. Communicative practices need to be reconfigured to recover the depth of experience. [Fuchs \(2016\)](#) proposes a critical theory of communication that combines political economy and aesthetics, advocating non-commercial media forms oriented by reflexivity and narrative density. This proposal effectively extends Dewey's project: to restore continuity between art and life, between form and democracy.

Aesthetic literacy – a concept that reframes Dewey's intuition in the digital context – offers a concrete path of resistance. It means cultivating attention, sensibility, and critical judgement towards media forms – not only in terms of content but also of rhythm, visuality, and affect. As [Buck-Morss \(1992\)](#) suggests, the task of critical thought is to 'restore perceptibility' (p. 40): to return to experience the capacity to feel and interpret the real.

Understood in this way, aesthetics is not an ornament but a politics of the sensible. It defines the field upon which the fate of democracy is decided. The contemporary challenge is to transform the aesthetics of performativity into an aesthetics of presence, in which time, the body, and the word regain their formative value. This reconversion requires both the institutional regulation of platforms and the affective education of citizens. The Deweyan horizon thus remains relevant: to reconstruct the public sphere from meaningful communicative experiences that integrate emotion and reason, form and content. At the same time, Han's warning is indispensable: without negativity and distance, aesthetics becomes an instrument of domination. Democratic regeneration will depend on our capacity to reconcile these two impulses – the aesthetic as integration and the aesthetic as resistance – while recognising that new forms of algorithmic subjectivation require a pedagogy of the sensible capable of returning to experience its reflective, shared, and ethical character.

Regenerating the public sphere therefore entails rethinking visibility itself. It is not enough to multiply communication; we must relearn how to see and feel *in common*. Only an aesthetics of attention – against algorithmic distraction and performative positivity – can restore to democracy the sensory depth that makes it possible.

This shift of attention, however, presupposes environments capable of sustaining it. The question that follows is how such environments can be institutionally organised.

Democratic Aesthetic Infrastructures

The concept of aesthetic colonisation clarifies how digital infrastructures organise sensibility through logics of visibility, acceleration, and affective modulation. If this diagnosis is correct, a central question emerges: what kinds of sociotechnical arrangements could sustain an aesthetic logic more compatible with democratic life? Aesthetic literacy plays

an important role (it cultivates capacities of discrimination, reflexivity, and attention) but its effects depend on environments capable of sustaining reflective experience. Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience as an integrating force presupposes conditions that allow continuity, deliberation, and shared meaning (Dewey, 1934). These conditions are fragile when communication unfolds in environments driven by extraction, optimisation, and behavioural targeting. Han's analysis of psychopower sharpens this point: the contemporary sensible is shaped by infrastructures that compress time, intensify affect, and transform freedom into participation in regimes of visibility (Han, 2017). To take aesthetic colonisation seriously is to recognise that democratic renewal requires transformations in the material infrastructures that shape the sensory field. Thus, confronting the concentrated power of major corporate (and often politically charged) platforms requires building counter-infrastructures that embed democratic values at both an economic and a perceptual level.

The political economy of digital platforms is central to this transformation. Srnicek (2017) describes platforms as economic actors that reorganise social relations by absorbing behavioural traces into circuits of value. Zuboff (2019) analyses the extraction of personal data as a new regime of accumulation. Couldry and Mejias (2019) identify datafication as a colonial relation in which the sensible becomes a territory to be mined. Fuchs (2016) emphasises the labour dimension of this process, demonstrating how participation, attention, and affective engagement are converted into surplus value. These diagnoses converge on a fundamental insight: the aesthetic forms of digital life (speed, stimulus, performance) are shaped by economic imperatives embedded in platform architectures. Any attempt to democratise the sensible must therefore address the ownership, governance, and operational logics that shape platforms at a structural level.

Against this backdrop, decentralised infrastructures offer concrete illustrations of how alternative arrangements of visibility and relation can take form. Analyses of the Fediverse highlight a distinctive constellation of sociotechnical practices that reorganise perception, interaction, and governance online. Gehl's *Move Slowly and Build Bridges* (2025) describes Mastodon and the broader Fediverse as 'alternative, community-run social media systems' developed and operated by 'ordinary people' (Gehl, 2025, 1). Their shared orientation follows the principle of 'making social media ours' (Gehl, 2025, 3), expressed through design choices, moderation styles, and participatory governance routines that shape the rhythms and atmospheres of interaction. Visibility emerges through locally configured practices shaped by software decisions, moderation procedures, and community expectations. These configurations generate heterogeneous temporalities and distinct modes of interaction that give rise to differentiated aesthetic environments. The sensory field appears as a space of situated variation, structured by communal forms of governance and by the perceptual expectations that guide everyday participation. Under these conditions, the Fediverse operates as an infrastructure in which perceptual forms develop through collaborative organisation oriented towards care, reciprocity, and contextual judgement.

This reorganisation of digital life aligns with the broader transformation identified in what is described as an emerging 'after Twitter' environment (Tkacz and Gehl, 2025). In his analysis of the 2022 'Twitter wave', Gehl notes that the dynamics involved encompass both technical configurations and the social orientations that give the Fediverse its group-

centred and noncentralised character (Gehl, 2025, 29). As Twitter's centrality recedes, space opens for multiple sociotechnical formations that the authors describe as 'platform polities': digital collectives organised around distinct normative commitments and modes of relational life. Aesthetic features of communication (its rhythms, modes of appearance, and styles of engagement) take form within these environments. Movements of users across platforms reflect a search for communicative spaces that align with their sensibilities and modes of inhabiting the social world. Within these formations, the notion of 'protective sociality' gains special relevance: a relational orientation grounded in safety, reciprocity, and mutual care, supported by infrastructures that enable communities to shape their own boundaries of interaction. These orientations generate communicative rhythms marked by attentiveness, relational presence, and shared attunement, producing aesthetic environments characterised by mutual recognition and sustained forms of connection.

Governance practices within the Fediverse add another dimension to this aesthetic configuration. In his account of the 'covenantal fediverse', Gehl (2025) highlights the centrality of blocklists as mechanisms through which communities articulate relational boundaries. Blocklists express 'morally informed agreements' that organise how instances federate and interact (Gehl, 2025, 11). These decisions give form to ethical commitments and enact the political and relational arrangements that communities seek to cultivate. Economic arrangements follow similar orientations: many instances are sustained through volunteer labour and donation-based support, practices associated with mutual aid and with efforts to distance these infrastructures from surveillance capitalism. Such configurations nurture aesthetic environments shaped by steady communicative tempos, contextualised moderation, and atmospheres grounded in shared responsibility.

A further dimension of this landscape appears in Gehl's conceptualisation of the Fediverse through the notion of 'noncentralisation', defined as the design of systems capable of functioning without any organising centre (Gehl, 2025, 6–7). ActivityPub provides the structural basis for these architectures, enabling interoperability across heterogeneous instances. The resulting network comprises thousands of instances and millions of accounts, with authority distributed across multiple sites of decision-making. In Gehl's terms, such architectures are intentionally designed to 'evaporate singular great men', dissolving the centralising logics that concentrate visibility and authority in corporate platforms (Gehl, 2025, 30). Perceptual organisation emerges from federated coordination, instance-level norms, and individual curatorial practices, fostering environments grounded in plurality, relational proximity, and situated interpretation. These decentralised conditions broaden the experiential horizons of digital communication and extend the organisation of the sensible across a wide field of collective agency. In this sense, decentralised infrastructures cultivate civic practices. Gehl describes them as 'schools for democracy', environments that allow communities to rehearse and sustain forms of collective life grounded in care, shared responsibility, and public-minded governance (Gehl, 2025, 2).

Platform cooperativism occupies an important position within this broader horizon of democratic infrastructures. Following Trebor Scholz's (2016) formulation, cooperative platforms emerge through arrangements of common ownership and participatory governance that organise digital environments around collective rather than commercial aims.

These institutional configurations cultivate civic aesthetic conditions in which interface design, moderation practices, and modes of circulation are shaped by shared values and deliberative intentions. Within such spaces, temporalities can be configured to sustain reflection; communicative encounters can take dialogical forms; and experiential rhythms can unfold in ways that support cumulative and shared perception. By shaping the sensory field in accordance with communal aims, cooperative platforms confer institutional expression upon Dewey's insight that democratic experience grows from environments capable of sustaining depth, continuity, and meaningful relation.

Public-service internet platforms extend this orientation into the institutional domain, translating the legacy of public-service media into a digital architecture oriented toward common life. Sustained through public resources and governed by transparent, participatory mechanisms, these platforms can organise perception and interaction in ways designed to cultivate diversity, accessibility, and civic relevance. As the *Public Service Internet Manifesto* emphasises, 'the dominant form of the Internet and Internet platforms undermines the democratic public sphere' and therefore 'we need new forms of the Internet and the media to safeguard and renew democracy and the public sphere' (Fuchs and Unterberger, 2021, 2). This diagnosis is accompanied by a constructive proposal: 'an Internet of the public, by the public and for the public; an Internet that advances instead of threatens democracy and the public sphere' (Fuchs and Unterberger, 2021, 10). Realising this vision requires infrastructures capable of shaping aesthetic experience through democratic principles. Their algorithms may be structured as auditable procedures aimed at broadening exposure rather than intensifying preference; their interfaces may privilege deliberative depth and interpretative clarity; and their governance may incorporate forms of civic oversight that anchor technical decisions within democratic accountability. Such arrangements treat the sensible as a public good (something to be nurtured, protected, and made available to all), thereby creating aesthetic environments oriented towards slow attention, plural encounters, and reflective experience. In this configuration, public-service platforms contribute to the aesthetic conditions that democratic sensibility requires, shaping shared rhythms of perception and enabling forms of communicative life rooted in mutual visibility, recognition, and care.

Across these models (federated networks, platform cooperatives, and public-service platforms) alternative infrastructures demonstrate the capacity to generate distinct aesthetic logics. Decentralisation fosters plural sensory worlds; cooperative ownership nurtures relational experience; and public-service mandates strengthen reflexive attention. Each model redistributes the power to organise sensibility. Each creates environments in which experience can acquire continuity, depth, and shared significance. Each participates in the broader task of shaping communicative life through forms that expand perception, relation, and understanding.

Aesthetic literacy remains central to this task. It equips individuals with perceptual competencies suited to navigating complex digital environments and cultivates sensitivity to form, rhythm, relation, and atmosphere: dimensions fundamental to democratic experience. Its effects unfold most fully in infrastructures that support reflection, plurality, and care. These environments allow aesthetic literacy to flourish as a civic capacity, linking the formation of sensibility to the organisation of the sensible. The renewal of the public sphere therefore involves a dual movement: the cultivation of democratic

sensibility and the creation of infrastructures capable of sustaining it. Democratic aesthetics develop from democratic infrastructures, and the organisation of those infrastructures shapes the perceptual conditions of collective life. Reclaiming the sensible becomes inseparable from reclaiming the infrastructures through which shared experience is formed.

Objections and Caveats: Collective Potency and the Logic of Performance

Social networks expose a central paradox: the same environments that fuel individual performativity also enable new forms of collective mobilisation. Recent studies show that protest movements increasingly adapt their communicative strategies to platform logics that privilege speed, simplicity, emotional resonance, and visual impact (Schaaf & Quiring, 2023). Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and *Fridays for Future* illustrate the capacity of platforms to mobilise millions around shared causes, activating powerful symbolic and emotional energies. Yet this collective vitality unfolds within the same aesthetic regime that governs the attention economy.

Digital mobilisation operates through affective aggregation. The viralisation of a hashtag or gesture expresses shared emotion but rarely sustains the reflective continuity that Dewey (1927) associated with the formation of a public. Communicative energy disperses into brief intense episodes whose efficacy depends on performative force. What emerges is a collective *Erlebnis* – a momentary communion of feeling – rather than an integrative *Erfahrung* conducive to deliberation. The performativity of activism reflects this condition. Participation becomes a gesture of symbolic authentication and moral belonging. Han (2015) describes this as the ‘exploitation of freedom’, where self-expression turns into emotional labour. Digital activism thus acquires an aesthetic dimension: it expresses conviction through visibility while remaining caught within the same algorithmic circuits that reward exposure. Solidarity takes the form of spectacle. Finally, the fragility of algorithmic bonds reveals the limits of this collective potency. As Obreja (2024) notes, user agency is continuously negotiated with the institutional logic of algorithms. Granted visibility is conditional, subject to fluctuating metrics and informational saturation. Collective action remains vulnerable to an environment that privileges immediacy over durable connection.

In sum, the mobilising potential of digital networks confirms the reach of the aesthetic diagnosis advanced here. Collective energy is genuine, but it is articulated within a sensory grammar dominated by acceleration, emotional intensity, and performativity. The digital public sphere thus embodies a constitutive ambiguity: democratic impulse and aesthetic capture coexist. Contemporary democracy unfolds in this interval – between the creative energy of the crowd and the technical form that contains it.

Conclusion: Aesthetics as a Condition of Democratic Regeneration

This article has argued that the contemporary crisis of the public sphere is, at its core, an aesthetic one. Beyond the proliferation of falsehoods or the erosion of trust, it involves a reorganisation of the sensible that reshapes how societies feel, think, and participate in the

common world. Algorithmic mediation has transformed communication into a regime of visibility, turning perception itself into a field of extraction and control. Once a formative force of experience, aesthetics now operates as a mechanism of fragmentation. Digital platforms have instituted an economy of feeling in which every emotion becomes data and every expression becomes value. This aesthetic colonisation of sensibility – what Han (2017a) names *psychopower* – erodes the conditions for the reflective public that Dewey (1927) conceived as the foundation of democracy. As Habermas (2023) observes, we inhabit ‘borderless public spheres’, globally connected yet experientially fragmented, where communication expands across territories while understanding remains dispersed.

The dialogue between Dewey and Han clarifies both the loss and the potential of the aesthetic in democratic life. Dewey conceives aesthetics as the integrative form of communication, where emotion, thought, and action cohere in shared meaning. ‘Art’, he writes, ‘celebrates those moments when the past enriches the present and the future opens as shared possibility’ (Dewey, 1934, 357). Han reveals how neoliberal aesthetics converts freedom into performance and community into spectacle. Together, they show that the sensible is political and that the quality of democracy depends on the organisation of experience. Algorithmic aesthetics commodifies perception and accelerates attention, replacing continuity and reflection with circulation and reaction.

Aesthetic critique emerges as a politics of the sensible. Regeneration begins by recovering the form, rhythm, and attentiveness that Dewey and Han associate with freedom. ‘Only belatedly do things reveal their fragrant essence of beauty’ (Han, 2015, 32); democracy requires the same capacity for pause, listening, and presence. Aesthetic literacy therefore constitutes a civic imperative. It cultivates critical feeling – an awareness of how rhythm, visuality, and affect structure communication. As Buck-Morss (1989) suggests, restoring perceptibility – returning to the body its power to feel and respond – is the first step in reopening the space of politics. She evokes this sensorial awakening through a vivid image: ‘our feelings, dazzled, flutter like a flock of birds in the woman’s radiance; and as birds seek protection in the leafy recesses of a tree, so our feelings take flight into the shaded wrinkles, the awkward gestures and invisible blemishes of the body we love, where they can lie low in safety’ (p. 19). From this sensory matrix, she concludes (p. 40) that perceptibility reactivates the capacity for shared experience.

This pedagogy of perception extends beyond formal education to journalism, art, and the design of platforms. Each domain can foster spaces of deceleration, interpretation, and narrative depth. Journalism – understood in Dewey’s sense as a form of public art – strengthens collective experience when it privileges interpretation, listening, and complexity over reaction and speed. These communicative practices embody a democratic aesthetics that joins expression with reflection.

Resistance in the digital age acquires an aesthetic form. It consists in reclaiming the capacity to organise experience outside the algorithmic logic of performance. Dewey’s insight that ‘the machine serves as the means of life when it is infused with art’ (1927, 204) defines the task of reappropriating technology through creativity and shared meaning. The transformation of digital mediation depends on cultivating forms that sustain continuity, empathy, and attention. Negativity here becomes a political value: the space for slowness, opacity, and reflection that enables depth and relation. This dimension of resistance becomes especially visible when considered through the everyday practices that shape

contemporary digital environments. [Bonini and Treré \(2024\)](#) show how multiple daily initiatives undertaken by users, workers, and activists reinforce cooperative and solidarity-driven forms of digital participation (p. 159). These practices take shape in the ways communities appropriate networked communication tools to create forms of relation oriented toward shared interests, civic creativity, and collective organisation. They also reveal the presence of a sensory field that remains open to democratic imagination. At the same time, they illustrate how alternative infrastructures can amplify such gestures, providing environments in which joint attentiveness, mutual care, and community-oriented orientations find conditions for development and consolidation.

The renewal of the public sphere advances along three complementary dimensions. Educationally, it requires the aesthetic formation of citizens as part of democratic literacy. Institutionally, it calls for public policies that promote sensible pluralism, supporting independent media, public art, and regulatory frameworks that value aesthetic diversity alongside data transparency. Culturally, it depends on communicative practices that reconnect form and meaning. These combined efforts create conditions for reflective participation and shared understanding. Within this framework, [Splichal's \(2022\)](#) notion of *reflective publicity* provides a compelling synthesis: it joins technical visibility and access with democratic reflexivity and mediation. These qualities (depth of reflection and mediation as a bond between governors and governed) constitute the sensible conditions that Dewey's integrative aesthetics helps to restore. *Reflective publicity* realises the public use of reason that unites Deweyan formation with Han's negativity: integration with critique, continuity with interruption, expression with distance. As [Kornbluh \(2023\)](#) notes, 'aesthetics is the field where capitalism and critique confront one another, because it is there that what may be felt is decided' (p. 195). This insight defines the urgency of the present: democracy endures through forms capable of translating suffering and hope into shared experience. Algorithmic aesthetics, by transforming sensibility into data, jeopardises that translation. Its transformation demands new ways of feeling together. The crisis of publicness, therefore, must be understood as simultaneously contractual and aesthetic: the colonisation of experience provides the affective and perceptual infrastructure of contractual publics, while contractualisation institutionalises the aesthetic economy of attention. A renewed democratic public sphere requires not only regulatory and normative frameworks, as [Splichal \(2024\)](#) proposes, but also an *aesthetic literacy* capable of restoring reflexivity to perception and communicability to experience. This transformation also depends on the infrastructures that sustain perception itself – that is, cooperative, federated, and public-service platforms capable of organising visibility, rhythm, and relation beyond the extractive aesthetic of commercial media.

The political-aesthetic challenge of our time is to cultivate an aesthetics of formation: an ecology of communication grounded in deliberation, active listening, and common experience. When shaped by such principles, digital communication can once again become a form of celebration: a public art that restores to experience its value as encounter. In this gesture, aesthetics reclaims its promise as the foundation of a living democracy.

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