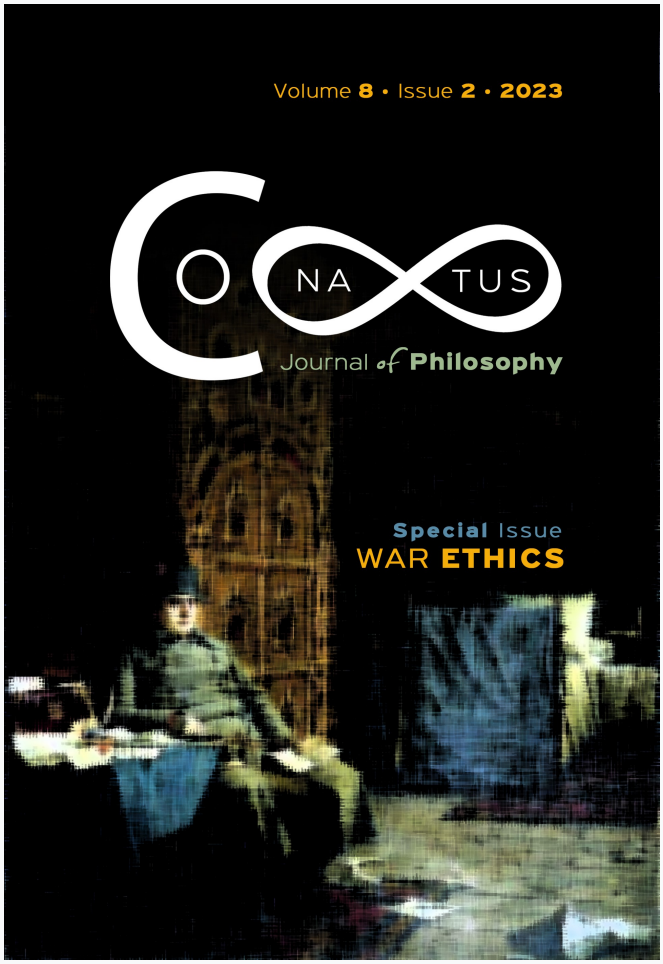
ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
EKT NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 8, No 2 (2023)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: War Ethics



Discussion on Social Media Aesthetic War: Maurice Blanchot and the Establishment of Ethics

Justina Šumilova

doi: 10.12681/cjp.35103

Copyright © 2023, Justina Sumilova

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0.

To cite this article:

Šumilova, J. (2023). Discussion on Social Media Aesthetic War: Maurice Blanchot and the Establishment of Ethics. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, *8*(2), 657–665. https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35103

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 10/08/2025 15:21:01

J. Šumilova · *Conatus* 8, no. 2 (2023): 657-665
doi: https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35103

Discussion on Social Media Aesthetic War: Maurice Blanchot and the Establishment of Ethics

Justina Šumilova
Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, Lithuania
E-mail address: justina.sumilova@protonmail.com
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1812-8466

Abstract

This short discussion paper proposes a non-traditional view to ethics and war, and aims to highlight new perspectives on how we view and understand war. Images, images, images are everywhere in the virtual sphere of the internet, YouTube, ads, and social media. This process of expressing oneself via the virtual image accelerates the fight for the aesthetic virtual beauty when people are trying to create an image of glorified, ideal, and perfect life. This is a mode of fight which aims to narcissistically show off their grandiosity and desire for recognition, admiration, and fascination, fighting for the viewers and followers. Such mode of hedonistic desire seems to shun ethics away from the screen. However, Maurice Blanchot, a 20th century French philosopher, who was prone to denounce the issues of his contemporary time in a rather obscure and distant way, may give us the opportunity to understand this war of aesthetics in social media and ethics.

Keywords: *aesthetics; war; ethics; social media; Maurice Blanchot*

I. Introduction

We usually understand war as an active and brutal conflict that happens in physical life. Our eyes are now on the world-wide conflicts and wars happening in many parts of the world, focusing on advanced technologies used to destroy the enemy. However, one silent and aesthetic mode of war has been going on for a long period of time, but there is not much attention given to it.

The virtual world of the internet, together with ads, posts, tweets, and social media in general, is another mode of war that we usually pay too much attention to as it seems to us to be a part of our everyday life. Social media, ads, and videos are a form of war for the aesthetic beauty. Social media can be compared to the double effect of glass and the myth of Narcissus, analysed in a unique way by a 20th century French philosopher Maurice Blanchot.

The point of this discussion is to widen our definition of war. Firstly, the article will interpret social media as a form of an aesthetic war stage relating it to Maurice Blanchot's analysis of Narcissus. The goal of this analysis is to understand why the dimension of ethics is gone, and what are the main reasons behind narcissistic motivation of aesthetic war. Secondly, the article will try to bring ethics back into play, by opening the chance of vulnerability and respect for the enemy in social media.

II. The icon and the narcissist

Benjamin states that montage functions as signs, labels, and other meanings that are used for advertising in the modern world.[1] These montages or pictures constitute a certain image and a very specific meaning. Social media is sprung by icons in various forms. Icon is easily understood to be a representation that helps the audience to follow a certain brand, celebrity, or influencer. This creates a distant desire of fascination to follow a certain icon, because it has something that we wish we had, yet know that it remains unreachable. The icon hides a dark secret of distant attraction, and this is where Maurice Blanchot's Narcissus comes into play. Blanchot stated that:

> But the aspect of the myth which Ovid finally forgets is that Narcissus, bending over the spring, does not recognize himself in the fluid image that the water sends back to him. It is thus not himself, not his perhaps non-existent "I" that he loves or – even in his mystification – desires. And if he does not recognize himself, it is because what he sees is an image, and because the similitude of an image is not likeness to anyone or anything: the image characteristically resembles nothing. Narcissus falls "in love" with the image because the image as such – because every image – is attractive.[2]

[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 213.

[2] Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 120.

Blanchot's Narcissus is looking directly at the water that is constantly in a flux. Such image is never static, and thus, it can never be fully understood in a non-obscure way. Even if social media icons seem to be static, they often change and fluctuate, depending on the desire of the person who owns the account. However, this icon on social media is not equal to the person who is changing and deciding what kind of icon one will use next, or now will the icon look like. Also, images do not "speak" to us in the same way as language does. Blanchot considered images to be "the living dead" as they seem to be devoid of sentences, contexts, and propositions.[3] What comes here into play is the desire of Narcissus to connect to his silent and lost self, that is in the form of an image, but all he can achieve is fascination.

In the *Space of Literature*, Blanchot states that when one is fascinated, one does not have an active contact or action of touching someone else. Instead, what happens in the process of fascination is that the gaze is absorbed by an immobile movement into the depthless deep,[4] which is precisely the way we look at the screen and the icon. This is a moment of seeing by not seeing because one's look is fixed, stagnating and immobile. Most importantly, we cannot return the look to the icon because there is nothing outside of it. One does not think or feel when one sees the icon, thus distance is needed to create this cold erotic fascination and relationship between the icon and the follower. Intimacy was an impersonal covenant established at the limit when this particular separation is experienced and affirmed in the most radical form.[5] Blanchot warns us about the fate of Narcissus stating that "one must not entrust oneself to the fascination of images which not only deceive (whence the facile commentaries of Plotinus) but render all love mad."[6]

Such fascination is an invisible, unreachable, and obscure object of desire in the form of an image or an icon. For Narcissus, it is enough to love a stranger and to be lured by attraction if one receives a mere, blind return of the gaze, in the form of the image, fixed its sight with avidity on him.[7] Benjamin stated that due to the massive reproduction of products and things the dimension of aura is lost once everything is

[3]Amanda Beech, "Death of Horror," in *Diseases of the Head: Essays on the Horrors of Speculative Philosophy*, ed. Matt Rosen, 71-112 (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2020), 87-88.

[4] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 32.

[5] Joseph D. Kuzma, "The Intimate Blanchot," *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 1 (2016): 18.

[6] Blanchot, *Writing of the* Disaster, 121.

[7] David Appelbaum, *In His Voice: Maurice Blanchot's Affair with the Neuter* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2017), 68.

repeatedly manufactured, everything becomes mundane, regular, material, and "too human." Produced and repeated, this results in changes of medium of contemporary perception and inflicts loss of the aura, which is an authentic dimension of unique phenomenon of distance.[8] This also correlates with Blanchot's concept of the erotic distance which is related to dispossession and loss. One gains the closest intimacy in that of losing something that one deeply desires. As Blanchot stated that seeing presupposes distance, decisiveness which separates, the power to stay out of contact and in contact to avoid confusion.[9] Thus, paradoxically, seeing is a way of distancing from the object which creates intimacy of losing something, unleashing the need to restlessly catch this object of desire, a mad love for speed, not the object. In research for such distance and speed, one loses the ability to be in an ethical contact: "the distance which then is the lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all things."[10]

However, for the postmodern Narcissus, this loss inflicts a desire of fighting for glorification of the image. Even if Narcissus is forever doomed to be distant from one's image, one still tries to sustain one's image as the best one among others. Such a narcissist is always in competition with others because one is trying to highlight something that is tragically so far away from one. Such distanced glorification of oneself is a common problem narrowing the distance only to the image, inflicting the feelings of inferiority, jealously, and competition in aesthetics.

Blanchot pointed out that the form of organic human life put into the inorganic form (whether that of writing, icons, images, posts, or videos) which is a tragical existential fate. Most of creators view their works as their inorganic extensions of themselves that "live" instead of them. Blanchot didn't hold such views and saw the extension of the artists' life in the inorganic form as arrogance. Blanchot's relationship with his own texts was impersonal because he'd state that the text written by him is not him, and that "he doesn't know this person anymore; he is anonymous to him."[11]

---

[8] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, 217-253 (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222 and 237.

[9] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 32.

[10] Ibid., 261.

[11] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 435.

III. Social media as glass surface

Glass, just like social media, has a double effect, which can be compared to mirror. Glass functions both as a barrier that prohibits full sensory contact with the world outside and a reflective surface that mirrors an image of the interior.[12] The duality restates the enigmatic nature of glass, a physical substance that is a liquid maintaining itself as a solid. Virtual media seems to be static and non-vibrant, however, it shares the same double effect of the glass. We can look at social media and see images on its screen, which is physical, and at the same time, social media can change and shift because we scroll, switch pages, or change icons. It is liquidity and movement in one place because the form of social media is that of limpidity, flux, and vibrant movement.

In social media, as well as in glass, the viewer can see a faint image of the self that is not really this person, but a phantomization that observes the observer oneself. The darkest aspect of the glass is that

> Wherever there is ambient light, the image, the double, is there, gazing back. With the force of the image looking in, the inward turn is indicated: the turn away from the looked-at object and the detour in the direction of an imaged source, a source of image – point of origination.[13]

Social media users are observed by a passive, inorganic mirror that of the social media and icons themselves. The Narcissus is the one being reflected in the icon and other social media, and this reflection is looking back at them. As Pessoa states:

> I stagnate in my very soul. I suffer a suspension of will, emotion and thought that lasts for days at a time; I can only express myself to others and, through them, express myself to me in the purely vegetative life of the soul, through words, gestures, habits.[14]

And in our postmodern world, such stagnation manifests in expression of icons, images, tweets, posts, and videos with a tragic lack of being obliged never to see directly but look away.[15]

---

[12] Appelbaum, 68.

[13] Ibid., 69.

[14] Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991), 68.

[15] Appelbaum, 65.

IV. War, the obsessive

Since now we know the issue of representation in the case of Narcissus, we can slowly shift our focus on the issue of war. From our analysis, it may seem that Narcissus is a tragic character that experiences love as fascination for a mere image or a random return of the gaze. The deepest issue of Narcissus is his incapability to reach himself or anything that is behind the glorified icon. Narcissus has an unattainable desire and obsession for the unreachable beloved; thus, he loses hold of his actions. He is so obsessed by this icon of himself, that he loses the mastery to make his icon and representation in the virtual world as the best one.

Narcissus creates astounding social media icons, images, videos to fulfil the need of aesthetic desire of other people. Basically, a Narcissus is trying to lure followers into fascination by one's aesthetic imagery portrayed by images, icons, videos, posts, and other virtual fragments. This desire of followers leads to a fight with other possible competitors which creates the need to always show more, more and more outstanding videos, images, or icons to keep the followers engaged and fascinated. A narcissist starts to obsess over one's image in social media and tries to reluctantly change it and improve it.

Obsession of Narcissus can be related to Blanchot's negative definition of obsession. Blanchot defines obsession is two different ways in two different books. In the Space of Literature, obsession is defined as a positive action, a constant come-back to a certain topic that leads to the creation of the new.[16] However, in *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me*, Blanchot reveals the agony of the main character who is obsessed with writing and is constantly thinking about the idea of writing without being able to start to write.[17] This negative obsession is a suppression of action when the anxious mind cannot actually experience the present moment. Instead, such mind is trapped in the future, reluctantly trying to do more and more and swipe away other competitors in the social media to gain followers for ego boost. Such negative obsession leaves no space for dialogue, ethics, and connection with the other.

The gaze of Narcissus is the gaze of war, obsession, and destruction. Such gaze leaves no space for connection and communication because their role is to obsessively fight for followers and influence with everyone, including themselves. Aesthetic appearance becomes the mode of war in which the Narcissus is trying to sustain the control

[16] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 24.

[17] Maurice Blanchot, *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1993), 4.

of the gaze of the followers via fascination, trying to fulfil one's tragic need of the self that is lost and unreachable.

V. Vulnerability of our sedentary dread

Maurice Blanchot revealed the dark and obscure gaze of the Narcissus which required vulnerability. What he revealed was a personal vulnerability, but the dark scourge of the social media. We are already discussed that virtual space can be compared to the surface of the glass. The grimiest aspect of the glass is that it gives us a resemblance of the face. In the icon, we do not see our own reflection that would be equal to that of a mirror.

Instead, we see an animated, fictional, or modified reflection of our physical selves or any other entity. What we see is a haunting presence that resembles a face that never goes away and is reflected in the dim light. This face always remains in the dark, to be sensed, it's "an intelligence whose motives are beyond the ken and whose radical ambiguity figures a face of terror, '*sedentary dread*.'"[18] This resemblance of a face is the viewer who is static and stagnating. What Maurice Blanchot is exposing here is our dark, invisible, stagnating side of ourselves that we chose to ignore. We do not want to feel, touch, see or talk with others anymore. Instead, we chose sedentary existence staring at the screen, indulging in our own desires, or competing with others in for followers and recognition.

The tragedy of such war is that once the follower sees my icon in social media, I become deprived of being me because the follower sees and comprehends me from a very different perspective. Blanchot also asks whether we can sustain our subjectivity if we are reduced to the thoughts of the follower or are we just crushed to this radical alienation. Blanchot states that we must come back to ourselves and our will, leaving other's perspective behind.[19]

Vulnerability is the ability to show oneself instead of hiding under the icons and images. Such vulnerability establishes the "I" that allows this "I" to connect and speak to others, instead of seeking their attention, gaze, and fascination. In doing so, one must show oneself as one is imperfect, diverse, and emotional instead of hiding under flashy vibrant icons.

Another way to be respectful of the enemy is to talk with them or write about them in social media space. Such talk does not necessary mean talking with them in real life, but that can take a form of respectful

[18] Appelbaum, 70.

[19] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 29.

and direct dialogue in the form of posts, images, or any other forms of social media. For Blanchot, writing is a way to highlight the ethical difference beyond dialectical difference which means that writing is a constant process of differing and deferring from itself which constitutes multiple relationships as it is always open to everywhere.[20] Thus, writing, whether it's a form of writing posts or posting videos or images, can function as a possibility for ethics to establish multiple *respectful* relationships.

Such communication is a start to a dialogue or at least a respectful fight with the enemy, without trying to obsessively destroy and dehumanize this particular enemy. Such behaviour shows that both enemies acknowledge each other on the same level, without reducing each other to the level of an object. Vulnerability creates intimacy and connection with the enemy, because the enemy knows about "me" and "my weaknesses," but at the same time, "my aesthetic enemy" is exposed to one's own weakness which may bring a glimpse of a dialogue and respect for both enemies. And finally, the last respectful aspect in aesthetic war is respect for the enemy's need of solitude and silence, and their choice needs to be respected. It is important to note that Blanchot viewed friendship, which could be possible among enemies, as a distance and silence of friendship.[21]

VI. Conclusions

The purpose of this discussion was to bring the question of aesthetic war in social media, relate it to Maurice Blanchot's analysis of the Narcissus, and provide some possible solutions of Blanchovian ethics to this issue. The Narcissus case shows the alienation with the self that manifests itself in a form of "pre-emptive" war for followers, attention, and likes. Maurice Blanchot was brave enough to dismantle the tragedy of Narcissus, and reveal our darkest, hidden "self" in the form of glass, transformed into the form of the reflected image on the screen. In such aesthetic war, Maurice Blanchot shows that vulnerability – the ability to show one's own weaknesses – to the "enemy" unconceals the ethical dimension by allowing it to work and function again.

References

Appelbaum, David. *In His Voice: Maurice Blanchot's Affair with the Neuter*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2017.

[20] Sanjay Kaushal, "Language, Time, and Death. An Ethico-Philosophical Perspective Following Hegel, Heidegger, Lévinas, and Blanchot," *Ethics in Progress* 13, no. 2 (2022): 20.

[21] Patrick French, "Friendship, Asymmetry, Sacrifice: Bataille and Blanchot," *Parhesia* 3 (2007): 37.

Beech, Amanda. "Death of Horror." In *Diseases of the Head: Essays on the Horrors of Speculative Philosophy*, edited by Matt Rosen, 71-112. Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2020.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 217-253. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Infinite Conversation*. Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1993.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

Blanchot, Maurice. *Writing of the Disaster*. Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

French, Patrick. "Friendship, Asymmetry, Sacrifice: Bataille and Blanchot." *Parhesia* 3 (2007): 32-42.

Kaushal, Sanjay. "Language, Time, and Death. An Ethico-Philosophical Perspective Following Hegel, Heidegger, Lévinas, and Blanchot." *Ethics in Progress* 13, no. 2 (2022): 11-24.

Kuzma, Joseph D. "The Intimate Blanchot." *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 1 (2016): 18-30.

Pessoa, Fernando. *The Book of Disquiet*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1991.