

# SALVADOR DALÍ'S *LIQUID AND GASEOUS TELEVISION*: A MYSTICAL AND WIRELESS DREAM

Anna Luigia De Simone   
IULM University, Milan  
[annaluigia.desimone@iulm.it](mailto:annaluigia.desimone@iulm.it)

**Abstract:** How can you reach the sky? For Salvador Dalí, just turn on your TV. That is, the *Liquid and Gaseous Television*: one of his inventions (1975) turning TV into a vehicle for cosmic voyages that allow man to communicate with the universe. Perhaps even with God. This device needs no wires. In it, communicative and transcendental horizons converge, updating the surrealist techniques of activating the unconscious into a new formula aimed at overturning coercive television narcosis into a liberating mystical-cognitive three-dimensional ecstasy. Dalí's wireless TV is a mechanism of mediation between reality and spirituality, discontinuity and reconfiguration, man and the sky. A dream or a model that embodies the future of television.

**Keywords:** art and TV, media, mysticism, Salvador Dalí, wireless TV

## 1 Introduction

How can you reach the sky? For Salvador Dalí, just turn on your TV. That is, the *Liquid and Gaseous Television* (1975): one of his inventions that became part of the collection of projects entitled *Imaginations and Objects of the Future* (1975), turning TV into a vehicle for cosmic voyages that allow man to communicate with the universe. Perhaps even with God.

*Liquid Television*, as he usually called his TV model even before representing it in his portfolio of the seventies, is to be understood as both a physical and mental apparatus. It represents Dalí's response to commercial television, whose communicative power he acknowledges, yet whose content he despises. He believes it is designed to accustom minds to homogenised and preordained needs devised for the masses. His television model is conceived as a cultural and spiritual device for the home, aimed at establishing a connection with individual viewers through serious content such as art, science, and religion.

*Liquid Television* aspires to be, therefore, a 'thinking machine' – a device to elevate the mind – which the artist designs using the tools familiar to him: those of art, such as painting, drawing, happenings, and cinema. However, it is not intended to remain merely a work of art or a simple conceptualisation.

In order to realise it, Dalí devised two disruptive strategies: one of surrealist origin, acting directly upon the device by manipulating the image consumption; the other conceptual, enacted through his performative interventions intended to subvert television language from within. These approaches, developed at different times, gradually converge until they form a unified direction, both becoming essential to understanding his project: to manipulate the broadcast mechanism; to overturn media banality; and to adapt the communicative register in relation to the audience.

The device invented by the master of Surrealism needs no wires. In fact, it is free of all restrictions: no cables, channels, or infrastructures. Nor does it impose its rules on the spectator, unlike traditional TV, whose messaging aims to homogenise its audience. It is a medium free of material or communicative limits – determined by the traditional cable and the assertive language of the broadcasters – that lets the viewer expand space and augment visual capacity by connecting, through the airwaves and the spirit, human and divine, earth and sky.

Like Surrealist objects, the *Liquid Television* activates a desire that stimulates the imagination, inviting viewers to experience lucid dreams by turning on their interior televisions. Dalí calls it liquid, soft, like his watches that reject the rigidity of the unquestionable and indicate the changeable nature of individual perception and memory's re-elaborations of space and time.<sup>1</sup> In it, communicative and transcendental aspects coincide, using new methods to stimulate the unconscious in a different way, with a formula intended to erase the narcotic trance induced by the cathodic screen and replace it with a mystical-cognitive ecstasy designed to reveal the secret of existence to everyone.

To explain the reception and transmission mechanism of this device, which aspires to act as a mediator between reality and spirituality, between the discontinuity of the image and its remote reconfiguration, between man and the heavens, Dalí combines biblical dogmas (Maria's Assumption, the Ascension of Christ, the existence of angels) with the discipline of particle physics, a favourite study of his during what is known as his atomic period: a phase when, God, Renaissance classicism and the atom formed the core of his pictorial explorations.<sup>2</sup> These works aimed to figuratively dematerialise matter, in contrast to the rejection of form that the artist considers typical of abstract and conceptual art, as he explains in many books and essays.<sup>3</sup>

The *Liquid Television* that Dalí conceives and experiments with is a device powered by the same paradoxical energy of his paintings: landscapes of the unconscious capable of awakening stupefied minds and lifting them to a higher state of self-awareness and closer to the mysteries of existence. In fact, thanks to its electromagnetic waves (which travel through the void, allowing an exchange of energy, information and images) and their spiritual counterparts, it can provide the much-desired impetus towards the absolute, the conquest of the blaze of immortality.

The uses of this TV are not limited to the interiors of a home. To turn it on, the device just needs to be upended, or one's eyes turned inwards, favouring the democratic conquest of the visionary state of ecstasy, in which anyone can 'see anything that the [...] mind creates,'<sup>4</sup> opening up to lucid hallucinations, the world of the soul, mystical intuition and a profound union with the universe, all indispensable for seeing the world in a new and different light.

According to this conception, the television of the future will be a mystical-technological device, a 'receiver of all kinds of information through interference, of all video information.'<sup>5</sup> A wireless instrument that also works outdoors (as shown in Dalí's drawings and paintings), which expands the perception of the surroundings and dematerialises space/time, deconstructing and reconstructing elsewhere the image of anyone, in a completely recognisable and realistic form. It will be capable of absorbing reality and reconfiguring it anywhere in an aerial dimension. Showing the earth in the sky and the sky on earth.

## 2 Dalí and Mass Media

The *Liquid Television* is not just a whimsical extravagance. Rather, it is the outcome of a visionary televisual concept developed by Dalí along his poetic itinerary, in works, notes, declarations and happenings featuring or made for the

small screen.<sup>6</sup> Instances drawn from an aspect of his work largely overlooked by art critics and art historians, who mostly see his relationship with TV as the logical consequence of his innate exhibitionism, without delving deeper into the artist's surprising awareness of the medium's potential:<sup>7</sup> the promise of connecting the spectator with the wonderful world of Surrealism, in a sort of spiritual communion with the universe.

In addition, Dalí's work about TV and on TV is an essential nexus in the re-evaluation of the visionary capacities of a figure considered among the most anti-modern of the twentieth century, but who should instead be seen as one of the foremost proponents of the visual culture of our time.

One of the first to perceive the importance of studying the link between the Catalan painter and television was Marshall McLuhan, who, in his analysis of some paintings (among others, the cover of the weekly *TV Guide*, titled *Today, Tonight and Tomorrow*, 1968), pointed out how Dalí's surrealist enigmas reveal the mediatic mechanisms of transmission and perception, and the consequent stupefaction of the spectator, day after day, seeing in them the clearest visual translation of his celebrated observations regarding the media-driven extension of man's senses (developed in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964).<sup>8</sup>

But it is equally significant that Andy Warhol and Nam June Paik, two major protagonists in the story of relations between art and TV, carried on a fruitful dialogue with the artist: photos, reports and *Screen Tests* (1966) document Dalí's familiarity with Warhol;<sup>9</sup> an excerpt from an interview in which Dalí compares television and holograms (one of his consuming passions) was included by Paik in his satellite transmission, titled *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984, min 15.10 to 16.10).

Finally, there is ample evidence of how his work was inspired by and oriented towards cinema and mass culture in many exhibitions catalogues<sup>10</sup> and publications.<sup>11</sup>

### 3 Dalivision

To fully grasp the prophetic import of the thought process that led Dalí to formulate his idea of television, we should first ask ourselves: what went through the mind of the master of Surrealism the first time he set eyes on a TV screen? Or what he meant when wondering: 'What is a television apparatus to man, who has only to shut his eyes to see the most inaccessible region of the seen and never seen?'<sup>12</sup>

Initially, looking at the images on the TV screen, the painter must have thought of them as good as his best canvases. The television seemed to be showing updated versions of his perfect representations, characterised by a completely unreal realism, a theatre of hallucinations that come alive in the spectator's eyes, challenging the spell cast by the moving images. Or, perhaps, the TV appeared to him as an object with a symbolic function, created to free the imagination, to induce dreams and cause anxiety by exploiting the mechanics of desire.

Dalí certainly did not share his contemporaries' feelings in this regard. Far from being fascinated by the technological and communicative progress (like the Futurists) or by the new aesthetic horizon television offered to the arts (e.g. Lucio Fontana in his Spatialist manifestos), his attitude also differed from those who spurned the new medium and tried to mitigate its most deleterious effects (among others, Fabio Mauri, *Il televisore che piange*, 1972; Chris Burden, *TV Hijack*, 1972; Richard Serra, *Television Delivers People*, 1973). His approach to the magic box reveals the same curiosity he reserved for optical instruments, scientific discoveries, different artistic lexicons and the various areas of culture he delved into and discussed with their leading exponents. Areas that he always applied to his work: proof of an open, visionary spirit which, however, never betrays his true, aristocratically anti-modern soul.

The thing that caught his painter's eye more than any other was the light that the tube irradiated. An electric band that splits the screen open, toward a space that would otherwise be inaccessible, and then insinuating itself in the mind and illuminating the darkest of interior pathways. Given the derealising power of the television image, which makes you believe that what you see is more real than physical reality, the hypnotic effect of the TV light can elicit illusions that seem completely real.<sup>13</sup> these may be related to the broadcast images, but they can also be quite different, depending on the spectator's ability to activate his imagination by modifying the images mixing them with his rêverie: creating psychedelic visions dictated by psychic automatisms, similar to those elicited by LSD, which affect the spectator directly and alter perceptions of self and reality.<sup>14</sup>

In these broadcast images, which focused on recognition, verisimilitude, and composition, concealing a disturbing naturalism, Dalí also saw a process of organisation of images that originate in the unconscious, a characteristic typical of his paranoiac-critical method.<sup>15</sup> As Dalí extensively explains in *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, *Dalí on Modern Art*, and *Diary of a Genius*, he wasn't captivated by advertisements, nor was he a fan of Pop iconography. He appreciated the metaphysical aspect, the sense of unease, the possibility of creating a perfectly rendered alternate reality. He was fascinated by the detachment inherent in every juxtaposition of appearances and disappearances. He was aware of the paradox presented by appearances that are simultaneously distinct and phantasmagoric, like a technological version of the principles that underlie his landscapes of the unconscious.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, with great concern for the public, he noticed in commercial TV an attempt to impose a state of forced coherence which, in his eyes, made television a gun loaded with blanks. A medium that has the capacity to blow open the doors to the surreal, display it and make it inhabitable, is reduced by the networks to an instrument producing immobility, addiction, and cerebral passivity. It could have been a surreal tool in the service of the revolution, but instead it's just a parlour game.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1940s onwards, Dalí's theoretical and pictorial investigation of television was aimed at the study and application of an alternative model. To achieve this, he offered two strategies for disrupting the medium. Initially, the hypotheses he advanced lay within the confines of Surrealist practice, such as exhortations to turn the TV set upside down, or placing some kind of filter (a grid, or a plaque with graphic inlays) between the screen and the viewer, or altering the definition (disturbing it with moiré patterns, or changing the pixel mosaic), so as to free the imagination and open the mind to the mystery.<sup>18</sup> In his words: 'I watch TV upside down, through a moiré screen, so that I never know what I'm looking at. It's a hallucinatory experience, much like LSD.'<sup>19</sup>

Later on, as part of a conceptual performative process aimed at subverting the language of television from within, Dalí participated directly in the media landscape, appearing on broadcasts of happenings, commercials, and quiz shows or giving interviews. In his TV appearances, as an actor, mystic or mage, he used all the artifices that television had borrowed from the Surrealist syntax (subliminal messages, objects in isolation, jingles, a penchant for excess), calling on the spectator to emerge from his state of narcosis induced by the hypnotic bombardment of repetitive and banal messages aimed at consumption and to transform it into ecstasy: a phenomenon related to knowledge stimulated by content and images that activate thought toward fundamental themes such as art, life, science, and religion (for instance, the celestial hallucinations, intended to induce inner vision, shown in the initial sequences of the video *Chaos and Creation* [1960], when the artist seems to catch the spectator in a vortex and swallow him, as if the viewer were instead swallowed by the sky forming the background; or the bulletism performance – shooting paint on a canvas with a rifle – on the *Ed Sullivan Show* [1961], ending in a vision of a crucifix; or his appearance on *Le petit dimanche illustré* [1967], featuring a live performance of a woman in the throes of a mystical ecstasy, with which viewers could identify).

## 4 Tele-visions

This approach reveals an attempt to allow everyone to enter – through the magic of the TV screen – into a sphere that the artist believes fluctuates in the ether between earth and sky. The television set, however one positions it, is only a

means for accessing one's own imagination, a transport to the absolute. An extension of the eyes, or a third eye that one can activate at will. As Dalí puts it:

I always bring with me an invaluable instrument, with which I realise most of my paintings. It looks more like a minuscule and fragile colour TV than a menacing, unpleasant and mechanical camera. But the most amazing thing is that it is completely soft! Yes, an EYE!<sup>20</sup>

Along this itinerary, intended to provide the instructions for 'turning on one's interior TV,' 'upending the device or turning one's eyes inward, to see everything the mind creates,'<sup>21</sup> Dalí's most authentic impressions about TV were set out on canvas or paper, in paintings and drawings. They display his first visions of television and they provide clues to the nature of Dalí's most advanced model of television.

Among the most significant examples is the project for the musical *The Seven Lively Arts* (1944). Originally consisting of seven paintings of the seven Arts, the series was destroyed in a fire in 1956, and subsequently recreated with new versions manifesting Dalí's growing interest in television, which replaced cinema and radio among the seven Arts. In particular, in *Celestial Ride* (c. 1957), the TV set is transformed into a rhinoceros with stilt-like legs: a recurring angelic figure in Dalí's lexicon, with the power to lift man up to the divine. Here, the rhino, with a large screen on its flank broadcasting a baseball game, is ridden by a woman holding a hanger/antenna pointing up to the sky. In *Television and Communications (or Modern Rhapsody)* (1957), a female figure (referencing the heroic woman extending the telegraph lines into the Wild West, painted by John Gast in *American Progress*, 1872) seems spellbound by a monster-movie camera that reminds one of the old versions, titled *Art of Cinema* (1944). But while in the original, the woman stretches out towards the monster in a trance, in the later version, she is cajoled by the technological machine, now more aggressive (and sexualised), which emits a blinding ray of light from its pupil.

Also in *La télévision* (part of the *Tauromachie Surrealiste* portfolio, 1966–1967), Dalí seems to transfigure the typical TV mechanism of irradiation, which, unlike cinema, is not projected onto a screen from a projector placed behind the audience, but instead projects its waves from the cathode tube directly on the viewer's body. In the etching, irrational forces emerge from the television set and, like a swarm of flies and coloured pixels, or subatomic particles, assail the spectator-toreador, overwhelmed by the assault. Or, perhaps, the artist was exploring how the image is transmitted: first disintegrated, then recomposed in a clear, limpid form.

Finally, according to McLuhan, the two thumb-televisions in the landscape of the 1968 cover of *TV Guide*, displaying images of news anchormen, are 'carefully separated to indicate the distance or interval determined by the touch' and are intended to represent the 'physical' interaction activated by televised communication.<sup>22</sup> The thumbs, which in the work symbolises the extremities the viewer is reduced to, are to Dalí 'very useful for watching TV' because the rounded 'shapes' of the 'thumbnails [are] like TVs.'<sup>23</sup>

The fingers are also the parts of the body where Dalí, during a hallucination, saw his liquid television appear for the first time. He recalls:

'I've discovered liquid television.' In other words, a liquid that when poured on the skin, immediately allows it to 'radiate' television broadcasts.<sup>24</sup>

## 5 Liquid and Gaseous Television

A detailed graphic visualisation of these ideas can be seen in the 1975 lithograph titled *Liquid and Gaseous Television*, part of the *Imaginations and Objects of the Future* series, which brings together many of Dalí's prophecies, among them: *Melting Space-Time*, *Spectacles with Holograms and Computers for Seeing Imagined Objects* and *Intra-Uterine Paradisiac Locomotion*. Like most of his works dedicated to television, this is also set in a typical Dalí landscape,

demonstrating that, for the artist, television is not associated with a specific place, but like a wireless device, can be turned on anywhere.

In an empty, clearly defined horizon on the left forefront, the viewer is seated on a red rock-couch (referencing the *Mae West lips sofa*, 1936), legs stretched out like a typical TV spectator. He is wearing a kind of body armour that makes him look like a big lizard or a robot. Glasses alter his vision: maybe the *Spectacles with Holograms and Computers for Seeing Imagined Objects*<sup>25</sup> or the 'electrocular monocle' for aerial vision, which the artist brought back from America in 1962, as reported by Descharnes, consisting of

a moving picture camera that captures images and then transmits them through the television to a telescope, which assumes the role of a screen [...] designed so that the eye can make out the projected image while at the same time seeing everything in its visual field normally.<sup>26</sup>

Through a multicolour column of smoke that flows like a liquid and acts like a filter between the viewer and the screen, we see an enormous suspended cube. On one face, there is a hyperrealistic image of the *Mae West room* (c. 1974), the ambient illusion created by Dalí that transforms a room of the Figueres theatre/museum into a sort of television studio set, with the lip-sofa on which to sit at the centre of the frame.<sup>27</sup> On the other is a translucent surface – an empty screen, or perhaps a cloud-covered panorama, which seems to be thrusting towards the foreground, as if the viewer were following the progression of the vision until the revelation of a sky. As Dalí explains in the *Imaginations and Objects of the Future* portfolio:

The important invention of the liquid and gaseous colour television, for example, is the simplest way to use phosphorescent emulsions to refract luminous waves. [...] This is the future of television. No physical device is necessary, just liquids and gases. This invention allows you to project a gigantic image in the sky—maybe Mae West—that is visible to everyone.<sup>28</sup>

In an interview that same year, he is more specific about his television, affirming that:

What Dalí has invented is the 'liquid television'. It consists of pouring a liquid onto one's hands, nose and clothing. The liquid replaces the television set. [...] The liquid is the image. [...] It's specifically designed to be the image. Like in holography. The liquid receives all kinds of information through interference, all the video information. The liquid allows for the transmission of greater quantities of information. Information is everything.<sup>29</sup>

The mystical-hallucinatory effect Dalí's visual model produces is also exemplified in works like *Gala Nude Looking at the Sea Which at 18 Metres Appears President Lincoln* (1974–1975): a subject revisited in 1976 and in a 1977 lithograph titled *Lincoln in Dalivision*. Already, during the realisation of the original canvas, the reference to the universe of television and information media was clear in the borrowing of the portrait of the president of the United States, taken from an article in *Scientific American* by the American cybernetician Leon D. Harmon.<sup>30</sup> A pixelated photograph is enlarged and entwined with Gala's profile, coinciding with the cruciform perimeter of the window the woman looks out from.

The work is composed in such a way that when the viewer squints slightly, to flatten the depth of field, the portrait of Lincoln comes to the forefront, pushing the figure of Gala back. Significantly, in the 1976 version, among the clouds and beyond the cross, we see the figure of *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951). It is almost as if the two paintings, viewed in sequence, reproduce the focusing process, as well as the same progression of images; from a face to a vision of the sky (or of paradise), as also in *Liquid and Gaseous Television*. In the work, the head of Jesus that represents the sun rising on the horizon is shown as a ray, almost a TV, which, by recomposing the discontinuous matter, lets the viewer recognise the image of God, a mysterious luminous substance that allows him to communicate with everything.

This television appears to contain the same power of communion assigned to the original painting of *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*, with regard to which Dalí confessed:

First of all, in 1950, I had a 'cosmic dream,' 'in which the painting, which I saw in colour, represented the 'nucleus of the atom'. Later, that nucleus assumed a metaphysical meaning: in it I see 'the oneness of the Universe,' 'Christ!'<sup>31</sup>

## 6 Media Mysticism

A sort of media mysticism underlies Dalí's television: a wireless device powered by energy and imagination that abandons all terrestrial limits and boundaries, embracing an aerial dimension projected towards the celestial horizon, whether actually located in the firmament or in the heart of the man of faith. This formula anticipates the most futuristic models of wireless television transmission, resulting from the mystical-scientific reflections that gave rise to his atomic period. These combine optical illusions (*Lincoln in Dalivision*, 1977), particle physics (the theory of material discontinuity, studied by the artist following the shock induced by the explosion of the atomic bomb and merged into *Mystic Manifesto*, 1951, *CREDO*, 1952, *Antimatter Manifesto*, 1958) and quantum realism (pictorial exercises in which the figures behave like foreign bodies that gravitate through space without coming into contact with each other: as in *Leda atomica*, 1947–1949; and *The Madonna of Port Lligat*, 1949 and 1950, almost recognising an element of transcendence in the material world, or envisioning the passage to anti-matter, the so-called God dimension, as in *Gala Placidia*, 1952, and *Maximum speed of Raphael's Madonna*, 1954). Dalí explains:

In an exuberance of genial ideas, I decided to dedicate myself to arriving at a figurative solution to quantum theory, and I invented 'quantum realism,' 'in order to master the force of gravity [...] and create fluctuating space'. [...] I was able to figuratively dematerialise matter; then I spiritualised it, to create energy.<sup>32</sup>

It is precisely the communicative power, the force that overcomes the conventional limits of space and time, following the rules of discontinuity and substantially entering the dimension of the divine, that most interests the artist. He is even more intrigued by the magic of the television, which is diffused by decomposing matter, but above all by recombining it in images, moment after moment, thanks to the conversion of light waves into well-defined and recognisable figures: scenes that confirm Dalí's faith regarding form and a masterful visual realism.

The apex of his pictorial expression in this regard, bringing together God, the Renaissance and the atom, is *Assumpta Corpuscolaria Lapislazulina* (1952) in which, according to the painter himself, 'Dalí, for the first time ever, has just drawn an *electron*, a *proton*, a *meson*, a *pion*.'<sup>33</sup>

In the Assumption of Maria, the moment of ascension (a term the artist often used in place of Assumption) is depicted with a vortex of particles which, while representing atomic fission, dissolution of gravity and divisibility of matter, lift the human, illuminated by divine light, up to the heavens, into anti-matter, where, recomposed, man may find a different but still comprehensible configuration in an unknown spiritual substance and in communion with the universe.

Commenting on the work, Dalí specifies:

My 'Assumption' is the opposite of the atomic bomb. Instead of disintegrating matter, this shows its integration, the reconstruction of the real and glorious body of the Virgin in the heavens. This painting inherently justifies all experimentation in modern art, because I was able to reconnect that experimentation with a classical objective.<sup>34</sup>

In his paintings, this ascensional movement, aiming for the heavens in order to connect man and God, is always reconfigured, like a televised image. In *Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina*, it starts with the human body, accompanying its dematerialisation and subsequent consubstantiation in divine form. A sequence which, in the various versions, reduces matter into particles, but never crosses over into abstraction, even when delineating invisible entities. Instead, following in the footsteps of the masters of the Renaissance, he reiterates his belief in recognisability, the efficacy of realism and perfectly defined images, although in a quantumised era. Therefore, in order to visualise the ascensional process of the meeting of earth and sky on canvas without renouncing realism, Dalí chooses to invest angels, or angelic figures – rhinos, wheelbarrows and elephants – with this meaning.

This sets off a chain of transmissions that lets him remain true to figurative representations, even at the microscopic level, and which seems naturally linked to his interpretation of the television's mechanism of reception/transmission, which is also reconfigurative, and even hyperrealist. The television and its electrons, which transform an image into waves and then make them visible in video, exercise the same rematerialising power summarised in *Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina*, imparting the same uplifting impulse as the angels.

In TV, a scan of the initial reality is sent from the broadcaster to the receiver, subdivided into a sequence of individual units proportional to the luminosity of the figure to be reintegrated into a realistic video by a second scanner in the final step of the process. In observing this transfer of waves and signals, Dalí was not captivated by the disintegration of form that had so fascinated the leaders of the avant-garde. What he sees in the pixelated – but realistic – image on the TV screen is the concrete confirmation of one of his most profound convictions: the demonstration that it is possible to realise a 'figurative dematerialisation,' 'that is, the sublimation of a corporeal being.'<sup>35</sup>

So much so that, to Dalí, television itself became the ideal medium to activate that same uplifting motion from earth to sky, from human to divine, symbolised in his paintings by angels and rhinos. Perhaps he imagined that the viewer, absorbed by the screen, would go on a journey to the farthest confines of the universe and of himself, astride an angelic rhino-television, as in *Celestial ride*: in which we witness the ascension of a secular and medial *Assumpta*.

This also supports Dalí's declaration that 'the Ascension is an elevator,'<sup>36</sup> driven by the power of its own antiprotons: atomic and anti-atomic particles which, when they collide, release kinetic energy that lifts the Virgin up to the heavens. The artist describes this phenomenon as a sensation of enjoyment, a spiritual and carnal ecstasy that pushes beyond the self, into a strongly realistic dimension. Somewhat similar to the tactile experience envisioned by McLuhan's theories,<sup>37</sup> but also to the baroque mystical ecstasy, which postulated a dual nature; material and spiritual. Specifically, Dalí references the writings of the Carmelite mystics, dating back to the fifteen and sixteen hundreds, like the Spanish St. John of the Cross and Saint Teresa d'Avila, in whose words, the encounter with the divine almost goes so far as to provoke a sensual delight at the very moment in which one experiences the fusion with the absolute.<sup>38</sup> An ecstasy represented in the painting *Perpignan Railway* (1965), showing the aerial, luminous, and anti-gravitational suspension of the artist, due to mystical and electromagnetic forces, who is attracted by the screen of the sky as Gala watches TV behind him.

In this setting, the television set takes on an angelic role of universal intellectual and spiritual elevation. In his extravagant television appearances, in fact, Dalí exhorts the spectator absorbed by the TV screen to wake up, cast off the narcotic spell and let himself be lifted up to the sky, to a surrealist dimension, and by riding the TV waves reach consciousness and faith, illuminated by the communion with God.

## 7 Conclusion

How, then, can we reconcile the authentically and aristocratically anti-modern position taken by Dalí, a champion of the legacy of past masters, with his parable of television? How should we interpret the headlong plunge of a sworn

enemy of the distortions operated by the artistic avant-gardes into the pop culture world of mass media? What drove a master of classic painting to enter the universe of happenings and performance art? Up to what point, for an aficionado of the most refined and elite aspects of art, can an ephemeral, mass-market product such as television – however reduced to its cognitive and imaginative functions – contribute to reaching the ultimate goal: immortality? Can *Liquid Television* be considered a dream, a model, or an attempt to reinvent wireless television?

Dalí was convinced that everything, however modern and advanced, should be accepted, but only after having passed through the eternal flame of classicism.<sup>39</sup> Through this profoundly outdated lens, his gaze also rested on television. To him, the device did not seem so different from the many objects with symbolic functions ideated by the surrealists, capable of triggering paradoxical visions that impact the deepest, most ancestral regions of our psyche. Watching as the images follow one another on the screen, the artist visualised the chains of associations produced by a paranoiac-critical delirium. In the battle between video space and physical space, surreal space emerged and took shape. And Dalí chose to inhabit this space, staging happenings in television studios that distorted the founding principles of performative practices attributable to conceptual trends, but were inspired by the inexplicable yet decisive interventions attributed in classical myths to the gods.<sup>40</sup> As Dalí wrote:

I believe in magic, which, in the ultimate analysis, is nothing more than the ability to make imagined reality materialise. Our ultra-mechanised era underestimates the value of the irrational imagination, which is apparently impractical yet is the basis of all discoveries.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, in returning to the realism typical of the small screen, Dalí's faith in figurative imagery finds confirmation. In support of this idea, he goes so far as to interpret the pixelation technique, which can reconstitute a disintegrated image and make it fully recognisable, as the result of a process of recomposition that doesn't contradict the discontinuity of matter demonstrated by particle physics. A figurative dematerialisation that presents an alternative to the simple disintegration of forms proposed by the currents linked to abstraction, considered by the artist empty and unacceptable.<sup>42</sup> A solution that obeys the laws of atomic physics and also those of classical proportion, both recurring obsessions in his mature paintings.

But above all, this system makes us think about the sequence of scanning-transmission-recomposition of image (perhaps of reality) that occurs between source and receiver, which Dalí referenced during his atomic period to depict ascensional events, such as in the *Assumpta*. Mary, in being assumed into heaven as if she were an icon shot from a cathode ray tube, remains fully recognisable in her earthly form, despite the atomic fragmentation of the individual elements composing her new divine entity.

It is precisely this perspective, viewed as outdated in modern times, this combination of technology, science, art history and spirituality, that conceals one of the unrevealed secrets of Dalí's interest in television. The atavistic hope, in both the artist and man in general, to become one with the absolute. An aspiration, previously pursued in painting, that underlies his entire poetic itinerary, aimed at defining a mechanism capable of mediating between human and divine, between earth and sky.

His mystical media, which brings together scientific and pictorial research, communicative and transcendental horizons within the magic box, leads him to invest in the dream and the theory of a vehicle of communication and connection with the universe. A device capable of stimulating the human mind to experience lucid dreams. This explains Dalí's impatience with the broadcasters – who in his view did not use television to free the public's imagination and open minds to new forms of consciousness, but instead induced in the viewer a state of flattening narcosis – and his ongoing battle to disrupt the medium's lexicon.

He is not satisfied, however, with man's dreaming while sitting on the couch at home. His true aim is to offer the possibility to dream while living. He wants people to project their visions everywhere. *Liquid Television* thus reveals its true nature: a mystical-technological device. A vehicle for cosmic journeys which, by dematerialising space and time, breaking down and recomposing anyone's image in another location, can absorb reality and reconfigure it in a

celestial dimension. When powered by the light of consciousness, it doesn't dazzle the viewer with narcotic daily banalities, but illuminates the mind, opening it up to the mysteries of the universe. Like a portable power source that produces a mystical ecstasy of higher consciousness, bringing together the believer's heart and the earth with the heavens. Perhaps with the eternal light. With God.

## Notes

1. In Dalí's paintings, such as *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), the watches are depicted as melting, drooping, dripping, and soft, symbolising the fluidity and subjective nature of time. These 'soft watches', or 'liquid watches', as they are often called, represent the idea that time is not a fixed, linear entity but rather a malleable and distorted experience.
2. Gregory Battcock, "Una entrevista con Salvador Dalí" (1975), in *Obra completa de Salvador Dalí*, ed. Francisco Calvo Serraller (Barcelona: Destino, 2006), vol. VII, 1402.
3. Among others: Salvador Dalí, *Manifeste mystique* (Paris: Éditions Robert-J. Godet, 1951); Salvador Dalí, *Dalí on Modern Art: The Cuckolds of Antiquated Modern Art* (New York: Dover, 1956).
4. Edith Efron, *Salvador Dalí, un genio y un "loco", nos dice qué piensa de la televisión* (1968), in *Obra completa de Salvador Dalí*, ed. Francisco Calvo Serraller (Barcelona: Destino, 2006), 1140.
5. Battcock, "Una entrevista", 1402.
6. To explore Dalí's television appearances and his reflections on television in his writings, please refer to: Anna Luigia De Simone, *Dalí Show. Per una televisione liquida* (Milan: Mimesis, 2024).
7. Despite showing the first signs of a new perspective, the following studies still place the performative charge at the centre: Dawn Adès, ed., *Dalí. La retrospettiva del centenario* (Milan: Bompiani, 2005), 17; Fèlix Fanés, ed., *Dalí. Cultura de masas* (Barcelona: Caixa Forum, 2004); Matthew Gale, ed., *Dalí&Film* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007); Jean-Hubert Martin and Montse Aguer, eds., *Dalí* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2012). It is noteworthy that, in Italy in the same year, Luca Beatrice credited Dalí with 'the invention of the artist as a star,' identifying 'the dividing line between the romantic attitude of the past and the media-oriented one of the future' in his Hollywood-style behaviour and use of mass communication. This interpretation was later revisited in Francesco Spampinato's book *Art vs. TV: A Brief History of Contemporary Artists' Responses to Television* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 135–138.
8. Marshall McLuhan, *Il paesaggio interiore. La critica letteraria di Marshall McLuhan* (1969), ed. Eugene McNamara (Milan: SugarCo, 1983), 20; Marshall McLuhan, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, eds. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, William Toye (Toronto–Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 353–354; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
9. Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests. The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Abrams & Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), vol. 1, 265–267.
10. *Dalí. Cultura de masas* (Museo Reina Sofía, 2004); *Dalí. La retrospettiva del centenario* (Palazzo Grassi, 2004–2005); *Dalí&Film* (MoMA, 2007); *Liquid Desire* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2009); *Salvador Dalí. Il sogno si avvicina* (Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2011); *Dalí* (Centre Pompidou, 2012); Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennale d'Arte (2015).
11. For example the publications sponsored by the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, in Figueres, that offer an ample international selection. While Fleur Chevalier has carried out a reconstruction and initial organisation of Dalí's appearances on French television. Fleur Chevalier, "Salvador Dalí et la télévision française", *Revue de l'art*, no. 183 (2014): 47–54.
12. Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, ed. Haakon M. Chevalier (New York: Dover, 1942), 303.
13. David Joselit, *Feedback. Television against Democracy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).
14. Dalí often compares lucid dreams to LSD-induced hallucinations, seeing them as effective in igniting minds and expanding the self. Yet, he declares himself 'absolutely opposed' to them. 'The brain is sufficient to produce visions,' he says (Efron, *Salvador Dalí*, 1145). Even though he claims that his ideal audience consists precisely of hippies – habitual acid users – and surrounds himself with them on television programs (*Le petit dimanche illustré*, 1967), he states: 'It is the hippies from San Francisco and elsewhere who feel close to me. As Éluard said, a poet is not the one who is inspired, but the one who can inspire others. Timothy Leary, the high priest of LSD, said that Dalí was the first LSD painter without LSD. I have never used any drugs. However, all the hippies recognise in me some of their own anxieties and their horror of bourgeois culture.' Salvador Dalí, *Las opiniones de Salvador Dalí* (1971), in Serraller, *Obra completa*, 1196.
15. The paranoiac-critical method is a system for rendering the incomprehensible into a coherent form, invented by Dalí to grasp the elusiveness of delirium and dreams through art. It relies on the free associations of psychoanalytic practice to make sense of the seemingly incongruent pairings between signifiers and meanings, between drives and dreamlike images. Salvador Dalí, "Interprétation Paranoïaque-critique de l'Image obsédante de 'L'Angélu' de Millet", *Minotaure* no. 1 (1933): 65–67.

16. Salvador Dalí, *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship* (New York: Dial Press, 1948); Dalí, *Dalí on Modern Art*; Dalí, *Diary of a Genius* (1963) (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965).
17. Efron, *Salvador Dalí*, 1140.
18. Dalí not only explains, but also shows how to manipulate images in videos (*Chaos and Creation*, 1960), interviews (i.e. *Édition spéciale des actualités télévisées*, 29/08/1964), films (*Soft Self-Portrait of Salvador Dalí*, 1966, *Impressions de la Haute Mongolie. Hommage à Raymond Roussel*, 1975), and tv programmes (*Hello Dalí!*, 1972).
19. Salvador Dalí, *JT 13H*, 11 May 1965.
20. Salvador Dalí, *La droga sono io. Aforismi e pensieri di un artista eccentrico e geniale* (1995) (Rome: Lit, 2007), 87.
21. Efron, *Salvador Dalí*, 1140.
22. McLuhan, *Letters*, 353-354; McLuhan, *Il paesaggio interiore*, 20.
23. Efron, *Salvador Dalí*, 1140.
24. Robert Descharnes, Gill Nerét, *Salvador Dalí. 1904-1989* (Köln: Taschen, 2007), vol. II, 662-663.
25. In *Spectacles with Holograms and Computers for Seeing Imagined Objects* Dalí tried to develop a technological version of his previous idea. A theory according to which, in order to stimulate the production of visions, one could use special lenses containing live fleas covered in phosphorescent paint: 'I thought it would be possible to place [the flea] between two contact lenses like those used by ophthalmologists to correct visual defects caused by a condition known as keratoconus. In this way, the flea could move freely between the two lenses, and with its painted flanks, it would undoubtedly provoke visual sensations that would be transformed into marvellous Walt Disney films.' A.L. de Lamela, "Sueños en technicolor", *El Diario de Nueva York* (17/02/1952).
26. Descharnes, 546–547.
27. In *Mae West room* (c. 1974), Dalí transforms a 3D space into the illusion of a two-dimensional image. He begins with a sketch titled *Face of Mae West which can be used as an apartment* (1934-1935) to create an anthropomorphic room whose illusion would only be visible through the flattening effect of the TV screen. In Figueres, the TV screen is replaced by a lens, but Dalí reprises the work in 2010 in a reinterpretation of the *Mae West room* installed in Palazzo Reale in Milan by Tusquets Blanca, an architect who had worked with Dalí on the original version, in accordance with the Fundación Gala-Salvador Dalí for the show *Salvador Dalí. Il sogno si avvicina*. Not an exact copy of the Figueres canvas, but a reworking, using more advanced technology – which Dalí had no access to – and taking up more space, in accordance with the original intention. Oscar Tusquets. Blanca, *Dalí architetto. Ricordi personali a proposito della creazione del museo di Figueres e della sala Mae West* (2003), in Trione ed., *Salvador Dalí*, 101.
28. Salvador Dalí, *Imaginations and Objects of the Future* (1975).
29. Battcock, "Una entrevista con Salvador Dalí", 1402–1403.
30. Leon D. Harmon, "The Recognition of Faces", *Scientific American*, vol. 229, no. 5 (November 1973).
31. Descharnes, *Salvador Dalí*, 433.
32. *Ibid.*, 418.
33. Salvador Dalí, "Reconstitution du corps glorieux dans le ciel", *Études Carmélitaines*, no. 2 (1952): 172.
34. Salvador Dalí, "Long live modern art, provided one paints starting from Raphael", (1952), in Dawn Adès ed., *Dalí. La retrospectiva del centenario* (Milan: Bompiani, 2004), 565.
35. Dalí explains: 'In a brilliant exuberance of ideas, I decided to devote myself to the figurative solution of quantum theory and I invented 'quantised realism', thus becoming master of the force of gravity [...] by creating "floating space". [...] I succeeded in figuratively dematerialising matter; then I spiritualised it, in order to create energy.' Descharnes, *Salvador Dalí*, vol. II, 418.
36. Dalí, *La droga sono io*, 33.
37. To the question: 'But isn't television itself primarily a visual medium?', McLuhan replies: 'No, in fact it's the opposite, although the idea that TV is a visual extension is an understandable mistake. Unlike cinema or photography, television is primarily an extension of the sense of touch rather than of sight, and it is the tactile sense that demands greater interaction among all the senses.' "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan", *Playboy* (March, 1969).
38. The artist had been particularly interested in the phenomenon of ecstasy – in its cognitive tension towards a reality that is both physical and metaphysical – since the 1930s, as evidenced by certain sequences in the films made with Buñuel (1929 and 1930), the photomontage titled *Le Phénomène de l'extase* (1933), inspired by the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1645–1652), in which Bernini depicts the mystic-erotic transverberation of Saint Teresa of Ávila, and the article *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (1933). In *Mystic Manifesto*, Dalí explains: 'Ecstasy is attained through the path of spiritual perfection described by Saint Teresa of Ávila.'
39. 'If the classics seem cold, it is because their flame is eternal.' Dalí, *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, 19.
40. Once again, the reference is to happenings performed in programmes such as *Ed Sullivan Show* (1961) or *Le petit dimanche illustré* (1967), culminating in religious visions.
41. Salvador Dalí, "Mimetizzazione totale per guerra totale" (1942), *Perverso e paranoico. Scritti 1927-1933* (1971), ed. Robert Descharnes (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2017), 272.
42. Dalí, *Dalí on Modern Art*, 30.

## Biography

**Anna Luigia De Simone** teaches Art and Media, History of Contemporary Art, and History and Theories of Contemporary Exhibitions at IULM University in Milan. She has published numerous works on the relationship between art and television, as well as on processes of intermediality. Her books include: *Architetture d'avanguardia. Scenari e visioni della città nel Novecento* (2008), *Andy Warhol's TV. Dall'arte alla televisione* (2017), *Dalí Show. Per una televisione liquida* (2024). She edited the volumes *Gillo Dorfles, Inviato alla Biennale. 1949-2009* (2010) and *NFT and Cultural Heritage* (2024). In 2021, she coordinated the editorial project for the *Treccani Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Art*.