

*The Transparent Society: Is the Liberation of Differences still what the  
21<sup>st</sup> Century needs?*

Christine Ross

Initially published in Italian in 1989, Gianni Vattimo's *The Transparent Society* was one of the key publications released in the 1980s – together with Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Fredric Jameson's 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', and Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism' – announcing a major shift in the field of Western philosophy, science, culture, art and architecture, one that signalled a fundamental crisis of the metanarratives sustaining the modern and modernist production of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This was a period (let us follow Lyotard here) where the legitimisation of knowledge provided by the 'grand narratives' of modernity (mainly the legitimising discourses of the Enlightenment and Marxism) ceased to be trusted, due to their inability to acknowledge heterogeneity. Knowledge was now produced and was to be produced through the deployment of small narratives. Vattimo's voice in that debate was unique: his was the only publication whose main thrust was to examine the philosophical traditions that could specify the emancipatory potential of postmodernity's 'liberation of differences'.<sup>2</sup> He also strongly engaged with the pivotal role of mass media in the rise of postmodernity. One of the book's main claims was that the advent of the postmodern, what Vattimo called the 'end of modernity', found in 'the society of generalised communication' one of its most concrete conditions of possibility and materialisations.<sup>3</sup> But – and this also made his book unique – *The Transparent Society* identified a deeper cause of the waning of modernity: the crisis of the modern idea of history, namely the crisis of history as a unilinear and progressive narrative. The dissolution of unilinear history meant

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92; and Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86. Also see Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures', *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88; and, for a major reorientation of the debate around postmodernity in the 1990s, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 1.

that the idea of history as evolving in a single path of development had now become untenable. Following the work of Marx, Nietzsche and Benjamin, Vattimo identified the main articulations of that unilinearity: the centring of history around Western European civilisation, on the premise of its alleged superiority in relation to so-called primitive societies; the construction of history by dominant social groups following the dynamics of class conflict; and the modern denial that that ‘images of the past’ are in fact ‘projected from different points of view’.<sup>4</sup> This is key to Vattimo’s understanding of postmodernity: he assessed but also fully supported the weakening of unilinearity, seeking to uphold the postmodern plurality of worldviews resulting from such a weakening. But he also saw postmodernity as emerging from the dissolution of history as progress – history as a teleological narrative of emancipation that privileges the perfecting of the Western European ideal of man, ‘as if to say: we Europeans are the best form of humanity and the entire course of history is directed towards the more or less complete realisation of this ideal’.<sup>5</sup> Endorsing that dissolution, Vattimo writes: ‘one cannot regard [human events] as proceeding towards an end, realising a rational programme of improvement, education and emancipation’.<sup>6</sup> He went on to specify that this programme (a programme oriented towards a foundation or origin) was being questioned philosophically, demographically and politically, namely in the weakening of European colonialism and imperialism, and ‘perhaps above all’ – and this is what I want insist on – in ‘the advent of the society of communication’.<sup>7</sup>

As an art historian specialising in the study of contemporary media arts and the investigation of how artistic practices acknowledge and produce differences, I find Vattimo’s argument crucial as a lens through which to understand art’s response to the historical present, as well as its ongoing yet renewed media production of heterogeneity. In this paper, I ask: if postmodernity – as Vattimo suggests and as I also believe – is indeed a key paradigm for the liberation of differences, how can it help us understand the value of difference today? If the media freeing of worldviews is still relevant, what part of the postmodern paradigm must be abandoned to address the planetary crises of the current century? To address these questions, it is crucial – from the outset – to recognise that Vattimo’s postmodern promotion of plurality is far from being a straightforward endeavour. For the philosopher, the society of mass media, namely ‘newspapers, radio, television, what is now called telematics’, is a necessary factor in the emergence of postmodernity.<sup>8</sup> This is so because these means of communication shatter unilinearity. He introduces the notion of ‘transparent society’ just after this statement, which appears early in the introduction. That section is, I believe, one of the book’s most remarkable passages (after all, it refers to the book’s title and

---

<sup>4</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 5.

specifies Vattimo's views on transparency: will he support or denounce that notion of a society's consciousness of itself inherited from the Enlightenment? Does he see the society of generalised communication as enabling transparency?) The passage reads as follows: 'What I am proposing is: (a) that the mass media play a decisive role in the birth of a postmodern society; (b) that they do not make this postmodern society more 'transparent', but more complex, even chaotic; and finally (c) that it is in precisely this relative "chaos" that our hopes for emancipation lie'.<sup>9</sup>

The proposal turns out to be more complicated than a first reading might seem to entail. Mass media are commended because of their capacity to break with a unilinear and progressive conception of modernity – they enable the multiplication of viewpoints. But this postmodern deployment is also somewhat problematic for Vattimo insofar as that multiplication might well be conducive to a chaotic society. He sees the possibility of emancipation not in chaos but in relative chaos, in relative (non)transparency. The mass media society of generalised communication, understood as emblematic of a postmodern society, generates 'a general explosion and proliferation of [...] world views', as exemplified in the United States where minorities (a diversity of cultures and subcultures) expressing themselves through the mass media are now a genuine part of public opinion.<sup>10</sup> 'For us, he writes, reality is [...] the result of the intersection and "contamination" [...] of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another and without any "central" coordination'.<sup>11</sup> Key here is Vattimo's understanding that such a multiplicity brings with it a new ideal of emancipation based on plurality, fragmentation, oscillation, a certain loss of belonging and the 'erosion of the very "principle of reality"'.<sup>12</sup> He supports that postmodern ideal. He sees in mass media the possibility of reinforcing the weakening of metaphysical foundations that he is looking for. But he is also looking for a counterforce to the problematic flipside of the society of generalised communication – the drastic sense of dislocation it generates, mass media's increased tendency to support the phantasmagoria of 'the world of objects measured and manipulated by techno-science', and their incapacity to guarantee our awareness of the relativity, historicity and finiteness of our own different worlds.<sup>13</sup> The pluralistic world of postmodernity is an invitation to experience a new form of freedom as 'a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation'; yet we are faced – Vattimo contends – with the challenge of finding out how to take that postmodern experience 'as an opportunity for a new way of being (finally, perhaps) human'.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 7, 10–11, 53–54.

<sup>13</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 8, 9 and 10.

<sup>14</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 10–11.

The rest of Vattimo's book is an extended search for philosophical approaches from which can be teased out this opportunity for 'a new way of being [...] human', a new way that deploys being more as an event than as a fixed or stable entity, and one whose conceptualisation does not rely on a universally-shared foundation of knowledge – which is both unwelcome and impossible in the era of postmodernity. Hermeneutics as a practice of weak thought – but also aesthetics, as I will show below – is one of the major philosophies investigated. As brilliantly observed by philosopher Matthew Edward Harris, Vattimo is searching for traces of being from past traditions 'by which we can – and must – orient ourselves' in the midst of the postmodern fragmentation of experience intensified by the society of mass media: 'What Vattimo considers to be potentially liberating – our "sole opportunity" [...] – is how we approach, consider, and re-use the traces of Being from past traditions. This process involves the Heideggerian concept *Verwindung*. *Verwindung* has multiple meanings for Vattimo, such as being resigned to tradition, yet also distorting or "twisting" it'.<sup>15</sup> *The Transparent Society* dedicates two chapters to the way in which aesthetics also carries traces of being that can be re-used or *twisted* (as Harris explains) to turn the postmodern experience into 'an opportunity for a new way of being (finally, perhaps) human'.<sup>16</sup> The modern development of aesthetics – especially Walter Benjamin's theorisation of the aesthetics of shock resulting from the avant-garde montage effects of reproductive media (film and photography) and Martin Heidegger's notion of the *Stoss* or blow of the artwork (the experience of anxiety as one is confronted with an artwork that suspends the familiarity of our universe) – are not without supporting mass media's dizzying effects. The viewer's experience of art is one of disorientation; it is more specifically an 'aesthetic experience [...] directed towards keeping this disorientation alive'; it reinstates the tradition of aesthetics – ensuring a sense of continuity with past traditions – but twists the traditional aesthetic ideals of harmony, stability and unity so that shock may *finally* 'take the form of creativity and freedom'.<sup>17</sup> In Chapter 5, Vattimo likewise returns to Hans-Georg Gadamer's neo-Kantian definition of art as creating 'community' – the philosophical understanding according to which the experience of beauty confirms the implicit consensus within the community of humans – to show mass media's explosive bringing to light of 'the proliferation of what is "beautiful"' as a twisting of that traditional understanding.<sup>18</sup> The beautiful as the experience of community persists, but only 'when community, when realised as "universal", is multiplied and undergoes an irreversible pluralisation. [...] Our experience then, is that the world is not one but many'.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Edward Harris, 'Gianni Vattimo (1936– )', *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (April 2013), <https://www.iep.utm.edu/vattimo/>.

<sup>16</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 10–11.

<sup>17</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 51–53, and 60.

<sup>18</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 67.

Vattimo's reflection is a plea for the pivotal role of art and even media arts in the transformation of society. Even though *The Transparent Society* was written just before the infiltration of the internet into our daily lives, it also announces how social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) paradoxically both encourage the expression of differences and consolidate their balkanisation – a process by which worldviews cease to be exposed to other worldviews and are reified to become alleged facts. His defense of postmodernity might even be seen as persisting in contemporary art, notably in feminist, LGBTQ, Afrofuturist and Indigenous artistic practices, that promotes plurality. Yet, history is on the move, and the planetary problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – including climate change, the migrant crisis and neoliberal globalisation – increasingly require not so much a release of differences as a dialogue between them. As specified by speculative realist philosopher Timothy Morton, there is no resolution of global warming (and I would add any planetary crisis) without the recognition of the deep relatedness of worldviews, of humans and nonhumans, of human beings *tout court*.<sup>20</sup> As also specified by decolonial thinkers, including Achille Mbembe, the question of the world ‘– what it is, what the relationship is between its various parts, what the extent of its resources is and to whom they belong, how to live in it, [...] where it is going, what its borders and limits, and its possible end, are – [...] *our* question. For, in the end, there is only one world’, despite or even more so because of disparity.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak speaks of the contemporary subject as a planetary subject, an imperative to rethink being-human ‘from planetary discontinuity’.<sup>22</sup>

21<sup>st</sup>-century art and philosophy are increasingly invested in the development of an aesthetics of coexistence. The most innovative artistic practices today explore, imagine, think difference – they follow Vattimo's call for its release – in an attempt, however, to connect worldviews, on the basis of the following premise: there is no resolution of planetary crises outside the consciousness of the interdependency of humans and nonhumans. This is not about finding a way to live together despite our dissimilarities but about addressing coexistence as a challenge, a difficulty, and a necessity. To proceed with my claim, I want to discuss an artwork that fully engages with that aesthetic challenge: the Inuit Isuma Collective intervention in the 2019 Venice Biennale Canada Pavilion – a video and webcast intervention that bridges two major planetary crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, global warming and the migrant crisis, and establishes the conditions of possibility for a dialogue *across*

---

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* (London: Verso, 2017); and Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 179–183.

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet’, in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 347.

worldviews (speakers and listeners, receivers and givers, the North and the South) to begin to solve these predicaments. To do so, it invents what I call, developing Spivak's insight, an ethics of responsibility.

Igloolik Isuma Productions is a collective of Inuit creators – the first to be featured at the Canadian Pavilion in Venice. Co-founded in 1990 by Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak Angilirq, Pauloosie Qulitalik and Norman Cohn, and primarily devoted to the production of independent video art, it has also helped establish several Inuit media institutions, including: an Igloolik-based Nunavut independent television network centre (NITV), IsumaTV (a website for Indigenous media art launched in 2008) and Digital Indigenous Democracy (an internet network initiated in 2012 whose main mission is to inform and consult with Inuit communities about the development of the Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation and other resource projects).<sup>23</sup> These media undertakings elaborate the digital extension of Inuit storytelling as a form of oral history transmitted by Elders to younger generations – a process increasingly understood as a means of empowerment whose effectiveness lies in the listening activity and multi-perspectivism it entails.<sup>24</sup> The Canadian Pavilion introduced two new works by Isuma Productions: a feature-length video in Inuktitut and English (with English and French subtitles), entitled *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019), and a series of four webcasts, entitled *Silakut Live from the Floe Edge*. Both the video and the livecasts were screened in the pavilion, but could also be viewed online on IsumaTV, as well as in different galleries in Canada. The *Silakut* livecasts were held on May 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th. However, it is the joint presentation of the video and the livecasts that makes this intervention crucial not only as an artistic response to the intertwinement of the migrant and environmental crises but also as a substantial redefinition of the public sphere. Considered together, they affirm difference – Inuit history as well as what Kunuk designates as the 'quiet' voices of the Igloolik Inuit community – *and* the need for members of the community to collaborate with one another, along with the need for collaboration between the Arctic North and South of the Arctic. That call is a response to the growing precarity of Igloolik, a community pressured by climate change – both the melting of the land and, more decisively addressed in the webcasts, the development of the Merry River Project, an open pit iron mine operated by the Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation in the Mary River area of Baffin Island, Nunavut.<sup>25</sup> The Mary River Property – I will be

---

<sup>23</sup> 'Silakut: Live from the Floe Edge', Art Gallery of Alberta, <https://www.youraga.ca/whats-happening/calendar/silakut-live-floe-edge> (accessed June 19th 2019); and 'Making Independent Inuit Video for 30 years', Isuma, <http://www.isuma.tv/isuma> (accessed December 9th 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Katarina Soukup, 'Report: Travelling Through Layers: Inuit Artists Appropriate New Technologies', *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 1 (2006), <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1769/1889>.

<sup>25</sup> Leah Sandals, 'Zacharias Kunuk Speaks on Isuma's Venice Biennale Project', *Canadian Art* (May 8, 2019), <https://canadianart.ca/news/zacharias-kunuk-speaks-on-isumas-venice-biennale-project/>; and asinnajaq, 'Isuma Is a Cumulative Effort', *Canadian Art* (Spring 2019),

brief here – is currently in operation despite environmental concerns expressed by scientists and some members of the Inuit population: concerns regarding the way in which the mining operation interferes with the traditional hunts for sea mammals; the effect of freighters on the ice used by the sea mammals (notably, the walrus) and on the narwhal – an arctic-dwelling whale that uses sound to navigate, communicate and find its prey but now found by recent environmental studies to be less vocal near the mine shipping routes; Baffinland’s acknowledgement of fuel spills and water contamination; and claims from members of Inuit communities of a hum or buzz-soundscape coming from deep within the Fury Strait and Hecla Strait on which sea mammal residents rely for food.<sup>26</sup> Baffinland Iron Mines is now in the process of seeking approval for its Phase 2 expansion to increase its iron ore production up to 12 million tonnes a year.

Both the video and the livecasts establish dialogue at the centre of Inuit life. In the 112-minute digital video, *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019), the Inuit hunter Noah Piugattuk, surrounded by his band, and a white man called the Boss – an agent of the government, assigned to get Piugattuk to move his band to a settlement housing development and send their children to school so that they can get jobs and ‘make money’ – meet at Piugattuk’s hunting camp.<sup>27</sup> Set in 1961 and shot on location in 2019 in Kapuivik, north Baffin Island, where Piugattuk and his band nomadically lived and hunted, the docudrama is based on the life of Noah Piugattuk and on historical events from the 1950s and 60s which have been pivotal to the implementation of settler-colonialism. Most of the video centres on the conversation, translated live, between Piugattuk and the Boss. They talk; they hear what each one has to say; they deliberate; they are listeners to each other, although in a dialogue that is far from being dialogical, ruled as it is by the hierarchy of power securing the coloniser/colonised relation. Their statements are translated yet often with hesitations and mistranslations by an Inuit interpreter sitting between them. The deliberation ends when Piugattuk refuses to accept the Boss’s proposition. ‘I wanted to look at the moment that they [the Inuit] were told to move’, says Kunuk.

---

<https://canadianart.ca/features/isuma-is-a-cumulative-effort/>.

<sup>26</sup> Information on the Merry River Project and its Phase 2 expansion can be found on the following websites: ‘Mary River Mine’, Baffinland, <https://www.baffinland.com/mary-river-mine/mary-river-mine/> (accessed December 9th 2019); ‘Mary River Project’, QIA, <https://www.qia.ca/about-us/departments/major-projects/what-is-the-mary-river-project/> (accessed December 9th 2019); ‘Baffinland cuts contracts, leaves 96 Inuit without work’, CBC, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/baffinland-contracts-cut-mary-river-inuit-jobs-1.5361604> (accessed December 9th 2019); ‘Baffinland must clarify effects on narwhal before expansion of Nunavut iron ore mine’, CBC, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/second-technical-meeting-for-baffinland-1.5111345> (accessed December 9th 2019); and ‘Environmental group asks to suspend Baffinland mine’s approval process’, CBC, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/baffinland-phase-2-hearings-oceans-north-1.5345336> (accessed December 9th 2019).

<sup>27</sup> In *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019), Noah Piugattuk is played by actor Apayata Kotierk; Isumataq (the Boss) is played by Kim Bodnia.

‘They were saying, “We don’t want to go anywhere. We don’t want to move”. But they were told they had to. So that’s what we’re looking at’.<sup>28</sup> While Piugattuk said no to the move, his was a unique voice amidst the Inuit population whose destiny was to take the form of a forced migration.

58 years later and filmed in the same area – Baffin Island – the four *Silakut Live from the Floe Edge* webcasts involve another dialogue in the making. They show Kunuk sitting with Elders (as well as a few members of the younger generation) from the Igloodik community. Gathered together, each member of the group talks one after the other, recalling memories of childhood, telling stories about human and shaman relationships, sharing their knowledge of different traditional cultural practices (string games, drum dancing, cooking). Kunuk progressively invites them to talk about the development of the Merry River Project and its impact on the community. We also see shots of the land, the floe edge where land meets the sea, as well as the film-crew and the hunters active on the land, especially in the webcasts of May 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> when seal hunting is being filmed live. Describing the project, Kunuk insists both on the media and natural components used and presented in the webcasts to express the community’s environmental concerns about the Merry River Project as well as the melting of ice, implicitly echoing Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier’s climate-change-informed call for ‘the right to be cold’<sup>29</sup>: ‘Silakut means ‘through the air’. [...] We plan to film live at our floe edge, from the ice and the sea, where hunters hunt seals, and broadcast halfway around the world to Venice. [...] The land is melting, and we want to show that this summer’.<sup>30</sup> Kunuk explicitly welcomes the webcasts’ public (which is always necessarily a shifting public) and invites it to listen to the different speakers expressing their environmental concerns about the mine project and the rupture it is creating between the humans living in Baffinland and the nonhuman animals. As is the case with the feature-length video, a translator, but now off-screen and addressing the audience exclusively, translates from Inuktitut to English, yet only approximatively – showing communication between speakers and listeners as never simply transparent. And yet, both in the video and the livecasts, listening is valued as much as or perhaps more than talking. Listening *enables* the talking, insofar as it provides the silence necessary to allow each individual to express him- or herself. The dialogue is thus never direct and is not particularly conversational – the comments are answers to Kunuk’s questions, but not a discussion between the members of the group onscreen: each member gives his or her perspective, following a tradition of storytelling. We, the audience, are positioned as listeners in the same way: we hear the different worldviews articulated from within the Igloodik community.

---

<sup>28</sup> Sandals, ‘Zacharias Kunuk Speaks on Isuma’s Venice Biennale Project’.

<sup>29</sup> Sheila Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman’s Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet* (Toronto: Penguin, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Sandals, ‘Zacharias Kunuk Speaks on Isuma’s Venice Biennale Project’.



The historical link between what is shown in the video and what is heard in the webcasts is basically the colonialist weakening of a people (its displacement, its acculturation) by which the South has been able to ensure an extractive (capitalist) logic of the land. It must be seen as a disclosure of responsibility – the responsibility of the Inuit community of the North to act politically so as to protect their rights, their culture, their land, their future; and the responsibility of the people from the South for their colonial operations, from which can emerge a heightened ecological awareness. Notice, however, how the video and the webcasts operate a major decentring of the Venice Biennale’s usual *modus operandi* – an international show where people go in order to visit art exhibitions; the webcasts are made in Igloolik and stage people living there; the video and the webcasts are available online as much to the community of Igloolik (available online at IsumaTV and Isuma’s iTunes) as to the visitors in Venice and worldwide. The Baffin Island Inuit Nunangat is temporarily at the centre in relation to a decentred Canada Pavilion. Notice also how the speakers in the webcasts never simply blame the South – they question the activities of the multinational company sustaining the Merry River Project, as well as the government, but the point of the webcasts is to speak about the problem and to make it as public as possible. It seeks listeners. Some members of the group mention the way in which the people from the South could help fund their cause; but it is never about the Inuit speakers saying that the environmental crisis is a crisis lived in the same way by everyone on the planet; they mostly insist on this being an Inuit cause – they are the actors and not simply the victims seeking pity or empathy from the South. This Nation-to-Nation approach is ‘consistent’ with the aims of Indigenous self-determination.<sup>31</sup> It is their cause and their cause needs – strategically – to be heard by the largest public possible, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Planetary discontinuity is acknowledged and it is in the context of that discontinuity that responsibility – accountability, responsiveness, dialogue and answerability – takes form. Hence the value of the livecasts which can potentially be heard from anywhere and by anyone on the planet.

Listening might well be the forgotten practice of our times – a mode of listening to the other’s story which, as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, holds open the threshold between sending and resending, sense and signification.<sup>32</sup> Listening as a slow temporality enabling discernment and sensitivity; the capacity to perform new perspectives in relation to other perspectives. In her definition of responsibility as an imperative to rethink being-human from planetary discontinuity, Spivak speaks of the imperative and the challenge of coexistence between subjects whose differences must be acknowledged yet redefined as they connect around common planetary problems:

---

<sup>31</sup> Sandals, ‘Zacharias Kunuk Speaks on Isuma’s Venice Biennale Project’.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

I am therefore suggesting that both the dominant and the subordinate must jointly rethink themselves as intended or interpellated by planetary alterity, albeit articulating the task of thinking and doing from different ‘cultural’ angles. [...] Imagine yourself and them – as both receivers and givers – not in a Master-Slave dialectic, but in a dialogic of accountability. [...] It is within this framework, thinking the world, not just the nation-state, that I say to all of us: let us imagine anew imperatives that structure all of us, as giver and taker, female and male, planetary human beings.<sup>33</sup>

Isuma articulates that dialogic less as a telling than as a listening-to-each-other.

Spivak’s ethical suggestion and Isuma’s intervention at the Venice Biennale bring us straight back to Vattimo’s upholding of postmodernity as a call for the liberation of differences. That postmodern call is as crucial today as it was in the 1980s. For there is no planetary subject or Inuit solicitation of Inuit listeners and listeners from the South without that postmodern decentring of worldviews facilitated by media art and communication technologies. Moreover, Vattimo was always concerned with the need to alleviate the postmodern fragmentation and reification of worldviews that negated their own contingency and historicity; and he retained – while substantially twisting it – the tradition of aesthetics so that art and the making of communities are not simply opposed to one another. Isuma follows that call. Yet, what its Venice intervention shows is that the planetary crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century increasingly require that the postmodern project of releasing diversity be replaced by coexistence, without which the environmental concern with the Merry River project can simply not be productive. In the fall of 2019, Kunuk brought Isuma’s video cameras to the Nunavut Impact Review Board hearings on the Phase 2 expansion of the Baffinland iron ore mine – plans that seek to double and eventually triple production and export, including the construction of a railroad and the use of super freighters shipping around the hunting areas of today’s Inuit communities of Igloolik and Pond Inlet.<sup>34</sup> The hearings, however, have been suspended. The conflict is still ongoing.

## Bibliography

---

<sup>33</sup> Spivak, ‘Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet’, 347 & 350.

<sup>34</sup> Sandals, ‘Zacharias Kunuk Speaks on Isuma’s Venice Biennale Project’.

- Art Gallery of Alberta. 'Silakut: Live from the Floe Edge'. <https://www.youraga.ca/whats-happening/calendar/silakut-live-floe-edge>.
- asinnajaq. 'Isuma Is a Cumulative Effort'. *Canadian Art* (Spring 2019). <https://canadianart.ca/features/isuma-is-a-cumulative-effort/>.
- Crimp, Douglas. 'Pictures'. *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88.
- Harris, Matthew Edward. 'Gianni Vattimo (1936- )'. *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002 (April 2013). <https://www.iep.utm.edu/vattimo/>.
- Isuma. 'Making Independent Inuit Video for 30 years'. <http://www.isuma.tv/isuma>.
- Jameson, Fredric. 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'. *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Morton, Timothy. *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. London: Verso, 2017.
- Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.
- Owens, Craig. 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism'. *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86.
- Sandals, Leah. 'Zacharias Kunuk Speaks on Isuma's Venice Biennale Project'. *Canadian Art* (May 8, 2019). <https://canadianart.ca/news/zacharias-kunuk-speaks-on-ismas-venice-biennale-project/>.
- Soukup, Katarina. 'Report: Travelling Through Layers: Inuit Artists Appropriate New Technologies'. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 1 (2006). <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1769/1889>.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The Transparent Society*. Translated by David Webb. London: Polity, 1989.
- Watt-Cloutier, Sheila. *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet*. Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2015.