

# Commemorating Gianni Vattimo's *The Transparent Society*

*Edited by*  
**Santiago Zabala &**  
**Michael Lewis**

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Commemorating Gianni Vattimo's *The Transparent Society*

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## **Contents**

Silvia Mazzini

*Introduction – The (Non-)Transparent Society: An Explosive ‘Context for Multiplicity’*  
pp. 1-5

Santiago Zabala

*Reconsidering the Emancipative Features of our Transparent Society: A Philosophical Reconsideration of Gianni Vattimo*  
pp. 6-12

Daniel Innerarity

*How Much Transparency do our Democracies Require and Tolerate?*  
pp. 13-22

Federico Vercellone

*The ‘Transparent Society’: An Aesthetic-Political Project.*  
Translated by Vanessa Di Stefano  
pp. 23-30

Daniela Angelucci

*Pluralism and Deterritorialisation: The Transparency of the Media and the Nature of Art according to Vattimo*  
pp. 31-40

Christine Ross

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

pp. 41-51

Jaume Casals

*The Concept of Transparency and the Transparent Society: Vattimo among the Modern Classics*

pp. 52-71

Gianni Vattimo

*Post... Modern!*

Translated by Thomas Winn

pp. 72-73

## *Biographies*

pp. 74-75

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## *Introduction*

### *The (Non-)Transparent Society: An Explosive ‘Context for Multiplicity’*

Silvia Mazzini

*The Transparent Society* is a key book, if not *the* very keystone, in Gianni Vattimo’s thought. Published in 1989 and then enriched with a new essay for the third edition in 2000, it stands in the middle of his production, in terms of both time and content. Commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of its first appearance, as the following collection of essays does, is therefore a precious opportunity both to retrace the development of the thought of one of the most important contemporary philosophers, and to reflect on the implications that this book bears, even today.

A scholar of Luigi Pareyson, a doctoral companion of Umberto Eco, Gianni Vattimo is internationally known as the theorist of *Weak Thought*, ‘an adventure’ in liberation from the strong structures of western metaphysics, through the weakening of modern rationality. What is meant here by ‘strong’? The term derives from Vattimo’s long reflections on Nietzsche, who, together with Heidegger and Gadamer, represents an essential point of reference. Western metaphysics, for Nietzsche, is based on the violent imposition of a foundation (from the *arché* of the first ancient philosophers, up to the principle of non-contradiction in Aristotelian logic, and so on). If the absoluteness, the untouchability of such a foundation is questioned, as happens in Nietzsche, then the foundations of the philosophical and socio-political structures of Western culture are shaken. That is to say, they weaken. But they do not disappear. For Vattimo, these structures, this rationality that has given shape to certain cultures, religions, institutions and models, are what we have at our disposal — what has been handed down to us. Consequently, awareness of the violence of metaphysics, and of the non-absoluteness of the foundation, does not require its complete elimination, or a possible replacement; the rationality and structures of metaphysics must be weakened, distorted (*verwunden*, in Heideggerian terms), but not overcome (*überwunden*) in a dialectical sense, or cancelled or completely forgotten. They lose their cogency, their ability to command, and above all their claim to uniqueness, but they continue to exist as survivals and in the midst of a multiplicity of other voices and instances.

The consequences of metaphysics' loss of absoluteness are addressed by Vattimo in what I call the 'triptych of difference'. By this term, I refer to three collections of essays published in the 1980s, which develop different arguments, but are especially similar in form, approach, and in the constellations of their content. *The Adventure of Difference* (1980), *The End of Modernity* (1985) and *The Transparent Society* (1989), reflect on the implications of the end of metaphysics not only for philosophical discourse but also for the social and political. These reflections are often intertwined with theories and practices from aesthetics and media studies.

In *The Adventure of Difference*, Vattimo observes that if there is no longer an absolute way of understanding being, then with the fall of a 'just and unique' model to structure culture, society and institutions, we also witness a multiplication of instances and points of view. These instances and cultures, previously excluded, ignored or subjugated by metaphysics, emerge in their differences, offering possibilities, alternatives and new developments for the path of emancipation which Vattimo is advocating. This multiplication also leads to the fall of the idea of a unitary and totalitarian narration of history. In *La fine della Modernità*, Vattimo shares Lyotard's assumption of the end of grand narratives. As a matter of fact, grand narratives were linked to the idea of a centralised history, which has always been written and interpreted from the European perspective. The centre around which events could be gathered and ordered took the Christian year zero as a temporal coordinate, the Occident as a spatial coordinate, and the ideal of the European man as a social coordinate.

With the end of colonialism and imperialism, the idea of the uniformity of history has become unacceptable. In Benjamin's terms, the history we are taught is written by the ruling peoples. The 'winners of history' have always been able to impose the criteria of relevance and the points of observation that were favourable to them. With the end of modernity and the rapid development of mass media, one comes into contact with other cultural worlds every day; subcultures, minorities, unknown realities suddenly present themselves in our lives, on the TV, on the street and on the internet. Each of these instances brings with it a different view of history, an alternative to Western rationality, various forms of life. This then — it should be emphasised — should not be understood as the end of history in Hegelian terms, but as the end of history as it has been told to us so far, the end of history as told from the point of view of Modernity, the end of the grand, unified narratives that asserted themselves as fact and presented themselves as absolute with their own criteria for the 'True', the 'Good' and the 'Right'.

Despite the fact that the mediatisation of society also brings with it real risks of consensus manipulation (and Vattimo has never missed an opportunity to warn us against Berlusconi's media empire, long before the topic of fake news came to the fore worldwide), this mediatisation represents an enormous opportunity for the

multiplication of points of view, historical narratives and cultures. In *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo observes that we are ‘living through an explosive situation [...] as an apparently irresistible pluralisation renders any unilinear view of the world and history impossible’ (TS 8). Now is the time to overcome the metaphysical point of view once and for all, the supreme point of view which for so long wanted to unify all of the others. Vattimo notes that this unitary point of view was the ideal for which the philosophers of the Enlightenment were already striving. It ‘can only be understood by analogy with the Hegelian programme of the “realisation” of Absolute Spirit and the full self-transparency of reason’ (TS 18).

Various fringes of philosophy and political discourse still yearn for this ideal of self-transparency of reason, intimately connected to the idea of a ‘clear and distinct knowledge’, designed on the Cartesian model. Such an idea of transparency can also be found in the theories of Habermas and Apel. In the normative ideal of the ‘unrestricted community of communication’, one tends to exclude obstacles, opacities and misunderstandings in order to achieve a state where nothing can come between speaker and listener, nor between analyser and analysed. However Vattimo crucially notes: ‘Instead of moving towards self-transparency, the society of the human sciences and generalised communication has moved towards what could, in general, be called the “fabling of the world”’ (TS 24). The ‘fabling of the world’ is another Nietzschean concept that Vattimo uses to describe a world full of different cultures, ideas and points of view. It refers to the German philosopher’s argument, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, that the real world has become a fairy-tale. In what way? Western metaphysics has been based on the distinction between a so-called ‘real’ world and an apparent one; but with the end of metaphysics, such a distinction shows its arbitrary nature. It is not a question, then, of replacing, for example, the ‘true’ world with the world of appearances; it is the hierarchy itself that collapses, leaving the way open to different worlds, born precisely of different fabulations, narratives, stories and histories. Thus, according to Vattimo, it makes ‘sense to recognise that what we call the “reality of the world” is the “context” for the “multiplicity” of “fabling” [...]’ (TS 25). We do not have a single reality of so-called ‘facts’ that imposes itself, but rather a multiplication of realities.

It is already clear how these observations lead, in Vattimo, to what for me is the salient feature of his thought – perhaps even more so than the concept of ‘weak thought’ for which he is internationally known. In the texts that follow *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo’s commitment to developing a *hermeneutic ontology* (and a *hermeneutic politics*) becomes increasingly evident; there is not one interpretation (reality) that can impose itself on others; rather, there is a dialogue, a confrontation and even a clash of interpretations. Hermeneutics can help us to emancipate ourselves from the domination of absolute truth and any claims to have achieved it. Vattimo’s focus on hermeneutics and its political implications stem from

the latest reflections of *The Transparent Society*, and in particular from the third Italian edition, which appeared eleven years after the first. The new introduction to the text, dated January 2000 (the official start of the ‘new millennium’), occasioned the addition of an essay on the ‘limits of derealisation’. Here Vattimo points out how in the ‘mediatised’ society, it no longer seems to make sense to establish the model of a transparent society. Indeed the society we live in, for Vattimo, is not transparent at all, but is rather rendered opaque by manifold realities and multiplied viewpoints. Of course, fierce resistance is still shown by certain instances anchored in metaphysics. These are opposed to what Vattimo calls ‘derealisation’, i.e. the consequence of the fabulation of the world, and seek to remain in or return to an ‘objectivist metaphysics’ (TS, 111). As an example, Vattimo adduces the demands of the capitalist market to create so-called ‘objective’ financial criteria.

The positive and emancipative outcome of the process of derealisation, however, is the multiplication and liberation of differences. We witness just such a liberation of thought-provoking interpretations in the dialogue between the authors of the current collection, who, in the *First International Workshop of the Pompeu Fabra University Centre for Vattimo’s Philosophy and Archives* (Barcelona, 28th October 2019), responded in very different ways to the question ‘Have we Reached Vattimo’s Transparent Society?’. Here we have an exquisitely hermeneutic dialogue between different points of view and disciplines. A dialogue in the methodological sense of the term, such as the one Jaume Casals sets in motion between different interpretations and histories of interpretation of *The Transparent Society*. Other essays, such as those by Christine Ross and Daniela Angelucci, focus on the role of art and the media in postmodern society – leading, as in Federico Vercellone’s paper, to the consequences, contaminations and fruitful intersections with the political implications of Vattimo’s thought. Daniel Innerarity critically reflects on transparency as a ‘value’ in Western democracies, while Santiago Zabala, dwelling on Vattimo’s reconsiderations of the emancipatory role, but also the controlling tendencies, of the media, not only retraces some nodal points of Vattimo’s thought but also underlines the political and philosophical implications dealt with in his most recent writings, thereby revealing certain possible developments of Vattimo’s work and various directions in which it may be taken. One of these developments is indicated by Vattimo himself in his short but dense essay. Analysing the relationship between post-humanism and postmodernism, he stresses the importance of overcoming the modern conception of a manipulative and totalitarian subject – the consequences of which are particularly apparent today, in the midst of the pandemic era, and even more so, with the emergence of climate change.

Using the image that Bergson, in his important essay, *Creative Evolution*, had used to define the movement of life, we can say that Vattimo’s *Transparent Society*, like an explosive, can burst ‘into fragments, which fragments, being themselves shells,

burst in their turn into fragments destined to burst again, and so on for a time incommensurably long' (CE 109). The following essays, therefore, can be considered as explosions of differences and meanings, which await readings, re-readings and interpretations in dialogue with their readers, to give rise to further, fruitful developments and considerations, now — and also in the future.

## Bibliography

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*Reconsidering the Emancipative Features of our Transparent Society:  
A Philosophical Reconsideration of Gianni Vattimo*

Santiago Zabala

If I must identify a turning point, a moment of crisis or of rethinking what matters, I would point to the second edition of *The Transparent Society* (2000) and its final chapter on ‘the limits of derealisation’.

Vattimo, *Of Reality* (2012)

Few philosophers reconsider their views. It is a difficult task to acknowledge having missed something or made an error. Sometimes revisiting earlier work is the result of critics’ pointing out errors, but it sometimes happens that a philosopher on their own acknowledges that something went wrong and must be adjusted. But it is still rare that a philosopher has enough integrity to acknowledge that their thesis must be reconsidered. Most of the time philosophers are certain of their ideas and would die before admitting a mistake. The difference between the responses is a matter not only of intellectual integrity toward readers, colleagues, and students but also of temperament. This is particularly evident in the case of Martin Heidegger. Besides refusing to apologise for joining the Nazi regime, which was his greatest mistake, he never acknowledged that one of his students (Ernst Tugendhat) was the source of a correction he made to *Being and Time* in 1965. But there are other examples, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Robert Nozick, who recognized their errors and made amends. The former stated in *Philosophical Investigations* that it was a mistake to believe semantics could solve all philosophical problems as he has previously thought, and the latter declared the ‘libertarian position I once propended now seems to me seriously inadequate, in part because it did not fully knit the humane considerations and joint cooperative activities it left room for more closely into its fabric’.<sup>1</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> On Heidegger’s Nazism see Gregory Fried, ‘The King Is Dead: Heidegger’s “Black Notebooks”’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 13<sup>th</sup> 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/king-dead-heideggers-black-notebooks>. Two months after Tugendhat delivered a lecture (‘Heidegger’s Idea of Truth’ [1964]) where he formulated, for the first time, his criticism of Heidegger’s concept of truth as *alētheia*, Heidegger wrote: ‘[to] raise the question of *alētheia*, of unconcealment as such, is not the

errors and corrections are interesting because they point out the contingency of the ideas, theses, and positions of even great philosophers. Gianni Vattimo is no exception.

*The Transparent Society* (1989) has a special place in Vattimo's oeuvre because it is the only book he repeatedly believed required a reconsideration. These reconsiderations are present not only in the third Italian edition (2000) – in the form of a new preface and chapter – but also in several interviews, passages from other books, and unpublished notes now available in his archives.<sup>2</sup> And Vattimo's latest book, *Being and Its Surroundings* (2018), has a chapter dedicated to this text's central thesis in relation to totalitarianism. Although Vattimo has written new prefaces to many of his books, this is the only text he has repeatedly returned to since its publication thirty years ago. The goal of this essay is to interpret these reconsiderations not as corrections but rather as further contributions to autonomous existence in a society that is 'anything but transparent', as Vattimo wrote in his autobiography.<sup>3</sup>

*The Transparent Society* was published in 1989, following five important books that traced Vattimo's thought during the eighties: *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (1980); *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics* (1981); *Weak Thought* (with Pier Aldo Rovatti, 1983); *Nietzsche: An Introduction* (1984); and *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (1985).<sup>4</sup> The introduction to *Nietzsche* is a monographic study of the German philosopher's key concepts, whilst all the other

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same as raising the question of truth. For this reason, it was inadequate and misleading to call *alētheia* in the sense of opening, truth.' Martin Heidegger, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking' in *On Time and Being*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 70. A complete reconstruction of this affair can be found in the second chapter of Santiago Zabala, *The Hermeneutic Nature of Analytical Philosophy: A Study of Ernst Tugendhat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). The Nozick quotation is from his *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989), 286–87.

<sup>2</sup> Vattimo's archives are available in the Library of the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. Boxes 16, 28, and 34 are particularly interesting as they include plans to rewrite *The Transparent Society*, and reviews by other scholars with his comments.

<sup>3</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, with Piergiorgio Paterlini, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 88.

<sup>4</sup> All these books are now available in English: *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (1980), trans. Cyprian Blamires and Thomas Harrison (Cambridge: Polity Press 1993); *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics* (1981), trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019); *Weak Thought*, with Pier Aldo Rovatti (1983), trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012); *Nietzsche: An Introduction* (1984), trans. Nicholas Martin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); and *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (1985), trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). A full bibliography may be found on the archive's website: <https://www.upf.edu/en/web/gianni-vattimo/arxius>.

books seek to understand the postmodern condition by employing philosophical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, which has always been at the centre of Vattimo's investigations — as demonstrated by his previous studies of Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Nietzsche — has enabled Vattimo to weaken those metaphysical concepts at the centre of our philosophical tradition. The question —also tackled by Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Jürgen Habermas — was not *whether* metaphysics and modernity had to be overcome but rather *how* such overcoming ought to take place through postmodernity.

In the books that preceded *The Transparent Society* Vattimo suggested that postmodernity should not be interpreted as a radical 'rupture' with modernity but rather as a new attitude capable of overcoming the objectivist obsessions of Enlightenment philosophies. In order to explain this new attitude, Vattimo uses one of Heidegger's most characteristic philosophical distinctions, between '*Verwindung*' and '*Überwindung*'. The latter suggests overcoming modernity with a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, a surmounting that goes beyond and leaves behind, falling unconsciously once again into modern foundations. Instead, *Verwindung* should lead us to think of 'turning to new purposes', 'twisting free', 'resigning', and 'accepting ironically' the state of modernity.<sup>5</sup> It is in this second sense that Vattimo offers us the idea of '*pensiero debole*', weak thought, as an aspect of the postmodern attitude and approach not only toward modernity but also toward society at large.

In the first edition of *The Transparent Society* (1989) Vattimo claims that the rise of mass media in the 1980s ultimately runs counter to two central features of modernity: the generalisation of dominion and its realisation in history. This is why he considers the dissolution of the idea of a linear history, that is, of a universal history that could be imposed upon others, one of the most important events signaling the end of modernity. 'The impossibility of thinking history as unilinear [...] does not derive solely from the crisis in European colonialism and imperialism. It is also, and perhaps above all, the result of the birth of means of mass communication'.<sup>6</sup> The end of 'grand narratives', as Jean-François Lyotard called them, takes place in the swift change from mechanical technology to information technology, where history is multiplied and dissolved. This dissolution is linked to Vattimo's ambition to weaken the idea of 'reality' and what Heidegger referred to as 'metaphysics' and Derrida to 'logocentrism'.

Proffering a weakened sense of reality, as well as truth and Being, allows Vattimo to replace the modern ideal of emancipation modeled on 'a lucid self-

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<sup>5</sup>On this important distinction see James Risser, 'On the Continuation of Philosophy: Hermeneutics as Convalescence' in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 184–202.

<sup>6</sup>Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (1989), trans. David Webb (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 5.

consciousness' with an ideal of emancipation based on difference, plurality, and transparency. In order to embrace the latter it is important to interpret the relative chaos that mass media created as an opportunity rather than a problem. The multiplicity of images and perspectives constitute a hope for emancipation and liberation not only in resistance to the idea of a single account of knowledge and truth but also for those voices that have been disregarded. Emancipation consists in '*disorientation*', which is at the same time also the liberation of differences, of local elements, of what could generally be called dialect. With the demise of the idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalised communication explodes like a multiplicity of "local" rationalities — ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities — that finally speak up for themselves'.<sup>7</sup> Although the weakening of the 'reality principle' has opened the way for the liberation of differences, Vattimo acknowledges that the 'problem of its critical status naturally becomes a matter of urgent concern'.<sup>8</sup>

In order to address the inevitable consequences of global communication technologies it is necessary to draw upon a philosophy that theorises an experience of reality as our belonging to it rather than first of all reflecting upon it. Defined as a 'philosophy of the epoch of the worldviews and their inevitable conflict', hermeneutics can help us recognise that 'everything sent out by the mass media is imbued with a strange air of fragility and superficiality'.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to other philosophers still attached to Gadamer's uncritical acceptance of tradition, Vattimo believes hermeneutics is a philosophical stance that not only theorises the interpretative nature of truth but also embraces the postmodern world of chaos and transparency: 'Hermeneutics is the philosophy of this world in which being is given in the form of weakening or dissolution. The thesis "there are no facts, only interpretations" has a reductive sense, of the loss of reality, which is essential to hermeneutics'.<sup>10</sup> This loss of reality is also an indication of the 'nihilistic effects of hermeneutics', which Vattimo draws from Nietzsche's revaluation.

This question of the consequences of this loss is at the centre of Vattimo's reconsiderations of his work. The new preface and chapter to the third edition of *The Transparent Society* responds to this question by pointing out that even though the general inspiration of the book — the possibilities of radical transformation enacted by the mediatisation of our existence — is still valid, a 'certain optimism with regard to the emancipative function of the media is now mitigated. This is not to question the

<sup>7</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> As Ashley Woodward explains in *Nihilism and Postmodernity* (Aurora, CO: Davies, 2009), the significance of nihilism in postmodernity is at the centre of Lyotard's, Baudrillard's and Vattimo's philosophies.

general philosophical approach, but rather to find a way out of the new problems — above all, political problems — created by the development of media and their social weight'.<sup>11</sup> Vattimo told Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone, 'When I prepared the third edition of my book *The Transparent Society*, a certain return to communism and the political critique of contemporary society had already begun to make itself felt'.<sup>12</sup> Among the many events that induced him to reconsider his position was the election of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994. The fact that the owner of the majority of Italy's TV networks and newspapers could use these to democratically rise to power demonstrated that technological transformation did not necessarily imply that emancipation would actually take place.

This general optimism regarding new global communication technologies — which emerged as a response to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's aversion to the 'culture industry' — was prompted by the 'absence of a central motor that determines all the other gearwheels' that so bothered the founders of the Frankfurt School. The transition from 'the gearwheel controlled from a central station to the horizontal model of the web seemed to many thinkers an opportunity to break free from the image of the Big Brother which conditions and manipulates the masses through propaganda'.<sup>13</sup> Victims of this optimism numbered not only postmodern theorists but also such critical theorists as Habermas, whose theory of communicative action could only have emerged in these circumstances. The 'ideal speech situation', on which so much of Habermas's grand theory was based, is one which is today actually supplied by the internet. But as we have learned from the proliferation of television channels and newspapers, and now Google and Facebook, these phenomena do not represent an extension of the public sphere so much as its colonisation by a 'transparent totalitarianism'.

In order to understand how the optimism of a 'transparent society' turned into a distrust of a 'transparent totalitarianism' Vattimo considers it important to remember the social and political transformations that took place after 9/11 with the war on terrorism. The obsession with national security has 'rendered us so transparent that there is no confusion, no Babel: research engines arrange massive amounts of data

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<sup>11</sup> Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Vattimo, 'Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality: A biographical-theoretical interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone', *Iris* 1, no. 2 (October 2009): 348.

<sup>13</sup> Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, 103. Vattimo explained in an interview in 2009: 'I think that I placed too much faith in technology and its emancipatory possibilities, a perspective that may be explained as a kind of reaction against the pessimistic outlook of Adorno. I felt that I had to settle accounts with the way in which both Adorno and Heidegger had effectively excommunicated technological society in general. In this sense, perhaps, my opposition to the Frankfurt School perspective here led me to overemphasise the event of being harbored within the technological *Gestell*, which, as I saw it, possessed an emancipatory potential.' Vattimo, 'Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality', 348.

from the start, any freedom that emerges from uncertainty and confusion seems unthinkable now'.<sup>14</sup> Vattimo, contrary to other intellectuals analysing these transformations, was also able directly to experience this fixation on security from within the European Parliament after winning a seat there in 1999. As a member of various commissions on these matters he noticed how the total transparency promised by technology was still grounded in actual power relations:

In a world where technology and economy are constantly integrated, the transparency promised by the media could only turn into a culture of massive control. Movements or transformations, regardless of whether they are central or peripheral, would not be tolerated or allowed to take place freely. [...] What we now know for sure is that transparency, whose nature we hoped was ambiguous, being endowed with the possibility of a Babelic liberation, is not ambiguous at all. Connected systematically to globalisation, it has become a feature of the total dominion of everything, which is not the 'truth' anymore, but rather its opposite.<sup>15</sup>

The distorting effects of the mediatisation of our existences, as far as emancipation is concerned, have been at the centre of Vattimo's reconsiderations for over thirty years. The latter have not only sought to mitigate a previously felt optimism regarding the emancipative function of the media but also serve as autonomous contributions to philosophy. This is why throughout his rethinking, particular space is given to the 'political' ability of hermeneutics to resist the totalitarian nature of communication technologies. Hermeneutics, contrary to Habermas's critical theory, for example, pursues emancipation not through objective knowledge but rather through the interpretative nature of truth and the weakening of reality. Whereas Habermas, Vattimo explains, 'has always been a successor (through Adorno) of a Hegelian and Marxist self-transparent and objectivist ideal, hermeneutics is rather the heir of Nietzsche: it is a question not of emancipation from interpretations but of emancipating interpretations from truth's dominion and claims'.<sup>16</sup>

Vattimo's reconsiderations were not a 'moment of crisis', but rather a 'moment of radicalisation'. This is evident in his call for readers not only to become autonomous interpreters against the totalitarian transparency that permeates our reality but also to resist those 'realist' limits that obstruct its 'derealisation'. The 'recent eruption of fundamentalism of every type that is taking place throughout the world',

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<sup>14</sup> Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, ed. Giuseppe Iannantuono, Alberto Martinengo, and Santiago Zabala (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2018), 186–87.

<sup>15</sup> Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, 191–92.

<sup>16</sup> Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, 105.

Vattimo writes, ‘is a sort of agoraphobic reaction, a nostalgic return to restricted and firm horizons such as those of the family, local communities, ethnicity, or religious sects’.<sup>17</sup> If this return to order is felt especially acutely today, as the rise of right-wing nationalist politicians throughout the world demonstrates, it is also because of its reinforcement through social media.

*The Transparent Society* and its reconsiderations are useful today in helping us resist the ongoing return to order that the mediatisation of our existences promotes, because they supply a progressive philosophy that can respond to these challenges.<sup>18</sup> When interpretation is understood as an ontological and practical point of view it can resist the ‘transparent’ and ‘neutralising’ effects of the algorithms of big data and social media that control and manipulate our lives. Hermeneutic interpretation not only unmasks the complicity of media with global finance, now often referred to as ‘surveillance capitalism’, but also serves as a practice that can preserve the Heideggerian idea of the event of Being, that is, the singularity of the human being. Recent whistleblower revelations — such as Christopher Wylie’s concerning Cambridge Analytica’s involvement in Brexit and the 2016 Trump election — received so much attention because they showed how (social media) transparency is meant to reduce our existence to statistical items in the system of production or consumption. Against this reduction Vattimo believes hermeneutics can help us to resist as autonomous interpreters, even as capitalist and security-state society continues to insist on increased levels of transparency.

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<sup>17</sup> Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), for example, considers transparency a false ideal that must be overcome, without suggesting how this can take place. A different approach may be found in the various contributions to Emmanuel Alloa and Dieter Thomä, eds., *Transparency, Society, and Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

## *How Much Transparency do our Democracies Require and Tolerate?*<sup>2</sup>

Daniel Innerarity

**Abstract:** Contemporary democracies have been configured as observation societies, which is revealed by the meteoric rise of the demand for transparency. This article examines the limits of transparency and its side-effects as well as the disadvantages of a purely ocular conception of democracy. It proposes balancing the obligations for transparency with other democratic values that should be afforded equal weight.

**Keywords :** transparency, publicity, democracy

In recent years, the concept of transparency has had a meteoric rise in our democratic societies. The observation of authorities is presented as a great instrument of citizen control and democratic regeneration. However, as with all political principles, transparency must be promoted and balanced with other principles. It would be best if our enthusiasm for transparency did not conceal the difficulties of truly exercising it, its disadvantages and possible side-effects, as well as the game of concealment it can promote. In addition to observing, citizens must have other abilities that are as essential for democracy. If we pay attention to all the variables that intervene in a democratic society, we can affirm that transparency is a value that should be promoted in its just measure, which is as necessary as it is limited, that a democracy requires transparency but does not tolerate it in excess, nor can transparency be declared democracy's sole principle. Our ocular democracies are articulated around the observation of the struggle that its elites unleash, and within the observation of that spectacle we find both the strength of its control and the limitations of transparency.

### **a) The Observation Society**

A 'monitored democracy' is that form of democracy in which citizens have multiple ways in which to observe and evaluate their governments. This possibility ranges from the traditional forms of parliamentary and judicial control to the growing role of regulatory agencies or social networks which ensure that everything that happens is an object of observation and public debate. The demand for transparency stems from the Enlightenment principle according to which the democratic life should be developed, in Rousseau's expression, 'under the public eye' (1969, 970-71). Since then, societies have evolved significantly and even though the problems they confront and our systems of government have become more complex, the demands for publicity have not decreased;

quite the contrary.

The reason for this demand for transparency is to be found within the very evolution of society, by virtue of which the authorities are made more vulnerable and dependent (Rosanvallon 2008, 61). Communication and information technologies make possible a type of democratic surveillance that was unthinkable in times of asymmetric information. The old power mechanisms do not function in a society in which citizens live in the same informational environment as those who govern them (Giddens 2002). Every society that is democratised generates a corresponding public space, in other words, it is transformed into an environment where new rules of observation, surveillance, desire for transparency, debate and control are in force.

We live in what I like to call an ‘observation society’ which consists of the unstoppable incursion of societies into the political scene. Political systems, from the domestic realm to the global space, are increasingly publically monitored. Let us think, for example, about what has taken place with international politics, how it has recently been transformed after benefitting for a long time from the privilege of ignorance. States could take the liberty of doing almost anything when what they were doing was barely known. The Soviet army met with less resistance when they attacked Budapest in 1956 than they did twelve years later in Prague; by then, European homes had televisions and the image of the deployed Warsaw Pact tanks helped forge the beginning of an international public opinion.

Globalisation is also a space of public attention that noticeably reduces distances between witnesses and actors, between those who are responsible and those who are merely spectators, between oneself and everyone else. In this way, new transnational communities of protest and solidarity are formed. These new actors, to the extent that they monitor and denounce, increasingly destabilise the authorities’ ability to prevail in a coercive manner. An observing humanity participates and is acting directly in the debate that establishes world public spaces and acts in the name of universal legitimacy, in such a way that no state can ignore the gaze resting upon it.

As in other spheres of life, in politics, the fact of knowing you are being controlled improves our behavior or, at least, dissuades us from committing the errors that are born in secrecy and where there is no transparency. As Bentham stated, publicity guarantees integrity and loyalty to the general interest, at the same time as it constructs a ‘distrustful surveillance’ (1999) of those who govern. Our public spaces know many expressions of this tendency, which has come to be called *‘naming and shaming’*: the dissuasive power of condemnation, public exposure, denunciations and shame, which is not an all-embracing power but often disciplines behaviour.

### b) The Disadvantages of Being Observed

I would like to point out the limits to transparency and one of its possible side-effects. Now that I have emphasised the importance of being controlled, I would like to point out the necessity of not being controlled, in other words, the impoverishment of political life when the principle of transparency is absolutised and we turn democracy into

‘politics broadcast live’, which is worn out with constant and immediate surveillance. One of the effects derived from the extreme surveillance of political actors is that it leads them to overprotect their actions and their words. One example of this is the fact that many politicians, knowing that their smallest acts and declarations are examined and shared, tend to restrict their communication. Democracy today is more impoverished by speeches that say nothing than it is by the express concealment of information. Politicians should respond to the demand for truthfulness, of course, but also to the demand for intelligibility. A good deal of the people’s dissatisfaction with politics stems not from politicians being untruthful but from their being so predictable and not saying anything at all.

The principle of transparency should not be absolutised, because political life, even though in small measure, requires spaces of discretion. Many other professions do as well, of course, such as journalism, whose right to not reveal their sources is recognised, since otherwise they could not do their job effectively. They should not defend it as a privilege (generally absences, silences or news conferences without questions are unjustifiable) but as a space of reflexivity in order to better perform the job that citizens have the right to expect from their representatives.

We should not let ourselves be seduced by the idea that we are facing a world of information that is available, transparent and without secrets. This is necessary because, in the first place, we know that certain successful negotiations from the past would not have come about if they had been transmitted live. There is something we could call the diplomatic benefits of intransparency. Of course, the secrecy of many traditional procedures is destined to disappear and those who participate in diplomatic processes from this point onwards must be conscious of the fact that almost everything will end up being known. But it is also true that the demand for total transparency could paralyse public action on more than a few occasions. There are compromises that cannot be reached in the light of day and with stenographers, both of which tend to provoke actors into radicalising their positions and in no way make politics a place of sincerity.

A recent example of this is the demand presented by Italy’s Five Star Movement in 2013 that its negotiations with the *Partito Democratico* to form a government be broadcast through *streaming*. We all understood at that moment that such a demand meant that there would be no agreement. I do not believe it to be an exaggeration to formulate the principle that a transmitted meeting is an un-deliberative meeting. Discreet commissions probably have a much higher deliberative quality than the weekly rituals of plenary sessions designed to control the government. In spite of certain precipitate celebrations of an imminent world without duplicity or areas of shadow, the distinction between on and off stage continues to be necessary for politics. In addition to this, by pressing for transparency and immediacy, the media provokes the behind-the-scenes politics that they then criticise. There will always be a second space in which the agreements that are impossible in a space continuously exposed to everyone’s scrutiny can be hatched. For that second level the principle of popular legitimacy is also valid, of course, but here the relationship between representatives and those represented will be more for delegation and accountability than for immediate exposure.

We must convert the principle of transparency into a central demand for governmental action in a democratic society, without losing sight of the fact that, like any principle in politics, it should be balanced with other priorities. Furthermore, its possible negative effects must be taken into consideration. As our political systems fight against unjustified opacity, we have also noted that those same control mechanisms tend to transmit excessive distrust and a fundamentally negative vision of politics (Behn 2001). Some of the rules of transparency and accountability can damage rather than reinforce confidence, to the extent that – in contrast to its declared purpose – they feed a culture of suspicion that increases public distrust.

At the same time, there are a series of strategies that produce intransparency through transparency, which Luhmann explained with particular subtlety (1995). ‘Being under the popular eye can be an astute strategy on the part of the leader or the communication experts to decrease the people’s control of the leader’s power if some precautions that have nothing to do with his public appearance are not taken’ (Urbinati 2014, 213). Transparency is only a principle that improves our democratic life if it is not enshrined while ignoring the self-interest that can be made of it and its consequences throughout the democratic society, which is also made up of other values, some of which are not very compatible with absolutised transparency.

### **c) Transparency or Publicity?**

Transparency is, without a doubt, one of the principal democratic values, allowing citizens to control the activity of their elected officials, verify that legal procedures have been respected, understand decision-making processes and trust political institutions. That is why it is not strange that it has exercised a power of fascination that sometimes makes it difficult to analyse its meaning, reflect on its content and its limits or undesired consequences. The principle of transparency has such an indisputable status that it can acquire the luxury of being indistinct and vague. We should not consider transparency as the only norm of our action on social reality, even while admitting that it stems from a legitimate desire to democratise power. In addition to limits, transparency can have negative consequences. More than a few scholars have noted that the internet can become an instrument of opacity: the increase in the amount of data provided to citizens complicates their surveillance (Fung & Weil 2007). How can citizens successfully carry out this task of control over the authorities?

For this reason, I prefer to talk about publicity and justification, which are more demanding principles than the principle of transparency. While transparency expects continuous visibility, publicity is by definition limited and delimited. Let us consider whether perhaps harassing some of our representatives at their homes or workplaces, which takes legitimate protest into private spaces, does not lead to great confusion about the distinction between the public and the private; we have sown an idea of transparency that suggests continuous visibility rather than a principle of publicity that is essentially limited to acts of political significance which take place in the public domain, thus allowing areas of intimacy and a private or even secret life.

On the other hand, while transparency tends to settle for data being made available, publicity demands that this data be configured as information that is intelligible to citizens. Transparency does not presume real access to information. In contrast, publicity means that the information is truly disseminated, that it is taken into account and that it participates in the formation of points of view. Because it is illusory to think that as long as data is public, truth will reign in politics, the authorities will open up and citizens will understand what is really going on. In addition to access to public data, there is the question of meaning. Placing large quantities of data and documents on the web is not enough to make public action more intelligible: it must be interpreted, the conditions under which it has been produced must be understood, without forgetting that this type of information generally does not account for more than a small portion of reality. Transparency is a necessary condition of publicity, but it does not guarantee it. This is the reason why there can be a potential availability of information but a lack of true publicity: because the work of the mediators (such as institutions, the means of communication, the labor unions and political parties) is not effective or there are limitations of a cognitive order (Naurin 2006, 91–92).

It is a delusion to think that we can control the public space without institutions that mediate, channel and represent public opinion and the general interest. What is occurring nowadays is that the disrepute of some of these mediations has seduced us with the idea that democratisation means disintermediating. Some people – with a logic similar to that used by the neoliberals to dismantle the public realm to the benefit of a transparent market – insist on criticising our imperfect democracies based on the model of a direct democracy, articulated by spontaneous social movements, deriving from the free play of the online community and beyond the limitations of representative democracy. The platitude that journalists, governments, parliaments and politicians are *dispensable* has been established, when what they truly are is *improvable*.

I am convinced that we are mistaken in this approach, which does not mean that the mediation provided by those professionals is always satisfactory. In a contemporary democracy, we citizens would not be able to clarify what is taking place, much less challenge the degree to which it strikes us as deserving of reproach without the mediation of politicians and journalists among others, to whom we owe, in spite of their many errors, some of our best democratic conquests.

Advanced societies rightly demand that there be greater and easier access to information. But an abundance of data does not guarantee democratic surveillance; that requires, additionally, mobilising communities of interpreters capable of giving context, meaning and critical assessment. Separating the essential from the anecdotal, analysing and placing the data in appropriate perspective demands mediators who have the time and the cognitive ability to do so. The political parties (another example of an institution that needs to be renovated) are an essential instrument in reducing that complexity. Journalists are also inevitable in the task of interpreting reality; their job is not going to be superfluous in the age of the internet; quite the contrary. Journalists are called upon to play an important role in this cognitive mediation, to interest the people, animate public debate and decipher the complexity of the world (Rosanvallon 2008, 342). But I

am defending the cognitive necessity of the political system and the means of communication, not their representatives who, like all of us, are also manifestly improvable.

#### **d) The Private Lives of Politicians**

We are witness to the increasing presence of politicians' private affairs in public opinion. This is due in part to the fact that public surveillance brings to light some aspects of the life of those who represent us that they would have preferred to keep secret. But this publicising of that which is personal often stems from politicians themselves and their communications advisors, who offer up aspects of their personal life that they consider beneficial for their popularity and the electoral battle.

The politics of transparency and the intentional exposure of one's own personal life are modifying certain conventions regarding the separation between the public and the private, even in those countries that used to clearly distinguish the two spheres. In any case, this over-exposure of private life is bringing about a transformation in the logic of the game, which turns politicians into victims or beneficiaries depending on the particular situation. Among the causes of this transformation, we can note growing competition among the means of communication, a degree of de-ideologisation and the personalisation of campaigns or the development of the internet. These are factors that clearly contribute to our understanding of some mechanisms without which this change in the limit of our collective attention would not have been possible. But there are reasons of a more structural nature that suggest that we are living in a time of expansion and generalisation of the private that weighs on the public space and denatures it. This tendency is going to persist, and one of our principal challenges is determining how to confront it based on new considerations regarding the relationship between the private and the public, among other things. It is not so much a question of protecting politicians' right to a private life, but preserving the integrity of the democratic process.

One argument for limiting the public use of politicians' private lives would come from the protection of an individual right, that allows each of us, politicians included, to prevent activities that they would prefer not to be subjected to general scrutiny from being revealed, observed or exposed without their consent. It is not a bad argument, since those who govern also have a right to privacy, but it is weak since it does not take into account that we are not speaking about just any citizen. Competing for a public office is a free choice for the candidate, who should be conscious of the burdens it entails. Those who strive for power must know that they cannot claim the right to privacy to the same extent as ordinary citizens. Greater power entails greater responsibility and therefore less freedom in which to hide. Those who exercise political power would like to enjoy being invisible in order to do what they wish they could do without suffering a public reprimand or censure (Urbinati 2013, 169).

But the argument that is focused on the protection of the private life of those who represent or govern us is insufficient, especially, because it does not centre on the good that must be preserved. When it is a question of political representatives, it is the

demands of democratic space that determine their rights and their particular obligations. Granting politicians an unlimited right to privacy would ensure that they enjoyed excessive power of control over the public discourse, which would lower the quality of democratic debate. Politicians are subject to a demand for responsibility that relativises or diminishes their right to a private life. This demand would justify making public certain behaviour that is generally considered private (information about their physical or mental health if it could affect their abilities, their financial situation or even the economic situation of their family members that could create conflicts of interest, or any circumstance that might condition their public behaviour). The principle of democratic responsibility authorises a certain degree of publicity regarding the private life of politicians, to the extent that information is considered necessary to evaluate their past, present or future capacity to assume a public function.

At the same time and for identical reasons (protecting the quality and responsibility of democratic life), there are good reasons to limit the publicising of private life. When politicians' private lives are made public, it has very negative effects on political life. When revelations with respect to private life dominate any other type of information, the general quality of public debate declines. There are many examples of this. For example, the Clinton-Lewinsky relationship marginalised the media's treatment of other questions, such as the new political proposals on social security, campaign finance, but especially the justification of the U.S. position on Iraq and the preparation for military intervention.

There is no doubt that certain types of sexual behaviour should be publicised more than they are. Sexual harassment is not a private matter. Behaviour that has a uniquely private character in principle, becomes a topic of legitimate investigation when it violates the law. However, with the exception of these concrete cases, excessive media coverage focused on politicians' private activities distracts our practices of democratic deliberation. The more attention is focussed on the banal details of private life, the less we develop the capacity to assess the nuances of public life. Politicians' private lives act as a great distraction in profoundly depoliticised societies.

For that reason, when a media outlet asks whether it should or should not reveal a private act, the questions it should ask itself are: what effects would this have on the quality of our democratic life? Is it knowledge that citizens should have in order to evaluate the actions of their representatives? If it must be done, does the degree of publicity match its relevance?

When transparency is demanded, it is important not to forget that the powerful or the industries of transparency have ways in which to divulge information and images that produce the emotional reactions that are most favourable to them, in other words, provoking the intransparency that suits them. Pushing politicians onto the public stage does not *eo ipso* limit and control their power. The case of Berlusconi has been highly illustrative in this regard: highlighting a leader's private life creates a spectacle that conceals the truly political considerations that should be on the public agenda. Berlusconi was permanently under the watchful eye of the media, but their intrusion in his life served not to evaluate his political weaknesses, but to satisfy a certain hunger for

scandals, which allowed us to overlook that which was truly important. As Michaël Foessel affirms, politicians entertain us with themselves so as not to have to talk about us (2008).

Making the life of the politician visible may make political life invisible. Giving the people ocular power does not guarantee that we are going to look at that which is most important or what society needs to know. The ocular power of the people tends to focus more on the person of the leader than on his or her policies. The things that should be the object of public visibility are not as interesting for observers as other matters; we are more curious, for example, about how much a politician earns than about how much work is actually being done; there are examples of personal behaviour that create more of a scandal than a scandalous decision would. This predominance of the personal is similar to our tendency to point the finger at a guilty party in order to visualise complex matters; ‘politicians’ also satisfy this reduction of complexity by suggesting that things are merely personal, converting the structural into something that can be assumed by a person. Between our personalisation of leadership and our recourse to scapegoats, we lose sight of those complex structures that should be the object of our democratic surveillance.

#### e) From the Power of the Word to the Power of Vision: Ocular Democracy

Democracy is the power of the citizens. The question is how we understand this power, how it is exercised, what modalities of empowerment are put into play. The current apotheosis of transparency implies understanding citizen power, fundamentally, as a power of vision.

Every society establishes a regulation of the relationships of visibility. In traditional societies, one of the privileges of power is a *privilege of active attention*: seeing everyone without being able to be seen or without having to be seen. The affecting power of many stories about emperors, popes or caliphs who disguised themselves in order to mix with the people and thus discover the state of public opinion is not due to the tensions of spycraft that they contain, but depends precisely on those fathers of the nation not being known. The great authorities of the past were recognised by their weapons, crowns, robes, insignia or musical fanfare, but hardly by their faces. The king was never naked. For modern political careers, on the other hand, the key is in having a *privilege of passive attention*: being seen by everyone without being able to see or without having to see. A contemporary emir no longer needs to camouflage himself; he can visit his territories every afternoon in order to be recognised, without the inconvenience of immediate contact with the people. This is possible due to the means of communication, whose political relevance consists fundamentally in their being the current distributors of the relations of visibility. Nowadays an anecdote about an authority figure camouflaged among the people would be impossible. Power resides in the face and that is why the paraphernalia that used to accompany authorities has fallen into disuse; the abandonment of those signifiers is due more to their uselessness than to the modesty of those who have chosen to do without them.

Modern politics has turned previous privileges on their heads. The public that politicians address is anonymous, undefined. The people are now invisible and those who have authority have it because they have managed to acquire a position of visibility for the other; those who govern are not those who see but those who are seen. The ability to see and not be seen belongs now to those who are governed.

The best formulation of this new ocular democracy in the age of spectacle can be found in Jeffrey Edward Green's book, *The Eyes of the People*, in which he states that 'the gaze rather than the decision [...] [is] the critical ideal of popular power' (Green 2010, 15). The people as spectator would have a power that the elite do not: the power of unveiling, a type of negative power that imposes an ocular responsibility on the representatives, the weight of being observed. The spectators are thus situated in a position of equals with those who are seen. The masses enjoy the omnipotent invisibility that guards used to have, and they exercise the pressure of constant vigilance over the representatives. In this way, the people are understood as an impersonal and completely disinterested unit that inspects the game of politics from the outside by virtue of the principle of publicity. Participation is minimal but the contemplation is extensive. The anonymous mass of those who see only looks because they essentially do not take part in the game except to elect those who truly compete.

If in representative democracy the voice, discourse and hearing were, respectively, the primary organ, function and sense, today the eye, the judging mirror and vision are central instead. In this way, the democracy of the internet has not broken with but prolongs the democracy of television; it is not the child of the discursive model of the agora but the videocratic model of the society of the visual means of information, which has replaced the voice with vision. Even though internet users interact and are not merely passive, their type of interaction is carried out in the assertive and apodictic style of images. Democratic dialogue has very little to do with the interchange of declarations on Twitter. All of this presupposes a decline in the politics of ideas and discursivity (Urbinati 2014, 85). Mediation and discourse have come to an end and are now secondary categories in the empire of vision.

The demand for transparency is fundamental so people can be in a position to judge and control, but it can be limited to being a voyeuristic reward for a public that does nothing but watch. We are, as Bernard Manin defined it, in an '*audience democracy*' (Manin 1997, 218) and politics has become something that the citizenry contemplates from the outside. Citizens have stopped being participants and have become passive spectators.

The empire of the visual impoverishes the level of political discourse. The public feels visually drawn to themes or perspectives on the themes that strike them as the most attractive, which do not always coincide with the true political issues or the depths of the matter, which frequently remain beyond the spectacle. One thing may conceal the other. In this way, even the function of democratic surveillance cannot be fully exercised, since the spectacularisation of political life hinders the perception of everything that does not fit into the category of spectacularity, things that are not very attractive to the citizen-spectator, anything that does not impress or is not personal, issues that do not stir rage

or envy or indignation, everything that is normal, banal, structural or complex.

Being ‘under the public eye’, as Rousseau demanded, can lead to a ‘politics of passivity’ (Urbinati 2014, 171), to a theatricalisation in which there is more entertainment than control, more ‘*politainment*’ than political judgment. For opinions to be public, it does not suffice that they be publicly expressed; they must form a part of ‘public affairs’, the *res publica*, and the judgment of what belongs is something that citizens carry out freely when they participate in the formation of their will and judgment as citizens, not as simple observers (Sartori 1987, 87). In order to forge a political will, one must do more than look; one must also participate, speak, protest. In an ocular democracy, the people can feel less encouraged to participate or decide as a sovereign precisely because they are busy continuously supervising their representatives. The spectacle is enough for them, exercising the negative sovereignty that limits the power of their representatives. In this way, transparency will be revealed as a strategy of regeneration that does not rise to the level of what is promised and that is, at times, even a true democratic distraction.

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## *The ‘Transparent Society’: An Aesthetic-Political Project*

Federico Vercellone

Translated by Vanessa Di Stefano

### 1. On the Subject of Transparency

The idea of the ‘transparent society’, formulated by Gianni Vattimo in a small book published for the first time in 1989, is the most advanced project of aesthetic politics or political aesthetics that has emerged in postmodern culture.<sup>1</sup>

Transparency in this case has nothing to do with the theories of vision that we find in painting and which employ the metaphor of the window, nor with the perceptual theories that relate to it.<sup>2</sup> The model of transparency has an eminently political value here, albeit in its aesthetic derivation. It concerns the aestheticised universe of mass culture that is positively welcomed by Vattimo, in open controversy with Adorno. Adorno’s theses are as good as overturned by Vattimo in terms of their axiological meaning, and radically modified in their descriptive meaning. Paradoxically, mass society is not, in Vattimo’s eyes, a society wrapped in ideology, so to speak; on the contrary, since it is run through with ‘media hermeneutics’ (and by hermeneutical media), it is the most anti-ideological and pluralistic society in history. It is not, therefore, a society ensnared by a “bad totality” as Adorno had it, nor is it a prisoner of the commodity-show as Guy Debord puts it in the *Société du Spectacle*.

So how does Vattimo understand transparency? On the one hand, it comes from Vattimo’s radical and positive interpretation of nihilism in recent years, of the idea that the media universe, traversed by myriad messages and thus an infinite hermeneutics, should be positively understood as a derealised world, dominated by the media and, precisely for this reason, pluralistic and ‘exposed’ in its mechanisms. Transparency would thus seem to almost be a form of redemptive appearance in Kant’s sense (it cannot be forgotten that in recent years Vattimo had Gianni Carchia as a pupil<sup>3</sup>), and at the same time a form of derealisation that

<sup>1</sup> Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (1989), trans. David Webb (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). The third edition of 2000 includes a new preface and chapter which have not yet been officially translated into English.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding this, see S. Poggi, *Il colore e l’ombra. La trasparenza da Aristotele a Cézanne*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Carchia, *Kant e la verità dell’apparenza*, Turin, Ananke, 2006.

tempers the tendentially repressive thrust of social hierarchies, depowering it in the sphere of appearance as a fictional dimension according to a model that is distantly influenced by Herbert Marcuse<sup>4</sup>. It is evident that all this ingenious articulation of a political-aesthetic project is closely connected to a particularly intense historical and cultural-historical moment, one dominated by postmodernism and its hopes of turning the incipient globalisation into something positive.

## 2. Nihilism and the Transparent Society

Through the idea of a transparent society a fundamentally positive concept of nihilism also manifests itself — as is well known — which Vattimo cultivates as the foundation of ‘weak thought’. The dispersing of reality in appearance and the postmodern aestheticisation of the world seem to release reality itself from its strongest and most tenacious bond: the ‘metaphysical’ consistency of otherness, its resistance. The key feature of the concept of postmodernity provided by Vattimo is — at least at first glance — quite far from that originally provided by Jean-François Lyotard. For the latter, postmodernism is, at least tendentially, a neutral concept, which merely provides a description of the current state of knowledge as it has become divorced from ‘grand narratives’ and has plunged us into a much more fragmented universe devoid of teleologically definitive horizons.<sup>5</sup>

In the version provided by Vattimo we are instead dealing — to limit ourselves to the essentials — with a shift of the social universe (and of the symbolic exchange itself) towards ‘derealisation/anaesthetisation’. A very significant stage in this whole itinerary — which would seem to reduce the distance between Lyotard and Vattimo — is the 1985 exhibition *Les immateriaux*, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Curated by Lyotard himself and taking place a few years after the publication of the *Postmodern Condition*, it was where the idea of a dematerialisation of reality through the new media first seemed to appear.

It is precisely the derealisation of postmodern society, which touches on aestheticism, that constitutes a positive opportunity for Vattimo. He writes as follows:

If we do not want to return to objectivistic metaphysics, we will not be able to oppose derealisation in the name of a recovery of lost reality (an enterprise that had all the characteristics of neurosis that Nietzsche attributes to reactive nihilism; and of which we have an example in the fundamentalism and fanaticism of various kinds that run through our societies); but rather we must seek aestheticisation in its aspects of conflict, and recognise in it the elements of friction

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<sup>4</sup> Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), 115 ff.

<sup>5</sup> J.F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

that constitute points of resistance and possible criteria of distinction and judgement.<sup>6</sup>

The fundamental idea behind the transparent society could probably be politically declined as a form of left-wing liberalism whereby the immense potential of real and symbolic wealth (and social wealth as symbolic wealth) expressed and created by the late-modern world would allow it to — and, on the other hand, could only — flow into a range of unlimited differences more effectively in a universe that is finally able to exploit the difference as wealth (and not, of course, to reject it as deviance). In Vattimo's eyes, therefore, the implication of aestheticisation is — very succinctly — the actual realisation of an authentic pluralism in Western societies.

Pluralism, in this field, is represented — as we have seen — by the media, which propose themselves as variegated and multiple sources and which effectively, if not by right, prevent a manipulative monopoly of consensus as hypothesised by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (where the latter is — as has already been mentioned — one of the most significant references for Vattimo in *The Transparent Society*). Naturally, this more technologically-friendly attitude, far — at least from this point of view — from Heideggerian thought, is also indebted to the easy, almost domestic accessibility of new technologies, which, while they may not turn Vattimo into a technology-friendly thinker like Gilbert Simondon,<sup>7</sup> still forcefully distance him from the classical technology/alienation paradigm that pervades the philosophical and literary culture of the twentieth century. There is no doubt that in the background of this discovery of a more *friendly* world there is a conglomeration of cultural and artistic phenomena, including *pop art*, which Vattimo seems, at least implicitly, to look upon sympathetically, despite the hostility shown to it by the Turinese *Arte Povera*.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, leaving aside these somewhat impromptu remarks, what comes to light here is a question of symbolic and juridical-symbolic legitimacy (an aspect that Vattimo does not dwell upon, however), which is a question of a society — to put it in very general, too general, terms — that has radically changed its identity with respect to the classical concepts of modernity. Postmodern society seems to legitimise itself on the basis of its own roles, in the absence of 'transcendental' institutions that would validate its way of being. The media represent, in this framework, both the market and the contemporary world, and the mechanism that legitimises them in their development. That transcendent element inherent in

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<sup>6</sup> Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (2000), pp.111-12.

<sup>7</sup> See first of all Simondon: *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Aubier, Paris, 1958; ed. expanded in 1989; *Sur la technique*, Paris, PUF, 2014. See also: G. Tenti, *Aesthetics and morphology in Gilbert Simondon*, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See *Dal Terzo Paradiso all'Arte Povera: intervista a Michelangelo Pistoletto*, ed. by P. Furia, F. Monateri and F. Vercellone, in 'L'Ombra', New series n.12, 2019, *Proposte per il reincantamento del mondo*, ed. by F. Vercellone, pp. 86-87.

institutions, that ‘founding thought’ of which Roberto Esposito speaks in one of his most recent books,<sup>9</sup> seems to disappear in this context.

### 3. Which Aesthetics for Aestheticisation?

Here a series of problems that are very much to the fore on the philosophical and political level are appearing in a very significant way.

First of all, how and in what terms should we think about the ‘aesthetic’ definition of the ‘transparent society’? It has as its premise the idea of aesthetic appearance in a key that is indebted to the third *Critique*, and which must therefore be understood within the sphere of representation. The concept of representation is, in the context of Vattimo’s thought, dependent on the symbolic economy of postmodern society. In this case we are constantly dealing with images that are structured and stabilised in the sphere of the social imaginary understood as a substantially ineffective and derealised sphere.

It is this concept of aestheticisation that creates doubts. The derealisation seems to refer to images devoid of all actuality and power. At least a misunderstanding of this kind seems to be induced by the ‘aesthetic’ definition of these images, with its vague Kantian origin. Why, in fact, would the market logic allow completely ineffective images to emerge? It would be contradictory to its purpose. Are there really sterile and powerless images that have no actuality? With regard to this, W. J. T. Mitchell and Horst Bredekamp have provided some decisive answers.<sup>10</sup> Without forgetting, however, that the images which appear on the market are necessarily full of desire and fascination (however much induced, it does not change anything...), and tend to take bodily form, as in the case of fashion and luxury brands, where they settle on the body and become, by covering it, powerful symbols. Moreover, as Marie-José Mondzain has shown, there is no *Ikon*, that is a visible image, that does not refer to an invisible image, and it is this dialectic, this ‘economy’ – following Mondzain – that expresses the desire to look out on a true ineffable that founds the political and aesthetic-political order.<sup>11</sup> That is the fundamental legitimising mechanism.

The order of pure representation, from this point of view, is simply not functional, and this is what the perpetual decline of the market ends up highlighting. Each time the image – whether it is of luxury, fashion, the face of charismatic leaders or images of terror (it is not relevant here) – expresses an identity and at the same time a possibility for identification. It is, so to speak, never suspended in

<sup>9</sup> R. Esposito, *Pensiero istituzionale. Tre paradigmi di ontologia politica*, Turin, Einaudi, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> See W. J. T. Mitchell *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2005; *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2011; H. Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> See M.- J. Mondzain *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004.

the sphere of representation. The image always tends to come true. It is always imbued with desire and expectations, so it is never pure appearance, rather it is always projected into a future that necessarily endows it with a *logos*, turning it into a project. The edge of the image gives it *logos* and time, projecting it out into nothingness and darkness — and therefore creating a relationship between surface and background — almost as if it were the boundary to complete, integrate and embody it. Thus, this *logos* connects the image to its background, which is the dark nothing to be integrated, and thus permanently turns the image into a project.

Wanting to define itself as a post-historical era, postmodernity seems to want to draw itself out of this logic, and, in so doing, to remove from the image its vocation to take form, purge it of darkness in order to stabilise it (and stabilise itself) on the level of pure clarity of representation. In this way, however, the images become ‘world pictures’ and they are stabilised — as Heidegger saw clearly<sup>12</sup> — in a horizon that makes them progressively (and ideologically) ineffective. This opens them to a potentially unlimited hyper-production; they become images of the world, possible identities. In the end, this is the logic of the image without a background, ‘devoid of the nothing’ of postmodernity, which no longer knows how to take form because it does not notice that lack inherent in being *only* an image of... On the other side of the coin, that of the fruition of the image, the disoriented subjects in the global world accentuate their demand for identity and therefore for images that they would like to embody.

It has to be said that we are dealing with an ‘aesthetic capitalism’.<sup>13</sup> It represents the key feature of an emptying of the symbolic and traditional boundaries of figurative space: by virtue of this, everything becomes visible, while sight becomes the principle of a ‘pictorial’ relationship with the world reduced to the two dimensions of representative space. The universe becomes ‘ocularised’<sup>14</sup> — to use a neologism — and the continuous intersecting of glances produces a general, mutual envy. The symbolic exchange is transmitted through the wire of the war of glances (be it rich ways of being or nuclear arsenals displayed as a terrible testimony to one’s personal power). On this path the image tends to take form and become substance after becoming a representation without depth. Transforming once again into an image of desire, it tends to become three dimensional once more.

This is the contradictory logic of postmodernism but also of its overcoming, the one for which the image, radicalising its intrinsic will to take form, responds more and more to the need of the subjects for identity, and denies the idea of being (only) a representation. On the other hand, the subjects, more and more disoriented in the global world, make an incessant demand for it because it

<sup>12</sup> See M. Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’ in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt, New York, Harper & Row, 1977, pp.115–36

<sup>13</sup> G. Böhme, *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*, Frankfurt a.M.; Suhrkamp, 2016

<sup>14</sup> See in this regard, starting with impressionist painting, V.L. Stoichita, *L’effet Sherlock Holmes. Variations du regard de Manet à Hitchcock*, Paris, Hazan, 20.

responds to their need for identity. This is the step that leads us beyond postmodernism in the direction of our world, which is submerged by a downpour of images that also constitute a hail of aestheticised identities: from fashion, to luxury, to tattoos, etc., which, however, would like to be 'real'. To the extent that it is clear that they are not, others will arise that are more 'true and suitable', thus substantiating the implacable logic of the 'world-picture' which is also that of the market.

#### **4. Beyond Aesthetics, Beyond Postmodernism**

The question that arises here is whether we have or have had to deal with a liberation of the symbolic similar to that evoked by Arthur Danto in his book on the death of art,<sup>15</sup> or with a sort of fall of the symbolic chain that corroborates Frederic Jameson's thesis.<sup>16</sup> If we lean towards the latter, we are not heading towards a happy postmodernism but towards a tragic and ridiculous dimension of the present age in which the breaking of the symbolic chain or of the stylistic series is perpetuated in a sensual narcissistic recognition directed towards the past and not an experimentation with the future.

The significance of the symbolic chain in its relationship with reality is that – to be very succinct – it is the symbol itself that proposes itself according to declared sequences and therefore proposes its own reality as a model.<sup>17</sup> The image, in this ambit, has no relationship with itself but only with what precedes or follows it, and the primacy in this case is not that of the objective genitive: 'image of'. The reality of the image itself in the image derives from its being put into sequence, and therefore from its style. The style makes the image *real* because it makes its message clear and therefore also its relationship with the invisible that legitimates it.

If the style (as we choose to retranslate Jameson's thought) declines, then – to arrive at political theology – the figure of the *katechon*, of the *power that holds back*,<sup>18</sup> the condition of all political theology, also declines. In other words, we are dealing with an implosion of the legitimising chain that we are witnessing today. The figure of the emperor or the statue of the ancestor in Classical Rome guaranteed, through the effigy, that is, on the basis of their own features and characterisations, the legitimacy and therefore the very reality of the person depicted.

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<sup>15</sup> See A. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> See F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1991.

<sup>17</sup> See O. Boulnois, *Au-delà de l'image. Une archéologie du visual au Moyen Âge (Ve-XVIe siècle)*, Paris, PUF, 2008, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> See. M. Cacciari, *The Withholding Power: An Essay on Political Theology*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018.

Now we are instead in the era in which legitimacy no longer succeeds in producing models, that is, sequences of legitimate images that tend to present themselves as *exempla* and therefore as reality in images. In other words, we live in a universe of aestheticised images that can no longer be configured as reality. This means that we are in an era without *exempla*, which can no longer represent, and, precisely for this reason, in an era bound to aestheticism and melancholy.

The epoch in which we live is the epoch in which the image chases the interrupted series, and the charismatic leader helplessly pursues charisma as a legitimate identity that is nevertheless barred to him because it lacks the chain of precedents and the attendant consequences that establish it. The blame does not lie with the leader who aspires to the charisma of legitimacy even if only to avoid feeling uncomfortable, who may not be aware of the mechanism that drives him, but with the symbolic and legitimising system that tends to neurotically reproduce an old and battered game that exhibits faults and discontinuities, but which, however, in the eyes of its actors, still appears, despite everything, as legitimate and therefore as universal. The identity, the certainty of not being the victim of a copy, of the false *archon* that presents itself under the guise of the real one, becomes in this context an increasingly repeated and anguished request in terms of legal legitimacy, matched on the other side by an increasingly intense offer by the market of very fleeting ‘authentic’ identities.

Identity is the true great commodity of our time. The age of the ‘world-picture’ is the age of angrily demanded identities which grow more fragile every day. All identities are always on the verge of decline and on the edge of the transition from typical to merely empirical. They therefore always require a momentary and sudden realisation, in order to decline quickly and become a servant of another series, that of the market. So we have a continuous shift from the typical to the obsolete, and from the legitimate to the supermarket. The market for its part produces and offers plenty of identities in order to, in its own interest, consume them just as rapidly.

In short — merely to point out the salient features of the issue — we are dealing with an immense difficulty of representation, where representing constitutes the reduction of reality to the image, the face of a possible universality. True realism is qualified by the ordering of the image, we could say by the styles of the image, and not by the perceived data. Aestheticisation constitutes, from this point of view, a loss of reality in the world of the image, and only secondarily in the world itself. It basically indicates a loss of the structure of that sequence that produces the ‘reality effect’ (or simply *reality*) in favour of a nominalistic disruption of the sequences functional to the needs of the market that can cling to fragments of identity and feed their hunger. In other words, what is fed is the desire for a full return of the series. If we think of *slow food*, for example, we are dealing very clearly with a synecdoche structure, in which the mechanism works according to the *pars pro toto* modality, where *slow food* refers to a system, that of ‘authentic’, ‘rooted’ life, and bases its ethically appreciable cultural and commercial presence

on this. The market, contrary to what has been said for a long time, does not these days homogenise, but rather personalises. After the great emphasis of the sixties and seventies on the universal rights that were protagonists of the political battles oriented towards the future, late modernity has wistfully returned to individualisation, one could say to the serial eccentric. Identity is no longer universal but increasingly determined by its particular inclinations. For example, to say who we are, very often we look to the past, even the recent past recognised as *our past*, not to the future: think, for example, of the passion for modern antiques or the revival of dialects. We are, more and more, our origins. Aestheticisation does not mean, in this context, anything other than a failure of the stylistic-symbolic chain which can no longer produce symbolic realities or symbols as reality.

## *Pluralism and Deterritorialisation: The Transparency of the Media and the Nature of Art according to Vattimo*

Daniela Angelucci

### **Between Belonging and Disorientation**

In 1989 Gianni Vattimo, in *The Transparent Society*, reflected on the decisive role of the media in contemporary society, stressing that this circumstance does not lead to greater transparency, but to complexity and chaos, due to the multiplicity of information. According to the thesis developed by the book, the intensification in the possibilities of information renders the idea of a unitary reality inconceivable, producing oscillation, plurality, and causing the principle of reality to disappear. With a typical reversal in his philosophical perspective, Vattimo concluded that it is precisely in this chaos that our hope lies: ‘Other possibilities of existence are realised before our very eyes, in the multiplicity of “dialects” and in the different cultural universes opened up by anthropology and ethnology. To live in this pluralistic world means to experience freedom as a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation’.<sup>1</sup> Vattimo therefore takes a stand against the recovery of a unitary reality, which has perhaps never existed for the human being, and against the neurotic attitude of nostalgia for the past, recovering Nietzsche’s idea expressed in the famous aphorism from section 54 of the *Gay Science*: now that philosophy has shown us that we are dreaming, all we can do is continue to dream. Against all catastrophic attitudes, which appear every time new technologies are introduced, in the face of the power of new media, Vattimo envisages an escape route in the philosophical process whereby he overturns what appears to be negativity into an emancipatory possibility. So: society is complex, chaotic, and this chaos is ultimately our salvation.

Thirty years later, has anything substantially changed in our society, compared to the situation described by Vattimo? Is continuous connection an evolution of earlier forms of media, or has there been a qualitative leap? In 2012 the Korean scholar Byung-Chul Han wrote a text with a title very similar to Vattimo’s, *The Transparency Society*. Reflecting on the omnipresent demand for transparency that today dominates public discourse, including political discourse, Byung-Chul Han states that ‘the society of transparency is *an inferno of the same*,’<sup>2</sup> a systemic coercion that tames and destroys negativity, otherness, diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 3.

Continuous exposure renders everything pornographic, without secret and therefore pleasure, eroticism, ambivalence, whereby what is eliminated is the veil of beauty. The last feature of today's society proposed by Byung-Chul Han is that of control: with digital connection it is possible to attain Bentham's panopticon, given the situation in which privacy is increasingly at risk, thanks to social networks, security devices, cameras scattered in public spaces. Byung-Chul Han's book is, in the end, a radicalisation of the most widespread idea with regard to contemporary society, an idea that in its profound catastrophism holds back every possibility of constructing a new imaginary. This idea can be responded to by taking up and developing some of the ideas presented in Vattimo's book from 1989.

Firstly, full transparency, whether desired or deprecated, is never achieved. Catastrophic consequences often result from a disproportionate belief in the power of the medium. Even if the media set out to achieve total control, total visibility (renouncing the multiplicity about which Vattimo wrote), this does not mean that something may not escape this mechanism, precisely through the media. In an influential book published in 1999, John D. Bolter and Richard Grusin defined 're-mediation' as that mechanism which represents one medium within another (for example, painting or photography in cinema or television), which today constitutes a fundamental characteristic of the new digital media. 'The desire for immediacy leads digital media to borrow avidly from each other as well as from their analogue predecessors such as film, television, and photography. Whenever one medium seems to have convinced viewers of its immediacy, other media try to appropriate that conviction'.<sup>3</sup> Such a characteristic of our contemporaneity can present a very problematic scenario: the recursiveness of re-mediation can have the effect of attenuating or even cancelling the difference between medium and reality by offering us a totally mediated reality. This, according to Vattimo's book, is not necessarily a problem, however, even if we admit that this may lead to a dystopian scenario, which is perhaps more real today than in 1989. Indeed, the act of re-mediation might just as well be oriented precisely towards the enhancement of differences.

In Italy, Pietro Montani, through the use of the term 'intermediality' (*intermedialità*), argued that the device of media recursiveness can be transformed (I would say deterritorialised, taking up a term proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) into an act of critical comparison between the media. Montani calls intermediality the active intervention in the regime of images that uses different media to enhance differences, and with such a concept he criticises both the idea of 'a direct grip of the image on the world [and] the "postmodern" thesis according to which the real world would risk being totally replaced by the simulated one'.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the strategy has strong social and political connotations: 'only by actively

<sup>3</sup> James D. Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Re-mediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Pietro Montani, *L'immaginazione intermediale. Perlustrare, rifigurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2020), XIII.

comparing the different technical formats of the image (optical and digital, for example) and its different discursive forms (fictional and documentary, for example) can justice be done to the irreducible otherness of the real world'.<sup>5</sup> Only in the context of an increasingly careful and fine-grained comparison between the different media, in fact, can we configure a series of practices capable of critically reorganising the discourses linked to new technologies. One may think of the typically intermediate phenomenon of cyber-activism. At the same time an overall reorganisation of the experience of images is more and more common in the field of cinema and artistic experimentation. The dystopian scenario which may be referred to multimedia's power of total simulation, therefore, seems to stand in contrast with creative work, the work of deconstruction, transformation and critical reflection on the media regime, which could become, as Montani writes, one of the decisive fields of the political struggle of our future. This is the Deleuze-Guattarian escape route (or 'line of flight') born within the very territory against which it intends to wage war, and that Vattimo, without referring to these two authors, often uses as a mechanism of thought. The text on the transparent society places this mechanism at its centre, that is, the ability to transform apparent poverty into wealth: the chaos of too much information causes disorientation, which may, however, represent an opportunity for the liberation of differences and highlight that which is plural.

### **Aesthetics Beyond its Borders**

In Vattimo's more general reflection on aesthetics we often see this kind of reversal at work. It is, for this reason, useful to broaden our perspective and consider also the texts by Vattimo, published shortly before *The Transparent Society*, which rather concern the impossibility of posing the ontological question regarding the definition of art. Here Vattimo wrote that the question 'what is art?' presupposes a certain vision of the world that today has lost its meaning. What *today* we are talking about has been said many times: it is the era that takes leave of modernity, which escapes the logic of development and the thought of the foundation, the era of the end of metaphysics, prophesied by Hegel, experienced by Nietzsche and recorded by Heidegger. The art we are talking about is therefore that of the age of art's death or rather its decline, which is an aspect of the more general event that is the *Verwindung* (Overcoming<sup>6</sup>) of metaphysics. What is problematic, then, is to assume that it is possible to answer the question 'what is it?', which can, in fact, be answered only using metaphysical categories that belong to an era that is over. This point continues to be important, since this question is still at the centre of the reflection of various authors, who work mainly in the field of analytical philosophy, and leads to reductive or tautological answers.

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<sup>5</sup> Montani, *L'immaginazione intermediale*, XIII.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Zabala, *supra*, p. 8, and elsewhere in this volume for a discussion of possible translations of this term – Eds.

However, according to Vattimo, not posing the question about the essence of art does not mean consigning art to silence; on the contrary, the time of art, that of the 'leap' and artistic genius, is paradigmatic of our age, which has abandoned linear, progressive-cumulative historicity. In Vattimo's thought, the sphere of aesthetics, far from being a depotentiated sphere, is therefore exemplary of that discontinuous succession of our time, which thus opens up new paths and horizons. The result is also the recognition of a peculiar 'responsibility' of aesthetics, not intended as a philosophical discipline, but as a sphere of experience that acquires an emblematic value in order to think of historicity in general. The centrality of the aesthetic, with its character of self-formativity and plurality, is accompanied — paradoxically, but not excessively so — by the abandonment of the search for an ontological definition, in accordance with the epochal dissolution, proper to our age, of every foundation.

The problematic aspect of this perspective, obviously pointed out by Vattimo himself, therefore concerns the death or decline of art understood in two senses: the end of art as a specific and separate fact; aestheticisation as an extension of the dominion of the mass media, insofar as it produces consensus, taste and *sensus communis*? Here we return to the starting point, to transparency as total exposure.

If the aesthetic pervades our world, what is the meaning (if not the essence) of art? Is it possible not to think of art as being confined in a separate space but also, at the same time, to avoid its disappearance, its total disintegration, at a time in which the whole world appears as 'a work of art'? I would add a few questions about philosophical aesthetics: by accepting the responsibility that accompanies the sphere of aesthetics understood in this way is it possible to avoid this disappearance when we are interested in addressing aesthetics from a perspective that seeks comparison with other dimensions? On the one hand there is the need to keep aesthetics linked to other dimensions considered as being more serious, as a moment that is not merely playful, not irrelevant (at several points Vattimo treats art, poetry, as a privileged experience with respect to common experience), on the other there is the need to preserve its specificity and strength.

I would like to quote Gianni Carchia, a scholar of Vattimo's, who addressed aesthetics without ever renouncing comparison and openness toward other themes, intending on the one hand to prevent a reductive narrowing of the meaning and task of the aesthetic discipline, but on the other hand being careful and aware of the risk of an indiscriminate expansion and therefore a dissolution of this discipline. This concern characterised Carchia's thought to the very end, with the last book published in his lifetime dedicated to ancient aesthetics, an era — that of classical antiquity — he investigated while searching for an artistic configuration 'all the more firm the more it was entrusted to the play [of] external influences. [...] Such works [of the classical era] are always, in fact, the result of a tension, of a

struggle: they are, properly, outcomes, achievements, born from a friction with heteronomy, a dependence of art on other spheres of values<sup>7</sup>.

A result of this questioning between the assumption of art and aesthetics as paradigms and the need to maintain their specificity can be considered as the thesis of the work of art as an event: it is recognised as a specificity, which does not, however, lie in some ontological property, but in its being not representation but rather ‘bringing-into-the-work the truth of being’, as Heidegger wrote in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (a thesis already central to Vattimo’s 1967 *Poetry and Ontology*). In fact, the truth we are talking about here is obviously not a truth that is already given, which art supposedly imitates, so it is not a matter of conforming, an adaptation to something already pre-constituted, but precisely an event in which the truth of an era is revealed. In the happening of the work of art the truth is revealed, it is indeed constituted. In this sense, the work of art organises new historical-social forms, and suspends the obviousness of the world, constituting itself as a cause of disorientation and establishing other possible worlds.

However, is this truth only an opening up of historical worlds? In some texts from *The End of Modernity*, in particular ‘The Death or Decline of Art’ (1980) and ‘The Shattering of the Poetic Word’ (1983), Vattimo goes beyond this idea by taking up the pair of Heideggerian concepts, ‘the setting up of a world’ (*das Aufstellen einer Welt*) and ‘the setting forth of the Earth’ (*das Herstellen der Erde*), which face up to one another in conflict. If setting up a world is linked to the historical, cultural dimension, the passage from Hölderlin that Heidegger cites – ‘Yet what remains, the poets found’ (Hölderlin, *Andenken*, 1803) – refers instead to the earth (*Erde*), that element of the work which remains as a sort of residue, a core that can never be consumed by interpretation.

In poetic language, in art, next to the opening of worlds and the unfolding of meanings there is an earthly, material element, which refers to our mortality and involves being born and maturing, bearing the signs of time. This material and temporal element, this ‘other than the world’, is the monumentality of the work of art, of poetry, not in the sense of a full cohesion and balance of form and content, but as a sign that does not allow itself to be consumed in postponement and interpretation. In this sense the poetic word ‘shatters’, as the title of one of Vattimo’s essays states: its shattering indicates the fact that poetry is not transitive, it does not refer to anything else; it is the simple act of showing, of displaying itself.

This exposure to mortality, which has a destructive sense for a thing-tool, represents an element of positivity for the work of art: in the conflict between world and earth there is in fact an unveiling (*Welt*) that has not erased the concealment from which it comes (*Erde*). In this ‘half-light’ the truth that is given does not have the authoritarian traits of transparency, of metaphysical evidence (in this sense experience is paradigmatic): it is truth itself that changes nature, becoming ‘half-light’. ‘What remains’, founded by poets, is a monument not only and not so much

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<sup>7</sup> Gianni Carchia, *Estetica antica* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000), VII.

in the sense of what is preserved, but in the sense of what remains, therefore a monument as trace, temporality, finiteness.

### On the Margins and in the Background

In the 1982 text 'Ornament/Monument' (contained in the second part of the book, *The End of Modernity*), Vattimo recognises in Heidegger's lecture *Art and Space* (1969), focused on sculpture, a new variation of the definition of art, that goes beyond a simple resumption of the themes of *The Origin of the Work of Art*. This new variation can be recognised starting from the question: what happens if the Heideggerian concepts of 'setting up a world' and 'setting forth the Earth' are thought with reference not to poetry, but to sculpture? In other words, in the shift from a temporal art to a spatial one. The reference to a spatial art clarifies what Heidegger means by the notion of earth, preventing a misunderstanding of it as foundation or inauguration. Here, in fact, the relationship between the concepts of locality (*Ortschaft*) and region (*Gegend*) can be understood as a specification of the relation between world and earth. The artwork arranges localities — it is the agent of a new spatial order — in the same sense in which it exposes new worlds, but the artwork is also a vanishing point in relation to the vastness of the region, of the earth. The shift from the temporal idea to the spatial makes it possible to better understand the meaning of this production of the earth, which is not a foundation or an inauguration, but rather an opening as expansion, breaking through. The earth — or even the region — is the background.

What is in the background, however, has a double meaning: 1) breakthrough, opening, horizon, vastness of the region; 2) what is placed in the background, as marginal. To be on the margins, to be marginal — the decorative and ornamental, peripheral character — does not concern only a particular type of art; it is presented as the character of all art, just as it characterises the truth which it brings into the work. A truth that can take place, as an event, is precisely a marginal and background event.

In explaining the marginal character of art (and truth) as one of the consequences of the explosion or diffusion of aesthetics, Vattimo refers to Walter Benjamin, among others, and to the famous notion of the 'decline of the aura', understood as the uniqueness and originality of the work. Benjamin, as is well known, identified the loss of the aura as the destiny of art in the era of technical reproducibility and as the cause of a new mode of perception, detached from the contemplative and cultic context, and subject to progressive developments. Although Vattimo does not point this out in his writing, it is interesting to note that in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin addressed the question of fragmented, dispersive perception — an attitude typical of the consumer of mass art in the new era — speaking of the cinematic spectator, but also of the distracted and collective reception induced by architecture, which has always provided the prototype of a work of art whose reception occurs collectively in a

state of distraction. If cinema, according to Benjamin, is the most powerful instrument of contemporaneity that causes the devaluation of the cult value of art, the architectural work — a place where subjects move around and are forced to abandon a merely contemplative attitude — has always presented the most clear example of the possibility of an oblique perception without meditation, made up mostly of occasional glances.

In the same way, in Heidegger we notice this shift towards the spatial dimension, a shift that clarifies the notion of earth, understood not as foundation but as breakthrough, openness, and therefore as open horizon, but also as marginality. At the same time, this clarifies the issue of monumentality, which is also at risk of being understood as solid and cohesive, foundational permanence. With a monument, the truth put in place by art does not appear profound and essential, but has the character of a residual trace: it is preserved, it remains, not because of its strength, but because of its weakness. And yet I would like to stress that this weakness does not renounce, precisely, a monumental vision of art, if it is true that what remains is founded by poets.

Going back to the tension between the pervasiveness of aesthetics and the loss of meaning, between a proper exit from the separateness of philosophical aesthetics and its always possible dissolution, I propose, following this analysis of Vattimo, the expression ‘on the margins and in the background’. The background and the margin can be the paradoxical — though by no means irrelevant — terms of the central peripherality of the aesthetic phenomenon of our epoch.

## Geophilosophies

In the final pages of this article I would like to make a brief comparison between the notions proposed by Vattimo with respect to the nature of art and some concepts developed by Gilles Deleuze. Vattimo has never addressed the latter directly, and what is interesting here is to link the two authors not so much with regard to so-called postmodernity, or the idea of the weakness of truth — since it seems to me that Deleuze’s use of Nietzsche’s thought does not move in this direction — but in reference to a set of themes that in Deleuze’s thought can be summed up under the name of geophilosophy. Deleuze wrote about it, with Félix Guattari, first in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and then in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), but also in *What is Philosophy?* (1991), where the term ‘geophilosophy’ is the title of the fourth chapter, composed of very dense pages. The theoretical need from which this concept arises is the need to abandon the image of thought, first of all Platonic, as an ascending path that moves from the bottom upwards, so as to replace it with a sort of horizontality, a surface movement, located on a plane of immanent multiplicities, that does not envisage any element transcending it.

It is in this context that the two authors use a pair of concepts that seem to recall, from a different perspective, the Heideggerian binomials referred to by Vattimo: territory, understood as the identity of places, closed and determined

space (striated space, in their terminology), and earth, as opening, infinite variation, space not marked by internal boundaries (smooth space). In this sense, the movement of ‘deterritorialisation’ — a Deleuzian word currently much used by other authors — represents the action of ‘undemarcation’, of escape from the territory of belonging, an action that opens all closed spaces, all territories, towards the earth: towards the ‘region’, we would say with Heidegger and Vattimo. Every possibility of escaping from a power by which one is determined, conquering a function that is not the one assigned, corresponds, however, to the possibility of a new ‘re-territorialisation’, that is, the establishment of a further territorial identity, from which it is necessary to escape. The two terms — deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation — taken together in a binomial, therefore, represent the operators that render the entire relationship between territory and earth dynamic (world and earth, locality and region), characterised by continuous openings, lines of flight towards a minority, marginal, open position, and as many moments of recomposition of a recognisable space marked by borders.

Although according to Deleuze and Guattari this movement can be found in all fields (it obviously has a lot to do with power and politics, but, the authors write, even singing can be a deterritorialisation of the mouth, which becomes available for a function other than the consumption of food), it is first and foremost essential for there to be a work of art. It is indispensable in art to have a connection holding together the ‘block of sensations’ of which the work is composed, while maintaining an opening towards the earth: ‘it still needs a vast plane of compositions that carries out a kind of deframing following lines of flight that pass through the territory only in order to open it onto the universe, that goes from the house-territory to the city-cosmos’.<sup>8</sup> Also in this case, what are recognised as indispensable elements for art are an inevitable principle of composition, a frame, which recalls the disposition of ‘locality’, that is the act of marking a territory, and a principle of opening, of deterritorialisation, of breaking through that refers to the earth as a background, to the vastness of the ‘region’.

Another link between Vattimo’s themes highlighted here and Deleuze and Guattari’s thought emerges in the chapter of *What is Philosophy?*<sup>9</sup> dedicated to art, from which the last quotation is taken. The chapter begins with a statement that may seem paradoxical to those who have in mind the image of Deleuze as a philosopher of differentiating production, as the one who defined philosophy as an activity that is primarily creative, inventive. In fact, the authors argue that the main characteristic of art is to preserve, in the same way that Vattimo perhaps surprises his most naïve readers when he speaks of art as ‘what remains’. However, in this case, as it is for Vattimo, what is preserved is never a monument in the sense of a foundation; rather, to affirm the self-positioning of the work of art, its support for itself, beyond the vicissitudes of its author, means first of all to reject the idea of art as an eminently subjective experience, dependent on the author. The block of

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<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London-New York: Verso, 2011), 187.

sensations that is created in artistic activity — what Vattimo would call the monument as ‘trace’ — is not in fact composed of perceptions and affections, but of ‘percepts’ and ‘affects’, terms that indicate sensations and feelings now independent, totally detached from subjective experience, available to anyone. The question of preservation therefore has to do with the question relating to the material from which the work is made, which constitutes the *de facto* condition, but the sensations it allows render the work of art self-sufficient in relation to subjective experience.

Also, Vattimo, in his text on the ‘shattering’ of poetry, presenting the notion of monument, is eager to reiterate that this notion should not be referred to a philosophy of self-consciousness, as a condition for a more authentic freedom on the part of the subject. The monument is not a function of the self-reference of the subject; it bears a trace, but always for others. The sensitive aggregate that is the work of art appears in both cases, for Vattimo and for Deleuze and Guattari, as something that detaches itself from the subjective experience of the artist to preserve itself as a trace, to remain in its intransitivity, in its simple showing itself without deferral. This territory, necessarily enclosed in a frame, supported by some kind of ‘armour’, is art only when it provides continuous lines of escape and openings, that is, when it is background, horizon, and at the same time search for a minority position, for a form of marginality.

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## *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

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<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

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<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>

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<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>

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<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*

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<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

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<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.

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<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 Igloolik 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 Iglooniit community.

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<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:

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<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.

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*The Concept of Transparency and the Transparent Society:  
Vattimo among the Modern Classics*  
Jaume Casals

I open a book from the University Library. The book is the first edition of *La società trasparente*, by Gianni Vattimo, Garzanti Editore, Milano, 1989. But my surprise is immense when I recognise the underlining method and familiar marginal notes of my dear friend Josep Ramoneda. I have a great volume in my hands. From that moment onwards I committed myself absolutely to reading Vattimo, even though he is a living and very gentle philosopher, as if he were a classic. The pages carefully studied by Ramoneda draw my attention to several passages and, since the author is already a classic, the question as to the meaning of these sentences becomes — how shall I put it? — a real goal.

The sentences I have chosen to comment on are:

It will not have gone unnoticed that the expression ‘transparent society’ has been introduced here with a question mark. 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. (Vattimo 1992, 4)

More precisely, the meaning which interests me the most is that of the third sentence (c). This is obviously the idea of the book that Vattimo was writing in 1989, and, of course, I am not going to dive so far into the classicism of the author as to say that we, the readers of today, know better than him what he was trying to say. Milan Kundera puts it brilliantly when he says that he likes the books that are cleverer than their writers (Kundera 1986, *passim*). And in some way this could be an interesting definition of what is a classic. But my only intention is to comment on the thesis of Vattimo amidst other classical theses on transparency, illuminating Vattimo (who obviously is clear enough on his own) with the light shed by Berkeley, Rousseau and Foucault: three thinkers of transparency and society as well.

Firstly, transparency is the Modern belief in the identity of the real world and the personal mind. The goal of the human spirit is this identity, by means of religion, science, or politics. And the ideas of one human essence, one wholly shared history and one common society are the conditions of possibility for transparency. So, these surpassed ideals are head-on refused: Vattimo's notion of the new postmodern age presents itself as altogether incompatible with them. My very simple hypothesis is that, even if Vattimo is using transparency as a quality that is to be replaced by complexity in the present time of mass media society, his development and his style invites the reader to suppose a sort of subtle thread connecting complexity to a new form of transparency. And, of course, this does not amount to a disagreement with him, but it is simply to admire a generous soul, encouraged by the social novelties of the last years of the 20th century.

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In his well-known book on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean Starobinski wrote:

Rousseau was unwilling to separate his thought from his person, his theories from his personal destiny. [...] If intimate personal experience enjoys a special place in that work, it acquires that place as the result of Rousseau's conflict with a society he deemed unacceptable. Indeed, as we shall see, the proper place of the inner life is defined solely by the failure to establish any satisfactory relationship with external reality. Rousseau desired communication and *transparency* of the heart. But after pursuing this avenue and meeting with disappointment, he chose the opposite course, accepting — indeed provoking — *obstructions*, which enabled him to withdraw, certain of his innocence, into passive resignation.  
(Starobinski 1988, xi-xii)

We read in these few lines, in an extremely contracted statement, the heart of Rousseau's thought and the evolution of his life. This is obviously Starobinski's interpretation. We take it to be neither true nor false, but rather an inspiring way to present the idea of transparency in classical Modern Philosophy. Rousseau and Berkeley, in a quite different intellectual environment, are probably, perhaps in spite of their own views, their age's most intensive incarnations of Plato. They are, to use Whitehead's famous words, 18th century footnotes to Plato's dialogues.

The abolition of matter, the philosophy of immaterialism, is in fact a sophisticated struggle to approach something established from the beginning: the transparency of the soul. Berkeley was around 25 years older than Jean-

Jacques. He was a clerk, bishop of Cloyne, an Irishman of English origins with his mind focused on the redemption of humanity by means of the evidence that philosophy offers to religion. In spite of this general aspect, Berkeley was a modern thinker in several ways — scientific, academic and also political. His sermons on passive obedience offer an example of this, as does his voyage to America (probably the first European philosopher to visit the New World), giving his name to a city and a well-known university. He is a predecessor of David Hume, the man who roused Kant from his dogmatic dream. Kant is most unfair when he speaks of Berkeley's 'foolish idealism'.

I underline these elements of modernity, with their profoundly ancient background, in my overview of Berkeley, to emphasise something that I don't like to say explicitly: Rousseau (there is no need to present his work in this kind of overview) and Berkeley are not so far from Michel Foucault and Gianni Vattimo in their particular style.

Berkeley is a thinker of one single idea. His *leitmotiv*, imitating a sort of scholastic lemma, is *esse est percipi aut percipere* (to be is to be perceived or to perceive). It means that, analysing seriously the ideas or perceptions, there is nothing in them except their ideal nature, nothing that leaves room for a material foundation that goes unperceived. Thus the nature of things is confined exclusively to their being perceived, while the nature of the soul is to partake of the activity of perceiving. The basic consequence in Berkeley's system is this: no matter is needed in order to sustain the world; just the perceiving of souls and their perceptions. In this case, why do things persist in their place, the books on the shelf, for example, when neither I nor you, nor he, is perceiving them? The perception of God, who creates in perceiving, is Berkeley's answer, inspired by the Pauline speech on the Areopagus in Athens: 'In God we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

We could find no finer distillation of Berkeley's thought than in the extraordinary pages of Henri Bergson's essay on philosophical intuition:

Dans le cas de Berkeley, je crois voir deux images différentes, et celle qui me frappe le plus n'est pas celle dont nous trouvons l'indication complète chez Berkeley lui-même. Il me semble que Berkeley aperçoit la matière comme une *mince pellicule transparente* située entre l'homme et Dieu. Elle reste transparente tant que les philosophes ne s'occupent pas d'elle, et alors Dieu se montre au travers. Mais que les métaphysiciens y touchent, ou même le sens commun en tant qu'il est métaphysicien: aussitôt la pellicule se dépolit et s'épaissit, devient opaque et forme écran, parce que des mots tels que Substance, Force, Étendue abstraite, etc., se glissent derrière elle, s'y déposent comme une couche de poussière, et nous empêchent d'apercevoir Dieu par transparence. L'image

est à peine indiquée par Berkeley lui-même, quoiqu'il ait dit en propres termes «que nous soulevons la poussière et que nous nous plaignons ensuite de ne pas voir». Mais il y a une autre comparaison, souvent évoquée par le philosophe, et qui n'est que la transposition auditive de l'image visuelle que je viens de décrire: la matière serait une langue que Dieu nous parle. Les métaphysiques de la matière, épaisissant chacune des syllabes, lui faisant un sort, l'érigent en entité indépendante, détourneraient alors notre attention du sens sur le son et nous empêcheraient de suivre la parole divine. (Bergson 1970, 1351-8)

In Berkeley's case, I think I see two different images and the one which strikes me most is not the one whose complete indication we find in Berkeley himself. It seems to me that Berkeley perceives matter as a *thin transparent film* situated between man and God. It remains transparent as long as the philosophers leave it alone, and in that case God reveals Himself through it. But let the metaphysicians meddle with it, or even common sense in so far as it deals in metaphysics: immediately the film becomes dull, thick and opaque, and forms a screen because such words as Substance, Force, abstract Extension, etc. slip behind it, settle there like a layer of dust, and hinder us from seeing God through the transparency. The image is scarcely indicated by Berkeley himself though he has said in so many words 'that we first raise a dust and then complain we cannot see'. But there is another comparison, often evoked by the philosopher, which is only the auditory transposition of the visual image I have just described: according to this, matter is a language which God speaks to us. That being so, the metaphysics of matter thickening each one of the syllables, marking it off, setting it up as an independent entity, turns our attention away from the meaning to the sound and hinders us from following the divine word. (Bergson 1946, 139-40)

The similarity between the image underscored by Bergson at the heart of Berkeley's work and the first approach of Starobinski to Rousseau in terms of transparency and obstacle is palpable. Jean-Jacques cannot hide his concentric way, his obsession with himself, his special obsessive interpretation of Michel de Montaigne's '*peinture du moi*'. Wherever the problem of himself appears in his writings it constitutes the key to understanding at the same time his pain and his genius. His last work, incredible in its display of unfettered literary

talent, the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, could help us to grasp why Starobinski chose these two terms to characterise the thought of Rousseau: 'Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n'ayant plus de frère, de prochain, d'ami, de société que moi-même' (1964, 35). 'So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour or friend, nor any company left me but my own' (2004, 27).

Jean-Jacques has already arrived on his deserted island, the Île Saint-Pierre, in the middle of the Bielersee, not so far from Geneva, absolutely devoted to his collection of plants. With an arrogant challenge, he turns his back on the rest of the world. His enormous disappointment with humanity is evident in the man who had wagered everything on the heart of the whole of humankind and established the foundations of modern republicanism.

Settled in the ideas of his writings, Rousseau, in spite of his doubts and the tone of his style, is at every moment looking for equality, community, general will, common sacrifice for justice, universal consciousness, civil renunciation of natural rights and freedom, deep education... in short: the transparency of souls must appear everywhere. But once this effort of thought and writing had finished, been celebrated, forbidden, burned, its author prosecuted and living alone on an island in a Swiss lake, the balance is a very opaque obstacle. The *Discourses*, the *Social Contract*, *Émile*, the public letters, all lead us into a final period in which the author becomes more 'concentric': the *Confessions*, the *Dialogues* and the *Rêveries* of — as is often said — a mad man; a great writer anyway.

J'aurais aimé les hommes en dépit d'eux-mêmes. Ils n'ont pu qu'en cessant de l'être se dérober à mon affection. Les voilà donc étrangers, inconnus, nuls enfin pour moi puisqu'ils l'ont voulu. Mais moi, détaché d'eux et de tout, que suis-je moi-même? Voilà ce qui me reste à chercher. (Rousseau 1964, 35)

I would have loved my fellowmen in spite of themselves. It was only by ceasing to be human that they could forfeit my affection. So now they are strangers and foreigners to me; they no longer exist for me, since such is their will. But I, detached as I am from them and from the whole world, what am I? This must now be the object of my inquiry. (Rousseau 2004, 27)

He dares charge men with the responsibility of ceasing to be human (*en cessant de l'être* — readers should note the pronoun) and thereby depriving themselves of the benefit of Jean-Jacques' love and intelligence. Society, then, as in some way the general language of philosophy was for Berkeley, is not transparent. Perhaps it has been closed for centuries, if we believe in the power of social perception that philosophers exhibit.

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Two centuries later, Michel Foucault writes ‘L’ordre du discours’ as an inauguration to his entry into l’Académie Française, taking the place of Jean Hyppolite, the well-known Hegelian. Foucault is a *maître à penser* for the Philosophy of our times. His works and his public role in the France of the last third of the 20th century, including his death, made his name. But even if his fame has increased still more since his death, I think that we could be misled if we interpret his writings in the context of the multiple, chaotic, mass-media invaded, transparent society in which Vattimo places his views on freedom and contemporary emancipation. However it seems clear to me that Foucault’s analysis of power and the political mechanisms of truth, along with the axiom — shared with Deleuze — of the world as a plane of immanent multiplicities, are travelling in the same direction as a number of the tendencies within *La società trasparente*. What Deleuze says about Foucault could probably be said about Vattimo:

Le principe général de Foucault est: toute forme est un composé de rapports de forces. Des forces étant données, on se demandera donc d’abord avec quelles forces du dehors elles entrent en rapport, ensuite quelle forme en découle. Soit des forces dans l’homme: forces d’imaginer, de se souvenir, de concevoir, de vouloir... On objectera que de telles forces supposent déjà l’homme ; mais ce n’est pas vrai, comme forme. Les forces dans l’homme supposent seulement des lieux, des points d’application, une région de l’existant. De même des forces dans l’animal (mobilité, irritabilité...) ne presupposent encore aucune forme déterminée. Il s’agit de savoir avec quelles autres forces les forces de l’homme entrent en rapport, sur telle ou telle formation historique, et quelle forme résulte de ce composé de forces. On peut déjà prévoir que les forces dans l’homme n’entrent pas nécessairement dans la composition d’une forme-Homme, mais peuvent s’investir autrement, dans un autre composé, dans une autre forme: même sur une courte période, l’Homme n’a pas toujours existé, et n’existera pas toujours. Pour que la forme-Homme apparaisse ou se dessine, il faut que les forces dans l’homme entrent en rapport avec des forces du dehors très spéciales. (Deleuze 1986, 131)

Foucault’s general principle is that every form is a compound of relations between forces. Given these forces, our first

question is with what forces from the outside they enter into a relation, and then what form is created as a result. These may be forces within man: the force to imagine, remember, conceive, wish, and so on. One might object that such forces already presuppose man; but in terms of form this is not true. The forces within man presuppose only places, points of industry, a region of the existent. In the same way forces within an animal (mobility, irritability, and so on) do not presuppose any determined form. One needs to know with what other forces the forces within man enter into a relation, in a given historical formation, and what form is created as a result from this compound of forces. We can already foresee that the forces within man do not necessarily contribute to the composition of a Man-form, but may be otherwise invested in another compound or form: even over a short period of time Man has not always existed, and will not exist for ever. For a Man-form to appear to be delineated, the forces within man must enter into a relation with certain very special forces from the outside. (Deleuze 1988, 124)

I mean, *grosso modo*, that their readers may feel themselves to be in the same universe, that of ‘an analysis that enquires more deeply into the ontological and pragmatic or linguistic space as the path to a political perspective’, or ‘knowledge of necessity as a prior step to a concept of freedom’. In this universe, we find, more or less hidden, the shades of a fight against the control and power disciplines proper to conservative traditions or totalitarian methods. I see these shades in Foucault, Deleuze and Vattimo, as a sophisticated but indelible part of the gaze they could share.

Vattimo remains quite prudent in his deep and always fine readings of the great German philosophers, from Kant to Nietzsche, Benjamin and Heidegger, who supply the tools necessary to decode the concepts that could explain the essential differences between Modernity and Actuality (the actuality of 1989), where French ‘structuralists’ used to take all sorts of documentary sources. Vattimo reads pure Adorno while Foucault works on a cocktail with careful measures of Kant, Borges, criminal archives, some pictures and classical literature. Vattimo needs some milestones where Foucault or Deleuze make a complete mineral collection. But this is, in my opinion, because Vattimo thinks that he has a new object to reveal, the so-called transparent society in a conscious and at the same time doubtful renewal. I suppose that neither Foucault nor Deleuze thought that they had a new social object, but just a new vision to reveal the evolution of the same, i.e. the eternal game of difference and identity.

Let's see just a couple of moments of this self-portrait that in some way Foucault tries to paint in 'L'ordre du discours'.

First of all, the determination of the universe in which the speaker Foucault is installed. This is not called 'society', because its material is the stuff of language. The common material of history, institutions and subjects is precisely the discourse: the logical concept 'universe of discourse' is a happy expression for the total object we are trying to explain. This is very clear in the explanation of the internal sociolinguistic procedures of control conceived as the cultural identity of communities. The analysis is in fact the destruction of so-called cultural identities, since these phenomena are included in the category 'systems [*procédures*] of control and delimitation of discourse'.

Il existe évidemment bien d'autres procédures de contrôle et de délimitation du discours. Celles dont j'ai parlé jusqu'à maintenant s'exercent en quelque sorte de l'extérieur; elles fonctionnent comme des systèmes d'exclusion; elles concernent sans doute la part du discours qui met en jeu le pouvoir et le désir.

On peut, je crois, en isoler un autre groupe. Procédures internes, puisque ce sont les discours eux-mêmes qui exercent leur propre contrôle [...].

Au premier rang, le commentaire. Je suppose, mais sans en être très sûr, qu'i n'y a guère de société où n'existent des récits majeurs qu'on raconte, qu'on répète et qu'on fait varier; des formules, des textes, des ensembles ritualisés de discours qu'on récite, selon des circonstances bien déterminées; des choses dites une fois et que l'on conserve, parce qu'on y soupçonne quelque chose comme un secret ou une richesse. Bref, on peut soupçonner qu'il y a, très régulièrement dans les sociétés, une sorte de dénivellation entre les discours: les discours qui « se disent » au fil des jours et des échanges, et qui passent avec l'acte même qui les a prononcés; et les discours qui sont à l'origine d'un certain nombre d'actes nouveaux de paroles qui les reprennent, les transforment ou parlent d'eux, bref, les discours qui indéfiniment, par-delà leur formulation, sont dits, restent dits, et sont encore à dire. Nous les connaissons dans notre système de culture: ce sont les textes religieux ou juridiques, ce sont aussi ces textes curieux, quand on envisage leur statut, et qu'on appelle « littéraires »; dans une certaine mesure des textes scientifiques.

Il est certain que ce décalage n'est ni stable, ni constant, ni absolu. Il n'y a pas, d'un côté, la catégorie donnée d'une fois pour toutes, des discours fondamentaux ou créateurs; et puis,

de l'autre, la masse de ceux qui répètent, glosent et commentent. Bien des textes majeurs se brouillent et disparaissent, et des commentaires parfois viennent prendre la place première. Mais ses points d'application on beau changer, la fonction demeure; et le principe d'un décalage se trouve sans cesse remis en jeu. L'effacement radical de cette dénivellation ne peut jamais être que jeu, utopie ou angoisse. Jeu à la Borges d'un commentaire qui ne sera pas autre chose que la réapparition mot à mot (mais cette fois solennelle et attendue) de ce qu'il commente; jeu encore d'une critique qui parlerait à l'infini d'une œuvre qui n'existe pas. Rêve lyrique d'un discours qui renaît en chacun de ses points absolument nouveau et innocent, et qui reparaît sans cesse, en toute fraîcheur, à partir des choses, des sentiments ou des pensées. (Foucault 1971, 23-25)

There are, of course, many other systems for the control and delimitation of discourse. Those I have spoken of up to now are, to some extent, active on the exterior; they function as systems of exclusion; they concern that part of discourse which deals with power and desire.

I believe we can isolate another group: internal rules, where discourse exercises its own control [...].

In the first place, commentary. I suppose, though I am not altogether sure, there is barely a society without its major narratives, told, retold and varied; formulae, texts, ritualised texts to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within. In short, I suspect one could find a kind of gradation between different types of discourse within most societies: discourse 'uttered' in the course of the day and in casual meetings, and which disappears with the very act which gave rise to it; and those forms of discourse that lie at the origins of a certain number of new verbal acts, which are reiterated, transformed or discussed; in short, discourse which is spoken and remains spoken, indefinitely, beyond its formulation, and which remains to be spoken. We know them in our own cultural system: religious or juridical texts, as well as some curious texts, from the point of view of their status, which we term 'literary'; to a certain extent, scientific texts also.

What is clear is that this gap is neither stable, nor constant, nor absolute. There is no question of there being one category, fixed for all time, reserved for fundamental or

creative discourse, and another for those which reiterate, expound and comment. Not a few major texts become blurred and disappear, and commentaries sometimes come to occupy the former position. But while the details of application may well change, the function remains the same, and the principle of hierarchy remains at work. The radical denial of this gradation can never be anything but play, utopia or anguish. Play, as Borges uses the term, in the form of commentary that is nothing more than the reappearance, word for word (though this time it is solemn and anticipated) of the text commented on; or again, the play of a work of criticism talking endlessly about a work that does not exist. It is a lyrical dream of talk reborn, utterly afresh and innocent, at each point; continually reborn in all its vigour, stimulated by things, feelings or thoughts. (Foucault 1971, 12-13)

One of the *vedettes* among Foucault's famous short writings is 'What is an Author?' The same approach that was involved in the analysis of founding texts and ephemeral commentaries is used here to demonstrate a near ridiculous fetishism of the 'author' figure. Foucault is not trying to deny the real life of some William or Jenny writing a poem or a tale or a trial act, any more than he is erasing a history related to a certain personal talent in the Mediaeval or Classical Modern Age here in Paris or there in Antananarivo. What is meant, it seems to me, is just the mechanism attached to the events related to the use of the concept 'author', the pragmatics and, therefore, the political and social effects of a word that is also a weapon in the eyes of the microphysics of power.

Je crois qu'il existe un autre principe de raréfaction d'un discours. Il est jusqu'à un certain point le complémentaire du premier. Il s'agit de l'auteur. L'auteur, non pas entendu, bien sûr, comme individu parlant qui a prononcé ou écrit un texte, mais l'auteur comme principe de groupement du discours, comme unité et origine de leurs significations, comme foyer de leur cohérence. Ce principe ne joue pas partout ni de façon constante: il existe, tout autour de nous, bien des discours qui circulent, sans détenir leur sens ou leur efficacité d'un auteur auquel on les attribuerait: propos quotidiens, aussitôt effacés ; décrets ou contrats qui ont besoin des signataires, mais pas d'auteur, recettes techniques qui se transmettent dans l'anonymat. Mais dans les domaines où l'attribution à un auteur est de règle — littérature, philosophie, science — on voit bien qu'elle ne joue pas toujours le même rôle; dans l'ordre

du discours scientifique, l'attribution à un auteur était, au Moyen Age, indispensable, car c'était un index de vérité. Une proposition était considérée comme détenant de son auteur même sa valeur scientifique. Depuis le XVIIe siècle, cette fonction n'a cessé de s'effacer, dans le discours scientifique : il ne fonctionne plus guère que pour donner un nom à un théorème, à un effet, à un exemple, à un syndrome. En revanche, dans l'ordre du discours littéraire, et à partir de la même époque, la fonction de l'auteur n'a pas cessé de se renforcer : tous ces récits, tous ces poèmes, tous ces drames ou comédies qu'on laissait circuler au Moyen Age dans un anonymat au moins relatif, voilà que, maintenant, on leur demande (et on exige d'eux qu'il disent) d'où ils viennent, qui les a écrits ; on demande que l'auteur rende compte de l'unité du texte qu'on met sous son nom, on lui demande de révéler, ou du moins de porter par-devers lui, le sens caché qui les traverse ; on lui demande les articuler, sur sa vie personnelle et sur ses expériences vécues, sur l'histoire réelle qui les a vus naître. L'auteur est ce qui donne à l'inquiétant langage de la fiction, ses unités, ses noeuds de cohérence, son insertion dans le réel.

[...] Le commentaire limitait le hasard du discours par le jeu d'une identité qui aurait la forme de la répétition et du même. Le principe de l'auteur limite ce même hasard par le jeu d'une identité qui a la forme de l'individualité et du moi. (Foucault 1971, 28-30)

I believe there is another principle of rarefaction, complementary to the first: the author. Not, of course, the author in the sense of the individual who delivered the speech or wrote the text in question, but the author as the unifying principle in a particular group of writings or statements, lying at the origins of their significance, as the seat of their coherence. This principle is not constant at all times. All around us, there are sayings and texts whose meaning or effectiveness has nothing to do with any author to whom they might be attributed: mundane remarks, quickly forgotten; orders and contracts that are signed, but have no recognisable author; technical prescriptions anonymously transmitted. But even in those fields where it is normal to attribute a work to an author — literature, philosophy, science — the principle does not always play the same role; in the order of scientific discourse, it was, during the Middle Ages, indispensable that a

scientific text be attributed to an author, for the author was the index of the work's truthfulness. A proposition was held to derive its scientific value from its author. But since the 17th century this function has been steadily declining; it barely survives now, save to give a name to a theorem, an effect, an example or a syndrome. In literature, however, and from about the same period, the author's function has become steadily more important. Now, we demand of all those narratives, poems, dramas and comedies which circulated relatively anonymously throughout the Middle Ages, whence they come, and we virtually insist they tell us who wrote them. We ask authors to answer for the unity of the works published in their names; we ask that they reveal, or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work; we ask them to reveal their personal lives, to account for their experiences and the real story that gave birth to their writings. The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality.

[...] Commentary limited the hazards of discourse through the action of an *identity* taking the form of *repetition* and *sameness*. The author principle limits this same chance element through the action of an *identity* whose form is that of *individuality* and the *I*. (Foucault 1971, 14-15)

The story of Will Adams, a sailor, carpenter, and an advanced amateur in mathematics, tales of whose marvellous knowledge reached the ears of a Shogun in the Japan of the 17th century, is deconstructed and rebuilt, as in the case of the mechanisms of the commentary and the author, to show this kind of 'ideological role', in the Marxian sense, that the myth of the inherent communicability of Occidental knowledge plays in the universe of discourse, i.e. the scene of the discursive integral version of the whole reality.

Faut-il voir dans ce récit l'expression d'un des grands mythes de la culture européenne? Au savoir monopolisé et secret de la tyrannie orientale, l'Europe opposerait la communication universelle de la connaissance, l'échange indéfini et libre des discours.

Or ce thème, bien sûr, ne résiste pas à l'examen. L'échange et la communication sont des figures positives qui jouent à l'intérieur des systèmes complexes de restriction; et ils ne sauraient sans doute fonctionner indépendamment de ceux-ci. La forme la plus superficielle et la plus visible de ces systèmes de restriction est constituée par ce qu'on regrouper

sous le nom de rituel; le rituel définit la qualification que doivent posséder les individus qui parlent (et qui, dans le jeu d'un dialogue, de l'interrogation, de la récitation, doivent occuper telle position et formuler tel type d'énoncés); il définit les gestes, les comportements, les circonstances, et tout l'ensemble de signes qui doivent accompagner le discours; il fixe enfin l'efficace supposée ou imposée des paroles, leur effet sur ceux auxquels elles s'adressent, les limites de leur valeur contraignante. Les discours religieux, judiciaires, thérapeutiques, et pour une part aussi politiques ne sont guère dissociables de cette mise en œuvre d'un rituel qui détermine pour les sujets parlants à la fois des propriétés singulières et des rôles convenus. (Foucault 1971, 40-41)

Can we see in this narrative the expression of one of the great myths of European culture? To the monopolistic, secret knowledge of oriental tyranny, Europe opposed the universal communication of knowledge and the infinitely free exchange of discourse.

This notion does not, in fact, stand up to close examination. Exchange and communication are positive forces at play within complex, but restrictive systems; it is probable that they cannot operate independently of these. The most superficial and obvious of these restrictive systems is constituted by what we collectively refer to as ritual; ritual defines the qualifications required of the speaker (of who in dialogue, interrogation or recitation, should occupy which position and formulate which type of utterance); it lays down gestures to be made, behaviour, circumstances and the whole range of signs that must accompany discourse; finally, it lays down the supposed, or imposed significance of the words used, their effect upon those to whom they are addressed, the limitations of their constraining validity. Religious discourse, juridical and therapeutic as well as, in some ways, political discourse are all barely dissociable from the functioning of a ritual that determines the individual properties and agreed roles of the speakers. (Foucault 1971, 17-18)

If Foucault insists in his suspicions on the multiplicity of technical unconscious microsystems that contribute to the elaboration of the 'discourse', the ultimate reason for this is not simply that he has left aside the ideas of History and Humanity as a whole, as the principles upon which Modern Philosophy is based. This is certainly the case, but it is not the endpoint of his analysis. The

discursive traces left by ordinary life reveal the complexity of what academic discourse has taken for granted. History, Mankind, Society, Truth, Illness, Science, Madness are grand words that, from one side, envelop a multiplicity of differences and identities within their apparent completeness, and, from the other side, are the names of ‘institutions’ that play their role by doing their effective job among this multiplicity in which the so-called discourse is the proper labour. I have already mentioned the backdrop, common to several thinkers of Foucault’s time, in which the unique Spinozist substance is viewed as a plane of immanence where the one and the multiple survive together far from the dialectical method. In modelling this point of view in the shape I have tried to describe, we cannot avoid the impression of a certain similarity between Foucault and Vattimo. Vattimo is claiming the obsolescence of the idea of One Community-One History, which is still present in his milestone thinkers, at the very centre of Berkeley’s theories on transparency, and at the heart of Rousseau’s as well. However he claims not only the obsolescence of these suppositions, but also the real game of a multiplicity of communities and truth in the mass media society, unknown — or almost unknown — to Foucault in his time, except perhaps in his visionary moments.

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Even though the connection is logical, and has been studied by several philosophers of the next generation, like S. Zabala (2009), Vattimo doesn’t take Foucault as a reference in *La società trasparente*. Probably because Foucault had died only four years earlier. But another possible hypothesis is conceptually interesting and clearly related to the sentence of Vattimo’s that I commented on earlier. The order of Foucault’s discourse is in the frame of freedom as knowledge of necessity. The legitimated public protests regarding excluded communities will always be seen as being dominated within this order of discourse, when studying and analysing, by the theoretical moment. I am in the order of discourse when crying ‘freedom’ in a public square. And this philosophical commitment contains a dose of pessimism and resignation.

That said, I read Vattimo’s book as clearly optimistic and, in some ways, not so far from the ideas of Berkeley and Rousseau before their respective frustrations (the failure of the Bermuda college, and the solitude of the Île Saint-Pierre). I mean that Vattimo starts — or tries to start — a sort of philosophy of freedom inside the complex transparent society in the epoch of the mass media. His theoretical proposition is engaged in a practical invitation. In a way strictly opposed to that of structuralism.

The concept of the ‘transparent society’ is considered by Vattimo always under a question mark. I haven’t forgotten it. Complexity is the positive sense in which we might grasp this idea. Let’s develop the hypothesis: transparency will in all probability arrive only if the pathway towards

emancipation is embarked upon. What we have as a fact is a more complex society where the mass media represents one of the greatest powers. The forces of man, to use the vocabulary of Deleuze, describing Foucault's thought, are now encountering some very special external forces that we call technologies of communication. If we are not wrong, around this point of encounter, a kind of fold may take place, and be studied as emancipation. But in Vattimo's approach the goal is not to deconstruct emancipation in terms of a microphysics of power and folds of forces, but rather to open the way for a new ambition of Man.

After the failure of the Enlightenment's illusions conceived by Berkeley and Rousseau, after the destruction of this Man by Marx and Nietzsche, and after the attempts at reconstruction by Benjamin and Heidegger, we arrive somewhere. A good passage to recommend to the author of *La società trasparente* is this moment of inspiration in which Deleuze says that, in fact, as Foucault shows, Nietzsche was the possibility of understanding Heidegger (Deleuze 1986, 121); but this is not true in the contrary direction: Nietzsche didn't wait for his own possibility: he simply took it. As Vattimo shows discreetly in a long footnote on French studies of Nietzsche early on in *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (*The Subject and the Mask: Nietzsche and the Problem of Liberation*), he is an expert in these kinds of games (Vattimo 1983, 10n2). In short, the question about transparency expects the answer 'yes', while Foucault would be happy enough with an exclamation like: what a curious phenomenon to study, this so-called transparency! What an interesting challenge to analyse it in terms of general opacity!

I have tried to lay out the ultimate reason why I need the shadow of Berkeley and Rousseau to read *La società trasparente*. To the ideas of One Humanity, One Reason and One History, Vattimo opposes, in his *tête-à-tête* with Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger, concepts such as *molteplicità*, *oscillazione*, *erosione*. These words ensure that the arrow lands very far from the evolution of self-consciousness that results in the emergence of Man and Reason, and also quite far from the torpedoes aimed by Nietzsche and Heidegger at this ship. It is better that he employs these concepts of instability without the enormous warring connotations of the German thinkers. They are given a twofold function. On the one hand, the attachment to what is small, local, different, homemade; on the other hand, the continuous oscillation between estrangement (*spaesamento*, 'loss of country') and sense of belonging (*appartenenza*). In the first case, we have something very similar in fact, when it has become truly fixed, to the big ideas of the grand philosophical systems of Classical Modernity. Love for one's village, one's party, one's club is at the same time our blindness, and we shall do the worst to protect what is for us the best. In the second case, we have something unfixed, the concept of which is not clear by itself (it is intrinsically *unselbstverständlich*), because its matter

is fluidity and it eludes any mind that is at ease. The oscillation between belonging and estrangement is, on another level, what we have to retain. This is called complexity, the nature of mass media society. The emergence of our freedom is linked to the assumption of this complexity, and perhaps to an affirmative answer to the question of social transparency. But this transparency, when it is conceived as one fixed real world for all, is simply askew.

But the freedom given by the mass media to so many cultures and *Weltanschauungen* has belied the very ideal of a transparent society. What could freedom of information, or even the existence of more than one radio or TV channel, mean in a world where the norm is the exact reproduction of reality, perfect objectivity, the complete identity of map and territory? (Vattimo 1992, 6-7)

In my own way, I shall try to summarise in six points my reading of *La società trasparente* :

- 1) I have insisted on the classical references of Vattimo: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, in a *crescendo* that moves from Man and History to critical complexity. In fact, Nietzsche and Heidegger are the guides: they show that the loss of the sense of reality is not a big loss. ‘If the proliferation of images of the world entails that we lose our “sense of reality”, as the saying goes, perhaps it’s not such a great loss after all’ (Vattimo 1992, 8). This sentence reminds us of the spirit of Rousseau on the island. The rest of mankind is ridiculous, almost nothing, since they have renounced the simple condition of being human.
- 2) But Rousseau’s Modernity (along with Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Voltaire, and Kant’s) is forgotten. A passage from an old master may be appropriate to the postmodern position. ‘Mais cet animal rapporte en tant d’autres effets à l’humaine suffisance que, si je voulois suivre par le menu ce que l’expérience en a appris, je gaignerois assément ce que je maintiens ordinairement, qu’il se trouve plus de différence de tel homme à tel homme que de tel animal à tel homme’ (Montaigne 1965, 466). ‘But so many of their actions bring elephants close to human capacities that if I wanted to relate in detail everything that experience has shown us about them, I would easily win one of my regular arguments: that there is a greater difference between one man and another than between some men and some beasts’ (Montaigne 1987, 31). Modernity is weak in its central ideas of Man, and hence no essence is claimed

to reduce human multiplicity to a concept capable of ordering current experience.

3) The oscillation between belonging and estrangement is developed in the very middle of the book where the commentary investigates the work of art, and several profound readings of Kant, Benjamin, Adorno and especially Heidegger are used to make room for the oscillation. Vattimo alludes to the Heideggerian *Stoss* (1989, 74-75), the idea being that this *Stoss*, in the analysis of the work of art, may be better understood with the help of the Benjaminian notion of *shock*, i.e. a movement of making something groundless, unfounded. The artwork therefore is moving towards the essential oscillation of belonging-estrangement. The work of art is in fact the hand that pushes the swing. I think that Vattimo's idea may be thought of as an oscillation between *Stoss* and *Schritt zurück*, to say it all in Heideggerian terms: oscillation from the philosophical step back, taking a certain distance in order to see, towards the thrust, the call of direct experience. And *vice versa*, of course. Take the space to run and jump deeper inside so as to know, and leave this inside in order to see and to say the truth.

4) Everywhere, by means of a patient focus on his *maîtres-à-penser* in a brilliant work of reading, Vattimo is inviting his own reader to run, to a real sprint; because emancipation is not a question of declaring what one really is. 'Continuing to dream knowing one is dreaming' could be the central sentence of a provisional moral that he borrows from Nietzsche: 'in the end the true world becomes a fable' (Vattimo 1992, 9, 7), and, as we have already said, this is not so serious a loss. Because the challenge is to try not to fall into the metaphysical way of thinking the general identity of man, in his one-dimensional history and thought, to use an expression of Marcuse's, absent from the text itself but whose faint redolence may be gleaned from the passages on Adorno and Horkheimer. Emancipation is something related to difference in itself and speaks the twofold language of *identificazione* and *spaesamento*.

5) The central point under investigation henceforth needs the aesthetic model, in which the link between art, life and society, established by the genius in Kant's third Critique, is unavoidable. The inner force animating every kind of judgement is reflective judgement (*reflektierende Urteilskraft*), whose movement towards a universal necessity is, in art, continuously frustrated by the evident absence of a concept to sustain it. But what in Kant's research could be interpreted as a default is here playing the role of a solution, and the authors in dialogue with Vattimo are in some way constrained to approach the evolution of Kant's universal

human community in the sense of a multiplication of communities and the development of complexity. ‘Aesthetic utopia comes about only through its articulation as *heterotopia*. Our experience of the beautiful in the recognition of models that make world and community is restricted to the moment when these worlds and communities present themselves explicitly as plural’ (Vattimo 1992, 69). Perhaps in this assumption we can find the answer to the perversion of a certain relativism, that uses the shadow of beauty, always universally recognised by a community, to compare Nazi experiences with Wagner’s music, or rock groups devoted to vandalism with Beethoven societies or fans of *La Traviata*: ‘In arguing that universality as understood by Kant is realised for us only in the form of multiplicity, we can legitimately take plurality lived explicitly as such as a normative criterion. What Kant legitimately, and not just in the false consciousness of ideology, regarded as a call to the universal human community (the expectation that the consensus of each and every human being worthy of the name would coalesce around the values of bourgeois “beauty”), has in the present conditions of the history of being become an explicit referral to multiplicity’ (Vattimo 1992, 69–70).

6) Neither the Frankfurt School nor Habermas more recently (we are still talking about the theoretical situation thirty years ago) have found the path to transparency, and by this I mean a complex questioning opportunity for a faithful transparency. In his effort to think being as an event, and not as a structuring of the whole, Heidegger inspires Vattimo in his inconclusive stroll through contemporary philosophy, as far from the Modern global unity of man as from the useful frivolities surrounding contemporary art.

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I would not like to fix Vattimo’s game of transparency. This is just his point and he has written a strong revision of his ‘dream’ in one of the previously unpublished papers from his recent *Essere e dintorni (Being and its Surroundings)*. ‘Il termine “trasparenza” si associa in me, e forse nella mente di molti, a qualcosa di passato, a un’epoca che è stata la nostra ma non lo è più, e che suscita una certa memoria nostalgica, come i buoni vecchi tempi dei nonni, delle zie, insomma, delle illusioni giovanili. È che alla trasparenza nessuno ci crede più, nemmeno quelli che – come i sottoscritto del 1989 – ne facevano un carattere costitutivo, sia pure pieno di contraddizioni, della nascente società postmoderna’ (Vattimo 2018, 15). ‘The term “transparency” is associated in my mind, and perhaps in the minds of many, with something of the past, with an epoch that was ours but is no longer, and which evokes a

certain nostalgic memory, like the good old days of grandparents, aunts: in short, of youthful illusions. The fact is that no one believes in transparency any more, not even those who – like the ones committed to it in 1989 – made it a constitutive feature, albeit rife with contradictions, of the emerging postmodern society'. His book of 1989 is however frankly aspirational and refuses sceptical conclusions and frustration. By highlighting the intellectual experiences of transparency on the part of Berkeley and Rousseau, the profile of *La società trasparente* seems to me clearer. Clear enough to allow us to put certain questions to our text and see if it is not from the beginning somewhat out of touch with the transformations apparent in contemporary societies.

Transparency is in the end the relation of the philosopher with his readings, from Hegel to Heidegger; and, therefore, in sharing this, we are invited to go on to the next step, called postmodernity, that has allowed us to leap over the past and characterise Modernity, its logic and metaphysics. In this sense, we are far from the Ancients' 'doing by thinking', even far, as we have pointed out, from French lovers of Nietzsche. For Berkeley, a metaphysical philosopher, at first glance, the opacity was the impossible journey to Bermuda to establish his school of life. For Jean-Jacques, a writer involved in real life and an efficient cause of the following Revolution, the opacity was himself, unhappy with the rest of humanity (i.e. his colleagues). For Foucault every attempt at conciliation between the world and the space of personal freedom will be nothing but a false version of what should be told in terms of the order of the discourse. Transparency has never been his problem. Gianni Vattimo has given us a valuable work in the horizon of mass media society: his book offers to our times a new opportunity for transparency, a new philosophy nourished by the reading of the critics of Modernity. He invites us to try a new category of answer to the remaining myths, as elevated as the proposals of the Modern classics deserve. The world is not the same. It had already changed in 1989. The concept of transparency was the key. The new role of this concept in the new society was more precisely the key. Transparency was opening an original view of Modern Classical philosophy and, at the same time, revealed an aspect of the unknown profile of the postmodern thought of the later 1980s. But we are no longer there. What is this answer that we, as well as Vattimo himself and his avid readers, are receiving from our multiple, complex and global world today?

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***Post... Modern!***

Gianni Vattimo

Translated by Thomas Winn

The recent conference held at the Pompeu Fabra University (where my archives are kept) for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my book *The Transparent Society* showed that still, even today, postmodernism has a lot to teach us. I am grateful to all of the participants for having contributed with their texts, which I read with great care and attention. Instead of responding to each contribution, which the *Journal of Italian Philosophy* kindly publishes here, I would like to quickly emphasise the meaning of the posthuman for postmodernism, given the importance that it has assumed in contemporary culture.

Postmodernism has also been a way to criticise the humanism of the metaphysical tradition. If you take it in the Heideggerian sense, this type of humanism was based on the idea of the subject and the object, which in Heidegger were criticised for remaining captive to the ‘technical scheme’ (the thing is that which is manipulated, the subject is the one which manipulates).

Does it make sense to think that the posthuman can be connected to the postmodern through this critique of humanism? This would be a way of lifting the condemnation with which posthumanism is normally charged, in its embarrassing connection with animality or organicity.

This connection to the ‘nonhuman’ cannot be ignored, especially if one thinks of how much the machine has — and in general the machines have — to do with the overcoming of humanism, and therefore with something non-human.

The idea of the posthuman opens up that particular field of thought which is concerned with the insertion of the mechanical, electrical, and other related elements into human life. It is difficult to say where this leads us: even now, the most advanced surgery or the practice of carrying out transplants appears to be moving in this direction, which is worth investigating and pursuing. On the other hand, more and more people will find themselves situated in a position where there is no longer any quantitative domination of knowledge and information available on the web. Even now, a single Hegelian scholar cannot dominate the whole of the bibliographical space surrounding Hegelianism. They can only hope to become acquainted with a part of the space, leaving the knowledge and use of the rest of the material to others. A Hegelian scholar will therefore be just one specialist among many. How could they be any different?

Another observation. You may think that the quantitative reduction in your outlook requires a very high level of confidence in giving every part of yourself to that reduction. If the whole is a system, approaching a part as a specialist includes the hope and possibility of not being consigned to the margins.

Second observation. Also, in light of this, can an argument in favour of Spirit (with a capital S) find any room here? In the Hegelian sense? I can only think of ‘the truth’ because I am supported by the entirety of the knowledge that I approach, even if my approach is only partial.

I’m reminded here of one of my Spanish meetings on the topic of the possibility that the historicising of a text, occurring through the accumulation of interpretations, does not necessarily have to be deployed over time (that is, historically) but rather in recalling and returning to one another in the present network.

This reflection, which seems trivial, leads us to consider the posthuman as being ‘post-’ or ‘trans-’ subjective. An endless bibliography, like Hegel’s, is no longer bound up together for one scholar alone. We can see in this a suggestion that allows us to consider the posthuman as transindividual, as being cooperative, but as something which we still know little about.

The word ‘network’ takes the usual sense in which it signifies the entire computerised world. Even when it is examined from this point of view, the posthuman conversation risks being cut short, or making progress but only with great difficulty. We are no longer subjects in the traditional sense of the word. Although, again, this observation includes the risk of overcoming such subjection in the direction of a collectivisation which might kindle a nostalgia for humanism.

## ***Biographies***

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