

Introduction

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

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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

- Vattimo, Gianni, *The Transparent Society*. Trans. David Webb. Cambridge: Polity, 1992 [1989] (Abbreviation: TS).
- Bergson, Henri, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. London: The Modern Library, 1944 (Abbreviation: CE).