

## *The 'Transparent Society': An Aesthetic-Political Project*

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### 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

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<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 immatériaux*, 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, Minit, 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 *Ikona*, 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

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<sup>9</sup> R. Esposito, *Pensiero istituyente. 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

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<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.