

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

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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’.¹ 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*’,² a systemic coercion that tames and destroys negativity, otherness, diversity.

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

² 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'.³ 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'.⁴ In this sense, the strategy has strong social and political connotations: 'only by actively

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

⁴ 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'.⁵ 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 Deleuzo-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* (Overcoming⁶) 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.

⁵ Montani, *L'immaginazione intermediale*, XIII.

⁶ 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 values⁷.

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

⁷ 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’.⁸ 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?*⁹ 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

⁸ 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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