

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

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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, épaississant chacune des syllabes, lui faisant un sort, l'érigeant 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 présupposent 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'il 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 Âge, indispensable, car c'était un index de vérité. Une proposition était considérée comme détenant de son auteur même sa valeur scientifique. Depuis le XVII^e 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 Âge 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 nœuds 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 raporte en tant d'autres effets à l'humaine suffisance que, si je vouloy suivre par le menu ce que l'expérience en a appris, je gagnerois aysément ce que je maintiens ordinairement, qu'il se trouve plus de difference 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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