

# The Transparent Society

---

Gianni Vattimo

*Translated by David Webb*

## Contents

1 The Postmodern: A Transparent Society?	1
2 The Human Sciences and the Society of Communication	12
3 Myth Rediscovered	28
4 Art and Oscillation	45
5 From Utopia to Heterotopia	62
6 Utopia, Counter-utopia, Irony	76
7 Disenchantment and Dissolution	90
8 Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation?	105
Index	121

The Johns Hopkins University  
Press · Baltimore

---

*The Postmodern:  
A Transparent Society?*

Much is said about postmodernity nowadays. So much, in fact, that it has become almost obligatory to distance oneself from the notion, to see it as a fad and to insist on its having been overcome. It is my belief, however, that the term 'postmodern' has a meaning, and that this meaning is linked to the fact that the society in which we live is a society of generalized communication. It is the society of the mass media.

In the first place, we speak of the postmodern because we feel that, in some essential way, modernity is over. To understand what is meant by saying that modernity is over, one must first understand what is meant by modernity. Amongst the many definitions, there is one that may be generally agreed upon: modernity is the epoch in which simply being modern became a decisive value in itself. In Italian, as in many other languages, I believe, it is still an insult to call someone a 'reactionary', that is, attached to values from the past, to tradition, to forms of thought that have been 'overcome'. Broadly speaking, this eulogy to being modern is what, in my view, characterizes the whole of modern culture. It is an attitude that did not really come

to the fore until the end of the fifteenth century (the 'official' beginning of the modern age), at which point the artist came to be thought of as a creative genius and an increasingly intense cult of the new and original emerged that had not existed before (in previous ages the imitation of models was in fact of the utmost importance). As the centuries passed, it became more and more clear that the cult of the new and original in art was linked to a more general perspective according to which, as in the Enlightenment, human history is seen as an ongoing process of emancipation, as if it were the perfection of the human ideal (the essay 'On the education of the human race' by Lessing is typical in this respect). If history is progressive in this sense, greater value will clearly be attached to that which is more 'advanced', that which is nearer to the conclusion and the end of the process. However, a conception of history as the progressive realization of what is genuinely human requires that it be seen as unilinear. Only if there is History can one speak of progress.

According to the hypothesis I am putting forward, modernity ends when – for a number of reasons – it no longer seems possible to regard history as unilinear. Such a view requires the existence of a centre around which events are gathered and ordered. We think of history as ordered around the year zero of the birth of Christ, and more specifically as a serial train of events in the life of peoples from the 'centre', the West, the place of civilization, outside of which are the 'primitives' and the 'developing' countries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries philosophy has launched a radical critique of the idea of unilinear history, exposing the *ideological* character of these views. Thus, in a short essay from 1938 ('Theses on the Philosophy of History'), Walter Benjamin maintained that unilinear

history is a representation of the past constructed by dominant groups and social classes. Indeed, what is passed on from the past? Not everything that took place, but only that which seems *relevant*. For example, at school we studied the dates of battles, peace treaties and even revolutions, but they never told us of radical changes in forms of nutrition, or in sexual attitudes, or things of that kind. History speaks only of events involving those who count, the nobles, the sovereigns, or the middle classes once they became powerful. The poor, and those aspects of life considered 'base', do not 'make history'.

If observations such as these are developed further (along a path cleared before Benjamin by Marx and Nietzsche), the idea of unilinear history ends up being dissolved. There is no single history, only images of the past projected from different points of view. It is illusory to think that there exists a supreme or comprehensive viewpoint capable of unifying all others (such as 'History', encompassing the histories of art, of literature, of wars, of sexuality, etc.).

With the crisis in the idea of history comes a second crisis in the idea of progress: if human events do not make up a unilinear continuum, then one cannot regard them as proceeding towards an end, realizing a rational programme of improvement, education and emancipation. Moreover, the end that modernity took to be giving direction to the course of events was itself drawn according to a certain ideal of man. More or less all Enlightenment thinkers, Hegel, Marx, positivists, historians of every type, considered the meaning of history to be the realization of civilization, that is, of the form of [Western European man]. Just as history may be thought as unilinear only from the point of view of one placed at the centre (whether this be the coming of Christ or the

Holy Roman Empire), so the conception of progress requires a certain ideal of man as its criterion. In modernity, however, the criterion has always been that of modern European man – as if to say: we Europeans are the best form of humanity and the entire course of history is directed towards the more or less complete realization of this ideal.

Bearing this in mind, one appreciates that the present crisis in the unilinear conception of history and consequently the crisis in the idea of progress and the end of modernity are not determined by transformations in theory alone – by the critiques undergone by nineteenth-century historicism (idealist, positivist, Marxist, etc.) at the level of ideas. What has happened is something quite different and of far greater magnitude: the so-called 'primitive' peoples colonized by Europeans in the good and rightful name of 'superior' and more evolved civilization have rebelled, making a unilinear and centralized history *de facto* problematic. The European ideal of humanity has been revealed as one ideal amongst others, not necessarily worse, but unable, without violence, to obtain as the true essence of man, of all men.

Along with the end of colonialism and imperialism, another decisive factor in both the dissolution of the idea of history and the end of modernity is the advent of the [society of communication.] Here I come to my second point, which concerns the 'transparent society'. 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.

The impossibility of thinking history as unilinear – an impossibility that, according to the thesis put forward here, lays the basis for the end of modernity – does not derive solely from the crisis in European colonialism and imperialism. It is also, and perhaps above all, the result of the birth of means of mass communication. These means – newspapers, radio, television, what is now called telematics – have been decisive in bringing about the dissolution of centralized perspectives, of what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard calls the 'grand narratives'. This view of the effect of the mass media seems to be the very contrary of that taken by the philosopher Theodor Adorno. On the basis of his experience in the United States during the Second World War, Adorno, in works such as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written with Max Horkheimer) and *Minima Moralia*, predicted that radio (and only later TV) would produce a general homogenization of society. By virtue of a kind of innate propensity for the demonic, this in turn would permit and indeed favour the formation of dictatorships and totalitarian governments capable, like 'Big Brother' in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, of exercising widespread control over their citizens by the diffusion of slogans, propaganda (commercial as well as political) and stereotypical world views. Instead, what actually happened, in spite of the efforts of the monopolies and major centres of capital, was that radio, television and newspapers became elements in a general explosion and proliferation of *Weltanschauungen*, of world views. Recent decades in the United States have seen minorities of every kind take to the microphones. Cultures and subcultures of all sorts have stepped into the limelight of public opinion. Of course, one could object that having a voice does not correspond to true political emancipation – economic

### *The Postmodern: A Transparent Society?*

power is still held by capital. This may be so: I won't pursue the issue here. But the fact remains that the very logic of the information 'market' requires its continual expansion, and consequently demands that 'everything' somehow become an object of communication. This giddy [proliferation of communication] as more and more subcultures 'have their say' is the most obvious effect of the mass media. Together with the end, or at least radical transformation, of European imperialism, it is also the key to our society's shift towards post-modernity. The West is living through an explosive situation, not only with regard to other cultural universes (such as the 'third world'), but internally as well, as an apparently irresistible [pluralization] renders any unilinear view of the world and history impossible.

This is why the society of the [mass media] should be contrasted sharply with a more enlightened, more 'educated', society (in the sense intended by Lessing, or Hegel, or even Comte or Marx). The mass media, which in theory offer information in 'real time' about everything happening in the world, could in effect be seen as a kind of concrete realization of Hegel's Absolute Spirit: the perfect self-consciousness of the whole of humanity, the coincidence between what happens, history and human knowledge. On close inspection, Hegelian and Marxist critics such as Adorno work with this model in mind, and their pessimism is based on the fact that it is not realized as it might have been (owing to the market, ultimately), or is realized only in a perverse and caricatural form (as in the sanctioned world of 'Big Brother', which may even be 'happy', thanks to the manipulation of desires). 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

### *The Postmodern: A Transparent Society?*

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? In actual fact, the increase in possible information on the myriad forms of reality makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of a *single* reality. It may be that in the world of the mass media a 'prophecy' of Nietzsche's is fulfilled: in the end the true world becomes a fable. If we, in late modernity, have an idea of reality, it cannot be understood as the objective given lying beneath, or beyond, the images we receive of it from the media. How and where could we arrive at such a reality 'in itself'? For us, reality is rather the result of the intersection and 'contamination' (in the Latin sense) of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another and without any 'central' coordination.

The view I want to put forward is that in the media society, the [ideal of emancipation] modelled on lucid self-consciousness, on the perfect knowledge of one who knows how things stand (compare Hegel's Absolute Spirit or Marx's conception of man freed from ideology), is replaced by an ideal of emancipation based on oscillation, plurality and, ultimately, on the erosion of the very 'principle of reality'. Humanity today can finally become aware that perfect freedom is not that described by Spinoza, and does not lie in having a perfect knowledge of the necessary structure of reality and conforming to it – as [metaphysics] has always dreamt. This is where the philosophical lessons learnt from Nietzsche and Heidegger are most important. For they have provided us with the means to understand the emancipatory significance of the end of modernity and of its idea of history. Nietzsche showed the image of reality as a well-founded rational order (the perennial

metaphysical image of the world) to be only the 'reassuring' myth of a still primitive and barbaric humanity. [Metaphysics] is a violent response to a situation that is itself fraught with danger and violence. It seeks to master reality at a stroke, grasping (or so it thinks) the first principle on which all things depend (and thus giving itself an empty guarantee of power over events). Following Nietzsche in this respect, Heidegger showed that to think of [being as foundation,] and reality as a rational system of causes and effects, is simply to extend the model of 'scientific' objectivity to the totality of being. All things are reduced to the level of pure presences that can be measured, manipulated, replaced and therefore easily dominated and organized – and in the end [man,] his interiority and historicity are all reduced to the same level.

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. By a perverse kind of internal logic, the world of objects measured and manipulated by techno-science (the world of the *real*, according to metaphysics) has become the world of merchandise and images, the [phantasmagoria] of the mass media. Should we counterpose to this world the nostalgia for a solid, unitary, stable and 'authoritative' reality? In its effort to reconstruct the world of our infancy, where familial authority was both a threat and a comfort, such nostalgia is in continual danger of turning into neurosis.

But what exactly might this [loss of reality,] this genuine erosion of the principle of reality, mean for emancipation and liberation? Emancipation, here, consists in *disorientation*, which is at the same time also the liberation of differences, of local elements, of what could generally be called dialect. With the demise of the

idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalized communication explodes like a multiplicity of 'local' rationalities – ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities – that finally speak up for themselves. They are no longer repressed and cowed into silence by the idea of a [single true form of humanity] that must be realized irrespective of particularity and individual finitude, transience and contingency. Incidentally, the [liberation of differences] does not necessarily mean the surrender of every rule or the manifestation of brute immediacy. [Dialects] have grammar and syntax too, and indeed only discover them when they become visible and acquire a dignity of their own. With the liberation of diversity, they 'find their voice', present themselves and so 'get into shape' for recognition; this is anything but a manifestation of brute immediacy.

The emancipatory effect of the liberation of [local rationalities] is not confined to guaranteeing everyone the possibility of greater recognition and 'authenticity', as if emancipation meant finally showing what everyone – black, woman, homosexual, Protestant, etc. – 'really' is (to use terms that are still metaphysical, Spinozan).

The emancipatory significance of the [liberation of differences and dialects] consists rather in the general *disorientation* accompanying their initial identification. If, in a world of dialects, I speak my own dialect, I shall be conscious that it is not the only 'language', but that it is precisely one amongst many. If, in this multicultural world, I set out my system of religious, aesthetic, political and ethnic values, I shall be acutely conscious of the historicity, contingency and finiteness of these systems, starting with my own.

Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, called this 'continuing to dream knowing one is dreaming'. But is such a thing

possible? This is the essence of what Nietzsche called the 'overman' (or beyond-man), the *Übermensch*: and he assigns the task of attaining it to mankind of the future, in the world of intensified communication.

The significance of the emancipatory 'confusion' of dialects is exemplified in Dilthey's description of aesthetic experience (a description that is decisive also for Heidegger, in my view). For Dilthey, to encounter a work of art (or indeed to acquire historical knowledge), was to experience in the imagination forms of existence and ways of life [different] from the one in which we have become immersed in our own concrete everydayness. As we grow older, we all narrow our horizons of life, specializing in one thing or another and enclosing ourselves within a particular circle of friendships, interests and acquaintances. Aesthetic experience leads us into other [possible worlds,] and we are made to realize the contingency and relativity of the 'real' world in which we have to live.

In the society of generalized communication and the plurality of cultures, the encounter with other worlds and forms of life is perhaps less in the imagination than it was for Dilthey. 'Other' possibilities of existence are realized 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.]

Such freedom is problematic. As an effect of the media, it cannot be guaranteed and remains a possibility still to be recognized and taken up (the media can always and everywhere be the voice of 'Big Brother', or of stereotypical banality, void of meaning . . .). Moreover, we ourselves still do not have a clear idea of its

physiognomy and so have difficulty in seeing [oscillation as freedom]. Individually and collectively, we still have a deep-seated nostalgia for the reassuring, yet menacing, closure of horizons. Nihilistic philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger (but also pragmatists like Dewey or Wittgenstein), in demonstrating that being does not necessarily coincide with what is stable, fixed and permanent, but has instead to do with the event, with consensus, dialogue and interpretation, are trying to show us how to take the [experience of oscillation] in the postmodern world as an opportunity of a new way of being (finally, perhaps) human.