The Transparency of Light - Our Crystalline Society

0. Prelude: Daylight

I was experiencing a certain chill, even on such a hot day, when I realized that my appreciation of certain music, and the enjoyment and lust (both sensual and non-sensual) experienced as a result of listening to it, depends largely, although certainly not completely, on the presence of **luminosity**.

   The peaks and valleys of musical highs and lows fluctuate according to a sense of illumination, whether internal or external, and whether or not mediated, as the case may be, through the crystalline lights of media. The creative spirit, which is the spirit of luminous self-transparency, is present whether one is *making* or *appreciating* a work of art (for there is an art to *interpretation* as well as to artistic *poiesis* as such); the taking-place of creative illumination is dependent on the presence of (re)active-interpretative consciousness, which state may be hard to *come* to and *stay* in. In fact, the place of appreciation, the place of beholding, which has been interpreted as a domain of aesthetical judgment in perception, is not a place in the sense of "space" or "room", but – for me at least, on such a nice summer's day – a place and placing of the *letting-in of light*. Yet we should be careful here: "letting-in" also means "letting-out", i.e. letting-**be** (as the Beatles sang, and as Heidegger wrote in *Gelassenheit*) in the internal-external juxtaposition of belongingness into a realm, a chasm, of pure luminous beauty. But here, with the introduction of the chiastic opening of the in-between of Being and beings (the *différance* of Derrida), we are in the realm of the abyss, and the earth, and the mortality of the *khora* and all that this entails. How did we get from light to darkness so quickly? The problem, if there is one, lies in the nature of 19th-20th century inherited discourse of bodily phenomenology. We are at loss for words when dealing with the spirit of Renaissance, of Enlightenment, of Hermetic *gnosis*. The genius-myth is dead, and "sublime" beauty is kitsch. The phenomenological disillusionment with idealist discourse (from Kant to Husserl) effectively ends with the semiotic and khoratic turn in continental phenomenology. The only reason I mention these things is that I find myself unable to speak of *light* – in terms of truth, beauty and gnosis – without falling back to a discourse of subterranean abysses, nocturnal chills and hermetic caves of darkness. Yet there is no escaping it: Heidegger, the reluctant midwife of post-modern hermeneutics, ushered in an era where the interplay of meaning, truth, beauty and mediation

(communication) is dependent on this double-edged concept of *light that illuminates without compassion*: truth, in all its beauty and ugliness, can appear cold and scary, however en-lightened the moment of clarity may be, however "open" the place of truth's (*aletheia*) setting-forth. Light, in other words, can be all-illuminating in the sense of stripping everything naked, like the Panopticon of Bentham or the all-seeing eye of Sauron in Lord of the Rings. The purifying ecstasy of the saints and mystics, too, can take frightening forms. Truth, even beauty, is not always "pleasant."

Yet here I am, in light (literally; sun in shining through my window), placed between the obscenity of material mediation and the sublimity of artistic appreciation. The paradoxical irony is not between light-as-love and light-as-revelation, but between *natural* and *artificial* light. What is the function of media, as media of mass communication, in transmitting and sublimating artistic perceptivity in its "natural" state? Can the electronic and photo-electric properties of our audio-visual media maintain or even amplify – or, for that matter, *improve upon* – the "natural" light of the "naturally enlightened" artist-genius-creator-poet? Can there be an authentic transparency of self-illumination in the artificial light of MTV, YouTube and the Nintendo Wii? What is *lost*, and what is *gained*, in the cross-cultural poly-saturation of semiotic insignia through the form and structure of mediated light? I was thinking of light, both natural and artificial, as I composed a track yesterday, working on my computer for some seven hours, all the while basking in the sunlight pouring in through my windows. I felt, and I knew, that I was *reflecting* (on) that light in my music, trying to tune in to audio frequencies which would best, and most "naturally" translate and colour my experience of (sun) light into aural form. Whether there is a physical route through which the brain (such as through the pineal gland or "the third eye") tunes into certain natural frequencies of illumination is a good question, but not something I want to argue here. All that matters is that I realized the essential paradox of my situation: trying to capture sun light into a digital form which would be reproducible (as exact copies) and easily transmittable across the internet, all the while trying *not to lose that connection* to the "natural" light "source." The Sun, as the source of the light phenomena, is itself ultimately a *reflection* of an even deeper source of (mystical) light – e.g. the Neoplatonic "One" at the source of all things visible. After all, the Sun (as an aerial phenomenon) is unstable: it always threatens to be obscured by the clouds and trees, and it doesn't stay up *forever*, but has to escape the world regularly. But if the Sun itself, indeed, is only a mediation of some ultimate source of luminosity (conceived of as the ideal of *the transparency of self-presence*), and if artistic creation, in its moment of "illumination" or "enlightened apprehension," itself, in *its* turn, is only a process of second order mediation – first of the sun (or whatever direct source of inspiration and illumination one may encounter) and secondly of whatever stands "behind" the sun (or behind the apparent universe of luminous beauty) – then art, digitalized and transmitted as radio- and

micro-waves (and increasingly through the satellite grid), is in a curious position of contributing to the *hyper*-mediation of luminosity, the hyper-realization (viz. Baudrillard) of the apparent universe. I recall that Plato's Republic said something very similar about art as reproduction (*mimesis*), although from the perspective of the traditional, static, conception of art as representative creation.

What do I mean by hyper-mediation and hyper-realization? Think of a folk dance, for example. It contains a certain relationship to the community, to tradition, to people, to rituals, to a certain setting, to a certain mood, to certain festive times of the year and so on. It is a mediated experience of life, a communally shared lifeform. But today such a folk dance (or any other once-upon-a-time "organic" first-order system) exists, first and foremost, in packaged form in various hyper-mediated realms ("artificial" second-order systems) of the mass media. There may be, for example, a CD recording circulating in Hong Kong of Chilean folk dance, or a TV-commercial that "ironically" uses nostagic themes for its purposes of charming the audiences, or an internet community – local or global – which brings together, facelessly but intimately, persons sharing the same interest, whether they actually ever meet in real life or not. Today, then, we live in a total system of information management (no surprise there). What I'm concerned with, however, is the presence of **light** as the unitary and all-pervasive general-purpose medium of this universe. Think of such interlinked phenomena as urban light grids (visible all the way to space), street lamps, flashy neon advertisements, office desk lamps, plasma televisions, 24/7 grocery stores lit up in green or blue hue (very subdued but elegant), supermarkets as multimedia experience centers, cinematic commercials, disco and club light shows, computer technologies keeping people up all night etc… In all these phenomena, the important thing is the movement towards artificial light(ing).

But if we accept the conditions of post-modern discourse – where the ideal of absolute self-consciousness and self-transparency is, at best, a necessary illusion, and, at worst, a dangerous delusion – we have to say that this is all there is: that *all* light is artificial; even, probably, sunlight. However, in the chapters to follow, I want to argue that the general movement towards the lighting-up of the world in perfect self-transparency is not halted by any heart-breaking disillusionment with En*light*enment Dialectic and its claims for perfect self-knowledge and Illumination. No, I claim that by a careful reading of Vattimo and Rorty regarding the state of discourse and philosophy after the age of "grand narratives" and established certitudes, we will find our way "back into the light" by going forward, *into* the further light of cybernetic *gnosis* – into its "jolt" of electric enlightenment.

1. First Movement: Vattimo and Transparency

As it will soon become clear, my essay is primarily a reflection on two books and two authors. These are Gianni Vattimo's "The Transparent Society" (1989) and Richard Rorty's "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (1980). The latter book will be dealt with in the next chapter.

So, to satisfy reader's expectations, this is where I should present and comment on Vattimo's theories of transparent society. However, I have chosen this moment to be *transparent* also in the face of the reader, and to open up and to explicate the very nature of my enterprise. For, as it happens, my essay henceforth is an extended reflection on the meaning and concept of a Transparent Society. I will use different concepts and different metaphors (explicated below), but my theories at no point go essentially contrary to the framework laid down in Vattimo's book.

Why have I chosen the style that I have? Why have I chosen, of all things, the concept of "Light" as the central theme of my essay? As regards the first question, it is simple: I have chosen to alternate between the radically postmodern style and the cautiously ironic style, since my aims include both 1) a clear *explication* of the authors in question and 2) a *radicalization* of the project of Enlightenment critique provided for by Vattimo and Rorty. At times, explication demands clarity of expression (a kind of analytic style), whereas radicalization of the postmodernist project, if done properly, obeys its own rules, and does things unexpectedly, even contrary to the expectations of the author. This fact also explains the choice of "light" as the carrying metaphor of my essay; it is, quite simply, a play on the idea of *transparency* taken to its logical conclusion. As it happens, I set out to explicate the trend in which the metaphysics of Light, in its modern form, is born out of the En*light*enment, though not reducible to it. The transparency of enlightenment stands for the perfect rationalization of society, and the birth of the era of information and the mass media. Consequently, in theories such as Kant and Habermas, it's interesting to find traces and signs of this "demand for clarity" which corresponds to the demand for "more light" in Masonry, for example. Also, and equally crucially, light is an important factor in the birth of the phenomenology of perception (the beholding of an object as representation), as that which gives form to an object. So luminosity, as that which shines light on form, simply refers to the "play of appearances," the *gleam* of things, self-present to the eye (the "I") in absolute self-consciousness. Light, here, is the formal guarantee of form (because without light, in total darkness, you cannot see – or "know" – anything). Both of these meanings will be utilized in my account of Habermas, for example. I have included these remarks *for the sake of clarity and transparency*, in order to appear in best possible *light*.

So, the macro-structures of my paper deal, quite faithfully, with the project laid down in "The Transparent Society," which, despite the name, is really not a sociological book or even a

philosophical book about society. It is, first and foremost, a collection of short essays, loosely thematically interrelated. The topics range from commentaries on Heidegger, Nietzsche and the Hermeneutical tradition to more free-ranging stream-of-consciousness explorations of the various "futurisms" of our time, from utopias and counter-utopias to imagined "heterotopic" pluralities. At any rate, the overall trend in Vattimo's book is an attempt to provide a holistic account of the movement of modernity (the Dialectic of Enlightenment in the Frankfurt School sense of the term) in terms of its major philosophic forces, working *in tandem*, as Vattimo sees it, towards a unified framework of rational, communicative and social transparency. He singles out Heidegger as especially crucial to the aesthetics of this new era, and mentions "the extraordinary importance of Heidegger's 'ontology' for our thought. It alone seems capable of opening us authentically to the experience of late modernity without a persistent implicit reference to metaphysical canons and principles." (p.73) I happen to agree; I happen to think that Heidegger's thought is crucial, perhaps unavoidable, in dealing with the openness of what Vattimo calls "heterotopia" in the society's standards of evaluation. However, I do not share Vattimo's faith that by relying on Heidegger, and constantly referencing him, quoting him, paraphrasing him, we get any closer to independence from dogma. It is these philosophers of openness, from Nietzsche to Heidegger, who are most often turned into dogmatic idols of worship, which is probably the last thing the authors would have wanted.

Amongst the consequences of seeing the world through Vattimo's lenses is a kind of movement away from grand, unifying narratives of the past: "To be sure, there is no sense in purely and simply denying the world a 'unitary reality', in a kind of reprise of naïve empirical idealism. It makes more sense to recognize that what we call the 'reality of the world' is the context for the multiplicity of 'fablings' [here V. is borrowing from Nietzsche] – and the task and significance of the human sciences lie precisely in thematizing the world in those terms." (p.25) This task corresponds to a skepticism concerning established normative "fables" of West's major Ideologies and Religions. Throughout, he relies on Heidegger and Nietzsche as the "good" thinkers, guiding his journey against the whole metaphysical tradition stretching from Kant to Habermas. A crystallizing of his thought, as respect to the legacy of all foundationalist metaphysics (which we mention in anticipation of Rorty's critique in the next chapter), is found in this wonderful passage:

> "Disenchantment is the recognition that there *are* no objective structures, values or laws and that everything is posited, created by man (at least in the realm of meaning). Accordingly, one can no longer avoid (as metaphysics in its various forms has always done, claiming to have grasped objective structures) the recognition that there is nothing but the play of forces.

Yet here, where the weak can do nothing but perish, the best is reserved not for the most violent but rather for 'the most moderate, those that have no need for extreme principles … those who know how to diminish the value of humanity in their thinking, yet without becoming little or weak.' [A quote from Nietzsche's notes, 1887] If one reads Nietzsche's late notes carefully, *it would appear possible to make sense of this leap towards an ideal of moderation*, which is certainly at odds with the current image of his thought. (p.97)

Isn't it wonderful? I have italicized Vattimo's "expression of hope" (see next chapter's epigraph) that Nietzsche can be seen as a pacifist, and that the project of the overcoming of metaphysics can be seen not as a violent upheaval but as a moderate, even pleasant, happening. This recognition that "there is nothing but the play of forces" (a precursor to Foucault, Sartre, even Fascism) does not need to lead to violence, despair and other forms of self-destructive nihilism. Despair, if we read Nietzsche - but also Heidegger - carefully, is only an *inauthentic* response to the call of nihilism. This anticipates Rorty's desire to escape "belief," not into despair, but into irony and contingency. (My *own* opinion here is even stronger: I think the abyss opens up to perfect, uncontained joy.)

We could devote our entire discussion to Nietzsche and Heidegger. However, as my main interest lies elsewhere – in seeing the movement towards anti-foundationalist post-modernism as the movement of Enlightenment's completion in ironic post-nihilism – I will now turn to Rorty, who provides us with another reassuring, and illuminating, narrative of the "end" of metaphysics.

2. Second Movement: Rorty and Hermeneutical Hope

*"[H]ermeneutics is an **expression of hope** that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled"* – Rorty, 1980, p. 315 (my emphasis)

This same movement, this movement of philosophy into non-metaphysical (or post-modern) self-transparency, is crystallized and reflected, like in a mirror, in Richard Rorty's "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (1980), a medium-length treatise of unquestionable importance and timeliness.

But what interests me in Rorty is *not* the rehabilitation of certain modes of thinking and a few continental philosophers (Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida) within the field of Anglo-American analytical philosophy - although this was clearly one of the book's main achievements. No, even more imporantly, and *reflecting* the topic of the *luminosity* of *transparency*, is the book's internal progression from historical reflections on such topics as psychologism-in-philosophy and epistemologies of "mirroring" (chapters I-VI) into the promise of what Rorty calls "Philosophy

Without Mirrors" (p.357): that is to say, "philosophy without epistemology" (ibid.). The book presents a problem – outdated epistemologies and theories of mind and language – and proposes its solution – philosophy "without" or "beyond" epistemologies and theories of mind and language. But the solution is not a simple attack on Kant, Plato and Descartes. Instead, Rorty finds it convenient to dispose of a certain mode of thinking, precisely as a general mode of thinking (proper to modernity) and not as a specific philosophic doctrine (proper to X, Y, Z). He is not attacking philosophers, per se, as much as *modes of philosophizing*. His skepticism concerning "Theory of Knowledge" (pp. 131-164) and what he calls "Privileged Representations" (pp.165-212) extends across the whole *episteme* of modern epistemology and finds its anchor, its hope, in various radical philosophers of the last 150 years, including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Quine, Sellars and Derrida. He is a skeptic, a cynic, an ironist and a critic (but moreover, it seems, an avid reader).

The last two chapters (VII-VIII) comprise "part three" of the book, simply called "Philosophy." It is important, I claim, that this crucial section of the book (its normative *summa*), explicitly procedes as a move from epistemology to hermeneutics. Indeed, the second-to-last chapter – standing as a bridge (because sandwiched) between the old, rejected and denounced philosophies treated in the earlier chapters and the newly proposed "philosophy without mirrors" where "edification" rules – is simply called "From Epistemology to Hermeneutics." In other words, hermeneutics is the *bridge of hope* between the Old (Epistemology) and the New (Pragmatism), between the Modern and the Post-Modern. In fact, if the "post"-prefix qualifying modernity signifies a *movement* **towards** something, **across** something, **over** something – then *this movement itself is hermeneutics*. (Here "is" stands for the active present form of being, as against the passive "is" denoting states and structures.) This movement, of course, is not towards or across modernity, but towards its unnamed and unnamable otherness. If you may pardon a silly excursion, the "post" in "post-modern" and "post-epistemological" seems closer to the more mundane meaning found in the word "post-office:" the carrier and transporter (of messages) over the visible horizon of meaning. And who, we may ask, is the representative figurehead of the *herme*-neutics of post-philosophy? It is **Hermes**, the messenger of the gods, the "mail man" of the skies! In carrying over, transporting across and messaging between different horizons of meaning, hermeneutics is the hermetic art of the divine "postal service" as well as an "expression of hope" (p. 315) for - towards & across - a *post*-epistemological *post*-modernity of edifying discourse transparent to its *own* needs, ends and purposes. Rorty is concerned with increasing the honesty and transparency of arguments by dispensing, with Wittgenstein, with delusions of grandeur in philosophy. Right at the beginning

of the book, to accompany his dedication "To M.V.R.," he quotes Wittgenstein: "… Philosophy has made no progress? If somebody scratches where it itches, does that count as progress?"[1]

So, let me summarize Rorty's argument as regards the hermeneutical move in post-modern discourse. The hermeneutical "turn" in philosophy is nothing other than an *over-turning* of metaphysics (to use Nietzsche's and Heidegger's phrase), a cessation of the need to cling to (invented, alleged, so-called) solid foundations. What he means by foundations is clear. He attacks modern epistemology, in particular, but also the whole history of "Platonic" idealism. The building up of metaphysical foundations has been exemplified, throughout the years, by the establishment of epistemological guarantees in the form of various "comprehensive" but mutually exclusive systemic philosophies of representation (i.e. "mirrors"), from Plato to Hegel. This tendency towards certainty has to stop, and indeed Rorty says that, for all intents and purposes, it already largely *has*, thanks to the revolutions in the philosophies of science and language and, in the continental tradition, the radical anti-foundationalism of Nietzsche, the hermeneuticians and the post-modernists.

The fact that we are still talking in terms of textual paradigms and edifying discourse, rather than media saturation of images and sounds, or the semiotic plenitude of intercontinental cultural exchange, should not *blind* us to the fact that the hermetic-hermeneutic *movement* into post-modernity is analyzable in terms of light-based models of reflection, diffusion and mirroring (recall Rorty's "Mirror of Nature"). This I shall attempt to do in the next chapter. But first, what have we learnt from Rorty? That foundations collapse in the penetrating light of ironic self-transparency; that philosophers shouldn't be so silly as to want total knowledge; and that contigency is fun.

3. Third Movement: The Hermetic Post Office of Light

We have defined hermeneutics in terms of the active movement of going-over the foundationalistic metaphysics of modernity. This so-called post-modern turn, as we have seen, is characterized by a hope for the cessation of the movement of the epistemological quest after truth. Hermeneutics, for Vattimo and Rorty, is primarily not a new theory of meaning and interpretation, but rather the *bridge (of hope)* between man and overman, between Old and New, between the Modern and the Post-Modern. Hermeneutics is *post*-everything, including post-Christian, for which reason it represents a certain phase of nihilism, and a certain disillusionment of modernity, within modernity itself, as the movement of secularization (as Vattimo pointed out).

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[1] This quotation, from Wittgenstein's *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, is found on the opening pages of the book, before pagination begins. The page, in my version, is right before the table of contents.

The messaging/transporting undertaken by the Hermetic "postal service" (the movement beyond modernity through nihilism) entails a hermeneutic-cybernetic theory of fluidity. Fluidity means speed, and ultimately the speed of light. In a given discourse, which may or may not have a solid foundation (metaphysics) *via* an appeal to truth (epistemology), one's interpretative horizon appears as a kind of circumferential event horizon tending to infinity (the null point of infinite distance i.e. the "perspective" of Renaissance) at the speed of light. The constancy of speed of light[2] in Einstein corresponds to the *a priori* categories of Kant and Habermas: The idealist philosophers, like modern physicists, presuppose the pre-existence of something ever-present, something that is always-already there, always-already faster than the eye can see (i.e. superior to the power of our higher faculties). For Kant, these were the categories of understanding (such as space and time); for Habermas it's the categorical assumption of ideal communication. In both cases, the locus of activity, the space-time of discourse, is defined in terms of a kind of "faster-than-light" grid of pre-understanding. One cannot "escape" the categories of Kant or the communicative discourse of Habermas any more than one can travel faster than the speed of light. That is, if one takes these theories at all seriously. Vattimo claims that "Apel and Habermas make explicit a transcendental attitude that Gadamer rejects, but which nonetheless remains an almost unavoidable risk for his philosophy" (p.109); namely, the risk of transcendental normative-regulative ethics of *logos* understood as self-transparent Reason. I am not concerned with their specific theories, here, except to point to the *transcendental*, that is to say Kantian, that is to say metaphysical, frame of reference within which they operate. Habermas's Enlightenment is entirely Rationalistic.

The space of interpretation within a philosophical space, or any other hermeneutic horizon, is curved (as Quine and Apel well knew) and tending to self-preservation and myopia. But, for Habermas, this myopic utopia of self-centeredness (of absolute transparency), paradoxically enough, is the only guarantee (a metaphysical foundation) for a democratic, open-ended and non-imposing mutual discourse. So, for Habermas, as for Kant, such an ideal categorical framework is not only a *limitation*, but actually a kind of support frame of reality, a structural outline within which (and *only* there) plurality can reign. These theories do not fit Rorty's demand for a non-foundational, epistemologically non-assertive, post-modern philosophy. But they *are* very relevant in the discourse set out by Adorno, Benjamin and continued by Vattimo. Kant and Habermas

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[2] This constancy is constant, of course, only in the so-called quantum vacuum (that is to say, empty space). When the physicists threw out the theory of the ether (the universal medium of space) in the last decades of the 19th century, little did they expect that something akin to a new ether would be discovered through the two versions of Einstein's relativity theory, first in special relativity in 1905 (where speed was seen as relative, but fixed to inertial frames of reference), and then in general relativity of 1915/16 (where space-time, as an effect of universal gravitation, was itself seen as relative). In fact, the speed of light, as the new absolute frame of reference, is something akin to "new ether", but without subtance or weight or inertia as such. Einsteinian relativism is the paramount science of absolute light.

(himself a neo-Kantian) represent theories where light-speed (representing *a priori* instantaneity), is present as a kind of universal ether of transparency. "**Light" is a priori**. But this kind of ethics of the bundle "logos-reason-discourse-communication-democracy-dialogue-enlightenment" represents a kind of *pre-post-modern* (which is almost, but not quite, the same as simply *modern*) attitude that is suspect to criticism, again provided for by Vattimo: "This [Kantian] aspect of Habermas's theory expresses the decline of utopia and the return to an untroubled acceptance of the independence of the aesthetic" (p.67). Furthermore, "Habermas's revival of Kantian aesthetics [as well as his epistemology, ontology etc, I mind add!] could also be taken as evidence that his defence of the Enlightenment and modernity implies a specific deafness towards many phenomena concerned with the standardization of 'aesthetic' culture" (p.68). The Enlightenment concept of clarity and truth (and the beauty therein) lies in a kind of beholding of representative reason, and in such a theory all light becomes light of reason, and all reason becomes *a priori* distributed truth conditions.

If such theories are "rationalist" prefigurements of the current universe of absolute, omnipresent light (as information, entertainment and electricity), then what kind of Enlightenment do they offer? Is light simply this pre-figuring, form-giving, always-already-existing substratum of experience? No – it is also something that *pierces* through in aesthetic illumination. But, crucially, it only pierces through (whether in Kant or Habermas) in the absolute self-transparency of *logos*.

4. Coda: Light as the Medium of Global Co-Presence

We have treated both Vattimo and Rorty as *reflections* (and as *reflectors*) of a certain hidden luminosity ingrained in the hermeneutical dream of an open society and its utopic vision of a communicative community opened-up to fulfil the ideal of self-transparency and to develop the self-confidence, without foundations and guarantees, of the post-epistemological Übermensch.

Vattimo writes that the contemporary world "is a world in which a potential reduction of history to the level of *simultaneity*, via technology such a live television news bulletins, is becoming ever more real." (p.17, my italics) I have earlier spoken of the value of the metaphor – but not *only* a metaphor – of **light-speed** in understanding our contemporary information age and its "a priori" structures and self-imposed frames of self-transparency. It should by now be clear that the *simultaneity* of events and locations is factually achieved, *not* instantaneously, but at light-speed. The speed at which events are transmitted via the electro-magnetic spectrum may be *nearly* instantaneous, but this practical illusion masks the fact that the diffusion of light and electricity takes place at the very definite speed set down by the laws of physics. What does this matter? Well, it means that the laws of utopian communication, such as of Habermas, should be understood as

electromagnetic vibrations in a common medium (or media) – i.e. the ether of Kantian-Einsteinian space-time – disseminated at the speed of light. There is this *fraction of a microsecond* between the setting up of the ideal communicative presence – the "reaching out" of the transcendental normative pre-regulative category – and the establishment – via a kind of lightning flash of pure illumination – of the domain of global self-presence (of the internet, of television, or whatever). The fact that there is a *speed* to what only *appears* instantaneous (e.g. the *a priori* categorical constitution of absolute self-presence in communication or aesthetic perception) should "shock" us a bit, to use Benjamin's expression. If Vattimo is correct in assuming that the "Enlightenment is neither a stage nor a prelude to emancipation, but rather its very essence" (ibid.), and if Enlightenment has a certain relation to "real" Light (understood as the self-presence of the illuminating flash of pure consciousness), then we should see *light*, *lighting* and *lightning* as the three modes of emancipation corresponding to the tripartite structure of Kantian *logos* (as in his "Three Critiques"):

1) Light = Pure (Theoretical) Reason (e.g. "passive" illumination; pure pre-cognitive self-presence)
2) Light-*ing* = Pure (Practical) Reason (e.g. "active" illumination, "shedding" light; applied reason)
3) Light-*n-ing* = Judgment of Reason (e.g. aesthetics, *Stoss*, "shock," electricity…)

The first category listed above concerns the discovery, or postulation, of categories of reason inaccessible to ordinary consciousness, and only discoverable as its *a priori* conditions. We have seen that Habermas's and Apel's transcendental ethics relies on this kind of metaphysics of "first principles." We have also seen how Habermas's omniregulative framework of communication is an **ever-present flash of absolute self-presence**, a kind of grid of absolute self-transparency, disseminated at the speed of light, omnidirectionally, from the radiant center of its opening. It is, then, like the Sun, or like the cosmic background radiation of "empty" space.

However, we have primarily concerned ourselves with the second category: the *lighting* up of the world, the shedding light on matters, the applied enlightenment of practical reason. This corresponds to the movement of modernity as the so-called legacy of "Enlightenment." I don't think it is arbitrary to speak of "active illumination" in this context. The very name of that crucial and formative period[3], *Aufklärung / Les Lumières / Enlightenment*, is tied to the metaphor and concept of Light as the process of an emancipatory application of Pure (Practical) Reason.

The third category is the aesthetic category, proper. Of course Kant lived in an era before electricity, so his theories of aesthetic judgment do not concern us here. Instead, we have

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[3] On this subject, of the many different Enlightenments, see Jacques Derrida's essay "Faith and Knowledge" in a book he co-edited with Vattimo: Derrida/Vattimo, "Religion" (1998), Polity Press, UK.

replaced the Kantian rhetorics of universalizable sublimity with Benjamin's and Heidegger's talk of "shock" and "Stoss" as more appropriate to the global media age.

Modern history is the movement from the "natural" light of early Enlightenment (the setting-out of the *program* of lighting-up the world to absolute self-transparency), through the application of these principles in action (the maintainance and refinement of *ethics* of absolute self-consciousness), to the actualization of global self-consciousness in the universal grid of electricity of the computer age (the third and final phase of the project of Enlightenment). This movement, the movement towards what Vattimo calls "The Transparent Society," corresponds to the prevailing of a kind of *universal aesthetics* of pure light, of pure mediation, of pure technological *gnosis*.

The main failing in Habermas, then – from the point of view of post-modern, post-metaphysical, post-nihilistic media theory – is that he is stuck in "phase two" of this process: the movement towards the application of the principles of practical reason towards the universal emancipation of all voices, subjects and "sources of light." The assumption is that the project of Enlightenment hasn't yet reached its peak. Habermas is working towards "further light", whereas Rorty, for example, has already almost *given up* on any grand philosophic projects of change.

Vattimo seems to situate himself somewhere between Habermas's 18th Century utopian idealism and Rorty's 20th Century pragmatic relativism, but his reliance on Nietzschean and Heideggerian projects, as seen before, seems to make his philosophy heavily derivative of German radicalism. However, standing on the shoulders of Teutonic giants, Vattimo gives us the best available "heterotopic" overview of the present state and future of the the *Transparent* Society, i.e. what I here call the *Crystalline* Society – a community where the transparency of electric signals and hypermediated lifeforms (which the *media* reflect and diffract, like *crystals*), which travel and flash across the known universe at the speed of light, represents the "total control" grid of Adorno and the Negative Dialectic of the Enlightenment, as well as McLuhan's "global village." The Enlightenment has certain pathos and direction, and until its goal of absolute self-transparency is reached, according to people like Habermas and other neo-Kantians, there is still work to be done. The fate of artworks in the era of mechanical (and digital) reproduction is certainly transformed, but their role is not belittled, weakened or reduced to fragmentation; instead, the "art of existence" that Nietzsche preached is becoming a reality in the cybernetic dissemination of heterotopic flashes of illumination. Indeed, Joyce's concept of "epiphany" – a momentary flash of sudden realization – is the most appropriate concept for this new age, as seen from the fact that in the science fiction of Philip K. Dick the phenomenon of epiphany is developed further, into a means of technoscientific *gnosis*. I think that this neo-gnostic conception of absolute spirit becoming flesh in the cybernetic

organism corresponds well to the Kantian-Hegelian-Habermasian project of *il*-luminating the living world with "the lightning flash" (Benjamin's "shock") of *en*-lightened omni-reflective mirroring.

It is this all-radiant, omni-reflective mirroring (as in a carnivalesque hall of mirrors) that characterizes the crystalline nature of our enlightenment paradise. The opening of truth radiates its beauty (and terror) at the speed of light, in a flash, like that of a thermo-nuclear explosion.

Sun, having set a long time ago, is carried over and beyond mere natural daylight.

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