

The background of the cover is a complex marbled paper pattern. It features several large, overlapping circular shapes in shades of blue, teal, and grey. These circles are filled with intricate, swirling patterns of fine lines and small dots in various colors, including yellow, green, and purple. The overall effect is a rich, textured, and somewhat abstract visual field.

eds. joke brouwer • lars spuybroek • sjoerd van tuinen

# the war of appearances

transparency • opacity • radiance

# **the war of appearances**

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**introduction**  
*in the thick of things*

joke brouwer  
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There are many interpretations of Heraclitus' statement "Nature loves to hide," and probably this one – the accepted English translation – is the least correct. In *The Veil of Isis*, Pierre Hadot offers at least five different interpretations of the original Greek, some of which mean the exact opposite of others.<sup>1</sup> In the end, Hadot opts for a typically Heraclitean, antithetical translation along the lines of "the way things appear is the same way as they disappear," similar to "the way up and the way down are one and the same," another famous fragment of the pre-Socratic philosopher's writing. Whatever its original meaning may have been, the statement quickly came to signify the idea that nature has secrets, or that it is in the nature of things to have secrets. And while it remains questionable to speak of secrets, there undeniably exists a specific thickness to things that prohibits us from seeing every feature of them simultaneously, making us speculate on the relationship between what is hidden and what is shown.

The first form of thickness is that of form itself: things tend to be volumetric; what we see on the surface "hides" a thing's internal configuration, be it an invisible structure or simply parts so tiny that the human eye cannot perceive them (what Lucretius called the "spectacle of atoms"). A second form of hiding is not so much a spatial condition but lies in the temporal realm, such as the origins or causes of things. While all things have a history, it does not become unambiguously visible on their outer surfaces, and even if it did show on the outside, we would find that history itself is ambiguous. The third and last form of hiding is also the most complex, namely that things arrive in the world split in two. All things are organized as well as structured; the distinction is similar to those between abstract and concrete, virtual and actual, or essence and existence, although seething disagreements continue about which division is the more convincing. In themselves, the three categories of volumetric extension, generative causality and internal depth do not interest us very much in this book, nor does even the logical conclusion that strong connections must exist between them. What matters to us at this point is that things simply have a thickness. The mere fact that we speak of things implies it. What interests us above all is that, as Heraclitus frequently suggests in the *Fragments*, this thickness means war, conflict, strife and battle: we live in the thick of things.

Perhaps we will understand that conflict better if for a moment we reverse Heraclitus' statement into "Nature loves to show itself," since the notion of hiding is dependent on the fact that things are shown. From the day we open our eyes, we are drenched in the visible; moreover, each individual thing has so many sides to show that it cannot stop varying and changing its appearance. The thick of things

means, firstly, that things act *as if* they have something to hide, dancing before our eyes like whirling dervishes. The uncertainty is enough to start the war of appearances; the conflict within things plays out as an external conflict – a continuous strife we call the present. Thickness, depth, conflict, uncertainty, ambiguity: these are expressions that allow things to be different from each other because they are different from themselves. If such difference were to dissipate, all actuality would immediately come to a stop, giving way to an omnipresent, darkened state we know better as entropy. The thick of things, then, requires strategies for dealing with that thickness, since it implies war and conflict.

The three strategies we have identified are transparency, opacity, and radiance. Each has its own advantages and its own supporting disciplines, and none of the three can claim prominence over the others. Since they are situated in the thick of things, all three occur in the highest regions of doctrines as well as in everyday behavioral plans and individual willpower. That means we leave it to the reader to decide whether the strategies originate in things or in thought; we are only interested in the fact that one implies the other, that internal conditions directly affect external conditions and vice versa.

In this sense, it is immediately clear that the notion of transparency involves a view of things that understands them as potentially transparent and that the light that pervades them is subsequently the light of the mind. It is the rational light of Enlightenment, of *Aufklärung*. There are no secrets, only gradations of transparency, turning the diaphanous structure of light into what Pierre Hadot calls a “Promethean” strategy of wresting secrets from nature. In short, enlightened thinking is not simply a matter of a switch from philosophy to science but, moreover, one that is fundamentally technological. Exposing the inner workings of things is a purely technological act. Appearances are viewed as porous, as mediators between inner and outer workings. There is nothing innocent about this view; the connection between truth and torture has been extensively studied by Page duBois, and the notion of porosity requires actual technologies of penetration and perforation.<sup>2</sup> Between the schematism of things and their physical appearances, between the most abstract mathematical patterns and concrete materializations, lies no obstacle that cannot be solved. And “solved” is not an innocent word, either, especially if we understand it in the context of strategies and war. Solving problems means dissolving appearances, shifting a world of appearances to one of blind workings. It is, of course, technology that loves to hide, not nature.

Today, we encounter this passion in two technical phenomena: automation and leaking. The first, which sides with the schematism of workings, is one that not

only automates human labor and behavior but robotizes our environment, showing us the nearest traffic jams, warning us of bad weather, calculating our chances at romance, ordering our pizza, heating the bathwater to the preferred temperature; in short, living at least half of our lives for us, and mapping them out in a way that urges our personal technology to constantly advise us on new movies, books, restaurants and whatever else. Automation, as it operates on algorithms, solves our lives as if we were the only obstacle between it and its full realization. The second phenomenon, leaking – a term from the same liquid order as “solving” – has nothing to do with truth but is a purely technical construct. Leaking only exists in the light of the media. As Baudrillard said more than once, it is here that the media turn against themselves. Leaking is literally troubling. It increases the opacity of things because, while penetrating and perforating appearances, it encounters ... more appearances. The project of transparency fails by default: truth simply unveils more veils, revealing more images behind images. Indeed, the revealing itself becomes the spectacle. What at first seemed to be proper causes immediately take on the form of new images. *Aufklärung* is the powered opening up of things, and by consequence a technical construct. The collapse of the project of Enlightenment has now gone beyond its final, postmodern stage of irony and leaves us only two other options: opacity and radiance.

The medieval advocates of the all-pervading light of God, such as Pseudo-Dionysius and later St. John of the Cross, quickly encountered the same problem in theology and posited an opacity that was absolute. The former theorized it as the Divine Darkness, and St. John as the *Dark Night of the Soul* – the title of his book in which God as presence is fused with absence, and in which that absence of light enables the fire of the heart to guide the saint through darkness.<sup>3</sup> The dark night is primarily one of thought: that is, of resisting images and the pursuit of detachment – a thought that goes beyond theory, since the Greek *theoria* signifies seeing. Such spiritual exercises were perfected by Meister Eckhart, the German mystical theologian who reconfigured detachment from a religious experience into a worldly attitude: *Gelassenheit*. Usually translated as “releasement,” it more precisely signifies a letting or even a leaving. Detachment means to leave things, not as an act of abandonment, as in leaving behind, but as a nonact of leaving things be. It is a form of serenity, i.e., peacefulness, and therefore a form of resisting the present as the realm of conflict, what we call the war of appearances. The willpower that drives transparency is now fully reversed into its absence.

Heidegger’s notion of *Gelassenheit*, developed in his famous “Memorial Address” of October 1955, is directly derived from Meister Eckhart’s example.<sup>4</sup> It



claims to be a meditative way of thinking, a nonpenetrative and, again, nontheoretical form of thought that Heidegger paradoxically qualifies as “open to the mystery.” In the end, nontheoretical thought is probably the best definition of speculative or reflective thinking. Heidegger directly posits meditative thinking against what he calls the calculative thought of science and actuality. The nonact of awaiting should consequently be understood as an act against transparency. While seemingly impassive in an attitude of waiting and pausing, it turns out to be *as strategic* as calculative thinking. After all, Heidegger asserts such thought in a context of rootedness and settlement. While meditating, we house ourselves, firmly founded in the ground, properly walled off, with windows looking out. In this sense, meditation adopts a false form of detachment: false because it cannot stop time and only acts as if it does. Like transparency, it relies on construct, stratagem and strategy. We cannot one-sidedly claim indifference or entropy – the world simply disagrees. While we are being detached and grasping at suspense and standstill, the world moves ahead through conflict and *calculates itself at every moment of the present*. Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* is the denial of technology’s existence at the heart of nature. Being self-constructs and self-engineers. The horizontality of a lake? It’s automatic. The shape of a cloud? Automatic. The fractal shape of a mountain? Automatic. Nature houses itself.

What is missing from these statements is that a mountain, a lake, or a cloud is more than its shape. Far more, and in any situation too much. Nature’s technology is not your typical determinist engineering, structured by mere posts and beams, but an engineering of sheer redundancy and affluence that we recognize from bird’s nests and jungles. Zillions of water molecules work together to establish the lake’s flatness. Heraclitean *phusis* (“nature”) means that each molecule counts on its fingers how to respond to its neighbors. Nature is physical calculation. The material computer of the lake is a computer far bigger than anything in the basements of the Pentagon or Google Inc. In contrast to human forms of computing nature does not separate appearance from calculation; the screen and the machine are one and the same thing. All its atoms act through “digital” finger-counting, with which they scan their environment. They do not see through; instead, they “see out” in the sense that they actively look forward. There is nothing blind in the workings of nature.

This brings us to our third strategy, radiance. Things are now their own media, doing their own broadcasting. Jewelry, saints, flowers, fireworks: their appearances themselves are acts, but actuality is too small to contain them. The thinking of radiance is neither reflective nor penetrative but a *wondering*. Wonder does not pen-

erate things; it leaves them as they are. In Whitehead's words, "at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains."<sup>5</sup> Things overflow – a word seemingly of the same order as "leaking," but in contrast to the latter, overflow issues from the surface. It finds its precursor in a Gothic *emanatio*: effluence. The Latin *emanare* denotes "flowing out," but emanation does not mean the horizontal movement we associate with the word. Emanating things cannot stop leaking, turning their movement into a begetting, an offspring. Things jump from themselves. The radicalism of emanation is contained in the Nicene Creed's "begotten, not made," which excludes both religious creation and materialist evolution. For the Neoplatonist Plotinus, of course, things emanate downwards; they descend from the One, in what Eckhart calls the *ursprunc*, the "original jump," as an off-spring or descendant. In the eyes of classical, Neoplatonist emanation, things do not so much flow as fall from an original state of perfection into everless-perfect beings. Radiance does not follow the classical concept of emanation in its pure verticality but finds a new form. It encounters every thing uniquely as overflowing, but not as continuous with the first cause. Each thing makes the flow discontinuous. Radiance, then, accepts both the flow of transparency and the blockage of opacity but puts them in the wrong order. That is, things paradoxically make themselves; their technology is that of appearance.

Radiance seeks an extreme form of phenomenology, a *wonderology*, a flickering spook-phenomenology in which things jump at each other, absent as they move upwards and present as they come down to meet us. Their activity, their workings, can only be understood as part of their flickering appearance. Their depth stretches backward to the point of blockage and forward into their surroundings. Wonderology does not mean we look up to things. We face them here in front of us; however, that is not where they came from.

#### notes

1. Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. M. Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006), chaps. 1–8.
2. Page duBois, *Torture and Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
3. Cf. Wim Nijenhuis, "Het Zwarte Licht" [Black light], in *NOX A: Actiones in Distans*, eds. M. Nio and L. Spuybroek (Amsterdam: 1001 Publishers, 1991), 93–106. Nijenhuis draws compelling analogies between Pseudo-Dionysius, St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart.
4. Martin Heidegger, "Memorial Address," in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J. Anderson and H. Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 43–57.
5. A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 168.



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## a critique of transparency

Here all shadows are forbidden; only light is admitted. No trace of dualism: utopia is by essence anti-Manichean. Hostile to anomaly, to deformity, to irregularity, it tends to the affirmation of the homogeneous, of the typical, of repetition and orthodoxy.

– E. M. Cioran<sup>1</sup>

The desire for transparency is a major phenomenon of the postmodern media society. We all seem to be simultaneously objects and subjects of “intelligence”: everyone spies and is spied on. This activity is often based in a belief that transparency is the gateway to a better world. According to this view, transparency makes all power inequalities visible and will ultimately put an end to them. This worldview is one of limitlessness: whether it’s the state or some imagined community that’s supposed to realize total transparency, neither the rule of law or democracy ever imposes limitations. This worldview is utopian, because ultimately, the better world will necessarily clash with a subversive desire for freedom. The Assanges and Snowdens of this world, in their efforts to bring about total transparency, resemble all too closely the rulers they seek to challenge in contesting and effectively undermining those rulers’ right to keep secrets. I would like to counter this with the argument Manfred Schneider makes in his fascinating *Transparenztraum* (The transparency dream):

In the era of global communication, every secret is in danger: the secrets of states, of banks, of researchers, of private individuals, and of secret services. At the same time, however, we are seeing an incredible rise in the number of secret things.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, those who wish to control power must know about and understand its acts. Transparency and democracy are closely allied. It is often argued that if facts could talk, the false truth of power would be revealed. Power relations would then reverse: possessed of full knowledge, citizens would no longer allow themselves to be ruled through fear and shame, and the emperor would be naked. Here we can make out the contours of a world without differences in level, without depth, without pretense: a flat surface where nothing stays hidden.

“Transparency” is a buzzword today. People tend to see the idea as innocuous. It dates back at least to classical antiquity, when many stories were told about the

desire for disclosure, from the oracle and the Sphinx in the Oedipus myth to Pandora's box. But the tale is always that of a dangerous wish that leads to tragedy.

Here, I will present a critique of transparency as it is terrifyingly imagined in two dystopian novels, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. In these books, as well as in the modernist aesthetic, transparency is conspicuously associated with glass, often used in combination with steel. It is envisioned as a hard pellucidity, with everything illuminated by a blinding light.

The panopticon of modern power aims for a "transparent citizen" – or *gläserner Bürger*, literally "glass citizen," a term coined in Germany in the 1980s – who no longer has secrets. But secrets and the keeping of them are precisely that upon which the citizen's freedom rests. People have a right to darkness. The paradox, as I will argue, is that in order to protect that right, the state must be allowed its secrets too.<sup>3</sup>

## democracy and transparency

In a description of the architecture of the Dutch House of Representatives, we find the following:

The first thing one notices about the House of Representatives' new building is its use of glass. The transparent exterior was designed to exude openness and accessibility, two contemporary democratic values. Its transparency is meant for two groups: citizens who need to be able to keep track of their representatives and politicians who need to direct their gaze outward.<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of parliamentary democracy marked a transition from absolute monarchy to a political system of popular representation and the monitoring of leaders. The principle of openness is essential to the functioning of a parliamentary democracy. The representatives of the people publicly debate with each other and the executive branch; there are visitors' galleries, and the press reports extensively on the debates. Notably, transparency is usually associated with seeing and rarely with hearing or listening. Yet openness in parliamentary debate mainly has to do with what is stated and discussed.<sup>5</sup>

The historical shift was an interesting one. Where rulers had previously enjoyed a near-absolute right to secrets and privacy, in democracies, that right was in-

creasingly limited, while citizens' right to privacy grew. Yet the relationship between transparency and democracy is less self-evident than is assumed in most theories of democracy, for a number of reasons. First, it is often suggested that transparency requires no form of mediation or representation whatsoever. When directness is total, facts are assumed not only to speak for themselves but actually to exist in an objective sense. That makes transparency practically an apolitical concept in a world that seems capable of doing without illusion.

Of course, this is a serious misconception. Visibility and transparency can only be achieved from a particular position, perspective and context. Observation is only possible from a distance. Facts can only be understood from a particular perspective. And distance and perspective, in turn, cannot be separated from context, certainly not where politics is concerned. Knowledge free of interest, of theory, of ideology, of social context, would be apolitical knowledge. Political knowledge, however, cannot exist without or outside mediation. Facts only take on political meaning once they are politically interpreted.

Transparency in the sense of total, self-evident, immediate clarity is a fantasy:

The delusion of transparency is the illusion of existing without media.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge has been associated with light for centuries. Observation is only possible in an illuminated reality. The Enlightenment asserted that the source of illumination was the human mind, in a radical departure from the idea of the divine light of knowledge. According to Descartes, reason was a natural light like the sun.

With human beings and their minds accorded divine status, the world became definitively anthropocentric. This was the second important illusion that led to the dream of transparency. Though Descartes saw doubt as the essence of human intellect, the pursuit of true knowledge was itself henceforth no longer subject to doubt. Politically, this made the illusion dangerous. Rousseau gave the Enlightenment's dream of transparency a political interpretation in the form of the desire for a "pure" society, a longing for realness and lack of corruption that is characteristic of every utopia.

There is a third important implication here. The natural state of affairs championed by people including Rousseau was one of unmediated, unsullied transparency. In it, needs and passions ruled unrestrained, without the many interferences of social reality and its language, mediations, representations, mas-

querades, theater and symbolism. The distinction between the representative and the represented was false. Popular sovereignty entailed immediacy.

The power of the people lies not in the representation of that power but in its dissolution into utter visibility.<sup>7</sup>

When the people rule directly, there is no democracy; it is only possible through representation. Politics is a question of representation, not presentation. Political issues exist only when, and because, they are made political. This is true even in the case of referendums: they pose questions that do not exist outside political representation. And it is also true in the case of political transparency. Being pellucid is a form of invisibility; visibility arises only when there is political interpretation. So the unmediated visibility that transparency seems to promise is impossible.

### **“glass citizens” in the panopticon of modern power**

The Enlightenment also gave transparency another aspect: the panoptic exercise of power. In the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham developed the idea of total visibility in crystal-clear form. The circular prison is its perfect embodiment. It constitutes the ultimate model of humanist normalization through discipline via surveillance, recording and observation. Bentham articulates the principle in the preface to his *Panopticon* with breathtaking conviction:

Morals reformed – health preserved – indemnity invigorated – instruction diffused – public burdens lightened – Economy seated, as it were, up on a rock – the guardian knot of the Poor-Laws are not cut, but untied – all by a simple idea in Architecture!<sup>8</sup>

The all-seeing eye is itself invisible; the prisoner knows he could be being watched at any given moment, but he can never know for sure, just as a pedestrian in a city or a driver on a road can never be certain whether the CCTV cameras are rolling. But the idea is enough: the prisoner is aware of his potential visibility and knows he is better off behaving in accordance with norms, since conformity could earn him the reward of early release.

Two centuries later, Michel Foucault showed how the panoptic principle had been developed further in various aspects of the modern exercise of power:

But the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building; it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.<sup>9</sup>

The panoptic principle brings an unprecedented efficiency to the exercise of power: only a few guards are needed to surveil a great many prisoners. The principle is also effective because it has a preventive function. No actual intervention need take place: “it gives ‘power of mind over mind.’”<sup>10</sup> In the welfare state, we see the same principle on a broader scale: the state is in our homes, under our beds and inside our heads, watching us. Through recording, monitoring and questionnaires, citizens are made transparent and induced to behave in “normal,” “safe,” “healthy,” “well-adjusted” ways. Alain-Gérard Slama speaks of an “*angélisme exterminateur*” (a “reign of exterminating angels”), Rik Peeters of a “preventive gaze.”<sup>11</sup>

Science and the professions are deployed to develop a comprehensive order of monitoring, oversight and insight. Information and communication technologies expand the panoptic principle to, and via, the Internet. Physical surveillance is replaced by various methods for linking up digital traces. Big data represents the latest manifestation of the urge for transparency. In the cloud, unbridled automated inspection makes the watchtower superfluous. The Internet of Things creates a physical environment that performs its own surveillance: my clothes and shoes monitor my behavior. Apps count my steps, check my heart rate and blood pressure, and direct me to the gym or the doctor. Insurers are thrilled. The popular discourse on the smart city reveals an unbridled techno-optimism that is dangerous in its political naivety. This megalomania around social engineering is unprecedented and denies or conceals the power relations encoded in every database. The intended transparency is completely panoptic, yet it is grounded in various kinds of misrepresentation and a nonphysical form of blindness.<sup>12</sup>

The “glass citizen” identified in the 1980s is slowly becoming reality; meanwhile, it has become apparent that citizens paradoxically do a lot to make themselves transparent. Not only do they incorrectly suppose they have nothing to hide, they unabashedly display all their more or less private behaviors and opinions. We have narcissistic citizens, a voyeuristic state and media pimps. And everyone combines these roles in various ways.

Everything is visible, and everything has to be visible: this rule holds true for both rulers and subjects and is greatly aided by the strong positive connotations



the idea of transparency has enjoyed since the Enlightenment. For modern humans, the hidden and the invisible belong to the domain of magic and mystery, and they are, or conceal, forms of ignorance. Politically, the old *arcana imperii* are seen as the unjust privilege of a powerful class that oppresses and subordinates the people. It is all too often forgotten that under the light of power, transparent citizens have more to fear from transparency than the rulers.

## **disenchantment through glass**

Strikingly often, glass physically and metaphorically represents the disenchanting transparency that is Enlightenment's goal. In the past, it stood chiefly for fragility and vulnerable visibility. We see this in early medical history with the glass delusion, whose sufferers believed they were made of glass and could shatter. In the seventeenth century, however, glass increasingly became associated with ideas of robustness and clarity. In Francis Bacon, we see a crystalline world of knowledge in which everything that exists is seen and understood. Glass is invisible yet reflective. It is brittle yet hard. Schneider mentions the mythological figure of Momus, son of the goddess Nyx, who wanted a glass window placed in the human breast so he could see the soul. We describe the eyes as windows to both the soul and the world.<sup>13</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, glass has been a favorite material of the architectural avant-garde, which often combines it with steel. The Crystal Palace, built in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851, is an iconic example. Glass and steel, manufactured products, replaced the divine creations of wood and stone. Social idealists use glass and light in urban design out of a belief that they make relationships transparent and therefore positive.<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin writes:

It is no coincidence that glass is such a hard, smooth material, to which nothing can be fixed. It is also a cold, sober material. Things made of glass have no 'aura.' In general, glass is the enemy of secrets.<sup>15</sup>

Glass is the enemy of secrets, hence its connection to the urge for transparency. As a metaphor, it combines inspection and introspection. The Bolsheviks' totalitarian schemes brought together the visibility of the world and that of human beings. The artistic avant-garde was enthusiastic. Surrealist transparency in art had

its terrifying counterpart in the totalitarian state. By making its citizens totally visible, that state turned everything political, penetrating society's most intimate crannies. The dream of transparency proved to be a nightmare. In his blind ambition to gain control, man created a force that rendered him entirely transparent to an omniscient but completely untransparent state.

The nightmare of transparency is not limited to totalitarianism, however. The dream of transparency is rooted in the desire to uncover secrets and know everything about the world – a desire that was radicalized in modernity and stripped of its classical links to danger. No facades, no illusions, no masquerades: behind all the concealment lies the real, the true, the authentic.

But the desire for disclosure will always run up against a particular quality of glass: it is at once invisible and impenetrable. "Glass citizens" can show themselves only through collision and breakage. And total transparency is only discernible when something is reflected.

This is in keeping with the political-theoretical conclusion that in a democratic state the will to power always involves the mediation of representation. Representation is not a reflection or an accurate portrayal but has its own meaning separate from that which it represents. Politics comes into being through representation. In this process of creative action, the represented citizens are present symbolically rather than with the immediacy the urge for transparency seems to compel. There is a distance between the representative and the represented. To an extent, the two are mutually unfathomable; both have secrets that are better kept. Neither citizens nor politicians are made of glass. Total transparency would mean invisibility. Distance and opacity are conditions of visibility. What is too close and completely transparent will remain invisible.<sup>16</sup>

## **blinding light**

Dystopian novels like George Orwell's *1984* show us why total transparency is horrifying. In writing it, Orwell was greatly inspired by Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1921 novel *We*. Zamyatin's story takes place in a distant future, a thousand years after a devastating war has decimated almost the entire world population. Only a few million survivors are left. They live in a city-state called One State. Whereas in *1984*, Big Brother watches citizens panoptically, and citizens never know whether they are being observed through the "telescreen," in *We*, total transparency pre-

vails. Everyone watches everyone else. Everyone is visible to everyone else. After all, everything is made of glass:

I saw everything as though for the first time in my life: the straight, immutable streets, the glittering glass of the pavements, the divine parallelepipeds of the transparent houses, the square harmony of the gray-blue ranks.<sup>17</sup>

Since everything can be seen through the glass, citizens' every action is immediately visible. Covering the glass is only permitted during hours designated for sleep or reproductive activity – naturally, One State practices biopolitics. The hidden, unregulated love between the novel's main characters is, of course, illegal, and completely at odds with total transparency. The glassy clarity of One State cannot tolerate lust. Eros is anti-state, a sensuality that is subversive and in conflict with the organized absence of privacy.

Elections, too, are completely transparent; everyone can see that everyone is voting for "the Benefactor." No one deviates. There is, of course, no reason to. In *1984*, people live under permanent surveillance. In Zamyatin's dystopia, there is "sousveillance": citizens themselves are the guards, watching each other and themselves. Surveillance cameras *avant la lettre* feature in Orwell; Zamyatin foresees camera-equipped mobile phones, Google Glass and drones rolled into one. Of course, things end badly for *We*'s protagonist. The two dystopias really only err in terms of time. *1984* is set slightly too early in history, but its ideas are common currency today. *We* sketches a distant future that has now begun to be reality.

A more recent novel is Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, which stars an eponymous fictional company. The company pithily expresses its mission in three slogans at least as ominous as those of Orwell's Big Brother:

SECRETS ARE LIES  
SHARING IS CARING  
PRIVACY IS THEFT<sup>18</sup>

*The Circle* is teeming with hymns to transparency. The company insists on radical illumination and total disenchantment: everything can and must be known and understood; nothing and no one has a right to secrets or mystery. These are reprehensible, because they impede progress. Everything and everyone is subject to constant monitoring; extensive information is stored on everything and everyone.

Thanks to modern technology, that monitoring is always surveillance and sousveillance in one. And when everything is public, no one, ruler or citizen, can hide. Evil is destined to disappear; only good will remain. The panopticon of total transparency is all-encompassing: everything has become a watchtower, everyone a guard.

Of course, there is no way everyone can always know everything – but everyone is allowed to. And since they're allowed to, in fact, they have to; not wishing to know is seen as backwardness. Fortunately, transparency is putting an end to that backwardness. Its proponents believe this type of progress, in its sensible rationality, will bring about a perfect world, that is free of domination (*herrschaftsfrei*). It is difficult to say, however, whether this world will be completely apolitical or whether the political will have permeated everything, leading to a totalitarian society. The idea of a power-free world in which only knowledge, reason and openness exist is a utopian one. Such a world would definitively render people equal. It would therefore be a totalitarian world, where anything that deviates from utopia and anyone who resists it would face total repression.

Zamyatin, Orwell and Eggers portray dystopian versions of Max Weber's theory of modernity. According to Weber, the Enlightenment radically put an end to all forms of magic, on the one hand through the rise of puritanical Protestantism and on the other through the unprecedented flowering of science. Mythical forces no longer ruled the world. Puritanism was a rational religion with a severe, ascetic work ethic<sup>19</sup> that displayed an elective affinity (*Wahlverwandschaft*) with modern science.

Like Weber, the three novelists keenly depict the dangers of a disenchanting world. The utopia of progress is a continuation of the Christian doctrine of salvation and brings with it the enchantment of transparency. In *The Circle*, humanity stands "at the dawn of the second Enlightenment." All knowledge will be unlocked – for the good of human beings and the human race as a whole, of course.<sup>20</sup> Given these good intentions, secrets are unnecessary, even suspect. Transparency is a matter of civilization.

Knowledge that is open and accessible to everyone makes prevention in an encompassing sense possible. One who knows everything can prevent anything, from illness to crime. In this, we recognize, with Byung-Chul Han, Nietzsche's proposition that in a society that has declared God dead, "the last man" will become obsessed with his health.<sup>21</sup> *The Circle* and *We* both show how transparency yields a blinding light that leaves little room for doubt. It is the false certainty of immediacy, of the unmediated.

## the promise of immediacy: the hall of mirrors

There is a lot of glass at the Circle. In the Glass Eatery, guests seem to float amid nine stories of transparent walls and floors. The offices have been conceived by designers with a predilection for the see-through. One of the founders has a glass desk and door. Plexiglass objects are everywhere. In a horrible experiment, a transparent shark in an aquarium devours everything that swims or is thrown into its path. Here there are three layers of transparency: the aquarium, the shark, and its entrails and digestive system.<sup>22</sup>

Glass enables both inspection and introspection. People can see not only the world but also themselves. This is Foucault's panopticon, where the awareness of visibility leads to normalization. Those being inspected know the behavior that is expected of them, and so they display it. Visibility is potentially constant. Deviant behavior is so risky that there is an obvious advantage not just in displaying the desired behavior as a diversionary tactic but in making it one's usual pattern. The transparency of the inspected one leads to normalization without physical coercion. It is the perfect discipline: voluntary, and very much so.

In the glass worlds of *The Circle* and *We*, transparency is total: every aspect of everybody can be seen. It is a life of *sousveillance* more than of surveillance. Even the guards in the watchtower can be seen and have nothing to hide. There is no longer even a central point from which inspection is carried out. The watchtower is decentered and distributed. In the panoptic reality of these novels, information must of course always be complete. An imperfect picture is undesirable, like a cracked or broken mirror that misrepresents reality. Only a perfect mirror can show the truth.<sup>23</sup>

But a reflection is never the same as reality. The most familiar image we have of ourselves, the one we see in the bathroom mirror every day, is not a mimetic image. What we see in the mirror is not us. The image a photograph or film provides is more reliable, but this is only a representation. In short, it is impossible to see oneself; only the other can do that. Even to ourselves, then, we are never entirely transparent.

Even digital photography, which sacralizes the here and now, seems to want to deny that a picture can only capture the past. A selfie seems to show the photographer in the immediate present, as a transparent exterior, without depth, without distance. The face becomes a "face" rather than a "countenance," in Han's words.<sup>24</sup>

As a surface, the face proves more transparent than the countenance, which Emmanuel Levinas has deemed a privileged site for transcendence to emerge via the Other. Transparency stands opposed to transcendence. The face inhabits the immanency of the Same.<sup>25</sup>

In the transparent society, everything has clarity, because unequivocalness is the norm. Ambivalence, mystery and ambiguity are not permitted to exist, and thus neither is lust, desire or seduction. The transparent society is therefore pornographic. There is no place here for the asymmetry of secrets or darkness. The strategic power games played in private and public deserve only unmasking and disclosure. To quote René ten Bos:

In a transparent culture that lays everything bare and wishes to leave nothing in silence, seduction is an event that must be excluded.<sup>26</sup>

Silence is an auditory concept. It causes discomfort and is therefore sometimes “unbearable.” It is said that silence implies consent. Often, we feel certain that someone who is silent must be concealing something.

One who is silent has something to hide; one who is silent cannot be trusted. Everyone must speak.<sup>27</sup>

One who is silent is, in any case, not transparent. He or she probably has a secret, or, in line with Wittgenstein’s statement, has arrived at a great philosophical insight.

## **aesthetics of transparency**

Transparency also has an aesthetic dimension. It’s no accident that modernist architecture is besotted with glass, especially in combination with steel. Much of it was never built: Frank Lloyd Wright’s glass towers for New York, Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse, his Plan Voisin for Paris. But plenty of it was: Mart Stam’s Van Nelle factory in Rotterdam, the buildings of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the innumerable glass skyscrapers of the metropolises. The transparent city is the modernist answer to the “reactionary” disorder of the age-old classical city.

The *Athens Charter*, written in 1943 under the leadership of Le Corbusier, formulates that response systematically and sometimes terrifyingly. The city has four

functions: living, working, recreation and traffic. Strict planning is needed to organize their spatial separation. The separation of functions is of vital importance in the modernist vision.

The charter sets out the conclusions of the famous fourth Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne, held in 1933 on board the SS Patris II during a two-week voyage from Marseilles to Athens and back, led by Le Corbusier and attended by key members of the European architectural avant-garde. They made maps at the congress showing their ideas for a great many existing cities; these were recently published in *Atlas of the Functional City*. The maps depict the separation of functions in an aesthetically pleasing and convincing style – from a bird's-eye view, of course, revealing the grand gesture but never the details at the human level.<sup>28</sup>

The “geometric” aesthetic James C. Scott writes of is outstandingly visible in the atlas. Transparency – clarity in the literal and figurative senses – is of eminent importance in this aesthetic; according to Scott, it helps to make the world legible. The bureaucratic planning of nature and society makes them manageable. Legibility is often achieved through classification and categorization. The result is a model-based orderliness that removes the real world from view by elevating it to the level of a higher plan or the void of abstraction. Transparency here is that of an artificial reality that obscures the complexity and variety of the world through modeling and schematization. It's no accident that the drawing table and, more recently, the computer play such prominent roles in the world of design.

This is the transparency of rational organization, which in modernism is defined and appreciated in a notably aesthetic way:

An efficient, rationally organized city (...) was a city that *looked* regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense.<sup>29</sup>

Straight lines, clear order, symmetry, visible mainly from above and without – this is a formal order that need never connect to the social order of the city. Legibility primarily serves the state's ambition to control and organize things.<sup>30</sup>

The modernist geometric aesthetic seeks to put an end to the historical contingency of the city as a continuously changing and often unintentional product of the movement of people, money, and decisions. The modern city is a “machine à habiter” that springs from the blueprint of a brilliant dictator.

The despot is not a man. It is the Plan. The correct, rational, exact plan, the one that will provide your solution once the problem has

been posited clearly in its entirety, in its indispensable harmony. This plan has been drawn up well away from the frenzy of the mayor's office or the town hall, from the cries of the electorate or the laments of society's victims. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds. It has taken account of nothing but human truths. It has ignored all current regulation, all existing usages, and channels. It has not considered whether or not it could be carried out with the constitution now in force. It is a biological creation destined for human beings and capable of realization by modern techniques.<sup>31</sup>

This is a revealing quote that shows us the philosopher-king and his lofty ideas. In it, we recognize Aaron B. Wildavsky's thesis that a problem only exists when there is also a solution; a love of planning and organization; a deep faith in the ability to engineer; even a preference *avant la lettre* for the disruptive, which breaches the existing rule of law; and the inclination of every idealist, including technocratic ones, to sacrifice democracy on the altar of utopia.<sup>32</sup> We know Le Corbusier sought without scruple to convince authoritarian regimes of the brilliance of his ideas. If they found his plans too radical, he moved on with ease: what was good for Moscow was good for Paris or Algiers.<sup>33</sup>

We see this same aesthetic preference for a formal, transparent order in *The Circle*. Here, however, it is not the familiar modernist appreciation of straight lines and angles that predominates; rather, the preference is for roundness. There are circular rooms and offices with "no right angles." The company's logo is made up of round shapes, with an open circle – a C – in the middle. In the eyes of powerful Circlers, though, unclosedness is intolerable. It must therefore be made into a finished geometric form: the circle must be closed. Closure is completion, totality, perfection.

A circle is the strongest shape in the universe. Nothing can beat it, nothing can improve upon it. And that's what we want to be: perfect. So any information that eludes us, anything that's not accessible, prevents us from being perfect.<sup>34</sup>

A completed circle is a closed system of egalitarian perfection, round and whole, all-encompassing and universal. It allows everything to be unified, for when there is no longer an outside, everything is inside. Inclusion is entire, participation total. Everything and everyone is equal in the blinding light of transparency.



## freedom and the right to darkness

So total transparency is egalitarian. Transparency compels equal treatment and hence gives rise to mediocrity. One who wishes to know everything, collect everything and compare everything must inevitably reduce it all to a common denominator. That denominator is often money, the medium of ultimate exchangeability, which can and must deny “all incommensurability, any and all singularity,” Han writes. “The society of transparency is an *inferno of the same*.”<sup>35</sup> We establish benchmarks, propagating the treatment of everyone as equal and average, especially if we use those benchmarks to develop “best practices” that we then “roll out” into the world. This mediocrity brings with it the danger of totalitarianism. If everything is measured, observed, and recorded, not only will uniformity and dumbing down be the predictable result, but we will get a completely panoptic world in which we are looked at, judged and sentenced from a single point of view, on the basis of a single common denominator. The kind of equality described here differs fundamentally from the classical political equality familiar to citizens of constitutional states. There, all people are equal in the eyes of the state, equal in their fundamental right to difference. This fundamental right to difference is the essence of freedom.

Total transparency precludes this equality in difference. It presumes simplicity and unequivocalty, viewing everything from a single perspective. Only in this way can everything be made visible. But it makes difference in the Deleuzian sense impossible. Transparency treats different ideas and points of view as the same. So difference as such disappears, or remains invisible. It stays a secret, hidden and not directly seen.

And herein lies the relationship between difference and freedom. For those who value one as the essence of the other, it is important that differences are not treated as the same and made transparent from a single perspective. Civil liberty depends on the right to secrets and privacy. After all, freedom is hardly imaginable without secrets. The state must not be allowed to know everything. And citizens must be permitted to keep secrets not only from the state but also from each other.

We cannot escape the blinding light of total openness. The digital panopticon surrounds us in a totalizing way: the guards and the prisoners are the same. So difference disappears. We use apps to build our own virtual fortresses. We see them as gateways to self-control and self-knowledge. Transparency makes us feel powerful. But in fact, “it makes things so translucent that they become ghostly and intangible.”<sup>36</sup>

The power of freedom, however, is a different kind of power. It enables us to opt out of modernist disenchantment, to sometimes choose for magic and mystery, to act against our own interests, to live in unhealthy ways. All this is freedom too. It's our fundamental right to get fat, so to speak.

But this will only be possible if citizens are able to opt out of transparency and remain silent about things that can't bear the normalizing light of day. After all, there will always be other people who will object to difference. There will always be an ineradicable paternalism that wants what's best for me and seeks to disallow things for my own good. It may come from fellow citizens, or the state, or a democratic majority that imposes "a better choice" on me and enforces it using the state monopoly on violence.

A transparent world devoid of secrets is an inhospitable world. Nothing stays hidden, unsaid, or untouched. The blinding light of total clarity lays everything bare and causes all mystery to disappear. Nakedness, stripped of every veil and enchantment, is all that remains. In a fully illuminated world, pretense and therefore truth disappears, since neither is transparent. Freedom cannot exist without the right to darkness and silence.

Freedom is at odds with transparency, since *not* wanting to know everything is a key aspect of it. Citizens not only must be able to have secrets and to keep parts of their lives hidden; they must also be able to choose not to know everything about themselves or others. If Google Glass becomes a metaphorical artifact of postmodern relationships, there will be implications for freedom. If there's nothing left to guess, to surmise, to suspect or fantasize about, personal encounters will lose their mystery. Human contact will become a question of logging in – certainly if the Internet of Things, through various forms of implanted technology, expands beyond inanimate objects into an Internet of Humans.

In the blinding light of transparency, only the very surface can exist. Every taboo will be smashed, all shame gone. When everything is illuminated, open and honest, every reason for shame will disappear; after all, no one will have anything left to hide. And with ignorance no longer an excuse, let alone a right, there will be no more mercy either.

The right to privacy, in the broader sense of secrecy, is the antithesis of the right to openness and transparency.

Privacy is the voluntary withholding of information reinforced by a willing indifference. Secrecy is the compulsory withholding of knowledge, reinforced by the prospect of sanctions for disclosure.

Both are the enemies, in principle, of publicity. The tradition of liberal, individualistic democracy maintained an equilibrium of publicity, privacy and secrecy. (...) The principles of privacy, secrecy and publicity are not harmonious among themselves. The existence of each rests on a self-restrictive tendency in each of the others.<sup>37</sup>

Transparency, then, need not be maximal in a pluralistic society, let alone total. Without privacy and secrecy, there can be no freedom and no pluralism. Without the right to darkness, citizens cannot not exercise their right to difference. This means that while transparency is an important democratic means of monitoring power and holding it to account, that same transparency threatens citizens' freedom if it becomes a blinding light that causes difference to disappear.

The state can only protect freedom and pluralism if they constitute a no-go territory for it, a space where citizens remain untouchable and their secrets private. Violation of this rule must be strictly forbidden by law and thus enforceable by that same state.

The protection of freedom demands that the state be able to act in the final instance. A special right to secrecy – so that it is able to combat threats to freedom and pluralism – is an indispensable part of the state's role as a final authority. Yet in its Heideggerian impenetrability as a final authority, it must also allow citizens a no-go zone that they can deliberately keep hidden. Citizens' freedom is not only the foundation but also the most important objective of this impenetrability.

#### notes

1. Emil Cioran, *History and Utopia*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet Books, 1996), 86.
2. Manfred Schneider, *Transparenztraum: Literatur, Politik, Medien und das Unmögliche* (Berlijn: Matthes & Seitz, 2013), 34. See also: Suelette Dreyfus and Julian Assange, *Underground* (Edinburgh/Londen/New York/Melbourne: Canongate, 2012); Glenn Greenwald, *De af luisterstaat: Edward Snowden, de NSA en de Amerikaanse spionage- en af luisterdiensten* (Amsterdam: Lebowski, 2014).
3. This essay is to a significant extent based on Frissen, *Het geheim van de laatste staat: Kritiek van de transparantie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2016).
4. [www.parlement.com](http://www.parlement.com).
5. Erna Scholtes also emphasizes that transparency is primarily a visual concept. In the Enlightenment, seeing was rationalized and increasingly became the dominant form of perception. Erna Scholtes, *Transparantie, icoon van een dolende overheid* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma, 2012), 13–5.
6. Schneider, *Transparenztraum*, 98.
7. *Ibid.*, 117.
8. Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings* (Londen/New York: Verso, 1995), 31 (*italics mine*).

## *a critique of transparency*

9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 205.
10. *Ibid.*, 206.
11. Alain-Gérard Slama, *L'angélisme exterminateur: Essai sur l'ordre moral contemporain* (Parijs: Grasset, 1993); Rik Peeters, *The Preventive Gaze: How Prevention Transforms Our Understanding of the State* (Den Haag: Eleven International Publishing, 2013).
12. Albert Meijer, *Bestuur in de datapolis: Slimme stad, blijf burgers?* (Den Haag: Boom bestuurskunde, 2015).
13. Schneider, *Transparenztraum*, 83–90.
14. *Ibid.*, 155 et seq.
15. Cited in *ibid.*, 244–5.
16. The state must diverge from its citizens. Distance and difference are therefore indispensable, as we argued in an essay on the Dutch government's "national logo"; see Van der Spek, Frissen, Rouw & Van der Steen, *Het gezicht van de staat* (Breda/Den Haag: Graphic Design Museum/Nederlandse School voor Openbaar Bestuur, 2009).
17. George Orwell, 1984; Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Wij* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Veen, 2014) 8 and 48. English quotation taken from Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg, accessed at <https://libcom.org/library/we-yevgeny-zamyatin>.
18. Dave Eggers, *De cirkel* (Amsterdam: Lebowski, 2011), 276.
19. Patrick Dassen, *De onttovering van de wereld: Max Weber en het probleem van de moderniteit in Duitsland 1890–1920* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1999), 195–7; Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Keulen: Anaconda, 2009), 81 et seq.
20. Eggers, *De cirkel*, 68.
21. Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015), 10.
22. Eggers, *De cirkel*, 20, 43, 166–7, 277 et seq., 312, 422 et seq.
23. *Ibid.*, 262.
24. Han, *The Transparency Society*.
25. *Ibid.*, 10 (italics mine).
26. René ten Bos, *Stilte, geste, stem: Een filosofisch drielুক* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2011), 23.
27. *Ibid.*, 46.
28. La Groupe CIAM France (1943); *Atlas of the Functional City* (Parijs: Plon, 2014).
29. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT/Londen: Yale University Press, 1998), 4 (italics mine).
30. *Ibid.*, 55–8.
31. Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City: Elements of a Doctrine of Urbanism to be Used as the Basis of Our Machine-Age Civilization* (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 154 (also quoted at length in Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 112).
32. Aaron B. Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Co, 1979), 388–9. In the absence of a solution, after all, there is no problem, only tragedy. Also see Frissen, *De fatale staat: Over de politiek noodzakelijke verzoening met tragiek*, 165.
33. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 114. Chaslin's recently published study *Un Corbusier* discusses Le Corbusier's sympathy for French fascists, his admiration of Hitler, his anti-Semitism and his links to the Vichy regime. Great architects are always forgiven much; Koolhaas's design of the Chinese state TV company's headquarters earned him few reproaches and a number of prestigious assignments. The question of whether work and ideas can be so cleanly separated is certainly worth asking, however, and the answer is probably no, certainly considering many architects' penchant for supplying a philosophical grounding for their work.
34. Eggers, *De cirkel*, 262.
35. Han, *The Transparency Society*, 2 (italics mine).
36. Hans Schnitzler, *Het digitale proletariaat* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij, 2015), 77 et seq., 94.
37. Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Politics* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 26–7.

## paolo cirio

In *Street Ghosts* (2008–), photos of people found on Google Street View are printed at life size and then posted at the physical locations where they were taken. The figures are printed in color, cut out, and affixed to the walls of public buildings at precisely the spot where they appear in Google Street View.

*Paolo Cirio works with the legal, economic and semiotic systems of the information society. He investigates social fields impacted by the Internet, such as privacy, copyright, politics and finance. He shows his research- and intervention-based works through artifacts, photos, installations, videos and public art. Cirio has exhibited in international museums and institutions and has won numerous prestigious art awards, including a Golden Nica at Ars Electronica, a Transmediale Award and an Eyebeam fellowship. His artworks have been mentioned by hundreds of media outlets worldwide, and he regularly gives public lectures and workshops at leading universities.*

## street ghosts









212 Lafayette Street, New York, United States  
Address is approximate



# NEW YORK



Berlin, Germany

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## diana scherer

Working with biologists at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, Scherer searched for a technique that would allow her to control the growth of plants' roots. In *Harvest* (2015), she induced the natural networks of root systems to grow artificial tissue by installing underground templates for the roots to weave themselves into. The patterns of her underground templates are based on constructional and ordering principles from nature, such as cells, crystals and shells.

*Diana Scherer studied fine art and photography at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. She investigates the relationship between humans and their natural environment and the human desire to control nature. Living plant material and intervention in biological processes form the basis of her research. Her work has been featured in publications including Capricious, Exit, and Hotshoe magazines and in solo and group exhibitions in Paris, New York, Berlin and Seoul.*

## harvest















