Introduction to: J. Brouwer, L. Spuybroek, S. van Tuinen (eds.), *The War of Appearances: Transparency, Opacity, Radiance* (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing, 2016).

In the Thick of Things

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.[1] 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 behaviorial 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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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 penetrate things; it leaves them as they are. In Whitehead's words, "at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains."[5] 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 ever-less-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,
[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.