Transparency and its Schematism
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"Just as the old injustice is not changed by a lavish display of light, air and hygiene, but is in fact concealed by the gleaming transparency of rationalized big business, the inner health of our time has been secured by blocking flight into illness without in the slightest altering its aetiology" (§ 36). Adorno's analogy between the administration of social conflict in monopoly capitalism and the objectification of subjectivity through the repression of mental suffering deserves to be unpacked in full. It is exemplary of an inchoate freudomarxism, which sees psychopathology as mirroring capitalist modes of production. It anticipates critiques of power structures and commercial interests at work in the psycho-therapy-education industry. But it also extends to domains beyond the corporation and the soul. It resonates with the contemporary failure of 'leaks' to end tax evasion or change the operations of secret services, as well as with the impotent appeals for more transparency made by technocrats and populists alike. In suggesting the real and not merely metaphorical interconnectedness of heterogeneous forms of false positivity, it performs the arch-gesture of the negative dialectic.

Today transparency still counts as a panacea. It promises accountability and healing for romantic relations, markets, and democracies as much as for the planet at large. Yet while transparency is celebrated both as a duty and as a right, it remains false insofar as it triggers no new forms of responsibility or liberation. For as Adorno would no doubt remind us, 'seeing through' is first of all the fetish of an enlightenment blinded by its own light. Transparency is the homogenizing element of the "context of delusion" (Verblendungszusammenhang): the convergence of total mobilization with total access in the form of a universal competition – the commodity form – of images.

At the heart of Adorno's analogy lies the socio-cultural drama of the impoverishment and mutilation of experience (Erfahrung). Accordingly, the analogy marks the beginning of an encyclopedic series of loose connections between social and individual pathology (§ 36), bourgeois psychology and authoritarianism (§ 37), the pursuit of happiness and mass ignorance (§ 38), or the replacement of speculative philosophy by the scientism shared by the analytical philosophy and psychoanalysis (§ 42). In fact we are not dealing with empirical analogies but with transcendental "schemata". They produce opaque but distinct kinds of evidence where the natural light of liberal democracy fails.

Kant introduces the notion of "schematism" in the First Critique to explain the harmony between disparate domains of experience, the intuition and the understanding. Whenever things appear transparent, this is because the imagination operates under the general 'rule' of the concept. Nevertheless, the schematism is not the head of subjectivity but its heart. It is hidden in the living 'depth' of the soul, indicating that it does not belong to the subject but rather to a drama in which we are always already beyond ourselves. The question that Kant fails to investigate is what makes the schematism submit to the rigid frame of our understanding at all. How did our capacity to synthesize get damaged this way? What remains of subjectivity when the schemas – the outlines of identities and equivalences – are already in place? This, as well

as the consideration of its own schematizing activity, should be the starting point of any critique of transparency.

Because subjectivity was considered the transcendental condition of enlightened transparancy, it could never appear as such. As a consequence, it will not be missed when the conditions of transparancy are replaced by other forces. In Dialectic of Enlightenment Adorno demonstrates that what naturalizes our experience is social practice. The culture industry relieves us from the labor of schematization, providing us with the framework of readymade concepts and sentimental clichés to which both nature and subjectivity must conform. Hence, the world of the binge-watcher immediately translates the humanist enthusiasm for the free use of one's own understanding into the objective necessities of self-preservation.

It would nonetheless be too simplistic to blame Hollywood and Netflix alone for this degeneration of subjectivity. The need for transparancy is quite a bit older, and its dialectic is not bound to the enlightenment epoch. In short, the problem is that transparency is intrinsically polemical. While it is an important weapon in the demystification of power asymmetries, the polemical never fails to turn against itself – in its hardened dialectical fashion, the negation of the negation always precedes the initial negation. This explains why, historically speaking, the need for transparency is more insatiable and encompassing than the need for secrecy that was typical of traditional dictatorships. It arises from the dream of global mastery and control.

In the panopticons, shopping malls, and boulevards of the nineteenth century, one already sees that the truth of openness and accessibility lies in the surveillance and governance of ubiquitous circulation rather than in the stripping of the emperor's clothes. By the time of the publication of Minima Moralia the schematism of human experience was already being usurped by Cold War information technologies. Nowadays, Silicon Valley has replaced mass mediatization with big data, probalistic logic, and automated decision-making. In surveillance capitalism, the market transparency of deregulation combined with centralized planning turns us all into passive 'users' – laboratory rats with or without UBI – from whom profitable behavioral data is harvested.

When understood in terms of logistics, transparency means invisibility and absence of noise. It is not a quality of information, but of the medium in which information becomes visible or readable. Modernity bathes in the pervasive light of maritime maps and GPS, of Vermeer's windows and of conceptual art, of remote sensors and MRIs, of dating-site algorithms and credit scores, of high-frequency trading and automized weaponry. In all these cases, technology dissolves the appearance of nature and reveals the blind workings behind it. Through the foreshortened emplotment of space and time, it provides the expansive schema of a world that knows no negativity, only constant improvement – the meta-world of whiteness (Harney and Moten 2021, 15-17).

The problem with transparency, then, is double. It is perhaps best understood as a code of conduct in the triple sense of behavior, management, and medium for transmission. It encodes and produces the circulating flows from which it extracts a surplus value of information. Whether it is our language, our attention, our will, or our intimate relationships, logistics renders them legible, calculable, available. At the same time, every code is an encryption. There is no transparency without means. These are typically light,

electricity and money – media that disappear into what they communicate and obscure what makes communication possible. Under modern conditions, it is not nature but technology that loves to hide. This means that no quantity of transparency can ever take away the suspicion that is inherent in the use of all media. It is precisely our restless desire for knowledge and information that reinforces mistrust and disorientation. What could possibly go wrong?

Our contemporary problem, perhaps also the problem of the enlightenment as a whole, is not a lack of transparency but of imagination. If the task of the schematism is to establish communication across differences without collapsing them, the understanding does the opposite: It renders us indifferent. Whether it is the mass murder at the European borders or the impact of climate change, we are unable to actually experience what we already know or feel beyond the necessities that we immediately recognize. Here the schematism functions like the famous invisible hand of the market. It is the filter of a hypocrisy that destroys the experience of the other, letting through only what can nourish the thick skin of our clear conscience.

This is also implied by Adorno's critique of psychologization as a means of dominance that forbids any knowledge of the suffering it produces. Just as fact-checking or ethical considerations about fairness constitute a degree zero of free thought, the exposure of hypocrisies oscillates between the emancipation of the repressed and the apology for absolute self-alienation. The very word 'happiness' – today revealingly substituted by 'resilience' – suffices to disparage its contrary, thereby relinquishing our capacity of imaginative schematization to the Kantian depth, or indeed the Freudian id (§ 38). Its authoritarian schema is that of a bad conscience that seeks compensation in herd-like ways of mobilizing the irrational and subhuman drives (§ 37, § 40). What better condition for the emergence of fascist states than this internalization of castration, the libidinal performance demanded of the individual who can be considered healthy in body and soul?

Today's return of behaviourism under the sign of the digital is well exemplified by Apple's flagship store in New York (Alloa 2016). The glass cube with basement illustrates how it is no longer necessary to hide the extreme asymmetry between user interface and the machinery underneath. The same goes for AI decision-making systems or the finance sector. Although the schematizing backend of social life remains unknown, its difference from the frontend fails to scandalize us. Through microtargeting and modelling, technologies for the automated distribution of privileges, we happily let ourselves be nudged into a libertarian paternalism instead.

Yet when it comes to the logistical conditions of fascism, perhaps there is no more adequate contemporary analogue than the distributed surveillance and total symmetry of blockchain technology. While a cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin decentralizes the control over currency, it subjects everything from law-keeping, healthcare and education to competition. Consequently, its unique transparency can only lead to reliability, not trust. Although its source is fully open, it only communicates its own schematization of human interaction, which is even more compelling as it immunizes us to the anonymity that defines everyday life. Hence the libertarian fantasy of self-sovereign identity: Where privacy no longer exists, demand data ownership. Yet in

complete abstraction of the vital need to share data, property will not solve the dilemma between privacy and security, or between well-being and convenience. Just as a selfie is unthinkable without the compulsive desire for personal transparency, commodification will not make us freer human beings, only more calculable and calculating ones.

The critical task today, then, is the same in philosophy as it is in psychology and technology; it is to jam the smooth functioning of schematism and turn the imagination into the broken mirror of reality. How to reclaim the thickness of a subjectivity that interrupts flows, instead of remaining a hollow switchboard for circulation? How to restore the aesthetic element as the ground of rationalism? Nobody is dreaming the depoliticizing dream of de-mediation, of getting rid of interference and regaining authenticity. On the contrary, it is only in the intransparancy of means and the accompanying indeterminacy of ends that the instrumental reason of effective neoliberalism opens a new, dreamlike dimension for a denaturalized politics (Brouwer, Spuybroek, and van Tuinen 2016).

In this regard, it is precisely Adorno's analogies that provide nuanced – some would justifiably add paranoid and far-fetched – intuitions of the falsity of the world. Our task as readers is not to reconstruct the networks that connect the terms. As with the essay, the aphorism, and the miniature, it is rather a matter of being incomplete and knowing it. In particular, critical language must stray from the demands of straight talk, that is, the total equivalence and interchangeability of language – its policed insignificance. Against the 'secularist' defence of the freedom of speech, it upholds language's non-innocence. Against 'progressive' attempts at explicitly codifying and designing linguistical behaviour, it maintains ambivalence and ambiguity. And against the 'egalitarian' pretension to analytical clarity, it asserts the rights of a philosophy that swims beyond the shallow end of the pool of language. Aesthetic Theory: the free use of the imagination in experimenting with non-indifferent modes of schematization.

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Biography

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