

To cite text:

Prokopijević, Andreja. 2026. "The ambivalence of transparency: aesthetic and political considerations." *Philosophy and Society* 0 (0):

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THE AMBIVALENCE OF TRANSPARENCY: AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of transparency and its interconnected counterparts as they emerge across aesthetic, political, and ethical domains. In contemporary democratic discourse, transparency is celebrated as a guarantor of openness, accountability, and truth. Yet its implementation often produces the opposite effects: intensified surveillance, the saturation of digital culture, and the rise of suspicion and conspiracy across diverse global contexts.

The analysis situates the concept within the dialogue between aesthetics and politics, from classical philosophy to the modern theories of Adorno and Habermas, highlighting the ethical tension between truth and concealment. It then interrogates transparency as both a political ideology and a moral imperative, showing how demands for total visibility have masked new forms of domination. Engaging Foucault's account of disciplinary visibility and Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the article argues that the pursuit of complete openness is structurally unattainable and potentially pathological, manifesting itself in the shift toward the external image as the bearer of identity. In this sense, transparency operates as a contemporary *distribution of the sensible* – a regime that organizes both perception and power.

By tracing the aesthetic experience of transparency in contemporary culture – where ideals of light and openness coexist with exposure and alienation – the article reframes transparency through Agamben's concepts of *bare life* and *inoperativity*, revealing their implications for law, human potentiality, and critiques of political authority in surveillance capitalism. Ultimately, transparency is reconsidered as a contingent and contested value rather than a flawless democratic ideal, emphasizing its paradoxical role in shaping subjectivity and public life today.

KEYWORDS

transparency,
aesthetics, political
theory, democracy,
ambivalence

Genealogical Note on Transparency: Framing the Question

In his *Preface to Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo declared that art must serve as a mirror to society, reflecting its historical and political truth. But the mirror is never a neutral device – it refracts, distorts, and reframes – “[i]f art must strive toward truth, this truth cannot and must not be absolute [...] Art reflects the world, not in an ordinary way, but by transfiguring it” (Anfray in Hugo 2020: ch. Présentation sec. Théorie du drame, para. 6). Caught between two revolutions, “the one of 1789 and the one he had foreseen”, Hugo writes his *Preface*... professing “the freedom of art against the despotism of systems” (Ibid.: ch. “Présentation”, sec. “Fonctions de la Préface”, para. 3).

Hugo’s metaphor of art as reflection in glass renews the resonance in questioning *transparency* – a concept that has migrated between the political, aesthetic and ethical spheres. The term originates from the Greek *diaphanês* (“to appear through”) to the Latin *transparens*. Aristotle conceptualized to *diaphanês* (the diaphanous medium, like air or water) as having two crucial aspects: *translucidity* (“letting vision through”) and *generativity* (“causally letting something appear”) (Alloa 2018: 34–35). The term *transparens* was coined in the 12th century. Theologians like Thomas Aquinas were deeply interested in transparency in the context of the “illuminated blessed animae”, or the quality of glorious souls in paradise, which were conceived as being as transparent as *glass* (Schneider 2018: 88).

The language of the concept has become omnipresent in modern politics. It was promoted internationally as a universal standard of good governance, a condition for aid, and a benchmark of democracy. At the national level, political reforms and public discourses frame transparency as a moral imperative: to be transparent is to be accountable and legitimate, while *opacity* suggests corruption and authoritarianism. Such concepts have even been exercised in practical application. In Georgia, for example, police stations built with glass facades in 2009 were supposed to serve as technology to fight corruption. Glass police precincts presented a symbol of the new transparency that Georgia – a country that had previously been described as one of the most corrupt nations in the world – promoted after the “Rose Revolution” of 2003 (Rosenberg 2013).

In Classical philosophy, the *modern ideal of transparency* was linked to light and truth, while early modern political theory recast these motifs as principles of rational publicity and open government. From the Enlightenment celebration of the public sphere¹ to nineteenth-century liberal reforms, transparency became synonymous with democratic legitimacy. Twentieth-century critiques unsettled this optimism. Walter Benjamin showed how technological

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, dreamed of a transparent society where citizens’ hearts could communicate directly without the distorting medium of representation. This was conceived as a release from the theater of society, where “[s]pectators turn into actors” (Schneider 2018: 93). Rousseau was also deeply skeptical of language, which he believed was a consequence of societal corruption that puts an end to true transparency.

reproduction erodes the “aura”² of the visible, and Michel Foucault famously analyzed the Panopticon as a regime in which visibility itself disciplines. In the digital present, calls for openness in governance, finance, and culture co-exist with data surveillance, algorithmic profiling, and the commodification of personal images. Transparency appears less as an unequivocal virtue than as a contested practice in which the demand to *make visible* can enable both emancipation and domination.

Material history reinforces this ambivalence. In pre-modern Europe, transparency was closely associated with *glass material*. Glass was identified with the qualities of perfection and the absolute. It was seen as an incorruptible material that existed in a state of purity. The initial understanding of transparency was inextricably linked to the unique properties of glass. This era is described as a “golden age”, where transparency was not merely a physical characteristic but a rare dimension imbued with powerful symbolic meaning. Reliquaries that displayed sacred objects exemplified this logic: the glass both guaranteed the authenticity of the relic and rendered it untouchable. Material confirmation of truth – a key virtue of glass – was its inability to be altered by sensory contamination – it does not absorb smells or tastes and is not deformable, establishing it as a pure and stable medium (Manzini and Petrillo 1989). Beyond its physical state, transparency presents a complex and contradictory perceptual experience. As Manzini and Petrillo point out, its elusive nature challenges fundamental human senses and assumptions about physical reality. The sensory paradox of a substance that could be touched yet seemed almost absent – light passing through as if matter were dematerialized – provoked both fascination and anxiety.

Later invention of synthetic materials introduced inexpensive, flexible transparency – *plastics* banalized what had once been exceptional. The arrival of plastics instigated a radical shift, weakening the traditional mode of relation to transparency and restructuring its meaning. This period is defined by democratization, functionalization, and a loss of its former prestige: its permeability and tendency to stain stripped transparency of its aura of purity and permanence; commercial packaging illustrates this reversal, using clear containers to suggest authenticity while often presenting only a surface illusion.

Contemporary design continues the transformation. Many processes now begin with complete transparency and then reintroduce opacity through chemical films or laminates. Smart windows and privacy screens exemplify a new priority: selective modulation of light and information. With the quantitative

2 The concepts of “aura” and “authenticity” are positioned as traditional qualities of art that are fundamentally challenged and liquidated by the technological advancement of mechanical reproduction. In the larger context of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the dissolution of “aura” and “authenticity” is essential, as it leads to a qualitative transformation of art’s nature, reversing its traditional function from one based on ritual to one based on politics: “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin 1969: 221).

extension of transparency into the commercial domain, the “connotation of nobility” that characterized glass disappeared. Material transparency transitioned from a rare quality to a widespread and banal one. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, its age of technical reproducibility “caused it to lose its aura” (Ibid.: 17). Transparency is no longer celebrated as an intrinsic property but as a medium for managing visibility itself. Philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein contended with this ambiguity. Wittgenstein observed that absolute clarity is conceptually unstable, a point that resonates in his *Remarks on Colour*, where he repeatedly returns to the puzzle of whether the singular inability of white to appear transparent should be attributed to a material constraint or to a discord within the very structure of our language (Ibid.: 12).

The trajectory from the fragile perfection of glass, through the disposable clarity of plastics, to today’s sophisticated filtering systems shows that *transparency* is a mutable cultural value rather than a fixed concept. The concept began as a sign of truth and protection. Nowadays, however, often signals strategic concealment or calculated exposure. Modern design, starting from total clarity only to add opacity by choice, suggests a fundamental inversion – we increasingly define our environment not by what we reveal but by what we decide to hide. The ideal of transparency, once an emblem of permanence, indexes the ability to engineer selective visibility³, revealing changing cultural notions of truth and value. In the 21st century, digital infrastructures and data economies transform transparency into a continuous extraction of information, blurring the line between voluntary openness and systemic monitoring:

Transparency seems to be one of those dimensions that, to be fully grasped, requires being considered in the plural. Under the pressure of technological innovations, the phenomenon has undergone transformations, sometimes so significant, from the imaginary mode through the way it is perceived or experienced, that it would probably be better to speak, not of a single dimension that has changed over time, but of several ‘transparencies’, several ways of understanding the permeability of matter. (Ibid.: 8)

The nature of the phenomenon is intertwined uniting aesthetics, politics, and ethics. Relational discourse between aesthetics and politics has been most systematically explored in modern critical theory. Adorno perceived that art possesses a degree of autonomy that enables it to resist direct subsumption under ideology, but autonomy itself becomes politically charged in contexts where aesthetic form discloses the contradictions of society. The task of aesthetics is to provide the capacity for reflection that art itself needs in order to understand its historical situation and its own truth content (Adorno 2002). Habermas situated the problem within the communicative structures of the public sphere, emphasizing that digitalization has triggered a structural transformation of the

3 Notably, analytic debates on the “transparency of experience” – the claim that consciousness reveals only its intentional objects and never itself – echo this political problematic: what appears self-evident is always already mediated, as argued by Moore (1903) and Shoemaker (1994).

media system comparable in scale to the invention of printing. While offering benefits in communication, it has had profoundly ambivalent and disruptive repercussions for the political public sphere, driven by the unique “platform character” of the new media (Habermas 2023). More recently, scholars have expanded this line of inquiry by examining how technological transformations shape political discourse itself. Dawson argues that the modern surveillance economy is fundamentally inverting the core functions of the civil sphere – the realm of values and institutions that enables social criticism and democratic integration. By reducing human life and interaction to quantifiable data points, a process termed “ordinalization,” commercial and state surveillance strips away essential context and meaning (Dawson 2025). In view of this, it could be said that aesthetic categories are not merely metaphors but the operative features of democratic practice, insofar as they structure how citizens imagine visibility, inclusion, and contestation in the public sphere. Thus, transparency is not simply a technical or institutional requirement but an aesthetic-political function that carries both normative weight and ambivalent effects. To analyze transparency, then, requires attention not only to its institutional manifestations but also to the aesthetic imaginaries through which it gains political traction.

This paper argues that transparency operates as a contemporary *distribution of the sensible*⁴ – a configuration of what can be seen, said, and known. In this sense, transparency reveals the intrinsic interdependence of the aesthetic and the political: it structures both perception and participation, determining the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the common and the private, the governed and the governing. In the digital age, the ambivalence of transparency intensifies as it is redefined through data extraction and algorithmic visibility, where the boundary between voluntary disclosure and systemic monitoring becomes increasingly indistinct. The argument proceeds in four steps. The first section outlines a brief genealogy of the concept of transparency, tracing its philosophical and political origins. The second turns to critical theory, examining the aesthetics and politics of hypervisibility in Adorno, Habermas, and later reflections by Han. The third situates these insights within contemporary discussions of sovereignty and subjectivity through Agamben and Lacan, while the final section draws together these strands to propose an understanding of transparency as an ambivalent condition of modern rationality – one that redefines both perception and the political imagination.

4 Transparency as a mode of distributing visibility: what is presented as “neutral” is actually the way in which what can be seen and what remains hidden is socially determined. The central argument posits that genuine politics and art are not defined by their explicit content or intended messages but by their capacity to disrupt the established, seemingly natural order of perception and meaning – what Rancière terms the *distribution of the sensible*: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière 2010: 12).

Hypervisibility in Modern and Post-modern Culture

The association between light, truth, and reason, traced back to the European Enlightenment, whose very name invokes a passage from darkness to illumination, was not simply a metaphor but a cultural imperative: to know was to see. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers privileged visual evidence as the most reliable path to knowledge, gradually marginalizing other modes of understanding and perception. It paved the way for “optical connection with the universe”, as Benjamin put it (Benjamin in Doolan 2023: 27).

Architecture soon translated this imperative into space. Jeremy Bentham’s design for the Panopticon (late eighteenth century) epitomized the belief that visibility could regulate conduct. In the circular prison, cells faced a central watchtower from which a guard might observe any prisoner at any time, though the guard’s own visibility remained uncertain. Bentham imagined that the mere possibility of observation would induce self-regulation, reforming morals and invigorating industry. As he developed his thoughts on judicial discipline and reform, Bentham “converted this idea into an idealized regime of hypervisibility” (Ibid.). Michel Foucault later extended this model into a general theory of *panoptism*, where “[t]he spatialising decription of discursive realities gives on to the analysis of related effects of power” (Foucault 1980: 70–71). As the diffuse web of disciplinary regimes entrenched in educational and medical systems was creating a web of surveillance – where everyone is watching everyone – finally, this discipline turned inward. The individuals freely choose the *continuous performance* in creating architectures of power:

In reality, power in its exercise goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power. (Ibid.: 72)

In 1990 David Brin, an American science fiction author, published his book *The Transparent Society*, envisioning a reciprocal world of universal surveillance in which mutual visibility would deter crime and enhance accountability. Two years later, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo published his own book under the same title, arguing that “techno-science was producing a mass media phantasmagoria” (Doolan 2023: 29). Vattimo’s central thesis contends that, contrary to dystopian fears of homogenization and totalitarian control (as envisioned by thinkers like Adorno or in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), the proliferation of mass media has led to a “general explosion” of worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*). This multiplication of perspectives shatters the singular, linear, and progressive concept of history characteristic of modernity. For Vattimo, this dissolution of a unified reality produces a society that is not more transparent in the sense of being fully knowable, but rather more complex and even chaotic. Yet this apparent disorientation marks not a crisis but the very condition for a new, postmodern form of emancipation. It opens the space for the proliferation of diverse “local rationalities” and for a freedom that arises

from recognizing the interpretative and contingent nature of all worldviews. Even though he acknowledged that “having a voice does not correspond to true political emancipation – economic power is still held by capital” (Vattimo 1992: 5–6), Vattimo saw the transparent society as one where everything becomes visible and interpretable, breaking centralized control.

Vattimo’s optimistic reading of media proliferation is historically displaced by Zuboff’s analysis, which reveals how the same proliferation becomes the raw material of behavioral control. In 2019, Shoshana Zuboff – in her analysis of *surveillance capitalism*⁵ – shows how digital platforms transform users into sources of behavioral data, rendering individuals transparent to algorithmic prediction while concealing the operations of the observing systems themselves. What for Vattimo was an emancipatory dispersal of truth becomes, in Zuboff’s analysis, a mechanism for behavioral prediction and control. For Zuboff, digital networks – especially those emerging after Google and Facebook – have become infrastructures through which human behavior is continuously recorded, analyzed, and monetized. The chaos of perspectives that Vattimo welcomed has been domesticated by algorithmic systems that re-stabilize meaning and behavior for profit. While Vattimo’s *transparent society* describes the ontological and cultural condition of late modernity – the fragmentation of unified truth into multiple interpretative horizons – Zuboff’s *surveillance capitalism* reveals how this very condition has been economically exploited and technologically consolidated into new asymmetries of power.

5 Google’s invention of surveillance capitalism emerged from a “state of exception” created by the dot-com crash in the early 2000s. Under pressure from venture capitalists demanding profitability, Google’s founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, secretly repurposed the vast troves of user data initially gathered to improve search results – a process Zuboff terms the *behavioral value reinvestment cycle*. They discovered that this collateral data, exceeding what was needed for service enhancement, constituted a *behavioral surplus* that could be analyzed to predict which users were most likely to click on particular ads. These *prediction products* transformed advertising effectiveness, ensured Google’s survival, and inaugurated a new economic logic. To obscure this extraction, Google employed euphemisms such as “digital exhaust” and “digital breadcrumbs,” suggesting valueless by-products rather than intentional exploitation. The resulting market operates through escalating imperatives that define its “laws of motion.” In this new information civilization, the *division of learning* – the capacity to know, decide, and shape futures – becomes the central organizing principle. Surveillance capitalism privatizes and corrupts this principle, producing a public “first text” of user services and a secret “shadow text” in which behavioral surplus is analyzed. Accessible only to corporate computational elites, this *shadow text* monopolizes the power to answer Zuboff’s defining questions: *Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?* Ultimately, surveillance capitalism undermines fundamental conditions of self-determination. By seeking to predict and guarantee human behavior, it usurps the *right to the future tense* – the right to imagine and construct one’s future – and violates the *right to sanctuary*, the refuge of both the private home and the inner self, rendering all aspects of life available for extraction by what Zuboff calls *Big Other*: “the sensate, computational, connected puppet that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior” (Zuboff 2019: ch. 13, sec. I, para. 1).

German philosopher Thomas Metzinger describes transparency as “a special form of darkness” (Metzinger 2003: 169). When a medium becomes entirely clear, it disappears from perception. Paul Doolan’s metaphor of the spotless window captures this paradox – the cleaner the pane, the more it vanishes, allowing the gaze to pass through while concealing the very structure that enables vision. In political and economic life, this logic becomes literal. Glass façades, such as Apple’s celebrated Fifth Avenue cube, perform openness while masking the real operations – data extraction, financial transactions, and managerial control – that occur beneath the surface. Doolan indicates that these critiques converge with Édouard Glissant’s plea for a “right to opacity” (Doolan 2023: 31). For Glissant, the Western imperative that every cultural other be made fully knowable constitutes a form of domination: an effort to appropriate difference by forcing it into transparency. He insists that persons and cultures must retain a presence that is not exhaustively legible – and that even the self requires zones of interior mystery to sustain creativity, relationality, and freedom:

How can one reconcile the hard line inherent in any politics and the questioning essential to any relation? Only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own. [...] Widespread consent to specific opacities is the most straightforward equivalent of nonbarbarism. (Glissant 2010: 194)

Recent critical theory increasingly treats transparency not as a self-evident virtue but as a complex aesthetic and political problem. Transparency has evolved into a ‘taken-for-granted ideal’ and the ‘inescapable ideology’ of our times. Political scientists Christopher Pollitt and Peter Hupe label such terms as ‘magic concepts’ (Alloa 2018: 28–29), which are imbued with a promise to solve major societal dilemmas. The hopes tied to transparency are multifaceted, spanning the political, ethical, and personal domains. Dieter Mersch, in his text *Obfuscated Transparency*, argues that “[c]omplete transparency leads to obfuscation” (Alloa and Thomä 2018: 9) – modern technology transforms the very ideal of openness into an *illusion*. What begins as a demand for clarity collapses into what he calls a *conditio mechanica*: human experience reduced to data points and mechanical operations. For Mersch, the technological regime that promises illumination in fact distorts perception, replacing lived reality with the abstraction of quantification. This paradox arises because the medium of transparency (e.g., technology, language) is never neutral and its total application produces its own blind spots. “[W]hen reason is made identical with transparency and the claims of theoretical enlightenment are hypostasized into universalizable processes that fail to heed the specificity and limits of their applicability, they turn against themselves and bring forth the same monstrosities that they had once warded off. This is the inner dialectic of ‘responsible transparency’” (Mersch 2018: 265).

This dynamic, which blurs the boundary between self-expression and self-surveillance, extends beyond the psychological into the aesthetic and political realms. Byung-Chul Han situates transparency within a broader cultural

logic that transforms both the experience of *beauty* and the conditions of *power*. In *The Transparency Society*, he argues that the cultural logic of transparency reconfigures value itself: visibility becomes the new measure of worth. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's distinction between *cult value* and *exhibition value*, Han observes that meaning and beauty – once grounded in distance, secrecy, and aura – are eroded by the compulsion to display:

A quick succession of events or stimuli does not constitute the temporality of the beautiful. Beauty is a pupil [*Zögling*], a late bloomer. Only belatedly do things reveal their fragrant essence of beauty. This essence consists of temporal layers and deposits that phosphoresce. Transparency does not phosphoresce. (Han 2015: 22)

What is no longer visible ceases to exist socially or politically. The unveiling of everything annihilates depth: “[n]egativity implemented through separation (*secret*, *secretus*), fencing-off, and isolation constitutes cult value. In the society of positivity, things become commodities; they must be displayed in order to be; cult value disappears in favor of exhibition value. Bare existence has no meaning as far as exhibition value is concerned” (Ibid.: 9). In the transparent society, culture loses narrativity and reflection, replacing them with the additive accumulation of data. The temporal rhythm of storytelling and thought gives way to the simultaneity of information, producing a world that is superficial – “[i]mages filled with exhibition value offer no complexity” (Ibid.: 13).

Politically, this aesthetic of exposure transforms the very conditions of power. Total transparency, Han argues, abolishes the *arcanum* – the necessary space of secrecy and strategic reflection that makes politics possible. The demand for permanent openness reduces political action to reaction, rendering deliberation and long-term vision nearly impossible. Thus, transparency is not emancipatory but depoliticizing: it replaces agonistic public discourse with administrative management and self-surveillance. “Compulsion to display exploits the visible. The increase of images is not inherently problematic; what proves problematic is the iconic compulsion to become a picture. Everything must become visible. The imperative of transparency suspects everything that does not submit to visibility. Therein lies its violence” (Ibid.: 12–13). Within the digital panopticon, visibility no longer serves as a means of accountability but as an instrument of conformity. Individuals internalize the imperative to expose themselves, participating voluntarily in the circulation of data that sustains the system of control. Freedom is thus inverted into its opposite – a condition in which self-expression becomes a mode of submission.

The depoliticizing effects of surveillance⁶ can be traced through David Lyon's analysis of how monitoring permeates everyday life and transforms social practices. “Since the later part of the 20th century countries across the world

6 Lyon defines surveillance as “any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purpose of influencing or managing those whose data have been garnered” (Lyon 2001: 3).

have been falling over themselves to establish advanced information infrastructures. This means that their surveillance capacities have grown at an exponential rate, easily outstripping all legal and political efforts to keep abreast of their social implications” (Lyon 2001: 4). Lyon notes that as “the internet and social media have quickly established themselves as ‘indispensable’ essentials of everyday life” (Ibid.: 3), public problems are increasingly framed as technical or administrative issues rather than matters for democratic deliberation – a shift that tends to depoliticize public debate and diminish space for strategic political reflection. Lyon argues that questions of time-space are “central to surveillance” as new surveillance methods “locate and coordinate human behaviors on both macro and micro time-space levels as well as allowing interactions between the two” (Ibid.: 19), thus “the problem of privacy arose within the fixed time-spaces of modernity” (Ibid.: 20).

Clare Birchall, in her chapter *Interrupting Transparency*, extends this argument from the internalization of surveillance to the cultural politics of transparency. She shifts the lens from how individuals are governed to how truth itself becomes governed. Birchall contends that the rise of populist movements – exemplified by Donald Trump’s election – has disrupted the modern narrative in which opacity is presumed harmful and openness is inherently good. The proliferation of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” she argues, unsettled the technocratic faith that simply releasing data would secure truth. Trump’s supporters, as she notes, often took him “seriously but not literally,” undermining the assumption that factual disclosure guarantees credibility. In Birchall’s view, this moment exposed the fragility of what she calls technocratic transparency: the belief that open datasets, such as those promoted by the Obama administration’s data.gov, can substitute for political accountability or robust public debate. She proposes “radical transparency”⁷ as an alternative – not a call for ever-greater quantities of information, but for a deeper contextualization of information itself. Data must be accompanied by an account of the conditions, assumptions, and institutional interests that shape its production. Without this qualitative dimension, open data merely transfers responsibility to individual citizens, encouraging a neoliberal ethos in which the public is expected to monitor the state by sifting through massive datasets that simultaneously feed the commercial data economy.

What emerges across these perspectives is a shared recognition that transparency is not a stable condition. The Enlightenment’s optical metaphors – illumination, clarity, and the imperative to bring everything into view – continue to inform both political discourse and aesthetic practice. However, as critics have shown, the logic of exposure can easily invert its own premise, revealing how the demand for visibility may obscure rather than disclose. A contemporary politics of transparency must therefore distinguish between the act of

7 “Radical transparency would allow citizens to position themselves in relation to data (rather than be positioned by it). It would allow for explicitly political rather than technical solutions to social problems” (Birchall 2018: 361).

making visible and the process of generating understanding. It also requires attention to what the ancient Greeks termed *apophasis* – the acknowledgement that certain truths can only be approached through omission or concealment. Across digital culture, architecture, and art, the task is to move from a quantitative logic of visibility toward a qualitative engagement with context, mediation, and the ethical *right to opacity*. Taken together, these perspectives reveal that transparency's emancipatory promise and its coercive potential are inseparable aspects of the same logic. The very mechanisms that aim to illuminate and liberate also generate new regimes of visibility and control, showing that transparency's ambivalence is not accidental but constitutive of modern power.

The Aesthetics of Public Reason

In his aesthetic theory, Theodor W. Adorno challenges the modern imperative of transparency and hypervisibility, proposing that truth in art resides precisely in what remains opaque, tense, and resistant. According to Adorno, art is a site where society's own contradictions are both reflected and contested⁸, and where any demand for immediate, seamless legibility⁹ is exposed as philosophically naïve. Adorno observes how modern art occupies a paradoxical position within a consumerist economy. Even the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity, yet art resists easy consumption precisely through its abstraction and refusal of direct representation. In an era that equates *visibility* with *knowledge*, such resistance brings into relief a cultural inclination toward instant legibility.

The resistance unfolds as a dialectic in which the force of the past presses toward the new. As Adorno put it, “[t]he truth of the new, as the truth of what is not already used up, is situated in the intentionless. This sets truth in opposition to reflection, which is the motor of the new, and raises reflection to a second order, to second reflection” (Adorno 2002: 26). In other words, traces of prior forms persist within the most radical experiments, and the authentic avant-garde draws strength from precisely those residues. Progress in

8 “If one applies the concept of abstraction in the vaguest possible sense, it signals the retreat from a world of which nothing remains except its *caput mortuum*. New art is as abstract as social relations have in truth become. In like manner, the concepts of the realistic and the symbolic are put out of service. Because the spell of external reality over its subjects and their reactions has become absolute, the artwork can only oppose this spell by assimilating itself to it” (Adorno 2002: 31).

9 “Whoever complains about modernism means the modern, just as hangers-on are always attacked in order to strike at the protagonists whom one fears to challenge and whose prestige inspires deference among conformists. The standard of honesty by which the modernists are pharisaically measured implies acquiescence with being who one is, no more nor less, and a refusal to change, a fundamental *habitus* of the aesthetic reactionary. Its false nature is dissolved by the reflection that has now become the essence of artistic education. The critique of modernism in favor of the putatively truly modern functions as a pretext for judging the moderate – whose thinking fronts for the dross of a trivial intellectualism – as being better than the radical; actually it is the other way around” (Ibid.: 26).

art, therefore, is not a linear advance, nor it can be dismissed as mere novelty. Adorno valorizes the friable and the fragmentary¹⁰. By embracing incompleteness, art dismantles the illusion of totality – “[t]he fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality” (Ibid.: 45). It is precisely what does not fit that keeps the artwork alive, holding open a space of questioning. In this way, art critiques the illusion of exhaustive legibility, showing that wholeness and finality mark not truth but reification.¹¹

Adorno situates this dynamic within the broader process that Max Weber marked as the *disenchantment of the world*.¹² Art, while refusing a naïve return to myth, also preserves what Adorno calls an “after-image of enchantment” (Ibid.: 58). By reintroducing ambiguity and non-rational elements,¹³ art “disenchants the disenchanted world” (Ibid.: 58), unsettling the regime of pure reason without succumbing to superstition. This movement toward what Adorno marks as *origin*¹⁴ should not be confused with nostalgia. Origin is not a literal past but a

10 “The portion of it that is *θέσει* grew to such an extent that all efforts to secret away the process of production in the work could not but fail” (Ibid.).

11 “If all art is the secularization of transcendence, it participates in the dialectic of enlightenment. Art has confronted this dialectic with the aesthetic conception of antiart; indeed, without this element art is no longer thinkable. This implies nothing less than that art must go beyond its own concept in order to remain faithful to that concept. The idea of its abolition does it homage by honoring its claim to truth. Nevertheless, the survival of undermined art is not only an expression of cultural lag, that ever sluggish revolution of the superstructure. The source of art’s power of resistance is that a realized materialism would at the same time be the abolition of materialism, the abolition of the domination of material interests. In its powerlessness, art anticipates a spirit that would only then step forth. To this corresponds an objective need, the neediness of the world, which is contrary to the subjective and now no more than ideological individual need for art. Art can find its continuation nowhere else than in this objective need” (Ibid.: 29).

12 Adorno takes up the phrase “disenchantment of the world” from Max Weber, who used it to describe the decline of magical and animistic beliefs as part of the broader process of rationalization, central to Western modernity. In works such as *Science as a Vocation* (1917) and his late studies on the sociology of religion, Weber emphasizes that secularization in the West was accompanied by the development of practices and beliefs grounded in the assumption that nature can be fully understood and controlled through reason. He also notes that ideals of perfection, once rooted in sacred contexts, became reframed as principles of technological progress and purposive-rational action, reshaping modern systems of values: “Our age is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Its resulting fate is that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from public life. They have retreated either into the abstract realm of mystical life or into the fraternal feelings of personal relations between individuals. It is no accident that our greatest art is intimate rather than monumental” (Weber 2004: 30).

13 “Emancipated from its claim to reality, the enchantment is itself part of enlightenment: Its semblance disenchants the disenchanted world. This is the dialectical ether in which art today takes place” Adorno (1997: 58).

14 “The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition. Its essence cannot be deduced from its origin as if the first work were a foundation on which everything that followed were constructed and would collapse if shaken” (Adorno 2002: 22).

potential: “the dignity of nature is that of the not-yet-existing” (Ibid.: 74). Art gestures toward this future origin by confronting the historical present with absolute honesty. Its truth content is thus doubly historical – it is both shaped by its own time, while also aiming beyond it toward what does not yet exist.

The culture that requires art to be immediately intelligible by reducing it to a commodity, exhibits what Adorno describes as *reified consciousness*.¹⁵ The desire for seamless legibility is itself immature, a refusal to face the contradictions that constitute social reality. Genuine artworks, according to Adorno, resist such reduction. They remain enigmatic, not only in their making but in their *truth content*,¹⁶ which cannot be exhausted by interpretation. They compel the question – *is it true?* – rather than offering the statement – *this is the truth*. For Adorno, to engage with art is to accept the discomfort. It entails an active exercise of critical reflection rather than the passive reception of given appearances. Thus modern art unsettles the presumption of perfect legibility. Confronting the illusion of all-revealing transparency – whether political, technological, or aesthetic – Adorno insists that opacity constitutes the very condition of *truth*.¹⁷ This critique resonates with the long aesthetic history of transparency. From Aristotle’s decisive step of transforming the commonly used adjective *diaphanês* into the conceptual noun *to diaphanês*, which frames perception as always occurring through a medium that both lets the gaze pass and brings the object into view,¹⁸ to modernist experiments with glass and translucent materials, such as Moholy-Nagy’s work and Giedion’s analysis of the Bauhaus building,¹⁹ transparency has long engaged both perception and spatial experience.

15 “Reified consciousness provides an ersatz for the sensual immediacy of which it deprives people in a sphere that is not its abode. While the artwork’s sensual appeal seemingly brings it close to the consumer, it is alienated from him by being a commodity that he possesses and the loss of which he must constantly fear. The false relation to art is akin to anxiety over possession” (Ibid.: 13).

16 The truth content of a work is not its message or theme, but “the truth that is revealed through” its form. It is “that aspect of semblance that is not semblance.” (Adorno 1997: 284). This truth is historical and emerges through the artwork’s determinate negation of empirical reality. Art’s truth content is not self-evident or discursive. “The truth content of an artwork requires philosophy. It is only in this truth content that philosophy converges with art or extinguishes itself in it” (Ibid.: 341). Aesthetics must provide the capacity for reflection that art itself cannot fully achieve on its own.

17 Adorno argues that art’s truth is not propositional but is revealed enigmatically through the work’s internal logic and coherence.

18 “Whatever appears (*phainestai*) in sense perception appears *through* (*dia*) something else, which does so much appear *in itself*; rather, it lets something else appear. In the case of vision, any element that yields this quality will be called “diaphanous,” inasmuch as on the one hand, it lets the gaze through (*dia*) and on the other, it brings about or generates (*dia*) the visible object for the gaze. In short, *diaphaneity* encompasses two aspects: 1. *Translucidity*: the permeable quality of a medium that (spatially) lets the vision through 2. *Generativity*: the productive quality of a medium that (causally) lets something come into view” (Alloa 2018: 35).

19 See Giedion (1949: 426-427).

The utopian ideal of total transparency, exposing everything to view, rejects the possibility that absence and opacity can be made intelligible, revealing depth, meaning, and ethical engagement beyond mere consumption. It is worth remembering that Paxton's structure of *The Crystal Palace* symbolized both technological progress and a new form of democratic openness, inviting the masses to circulate within a seemingly infinite interior of light and visibility. Yet as critics have long observed, this ideal of openness was inseparable from a politics of control. As Sloterdijk has argued, the Palace represented a "greenhouse" for bourgeois existence, enclosing culture within a fragile structure that was at once emancipatory and disciplinary.²⁰ Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* provides an even more incisive critique – for him, the Palace epitomized the terror of indestructible visibility, a structure before which rebellion was impossible because it is a structure "at which you cannot secretly stick out your tongue" (Dostoevsky 1999: 32). From these perspectives, the Palace functions less as a utopian achievement of openness than as an aesthetic prototype of what would later become the ideology of hypervisibility in political life.²¹

While much of modern architecture embraces glass as the emblem of transparency, certain strands of contemporary art stage a critical resistance to this imperative. Worth mentioning is Rachel Whiteread's sculptural practice as she uses casting techniques to materialize negative space, giving form to what is usually hidden or *visually absent*. *House* (1993), the cast interior of a Victorian terrace in London, transforms domestic space into a locked monolith. The interior is made exterior in a way that frustrates the viewer's desire for transparency. Similarly, her *Holocaust Memorial* (2000) in Vienna consists of an inverted library, its books turned inward and its doors permanently closed. The memory is preserved not by making things visible, but by confronting the impossibility of full access. Whiteread's art affirms that what remains concealed, enigmatic, or inaccessible can be more truthful than what is exposed to view. Her sculptural practice engages the tension between transparency and clarity – it renders a visual absence intelligible by resisting the fantasy of total visibility. The materialization of the negative spaces of ordinary objects reveals that meaning often emerges through what is withheld rather than displayed.

20 "The construction of the crystal palace can only be followed by the 'crystallization' of circumstances as a whole – with this fateful term, Arnold Gehlen follows on directly from Dostoyevsky. Crystallization means the intention to generalize boredom normatively and prevent the reirruption of 'history' into the post-historical world; furthering and protecting benevolent ossification would be the goal of all future state power" (Sloterdijk 2013: 171).

21 This logic of hypervisibility resonates with Jean Baudrillard's account of the *fractal stage of value*, where value proliferates without stable reference and produces what he calls an "epidemic of value": "At the fractal stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general. Properly speaking there is now no law of value, merely a sort of *epidemic of value*, a sort of general metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value" (Baudrillard 1993: 5). A more detailed engagement with Baudrillard's broader theory of simulacra and hyperreality would shift the analysis toward ontological and semiotic questions that exceed the political-aesthetic focus of this article.

In doing so, Whiteread's work exemplifies an aesthetic that challenges the logic of exposure.

While Adorno positions the critical power of art in its resistance to commodification, Habermas foregrounds the organizing function of communicative structures in shaping the public through the commercialization of culture and the rise of mass media that have transformed the public sphere from a domain of rational debate to a domain of consumption. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas reconstructs the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere as a historically specific moment when private individuals, freed from feudal dependencies, came together to engage in rational-critical debate. The space of early modern salons, coffee houses, and journals marked an unprecedented attempt to mediate between private life and the state through the use of reasoned public discourse. The authority was not measured by birth or status but the validity of the argument itself – grounded on the idea of Enlightenment ideals of *common humanity*.²²

For Habermas, this sphere of rational-critical communication represented a unique moment in which culture became the medium for politics. Literature, philosophy, and art provided a training ground for citizens' capacity to reason publicly. Yet this sphere, historically limited to educated male property owners, also embodied exclusion. The very idea of the private individual was divided between the *bourgeois* – the owner of property – and the *homme*, the abstract human being among others. Such internal ambivalence, as Habermas notes, extended into the structure of the public sphere itself, which simultaneously claimed universality and excluded large segments of the population, including women and the working class. The tension between inclusion and exclusion (between *bourgeois* and *homme*) was built into its structure from the start.

Habermas identifies the gradual decline of this critical public sphere through what he calls its *refeudalization*.²³ As modern capitalism expanded, mass democracy and the culture industry replaced the earlier form of critical publicity with representative publicity (*repräsentative Öffentlichkeit*) – a spectacle of mediated authority where communication became commodified and manipulated:

Public relations do not genuinely concern public opinion but opinion in the sense of reputation. The public sphere becomes the court *before* whose public prestige can be displayed – rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on. (Habermas 1989: 200–201)

22 “The three elements of voluntariness, community of love, and cultivation were conjoined in a concept of the humanity that was supposed to inhere in mankind as such and truly to constitute its absoluteness: the emancipation (still resonating with talk of ‘pure’ or ‘common’ humanity) of an inner realm, following its own laws, from extrinsic purposes of any sort” (Habermas 1989: 47).

23 “In proportion as private life became public, the public sphere itself assumed forms of private closeness – in the ‘neighborhood’ the pre-bourgeois extended family arose in a new guise. Here again private and public sphere could not be clearly distinguished. The public's rational-critical debate also became a victim of this ‘refeudalization.’ Discussion as a form of sociability gave way to the fetishism of community involvement as such” (Ibid.: 158).

The modern press, radio, and television transformed citizens from participants in debate into consumers of opinion, thereby undermining the potential for rational consensus. Habermas argues that the contemporary public sphere no longer exists but must be artificially made, continuously produced within the mechanisms of mass communication. Neil Saccamano, in his text *The Consolations of Ambivalence: Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1991), interrogates this narrative and exposes its underlying tensions. He observes that Habermas's reconstruction of the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere depends on a *fictitious identity* between the cultural and political domains, as if literary discourse were already political practice. The very separation that Habermas seeks to maintain between culture and politics collapses under the weight of his own historical account, for he must rely on the cultural sphere to provide the normative ground of rational communication. Saccamano argues that this identification is not simply historical but structural: the ideal of communicative rationality presupposes the existence of a universal subject of reason that is itself the product of cultural representation. What Habermas presents as a pre-existing human capacity for rational discourse may in fact be a fictional construct generated within the very literary culture he idealizes. Saccamano pushes this critique further by showing that the logic of self-generation – the way the public sphere “makes” itself – undermines Habermas's belief in a transparent relation between discourse and subjectivity. “According to Habermas, the liberal idea of humanity employed to dissolve power into reason only ‘later degenerated into mere ideology’” (Saccamano 1991: 690). If, as Habermas later claims in his theory of communicative action, *consensus* arises from the formal conditions of discourse, then the subject of rational agreement is not given but produced through the very act of communication.²⁴ In this view, language does not merely mediate social relations; it creates them, carrying within itself the force it pretends to overcome. Rationality, therefore, cannot be fully separated from power, since every consensus requires the performative force to produce the subject who assents to it. As Saccamano notes, “force inhabits discourse” (Ibid.: 698); the attempt to reach noncoercive agreement already involves a kind of coercion – that of the form itself. The aesthetic, in this sense, is not opposed to the political – it is the condition of its appearance:

The aesthetic character of the ‘truth’ of the idea of humanity is related more generally to the status of representation in Habermas's study. The normative ideal of public interaction in participatory democracy for Habermas, as for Rousseau, is nonrepresentative. (Ibid.: 693)

24 “Normative agreement has to shift from a consensus pre-given by tradition to a consensus that is achieved communicatively, that is, agreed upon [*vereinbart*]. In the limit case, what is to count as a legitimate order is formally agreed upon and positively enacted; with this, rationally regulated action [*Gesellschaftshandeln*] takes the place of conventional social action” (Habermas 1984: 255).

The implication of this critique is significant for any reflection on cultural or artistic communication. If the public sphere depends on the aesthetic fiction of a universal rational subject, then its “truth” lies not in *transparency* but in the aesthetic suspension of social difference. The early bourgeois public, trained through literature to imagine itself as a collective of reasoning equals, was not realizing universal humanity but performing it. Its universality was aesthetic before it was political. This aesthetic foundation explains both the emancipatory promise and the ideological ambivalence of Habermas’s model: it contains, as he insists, an “element of truth that raised bourgeois ideology above ideology itself” (Habermas 1989: 48), yet that truth remains grounded in representation – in the fiction of shared humanity that art and literature made visible.

As Saccamano notes, Habermas’s reconstruction of the public sphere seeks a new addressee for the message Adorno and Horkheimer entrusted to an *imaginary witness*.²⁵ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this figure marked the vanishing point of critique within a totally administered world. Habermas transforms this elegy into a *task*, but the social form that could sustain such a task has again disintegrated. Digital infrastructures promise transparency and participation while reproducing the asymmetries of visibility and control. Communication becomes data-predicted dialogue. As Shoshana Zuboff observes, *surveillance capitalism* converts the conditions of publicity into mechanisms of extraction, turning speech acts into raw material for behavioral governance. Habermas’s analysis of *refeudalization* thus acquires new significance. The public sphere has not collapsed but been repurposed. Rational communication persists only as form, while its substance is absorbed into algorithmic administration.

Comparative Ethnographies

Habermas’s notion of communicative rationality rests on the assumption that consensus can emerge through reasoned discourse. Yet this model reflects the historical conditions of the bourgeois public sphere – the social world of developed and semi-developed Western democracies in which Enlightenment ideals could be enacted within specific institutional and cultural boundaries.

By the late twentieth century, *transparency* had become a global norm. Following the end of the Cold War, it was enshrined as a central component of the emerging “New World Order.” Propagated by powerful transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations, transparency became a key term in global-speak²⁶ – synonymous with

25 “It is not the portrayal of reality as hell on earth but the slick challenge to break out of it that is suspect. If there is anyone today to whom we can pass the responsibilities for the message, we bequeath it not to the ‘masses,’ and not to the individual (who is powerless), but to an imaginary witness-test it perish with us” (Horkheimer and Adorno in Saccamano 1991: 685).

26 “In post-Cold War peacemaking and peacekeeping initiatives, the United Nations, Western bilateral donors, and international organizations have not only celebrated transparency as a strategic objective but also identified its pursuit by states emerging

good governance, free markets, and democratic legitimacy. From the founding of Transparency International in 1993 to the IMF's 1998 rules on financial disclosure, alongside the proliferation of truth commissions and arms-control agreements, an ethic of near-complete visibility was established at the global level. This "transparency-boom" was paralleled by a growing atmosphere of mistrust and conspiracy thinking.

Anthropological research – using the methodology of "seeing the global in the local and the local in the global" (West and Sanders 2003: 10) – reveals that the global *ideoscape*²⁷ of transparency is not passively received. Rather, it is interpreted, negotiated, and often met with skepticism through local ideoscapes of suspicion. These vernacular theories construe power as inherently occult, ambivalent, and conspiratorial – challenging the simplistic clarity promised by globalist rhetoric. Across diverse cultural contexts, the imposition of "transparent" processes is often read as a performative act designed to conceal the true, opaque workings of power. Local communities draw on rich historical and cultural repertoires – including shamanism, sorcery, and collective memory – to interpret phenomena that defy official explanations and to reclaim agency in the face of imposed transparency. This cultural translation of economic and political relations can be read as an attempt by local subjects to define their own position within the global order.

A key focus of inquiry concerns the 1997 Asian financial crisis in South Korea. IMF reforms were introduced under the banner of accountability, but for many citizens, the future became uncertain as job losses and rapid social change rendered abstract market forces painfully concrete. Traditional shamans responded by reinterpreting economic chaos through spiritual idioms. Their rituals provided a language to articulate anxiety and personify impersonal forces. Providing meaning, rather than measurable solutions, became the primary social need:

from civil conflict as a precondition for continuing assistance. The staging of multiparty national elections in countries such as Cambodia, Guatemala, and Mozambique has been described as a necessary measure in the campaign to establish political transparency, as has the establishment of war tribunals and 'truth commissions' in countries such as Bosnia, Rwanda, El Salvador, and South Africa. In the arms trade, *transparency* has, in recent years, been employed as a euphemism for adherence to arms-reduction and nuclear-nonproliferation agreements" (West and Sanders 2003: 1–2).

27 "Arjun Appadurai has provided a useful conceptual framework for exploring this complex world of multiple modernities. He suggests that we understand cultural interconnectivity in terms of what he defines as a variety of scapes – for example, ethnoscapas, mediascapas, financescapas, technoscapas – formed of cultural flows that move over, and superimpose themselves on, geographical landscapes. Among these, he includes *ideoscapas* – chains of ideas, terms, and images that can be condensed into key words (e.g., *freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, democracy*) and exported to new contexts. In this volume, we treat transparency as a key-word component to ideoscapes that travel the globe conveying notions fundamental to the operative logic of globalizing economic and political institutions" (Ibid.: 10).

Tellingly, shamans do not often claim to be able to see, clearly, the hidden powers behind the generalized social condition referred to simply as IMF. What they see, instead, is the obscurity produced by the IMF. [...] The silence and weakness of the spirits, however, is powerfully expressive of the experience of the moment for many Koreans, constituting a salient counter discourse to IMF claims to be producing a more ‘rational,’ more ‘transparent’ economic climate. (Ibid.: 18)

A comparable dynamic unfolded in Nigeria during the 1996 Otokoto affair.²⁸ Allegations of ritual murder for wealth triggered riots and attacks on local elites’ property.²⁹ Governmental hesitation and the withholding of an official report reinforced suspicions of a broader cover-up. In the moment of the riots, “Owerri residents turned from their television screens to the marketplace – which served them [...] as a place in which they could render *themselves* visible to *themselves*” (Ibid.: 20). Conspiracy discourse here functioned less as conjecture than as a framework for political critique, emphasizing the perception that power consistently conceals a hidden, violent core. Taken together, these ethnographic accounts show that the global discourse of transparency is always refracted through local cosmologies of suspicion. Transparency thus emerges not as a neutral ideal, but as a global ideoscape – a circulating formation that generates distinct political imaginaries shaped by context, history, and belief.

Other examples track how transparency projects intended to stabilize new democracies encounter older cosmologies of secrecy. In Mozambique, UN-monitored elections introduced voter ID cards intended as a transparent expression of the collective will of the people. The cards were instead interpreted as identity tokens – analogous to colonial passbooks and to sorcery substances (*shikupi*) – signifying that power both reveals and conceals for its own purposes. These cards evoked the ambivalent powers of sorcery, where legitimate authority and occult manipulation often overlap. The very artifact of “transparent” citizenship thus re-entered a long genealogy of visible–invisible control.³⁰

28 The Otokoto affair refers to a 1996 incident in Owerri, Nigeria, when the discovery of a ritual killing involving local businessmen and politicians sparked mass protests and widespread violence. The case became a symbol of perceived collusion between occult economies and political power.

29 The official narrative maintained that the state investigation into the ritual murder case demonstrated the rule of law and the government’s commitment to justice. However, for many citizens, the public inquiry appeared as a spectacle designed to obscure the complicity of political and economic elites in the use of “money magic” and occult violence for wealth accumulation.

30 “For Muedans in 1994, voter cards echoed with messages embedded in identity tokens of the past, warning of the capriciousness of power, reminding them that power works in both visible and invisible realms and that it reveals itself and/or its subjects when this serves its purposes but conceals itself and/or its subjects when this serves its purposes better. In refusing to accept voter-identity cards, Muedan elders rejected the simple metaphor advanced by election organizers in favor of their own, more complex analogies rooted in historical experiences in which identity tokens were previously used” (West 2003: 95).

Indonesia under Suharto offers another variation. Official rhetoric stressed bureaucratic clarity,³¹ but everyday governance required informal payments and personal networks. Christian communities in Central Sulawesi interpreted kidnappings, sudden wealth, and political violence through an “occult cosmology,” using prayer as a technology to contest hidden forces.³² Similarly, post-socialist Tanzania experienced what anthropologists term *millennial capitalism*:³³ the influx of global commodities unsettled older witchcraft logics that assumed a zero-sum transfer of tangible goods. Modern wealth, seemingly unmoored from local exchange, generated new uncertainties about who or what might be secretly exploited.

The United States, often imagined as the home of information saturation, proves no less susceptible. Fundamentalist congregations and apocalyptic movements read geopolitical events – the Gulf War, the European Union, the environmental regulation – as signs of an eschatological plot. Conspiracy becomes both critique and consolation, an idiom through which believers act on the world and endure its opacity. Even more radical groups such as Heaven’s Gate inverted the same structure of feeling, portraying earthly institutions as instruments of alien control and offering disciplined withdrawal as a path to liberation.³⁴

Across these sites the pattern recurs: ultimately, transparency and opacity are not polar opposites but a co-constitutive, dialectical pair. Communities develop ingenious ways – ritual, rumor, protest – to render abstract global forces intelligible and to contest the claim that official disclosure equals *truth*. The forementioned examples show that the more the world is rendered in the empirical language of transparency, the more people seek recourse to conspiracy and occult cosmologies to explain what lies beyond the visible. Transparency and conspiracy are the enduring, mutually reinforcing tropes through which modern subjects grapple with the complexities of power. The promise of a fully illuminated world remains an unfinished, and perhaps impossible, project. On the global level, *transparency* doesn’t function as a singular Enlightenment trajectory; it is refracted through local histories, religious idioms, and

31 The state provides a transparent, secular “order” to manage diversity and prevent “disorder.”

32 Christians see the secular state as a conspiracy for Islamicization, while all use sorcery (*dotti*) to navigate unseen powers.

33 “[N]ot simply ‘capitalism at the millennium,’ but, more fundamentally, ‘capitalism invested with salvific force[,] with intense faith in its capacity, if rightly harnessed, wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered’” (Sanders 2003: 154).

34 “UFO/alien discourses and the postwar culture of paranoia in general are liminal cultural spaces – nervous systems – that accommodate a variety of reactions to the anxieties of the times. Some of them are loose and low cost; others, especially the conspiracy dramas, the inhabitable paranoias, like Heaven’s Gate’s, are narrow, taxing, intense, and exacting. The entry requirement for Heaven’s Gate was total separation from the world – leave behind family, love, sex, work, material possessions, personal names and identities – ‘everything except enough food and liquids to sustain your vehicle while it is here, and enough rest to give it strength that it needs while it’s in a decaying atmosphere such as the Earth’s’” (Harding and Stewart 2003: 278).

memories of colonial or authoritarian surveillance. Traditional cosmologies do not simply vanish before modern rationality; they adapt, hybridize, and sometimes provide the only workable interpretive frame when formal institutions appear compromised.

The ethnographies unsettle reductive empiricism, which equates greater quantities of data with greater access to reality. In this sense, the global pursuit of transparency may itself generate the very suspicions it hopes to eliminate, because visibility and secrecy are mutually constitutive. Across these contexts, the global agenda of transparency produces localized regimes of suspicion, showing that transparency and conspiracy function as co-constitutive frameworks of interpreting power. Each reconfigures perception itself – transforming the desire to see clearly into a mode of imagining the hidden – thus revealing the aesthetic dimension of how political meaning is made visible.

Sovereignty of the Self

The critique of transparency must be deepened by addressing the ways in which contemporary demands for visibility operate at the intersection of sovereign power and the formation of subjectivity. The question at stake is not merely epistemological – how much can or should be seen – but ontological and political: how exposure itself *constitutes both the individual and the collective body*. If transparency functions today as a dominant ethical and technological norm, it does so as a mode of governance that organizes life through visibility, a logic that – as Zuboff has argued – transforms sovereignty itself into a function of data extraction.³⁵ Within this configuration, sovereignty no longer appears solely as the prerogative of the state but becomes diffused through mechanisms that render subjects legible, measurable, and accountable – a process in which, as Han observes, every individual becomes both agent and commodity of their own exhibition. The modern subject thus emerges as an economy of self-exposure that rearticulates the relation between freedom and control.³⁶ This section draws on Agamben and Lacan to show how transparency operates at the intersection of sovereignty and the formation of the subject, where exposure becomes a condition of both recognition and control.

35 Zuboff concludes that surveillance capitalism constitutes an overthrow of the people's sovereignty. It is a "tyranny" that treats all people as equally insignificant "Other-Ones" whose lives are rendered as data in the service of others' interests. It has achieved this by expropriating human experience without authority: "The success of this *coup de gens* stands as sour testimony to the thwarted needs of the second modernity, which enabled surveillance capitalism to flourish and still remains its richest vein for extraction and exploitation" (Zuboff 2019: ch. 18, sec. IV para. 6).

36 "In the society of exhibition, every subject is also its own advertising object. Everything is measured by its exhibition value. The society of exhibition is a society of pornography. [...] Capitalist economy subjects everything to compulsory exhibition. The staging of display alone generates value; all the inherent nature of things [*Eigenwüchsigkeit der Dinge*] has been abandoned" (Han 2015: 11).

Agamben's analysis of sovereignty provides a structural framework for understanding this paradox. Building on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Agamben argues that the decisive event of modern politics lies in the politicization of *bare life* (*zōē*) – that is, the transformation of mere biological existence into the direct object of political decision. Drawing on Carl Schmitt's definition of the sovereign as the one who decides on the state of exception, Agamben situates sovereignty at the threshold between law and its suspension, endowed with the power to determine when the law ceases to bind. The figure of the *homo sacer* – a person who may be killed with impunity yet not sacrificed – exemplifies this logic of *inclusive exclusion*,³⁷ in which life is incorporated into the juridical order precisely by being placed outside its protection. The *state of exception*, rather than an anomaly, becomes the structural foundation of modern governance. In this sense, the concentration camp is not an aberration but the hidden paradigm of political space, where law is applied through its own suspension and human agency is exposed as *bare life*.³⁸

Charlotte Epstein's reconstruction of *habeas corpus*, which traces the formation of the modern subject through the legal presentation of the body, can be seen as a concrete counterpart to Agamben's account of sovereign power. The writ that demanded that one "shall have the body" established corporeal presence as the fundamental site of political recognition and subjection. What originated as a safeguard against arbitrary detention simultaneously inscribed the body into the sphere of state power. As Epstein demonstrates, the act of appearing before the law transformed the *body* into evidence of personhood, but also into an instrument of governance. Freedom was articulated as the right to possess one's body,³⁹ but this possession depended upon compulsory exposure to authority. Privacy, often imagined as withdrawal from visibility, thus emerges historically from the obligation to appear. The subject's capacity to be recognized as a legal person presupposes submission to an *external gaze*.

This paradox persists in contemporary regimes of biometric and digital surveillance. The "presentation of the body" has become continuous: faces, fingerprints, and data traces circulate as credentials of identity across infrastructures of verification. The subject no longer speaks for itself; the body speaks as data. What once guaranteed liberty now functions as the precondition of legibility

37 "The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zōē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998: 12).

38 Ibid., esp. ch. 7, "The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern."

39 "Genealogies set into relief the givenness of bodies by showing how they are woven into social and technological constructs. Here I use the genealogical perspective to examine the ways in which the body was mobilized in the social construction of privacy. [...] The demand for privacy, then, is a political demand, in the specific sense that it is bound up with the make-up of the modern individual as a political subject" (Epstein 2016: 6).

within algorithmic governance. As Epstein notes, “our bodies are increasingly laid bare as a result of the spread of biometric technologies through the fabric of our everyday lives; which constitutes an instance of the routinization of surveillance characteristic of our contemporary ‘surveillance societies’” (Epstein 2016: 2). The sovereign’s prerogative to expose life to power reappears in the normalization of self-disclosure as civic virtue. Epstein’s analysis thus bridges Agamben’s biopolitical framework with the affective economy of visibility that defines the present: *sovereignty* today is reproduced less through coercion than through participation:

[W]e are attached to our *privacy* as a function of being a modern political subject founded in, and still attached to, the old regime of sovereignty. This explains our unease in the face of the increasing loss of privacy that our surveillance societies (which include but do not stop at the state) demand of us. (Ibid.: 13)

At this juncture, the question of sovereignty converges with the formation of the *self* in the psychoanalytic sense. Jacques Lacan’s theory of the *mirror stage* offers a microcosmic analogue to Agamben’s structure of exposure. The infant’s identification with its reflected image inaugurates the ego as an external construct – a unity founded on *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition. The subject perceives itself as coherent only through an image that originates outside it, thereby internalizing alienation as the very condition of identity. Entry into the *symbolic order* – language, kinship, and law – requires mediation through the gaze of the Other (*le regard de l’Autre*):

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [*savoir*] into being mediated by the other’s desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. (Lacan 2002: 79)

This structure becomes paradigmatic in the digital environment, where the production of the self through images attains systemic form.⁴⁰ Social media platforms function as permanent mirrors that invite continual self-presentation. The *ideal I* is sustained algorithmically, quantified through metrics of recognition and filtered by norms of desirability. Transparency, in this sense, operates simultaneously as promise and constraint. While individuals voluntarily project themselves into visibility, the infrastructures that capture their

40 According to Epstein, biometric technologies promote a new model of the body as inherently transparent, measurable, and “guilty until proven productive.” This system operates through “subjectivation,” enlisting the subject’s voluntary participation in their own surveillance. Simultaneously, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the constant exposure to a disembodied, panoptic gaze threatens the very conditions of psychic life. Lacanian theory suggests that a “penumbra” – a sphere of non-transparency – is essential for the development and functioning of an autonomous subject, as it shields the individual from the potentially violent effects of total exposure to the “gaze of the Other.”

data remain opaque. The reciprocity of the gaze collapses – in seeking to be seen, the subject renders itself governable:

Objet a, second, points to another place for the ongoing play of appearances and disappearances punctuating the subject's psychic life. *Objet a* is the unconscious object-cause of desire. It is that which drives the subject who knows that it is driven by something, but does not know exactly by what. This penumbra of unknowing-knowingness, to characterize the space of the unconscious, is where the subject regularly dwells with its *objet a*. It is also why, I suggest, it needs to be able to remain unexposed to gazing Other(s). *Objet a* is a relic from an earlier stage in the subject's make-up, a trace in the unconscious of that uninterrupted one-ness with the m(O)ther's body, a phantasmatic remainder of that lost unity. *Objet a* drives desire because it functions as the promise of being what the subject needs to regain that completeness. (Epstein 2016: 21–22)

From this perspective, Agamben's *state of exception* and Lacan's *mirror stage* delineate complementary scales of a single apparatus of visibility. On the macro level, sovereign power operates by deciding which forms of life are recognized and which are excluded – by determining the threshold of legibility. On the micro level, the subject internalizes this structure through the compulsion to be seen and confirmed by the gaze of the Other. The two economies converge within the regime of *digital transparency*, where participation coincides with exposure. The sovereign decision to render life visible is replicated within the psyche as the demand for self-exposure.

The notion of the *sovereign self* thus reveals its constitutive paradox. The liberal ideal of autonomy depends on continuous surrender – on the imperative to make oneself visible, traceable, and verifiable. Sovereignty migrates inward, not as mastery but as self-regulation: the subject governs itself through the very logic that governs populations.⁴¹ Epstein's genealogy reveals that the modern individual inherits sovereignty as self-possession. This possession, however, remains contingent upon exposure to power. Agamben elucidates its biopolitical structure, and Lacan its psychic economy. Together, they reveal that transparency holds a capacity to sustain a regime in which visibility becomes the instrument of domination.

The dynamics of internalized sovereignty brings into focus the problem of resistance itself. To resist this regime does not mean retreating into secrecy, but reclaiming *opacity* as an ethical and political resource. Agamben's notion of *impotentiality*⁴² – the capacity not to act – articulates a form of freedom that interrupts the compulsion toward hypervisibility. Similarly, Lacan's

41 Epstein challenges the notion that Foucault's "disciplinary societies" and panopticon have been superseded by Deleuze's "societies of control." She argues that discipline and control are deeply imbricated, with Foucault using the terms synonymously. Surveillance societies are quintessentially disciplinary, and the panopticon's logic is enhanced, not replaced, by new technologies.

42 "Only a power that is capable of both power and impotence, then, is the supreme power" (Agamben 2007: 43).

conception of the divided subject affirms that incompleteness and opacity are the conditions of agency and desire. The capacity to sustain oneself as a *sovereign* is dependent upon the right not to be fully known. The restoration of this interval – between legibility and disappearance – marks perhaps the last remaining site of freedom within the current regime of hypervisibility. In the context of digital transparency, this interval is continually threatened by biometric identification, algorithmic profiling, and the culture of self-branding. These technologies demand constant verification of presence – turning visibility into the very mechanism of subjection. Within this configuration, Agamben’s impotentiality and Lacan’s divided subject together expose the paradox of digital sovereignty: the more one displays oneself, the less one belongs to oneself.

Conclusion

Building upon the preceding analysis of *sovereignty* and *subjectivity*, these reflections reconsider transparency as a broader paradigm linking the *aesthetic* and the *political*. Transparency, as both an ethical ideal and a political technology, exposes the fundamental ambivalence that structures modern rationality. Presented as a universal value – the promise of openness, truth, and accountability – it simultaneously operates as an instrument of governance, a *form of sensibility*, and a *regime of visibility* that shapes how reality is experienced and judged. The aesthetic and the political thus converge in what Rancière calls “the aesthetic dimension of the political experience” (Rancière 2005: 13), where the sensible is never neutral but distributed, determining what can appear as public or remain unseen.

This entanglement of *visibility* and *power* marks the limit of the Enlightenment rationality. Within that horizon, opacity was aligned with ignorance while transparency was equated with virtue. Yet the history of modernity suggests that the pursuit of transparency does not dissolve domination but reorganizes it through new mechanisms of control. Power now operates less through concealment than through exposure – through the circulation of bodies, gestures, and data within networks of surveillance and normalization. As Han observes, transparency becomes a psychopolitical regime that governs by anticipation rather than coercion (Han 2017).

Its aesthetic dimension lies in the economy of appearances that sustain digital life. Technological infrastructures no longer merely mediate the visible world; they produce it. Recognition and participation coincide with exposure, and visibility itself becomes a form of governance. The subject – both spectator and spectacle – internalizes this economy, performing freedom through the very operations that calibrate perception.

To disentangle transparency from its ideological hybrids is to recognize that its value cannot be absolute. Critical and aesthetic practices preserve the interval where reflection and imagination remain possible. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, “the aesthetic dualism of the work gives evidence of the historical-philosophical tendency” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 37); opacity,

in this sense, sustains the conditions of critique. Habermas's ideal of rational-critical visibility persists, but under algorithmic capitalism its communicative promise collapses into the market of attention. Transparency, once the symbol of Enlightenment reason, now risks becoming its parody – producing saturation rather than understanding, visibility without vision.

Seen in this light, *transparency* organizes both the sensory and the political. Its genealogy – from the fragile planes of natural glass to the algorithmic screens of digital modernity – reveals a transformation in how perception and power intertwine. The relationship between the sensory and the political mirrors that between the private and the public, defining the horizon within which freedom and reason remain thinkable. If the *political* guarantees the sovereignty of the subject, it does so through the *aesthetic* as its constitutive form. To recognize this interdependence is to understand transparency not as the sign of a healthy democracy, but as the condition through which subjects learn to see – and to be seen (Epstein 2016: 24). The argument advanced here defends the *right to opacity* – not as a withdrawal from the public, but as the ethical space that enables freedom, imagination, and critique. Opacity safeguards the interval in which meaning can be negotiated rather than imposed. At the same time, this defense does not reject transparency altogether; it calls instead for its *redefinition* as a qualitative practice of contextualization. Only by reclaiming the limits of what may remain private can the public sphere recover its capacity for reflection and autonomy.

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Andreja Prokopijević

Ambivalencija transparentnosti: Estetska i politička razmatranja

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad ispituje pojam transparentnosti i njene međusobno povezane pandane kako se pojavljuju u estetskim, političkim i etičkim domenima. U savremenom demokratskom diskursu, transparentnost se slavi kao garant otvorenosti, odgovornosti i istine. Ipak, njena primena često proizvodi suprotne efekte: pojačani nadzor, zasićenje digitalne kulture i porast sumnje i teorija zavere u različitim globalnim kontekstima.

Analiza smešta ovaj pojam u dijalog između estetike i politike, od klasične filozofije do modernih teorija Adorna i Habermasa, naglašavajući etičku napetost između istine i prikrivanja. Zatim se transparentnost razmatra kao politička ideologija i moralni imperativ, pokazujući kako zahtevi za potpunom vidljivošću prikrivaju nove oblike dominacije. Uključujući Fukoovu analizu disciplinarnе vidljivosti i Lakanovu teoriju stadijuma ogledala, rad tvrdi da je težnja ka potpunoj otvorenosti strukturno neostvariva i potencijalno patološka, manifestujući se u pomeranju ka spoljašnjoj slici kao nosiocu identiteta. U tom smislu, transparentnost funkcioniše kao savremena raspodela čulnog – režim koji organizuje i percepciju i moć.

Prateći estetsko iskustvo transparentnosti u savremenoj kulturi – gde ideali svetlosti i otvorenosti koegzistiraju sa izloženošću i otuđenjem – rad reinterpretira transparentnost kroz Agambenove pojmove golog života i neoperativnosti, otkrivajući njihove implikacije za

pravo, ljudsku potencijalnost i kritiku političkog autoriteta u uslovima nadzornog kapitalizma. Na kraju, transparentnost se preispituje kao kontingentna i osporavana vrednost, a ne kao besprekorno demokratsko načelo, uz naglašavanje njene paradoksalne uloge u oblikovanju subjektivnosti i javnog života danas.

Ključne reči: transparentnost, estetika, politička teorija, demokratija, ambivalencija

