The Paradoxical Misconceptions of Transparency

Os Equívocos Paradoxais da Transparência

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Han, B.-C. (2014). *A sociedade da transparência* (M. S. Pereira, Trans.). Relógio D'Água. (Original work published in 2012)

The sheer volume of information and communication is no automatic guarantee of adequate clarification of reality. Some even argue that "the more information is set free, the more difficult it proves to survey the world" (p. 62). That is the position of Byung-Chul Han, a critic of contemporary society. "It has been demonstrated that more information does not necessarily lead to better decisions" (p. 15).

Something similar was explained by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo in 1989 in a work with a similar title, *A Sociedade Transparente* (The Transparent Society). The lack of reference is surprising, given both the similarity of the title and the thinkers cited by both. Vattimo (1989/1992) argues that the dominance of the media does not render society "more 'transparent', more self-aware, more 'enlightened', but rather as a more complex, even chaotic society" (p. 10).

A Sociedade da Transparência (The Transparency Society) is a short essay (73 pages) consistent with other works by the author already published in Portugal as part of Relógio D'Água's Antropos collection. Miguel Serras Pereira's Portuguese translation of the German original (published in 2012) has been available since September 2014.

Since then, more than 20 essays have been translated and published in Portugal, some of which focus on themes related to communication, such as *The Crisis of Narration* (German original from 2023, published in 2024), *Infocracy* and *Non-Things* (originals from 2021, published in 2022), and *In the Swarm* (original from 2013, published in 2016).

With *A Sociedade da Transparência*, two other essays were released in Portugal on the same date: *The Burnout Society* and *The Agony of Eros*. One could say that this forms a "trilogy", introducing readers to the author's thinking. There is such a connection between them that if they were shorter and the emphatic statements repeated like soundbites were removed, we could have a single publication offering the same critical perspective on society. Repetition between chapters also happens in different works, as in this example: "the exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Perpetrator and victim collapse into one. Auto-exploitation proves more efficient than allo-exploitation because it is attended by the sensation of freedom" (p. 71): "the exploiter is the exploited. The subject is perpetrator and victim in one. Auto-exploitation proves much more efficient than allo-exploitation because it is accompanied by a feeling of liberty" (Han, 2012/2014a, p. 17).

Byung-Chul Han is a South Korean philosopher (Seoul, 1959) who has lived in Germany since the late 1980s, where he began his philosophical and theological training. He has been sharing his thoughts in short essays since 2010 when he released the original *The Burnout Society*, the first in his "trilogy". He studied Philosophy at the University of Freiburg and Literature and Theology at the University of Munich. At Munich University, the young metalwork student, who emigrated from South Korea to Germany shortly after the age of 20, completed his doctorate in 1994 with a thesis on Martin Heidegger, an author frequently referenced in his works. A transdisciplinary thinker, he draws inspiration from the Frankfurt School for his reflections. He has since emerged as one of the most renowned contemporary philosophers. A key factor in his success is his distinctive style, characterised by the brevity of his works and "agile and incisive sentences, sometimes extremely assertive, that seem to pop out of the paper like bursts from a machine gun" (Sibilia, 2018, para. 9).

This essay addresses the issue of transparency, primarily associated with freedom of information, now a characteristic that permeates all areas of society, over which it exerts a transformative power. In this way, transparency has become a defining attribute of society. Today, the violence exerted by transparency is so intense that human beings are reduced to "functional elements within a system" (p. 13).

Transparency extends beyond merely ensuring freedom of information or combating corruption; it changes the pace of communication and standardises social dynamics. The "omnipresent demand for transparency" (p. 11) transforms society into an "inferno of the same" (p. 17), seeking "to eliminate all asymmetrical relations" (p. 32). By eliminating what is strange (different), transparency speeds up communication, as the other, being unequal, embodies the negativity and ambivalence that oppose transparency. Similarly, because they cannot become operational, transparency eliminates all rituals and ceremonies because they "represent an obstacle to the acceleration of the flows of communication and capital" (p. 48).

Drawing on Bentham's theory of the panopticon, he developed his theory of the digital panopticon, which abolishes "the distinction between centre and periphery, which is fundamental to the Benthamian panopticon" (p. 67). Now, "everyone controls everyone" (p. 69); the actor and the victim coincide, the exploiter and the exploited. There is no separation between the interior (inside) and the exterior (outside). Without a fixed perspective, surveillance is no longer anchored in a single point but extends to all those being surveilled who, in a paradoxical twist, control each other. "A feeling of freedom accompanies it" (p. 68) because, contrary to expectations, "surveillance is not occurring as an *attack on freedom*" (p. 72). Volunteers and actives alike are the individuals under surveillance who have contributed to the construction and maintenance of the digital panopticon "by putting themselves on display and baring themselves" (p. 69).

Han is determined to highlight the paradoxical misunderstandings of transparency. Firstly, "human existence *is not transparent, even to itself*, interpersonal transparency proves impossible to achieve" (p. 14). Further damage includes the annihilation of spontaneity and intuition, thought and spirituality, pleasure, fantasy and enchantment,

trust, otherness and distance, narrativity and memory, the flavour of things and time, contemplation and transcendence. By seeking transparency so much, it becomes a society that is "*see-through without light. (...)* The medium of transparency is not light, but *rather lightless radiation*; instead of illuminating, it suffuses everything and makes it see-through" (pp. 59–60). Another paradox lies in the elimination of distance without, however, promoting proximity because "transparency *re-moves* everything into uniform *de-distantiation* that stands neither near nor far" (p. 27).

The transparency society is one characterised by excessive exposure and exploitation; it is shameless and undressed, pornographic, colourless and depoliticised, suspicious and anaesthetic, obscure and obscene, devoid of metamorphosis and seduction, truth and appearance, poetry and music, meaning and sanctity. Despite its main values being production and income, it is an empty and lifeless society: "only *emptiness* is completely transparent" (p. 61); "only what is dead is completely transparent" (p. 15).

Throughout the nine chapters, in which he exposes numerous misconceptions of transparency and endeavours to connect them, he also explores many other aspects typical of contemporary society: the society of positivity, the society of exhibition, the society of evidence, the society of pornography, the society of acceleration, the society of intimacy, the society of information, the society of unveiling, and the society of control.

The excess of positivity is the starting point that underpins the main misconceptions of this society of transparency. It "manifests itself first and foremost as a *society of positivity*" (p. 11), devoid of negativity and thought. Thinking is not transparent; "negativity inhabits thinking, which causes it to *experience what transforms it*" (p. 48). Similarly, time is described as "without destiny or event" (p. 11), and images become "pornographic" and devoid of "temporal density" (p. 45), silence, and contemplation.

Contrary to appearances, "it makes one incapable of *doing something*" (Han, 2010/2014b, p. 55), positivity is one of the causes of this society's own tiredness: "the tiredness of positive potency" (p. 55). In the essay *The Burnout Society*, this starting point is emphasised once more in the second part of the "trilogy", *A Sociedade da Transparência*: "psychic disturbances such as exhaustion, fatigue, and depression — all of which can be traced back to the excess of positivity" (p. 17).

Using short, often paradoxical sentences that demand pauses in the reading cadence, Byung-Chul Han summons various authors to either bolster or challenge his viewpoints: Heidegger, Hegel, Nietzsche, Humboldt, Baudrillard, Simmel, Benjamin, Schmitt, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Agamben, Sennett, Plato, Rousseau, Bentham, among others. Han's adeptness at summoning so many different thinkers highlights the absence of others; for instance, he concludes the fourth chapter asserting that "the society of pornography is a society of the spectacle" (p. 45), yet he does not mention Guy Debord's (1967/2012) *la société du spectacle* (the society of the spectacle), a term coined in Debord's original work dating back to 1967, published in Portugal in April 2012. Additionally, the last chapter is entitled "A Sociedade de Controle" (The Societies of Control) without mentioning Gilles Deleuze, who famously coined the term in 1990 (Sibilia, 2018).

Byung-Chul Han sparks reflections with provocations, outlining alternative paths that diverge from the society of transparency. His critique of societal wrongs also serves as an attempt to propose antidotes capable of purifying the excesses caused by the ideology of transparency.

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Acknowledgements

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