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AESTHETICS in the AGE of NEW MEDIA

Edited by Lorenzo Serini and Marta Vero

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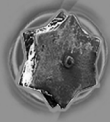
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*The End of Metaphysics?
Gianni Vattimo on the Will to Power
as Art in the Age of the Internet*

Matthew Edward Harris

Abstract

The philosopher Gianni Vattimo has put forward that we are living after the death of God and end of metaphysics, that Being is in inexorable decline. In part, this is due to the effects of information and communications technology giving mass exposure to minority voices, exposing the subjectivity (and contingency) of representation, of Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's notion of the will to power as the culmination of metaphysics. Vattimo puts forward the figure of the Übermensch negotiating the traces of tradition liberated through information and communications technology (and the media more broadly) in an artistic way, creating pastiches and wearing masks and costumes in an ironic way. However, I would argue that cookies, social media and Apple technologies reassert the ego (the foundational modern metaphysical bedrock) and bring back hierarchical distinctions in a strong sense, that they show a non-reactive challenge to nihilism that questions 'weak thought.'

Introduction

Over the past few decades there have been a number of voices in areas such as philosophy, theology and critical theory that have expressed the conviction that we are living in a post-metaphysical age, or – in a more nuanced fashion – that we are living in the age of the end of metaphysics. Derrida saw only traces of metaphysics left.

Lyotard spoke of the end of metanarratives, such as ‘progress’ or ‘emancipation’ following the World Wars and the increasingly plural, heterogeneous and multicultural world in which we live, one in which technology has facilitated the proliferation of an infinite number of minor and local narratives, such as through radio, television and – most importantly of all – the internet. One philosopher conceptualises these developments in the history of ideas, and that is the contemporary postmodern nihilistic thinker, Gianni Vattimo.

Vattimo is an interesting test case for the assumptions pertaining to the end of metaphysics, in particular those that concern the role of technology in facilitating this eventuality. Vattimo’s principal influences are Nietzsche and Heidegger, and they provide not only the structure of his thought, but also the means by which one can critique his conclusions. In particular, I would argue that current technology, social networking and the internet specifically, could be interpreted as a continuation of metaphysics that

has absorbed, even neutralised, the trends towards plurality and weakening that occurred through the use of older, more traditional media.

Through neutralisation, metaphysics was able to absorb these more contingent and historical modes of self-creation and expression, retaining the Enlightenment metaphysical project based on the ego, but developed in ways that take local narratives into account. What I wish to argue is that Martin Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche offers a competing interpretation of the 'signs of the times' that interprets the effects of the latest technological advances, especially social media, more plausibly than Vattimo's own reading of Nietzsche and technology.

In order to do this, to see now Heidegger's Nietzsche and Vattimo's Nietzsche differ, it will be necessary to survey their respective opinions on the 'will to power as art.' Even before this difference is outlined, it is necessary to survey Vattimo's views on metaphysics and technology in more detail.

Vattimo and metaphysics

Vattimo thinks that metaphysics is violent. By this he thinks that the essence of metaphysics – the establishing of a permanent, unchanging and certain ground for truth – silences questioning and closes down debate, reducing everything back to

the *grund* (ground), whether it be Platonic forms, Aristotelian categories or the Kantian numinous. Metaphysics, through the use of reason, establishes foundations upon which truth is made objective and to which one «must give one's assent or conform»¹. Technology, the fulfilment of metaphysics, aims to link «all entities on the planet into predictable and controllable causal relationships»².

Calculability and control are at the heart of metaphysics' essence. Following Heidegger, Vattimo refuses to see the history of metaphysics (which, ontologically, is the history of Being) as one merely of error, but as a normative way of thinking that was instituted by Socrates and Plato. Metaphysics has entailed truth being conceived in terms of correspondence to already designated norms from the *grund* until the death of God, that is, until the end of metaphysics heralded by Nietzsche's announcement to that effect.

The death of God can, and does, mean many things to Vattimo. It represents the collective loss of a need for certainty as a result of improvements in science and technology that have removed our worst fears, making life more bearable. The 'death of God' is more than the end of religious belief for Vattimo. As he says, «my use of the death of God depends [...] not only the death of God but also of the end of metaphysics and the end of truth»³.

1 Vattimo (1999), p. 43.

2 Vattimo (1988), p. 40.

3 Vattimo (2007a), p. 92.

These technological developments depended on a stable worldview, made possible by monotheism, which was itself metaphysical. This interpretation of the death of God picks up on a general tendency to see it as an impossible mixture between a murder and a suicide. Humans have murdered God not through their unbelief, but paradoxically by their faith.

The value of truth, adhered to in faith, throughout the history of metaphysics, has transpired to be revealed as a lie in its fruit, historical criticism, and God is most symbolic of truth, implying that there is a strain of self-defeat in Christianity. John Gray points out that Christianity introduced the value of truth into religion, making a link that Vattimo arrived at independently and expressed in a different way through his designation of ontotheology (the maximising attributes of God, such as his omnipotence) as being a form of metaphysics. «Atheism», writes Gray, «is a late bloom of a Christian passion for truth»⁴.

What the death of God is not is a flat-footed atheistic denial of God's existence. To make such a pronouncement would be to repeat the logic of metaphysics. Avoiding metaphysical repetition in this way, Vattimo also rules out a new beginning, including the Nietzschean project of a revaluation of all values. Nihilism cannot be a description of reality, nor can there be any new beginning after

⁴ Gray (2004), p. 127.

nihilism, for the ‘new’ was the modern metaphysical value *par excellence*. Instead, one gains emancipation from metaphysics from a *Verwindung*, a resignation-convalescence-alteration of strong metaphysical structures. This Heideggerian term is employed by Vattimo to denote a ‘twisting-free’ from metaphysics in this way. Metaphysics cannot be done-away with completely, but its traces can be twisted until are weakened of much of their violence.

To avoid hermeneutical nihilism (or *pensiero debole*, ‘weak thought’ as Vattimo calls it) being regarded metaphysically as a meta-theory of interpretation, Vattimo grounds it historically as the culmination of a process of weakening, one that gradually brings to common consciousness the extent to which we are historically conditioned. Vattimo sometimes draws upon both the history of Christian thought and also Heidegger’s ideas in order to do this, but one of his favourite narratives is the section from Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols*, entitled «How the Real World Finally Became a Fable»⁵. This is Nietzsche’s history of philosophy in brief. It begins with Plato, in which the *ontos* (really real) are the timeless, eternal forms. With Christianity these hopes become temporal, but are placed post-mortem. As a result of changes brought about by the Enlightenment, the real becomes postulated as a numinous thing in itself, which then definitively becomes unknowable. Finally, in reducing reality to the historical, observable and measurable,

5 Nietzsche (1990), pp. 50-51.

not only has the Platonic metaphysical schema been reversed, but also its presupposition of the distinction between the real and the apparent been abolished, too.

Vattimo also benefits from Heidegger's interpretations of the history of Western thought. Heidegger had many readings of this history, but among his most interesting concerned the link between technology and metaphysics, found in essays such as «The Question Concerning Technology» and *Identity and Difference*. In this view, the essence of technology (*techné*) is nothing technological, but metaphysical. Technology is a mode of revealing in which something is brought forth external to its own natural mode of revealing (*physis*).

Originally, this bringing-forth was in accordance with the nature of the object in its environment, such as a windmill bringing being turned by the wind. Over time, when production was mechanised in the industrial revolution and measures were standardised, revealing and production were not brought forth naturally but were instead 'challenged forth.' On the latter mode of revealing, things are pushed into production, and even if they are dormant their primary mode of revealing themselves is through their designation as 'standing reserve'; even an airplane on a runway is waiting to fly.

Even for 'natural' things, it is now impossible to think of the Rhine without hydroelectricity and tourism coming to mind. Crucially, humans do not

escape challenging-forth, as can be seen in terms such as ‘human resources.’ In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger uses the term *Ge-Stell* (‘enframing’) to express the apex, the culmination of metaphysical organisation and rational planning of the world. In the transappropriation, the whirling, reciprocal movement of the enframing of humans and Being facilitated by technology, both subject and object lose their metaphysical qualities, including these designations of subject and object: «The appropriation appropriates man and Being to their essential togetherness. In the frame, we glimpse a first, oppressing flash of the appropriation»⁶.

Vattimo reads this moment of the *Ge-Stell* in terms of the first flashing-up of *Ereignis* (the event of appropriation). For Vattimo, the *Ereignis* has its prelude in the *Ge-Stell*, with the world of technology giving rise to this realisation for emancipation from metaphysical epithets. While Heidegger conceived the *Ge-Stell* (and therefore *Ereignis*, at least according to *Identity and Difference*) in terms of industrial, mechanical technology, Vattimo saw it as taking place through information and communications technology. The latter would control the former, as well as creating a multiplicity of ‘world pictures’ and messages. The infinite plurality of messages and pictures would have the effect of decentring the individual, making them «roll from the centre

6 Heidegger (1969), p. 39.

towards X»⁷, which was one of Nietzsche's many descriptions of nihilism⁸. Moreover, information and communications technology would be able to report events simultaneously with their occurrence, being filtered immediately through myriad ways of interpreting the world. This would reduce objectivity and blur (or even, collapse) the distinction between the 'real' and 'apparent' worlds.

Information and communications technology, then, have many ways of bringing-about nihilism, for Vattimo. By reporting simultaneously with events, they collapse the distinction between real and apparent worlds. Through the proliferation of images and messages, they decentre the world and create epistemological levelling, confusion and 'democracy.' Cumulatively, they also bring about the 'event of appropriation' which Vattimo reads as a 'transappropriation,' where both Being and humankind reciprocate their characteristics endlessly until they are worn out. Following Heidegger, Vattimo sees humanism as a form of metaphysics⁹.

So if the strong, Enlightenment-based notion of the human being as an autonomous, sovereign self-legislator no longer is able to see itself in this way due to the decentring, disempowering effect of information and communications technology, then this is another way in which Vattimo sees technology

7 Vattimo (1988), p. 20.

8 Nietzsche (1968), p. 8.

9 Vattimo (1988), pp. 31-32.

– including the internet, with its lack of centre, infinite images and messages and control of other machines – as bringing metaphysics to an end.

The end of metaphysics?

Nihilism, for Vattimo, is «the discovery of the lie» of truth as something stable¹⁰, and that the world is just a fable, a play of interpretations. Vattimo sees the death of God as the aesthetising of both the world and the self, particularly in his earlier work.

This is related to his interpretations of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. One of Vattimo's interpretations of this figure is of a person who runs through the storage box of history (an image taken from the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*), putting on masks and costumes and taking them off¹¹. Nietzsche thought this was a bad thing, leading him to look for 'suprahistorical' forces to counteract this ransacking of history¹², but Vattimo thinks not only is this all we have, but that this ironic way of looking at history as a pastiche is liberating as it frees us from taking our heritage (which we cannot escape, only weaken) too seriously: «liberated, the Dionysian consciously opts for a multiplicity of masks»¹³. These images and masks are taken in the way of moderation, of

10 Vattimo (1993), p. 93.

11 Nietzsche (1997), pp. 72, 84.

12 Op. cit., p. 120.

13 Vattimo (2002), p. 196.

seeing them as styles chosen for aesthetic reasons, ones we may prefer based on our thrownness. One approaches them, and lives among them, as a person who is 'over' in the sense that they can tolerate diverse perspectives and flourish among plurality, taken in an ironic, distorted way.

The effect of this plurality is to democratise the self and the world; hierarchies are reduced to an aesthetically pleasing play of interpretations. Vattimo thought radio and television contributed to this development, of bringing greater plurality to consciousness. In his view that weakening in this way is an irreversible process that comes ever more to consciousness, Vattimo seems to have been prescient, writing before the internet. The internet – with its blogs, social networking and marginal websites – exacerbates the democratising effects of earlier forms of media and communications technologies. The age of the internet truly is the age of the world *pictures*.

The will to power and Heidegger

Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche explicitly links the will to power both to metaphysics and technology. Seeing Nietzsche's thought simultaneously as the apex and culmination of the modern centrality of the subject, Heidegger regarded Nietzsche as the last metaphysician. The will to power wills its own will, which is a

voluntaristic imposition of value, and therefore anything that furthers this will. Heidegger thought that while Nietzsche heralded the end of metaphysics by pointing towards this eventuation, his thought still remained within it. In his fourth volume on Nietzsche, Heidegger thought that in modern metaphysics, the question ‘What is the being?’ had been transformed into one about fundamental truth, therefore exchanging certitude about salvation and revelation for certitude based on self¹⁴. This can be traced back to Descartes’ *Cogito*.

While ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ is the most famous and well-known version of Descartes’ foundational formula for certain knowledge, in some passages he uses ‘*percipere*’ (to take possession of/represent/that which he can master)¹⁵. To be human is that to which its Being takes from being able to permanently represent things in an open field in the certitude towards which one is brought. If a *res cogitans* represents and takes possession of something, the other side of this duality, *res extensa*, is mathematical in nature and is related back to (and is the consequence of) the first principle of the certainty of representation implicit in the *Cogito*. In the history of metaphysics, this gives rise to machine technology¹⁶.

In Descartes’ work, ‘subject’ now becomes a proper noun for man, and everything else object; Being for

14 Heidegger (1991), p. 97.

15 Op. cit., p. 104.

16 Op. cit., pp. 116-117.

him is representedness in secure representation¹⁷. 'Security' comes from the metaphysical need for certitude, which manifests itself in rational calculation and planning in the world of techno-science which is the culmination of metaphysics. Before this, though, certainty comes to be a condition through Kant's transcendental development of the Cartesian Cogito. In Descartes one has the 'point of view' as being related both to 'mastery' and 'certainty.'

With Kant, this becomes a 'condition' in the transcendental sense. Kant, though, still held onto the noumenal, of the 'thing-in-itself' that was unknowable. By contrast, inverting Plato¹⁸, the start of metaphysics, Heidegger interprets Nietzsche as holding that there was nothing but becoming. Nevertheless, Heidegger also thought that Nietzsche posited a subject who had to live in this becoming. As such, the subject needed to engage with the flux of becoming as follows:

«To be able to be as life, life needs the constant fixity of a 'belief', but this 'belief' calls for holding something to be constant and fixed, taking something as 'in being'. Since life posits values, yet is at the same time concerned about its own securing of permanence, a valuation must belong to life in which it take something as constant and fixed; that is, as in being that is, as true»¹⁹.

17 Op. cit., p. 120.

18 Heidegger (1991), p. 154.

19 Heidegger (1991), pp. 62-63.

A 'point of view' in the Cartesian sense, combined with the Kantian 'condition,' becomes a 'condition of life' in the sense of a representing as a value. All life is becoming, but the becoming of a subject is the will to power. If the will wills its will, it posits values that it holds fast with the certainty characteristic of the history of metaphysics. In Nietzsche's philosophy this is expressed in the 'doctrine' of the 'eternal recurrence.' As Nietzsche held that becoming is all that there is, this is, for Heidegger, the mere reversal of Plato's eternal forms. The eternal recurrence is putting one's 'stamp' of Being onto becoming in order to fix the values that enable one to live a life as the *Übermensch*. The reduction of Being to a value is, for Heidegger, the ultimate forgetting of Being and the culmination of metaphysics.

In the essay «The Age of the World Picture», Heidegger says that «Value is the objectification of needs as goals, wrought by a representing self-establishing within the world as picture». Representing replaces the substantial objectivity of an object, and is instead a will, a mastery, a «making stand-over against, an objectifying that goes forward and master»²⁰.

Heidegger makes the link between this change in the subject-object relationship wrought by Descartes and reaching its apex in Nietzsche, and technology: «In the planetary imperialism of technologically organised man, the subjectivism of man attains its acme, from

²⁰ Heidegger (1977), p. 150.

which point it will descend to the level of organised uniformity and there firmly establish itself»²¹.

In an essay entitled «The Will to Power as Art», one which Vattimo states as being key to his move towards his later thought²², he writes the following:

In the end of metaphysics as technology, the nexus between metaphysics, domination and will, which had hitherto remained hidden, becomes explicit. The system of total concatenation of causes and effects, prefigured by metaphysics in its 'vision' of the world and actualized by technology, is the expression of a will to dominate. Hence the Nietzschean will to power is simply the most coherent culmination of the history of Western metaphysics²³.

Willing, valuing and representing: these activities of the subject culminate in the *Ge-Stell*, in the end of metaphysics in the modern world of technology. This is Vattimo's understanding of Heidegger's interpretation of the relationship between the will to power, technology and the culmination of metaphysics.

It was for this reason chiefly that Heidegger regarded Nietzsche as a metaphysician and why he took a dim view of technology as «the unfolding of the will to power as technocracy»²⁴. This is because in the essay «Dialectic and Difference», Vattimo writes that, «The technical world described as *Ge-*

21 Op. cit., p. 152.

22 Vattimo (1993), p. 4.

23 Op. cit., p. 86.

24 Op. cit., p. 87.

Stell is the world of planned production, served by knowledge as representation, and in which man is repeatedly interpellated in an ordering process imposing on him a continuous pursuit of things to serve as reserves of resources»²⁵.

The will to power and Vattimo

Vattimo consciously reads Heidegger against (or in his view, better than) Heidegger himself.

Disagreeing with Heidegger's view that Nietzsche was the last metaphysician, Vattimo sees Nietzsche as being the prophet of nihilism whose own writings contributed to the bringing-about of European nihilism.

In taking up Nietzsche's thought in this way, in the 1980s and early 1990s, on and off, Vattimo engaged with the theme of the will to power in a way that situated it within aesthetics. Vattimo envisaged art as a space outside the formalism and ground-based thinking of metaphysics, kind of the Dionysiac mode of thinking compared to metaphysical Apolline thought. In his earlier meditations on this line of thinking, art was considered an emotive alternative to the rationalism of metaphysics, as a locus of thought outside of the space of form and rationalisation. Later in the decade Vattimo adjusted this notion of

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 169.

the will to power as art to bring it into line with his hermeneutics. Aesthetics links in with the will to power in at least two different ways for Vattimo. Firstly, the plurality of world images resulting from information and communications technology aesthetises the world. Secondly, the *Übermensch* as artist becomes the ideal for Vattimo, the person best acclimatised to the postmodern world of images. The second point follows from the first, and both will be outlined in turn.

My main three sources for this section are his influential book, *The Transparent Society* (1989 for the original Italian edition, 1992 for the English translation), *The Adventure of Difference* (1980) and Vattimo's book on Nietzsche from 1985. The former book is the main source for the idea of technology aesthetising the world, whereas both of the latter allow us to connect the aesthetising of the world through information technology to the will to power as art and the artist as the *Übermensch*.

For Vattimo, the will to power as objectification of representation leads to the creation of images (quite literally objectification: making an object). However, the world of information and communications technology brings to light such a dizzying proliferation of images that we are truly in the age of the world pictures, in the plural: «what refutes metaphysics, thereby making the belief in an objective, stable, and instituted order of being untenable, is the inexorable proliferation of world

‘pictures’»²⁶. Pluralisation leads to conflict, such that it is impossible for one to genuinely believe that one’s representation of the world is objective, but that instead one comes to awareness that one’s representation of the world, one’s will to power, is subjective.

Individual wills to power have been given a voice through information and communications technology. Even before the internet, presciently, Vattimo could write that «radio, television and newspaper became elements in a general explosion and proliferation of *Weltanschauungen*, of world views»²⁷.

I would argue that it is not so much that the worldviews have proliferated through the use of these kinds of technology, but that they have been represented more easily. Elsewhere in *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo writes that that «For us [living today], reality is rather the result of the intersection and ‘contamination’ (in the Latin sense) of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another and without any ‘central’ coordination»²⁸.

The images are representations, objectifications of a will to power which, through their circulation, reveal themselves to be without objective basis, but are in fact contingent and competing. Vattimo sees the world as more than an aesthetic experience because

²⁶ Vattimo (2002), pp. 14-15.

²⁷ Vattimo (1992), p. 5.

²⁸ Op. cit., p. 7.

of the emphasis he places on the history of Being, that the age of world pictures (late-modernity) has a history; hermeneutics is a response to tradition, to the history of Being²⁹. Nevertheless, Vattimo does refer to the death of God as «a dissolution of the real into ‘secondary’ qualities bound with the perception of the senses»³⁰.

How might one link the aesthetising of the world more closely to the will to power? One can do this by linking the will to the fundamental Nietzschean distinction between the Apolline and the Dionysiac in art found in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The Apolline gives form and, broadly speaking, constitutes the metaphysical drive for certainty and measure in the history of ideas. Insofar as the ego gives rise to strong form, then this underlies the metaphysical interpretation of the will to power in Nietzsche as taking the Cartesian ego to its logical conclusion; the interpretations that constitute the world are competing wills to power in this strong sense.

However, Vattimo argues that if one observes the sheer multiplicity of interpretations, which has become easier since they have become inescapably evident through information and communications technology, the other basic artistic drive – the Dionysiac – should come to the fore. While the latter can be understood metaphysically through a notion of it representing some formless chaos, it is

29 Vattimo (1997), p. 109.

30 Vattimo (2002), p. 52.

understood by Vattimo as an artistic playfulness that revels in the chaotic multiplicity of interpretations whereby they are regarded as masks, as pure surface and contingency.

For Vattimo, «Nietzsche's thought places metaphysical subjectivity in crisis and thereby opens up a new perspective, in which the relations between Being, truth and interpretation combine to produce a creative conception of man: liberated, the Dionysian consciously opts for a multiplicity of masks»³¹.

On this understanding of art in relation to the will to power, both the world and the subject are 'disorganised' (as a process) through the fabling of the former and, by consequence, the latter; the disorganisation of hierarchies within the subject (metaphysically construed) is a result of the subject realising that the world is a fable and that interpretations are styles based on subjective interests projected onto the world.

As such, Vattimo can write that «The Heideggerian hope of a new epoch of Being must probably pass (beyond the deployment of metaphysics in the complete organization of the world) through [the] operation of radically disorganizing the subject, which for Nietzsche is accomplished first and foremost in the will to power as art»³².

The will of the *Übermensch*, therefore, brings forth a new perspective which is not another

31 Vattimo (2002a), p. 196.

32 Vattimo (1993), p. 107.

interpretation, but a disposition to negotiate the play of interpretations in a manner which is simultaneously disinterested and playful, yet also artistic in the ironic adoption of masks of sometimes conflicting styles (interpretations).

Artistic revelry of this kind brings forth fusions of styles, retro, kitsch and more besides. Later, in *Beyond Interpretation* (1994), Vattimo ties the argument from *The Adventure of Difference*, *Nietzsche* and *The Transparent Society* together, drawing on Heidegger's «The Age of the World Picture». Vattimo argues that the multiplicity of world pictures (i.e., interpretations) is the result of individuals longing for the certainty of reality in an age where none can be found.

In reducing the world to images, the will to power becomes more explicit as assurance becomes more absolute: «when man rebels against divine authority, the practical essence of representation itself becomes more explicitly and the assurance must become absolute»³³.

Information and communications technology bring these interpretations into conflict and become reduced to the level of representation in the fabling of the world, undermining the notion of certainty further. The will to power as art can be found, therefore, in the most moderate (Vattimo's *Übermensch*) who gathers together the multiplicity

³³ Vattimo (1997), p. 25.

in the fashion of ironic mask-wearing of the interpretations of others, transcending their own interest to get beyond simple conflict, holding their combination of masks weakly and without violence.

Subjectivity is no longer strong and hierarchical in Vattimo's image of the *Übermensch*. Rather, multiplicity is gathered together in a unity, in a weakly held conglomerate of various interpretations understood by the moderate subject as a series of artistic representations projected onto the world as images which can be taken as masks.

The internet, social media and the persistence of metaphysics

It is a moot point whether the self has been eroded and weakened in late-modernity. Vattimo claims that interpretative plurality will make the agent who responds to the liberation of metaphor in a non-reactive way a hermeneutical nihilist in the form of an artist, one who is able to negotiate plurality with detached irony.

This artist, as *Übermensch*, is a wearer of masks. In Vattimo's eyes, the disinterested, ironic mask wearer weaves the tapestry of interpretations into a detached worldview held in a weak way.

What one wonders is whether the internet, and social media, encourage weakening of strong structures in this way, or if metaphysical distinctions

have been hardened as a result. Take Apple I-technology as an example. The iPhone, iPod and iTunes all put the self at the centre of the universe. More than this, they all gave rise to ‘downloading,’ ‘shuffling’ and rearranging pieces of musical art without context. Eclecticism could be seen as weakening the self by disregarding the intentions of the artist.

If ‘Money’ were to be extracted from *Dark Side of the Moon* and placed beside ‘Waiting in Vain’ by Bob Marley and ‘If I Were a Carpenter’ by Tim Hardin, then the artistic vision (a form of will to power) on the part of Pink Floyd is weakened as it is now decontextualized from their artwork.

Nevertheless, the Apple user who has facilitated this eclecticism is now the artist in the Vattimian sense in wearing the masks of different styles (Progressive Rock, Reggae, and Folk, respectively), but these different styles are rearranged in accordance to his or her preferences; the weakening of the artistic vision of others is dependent upon the newfound ability within technology to restructure music on the basis of one’s preferences.

Arguably, through the compilation mix tape this ability already existed. However, through iTunes and downloading not only is music purchased in atomised ways, but is also consciously configured on the basis of products aimed at reinforcing the ego. The world revolves around a self with preferences that hoovers up and envelops plurality.

In other words, plurality exists only insofar as it can be appropriated by the ego. That others have Apple products does not matter, as they, too, are egos with value insofar as they are 'I's, making this reasoning a form of postmodern categorical imperative.

Dr Julian Baggini has recently written about the philosophical dangers of the new Apple smart watch. In particular, the gathering of data on what we eat, how much we exercise and so on gives rise to what he calls the «quantified self»³⁴. Data on what we do, learn and spend time on could lead to obsession and inward focus.

Moreover, going beyond Baggini, I think it could lead to compartmentalisation of the self, creating hierarchies between the compartments (the 'health' section of the self, the 'social media' section of the self, and so forth). Baggini writes, «The constant monitoring of our wellbeing also feeds the illusion that we can and should control what we can only influence»³⁵, but I would go further and state that rather than ironic 'mask-wearing,' the smart watch promotes control, which is characteristically metaphysical.

Another phenomenon that works in this same way is that of cookies. Until recently, Vattimo thought of the internet as facilitating weakening. Through political campaigns by media magnates, such as Berlusconi, he has lost faith in the ability to find emancipation from strong structures through

³⁴ Cfr. Baggini (2015).

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

the internet, but this is only because he has seen how power can be exerted on a Marxist conception of power, that is, from the top down and imposed. Expressing his concern about control in the media, Vattimo sees it as a possibility for those who own the media in a country to control the outcome of elections by causing the ‘immobility’ of the electorate who move within an information ‘bubble’ that the media outlets own³⁶.

It is still implied in Vattimo’s thought that the structure of the internet (or, better, its lack of structure) should enable the possibility of emancipation from metaphysics through weakening. However, cookies reinforce the strong sense of self by configuring adverts and preferences that give the appearance of the world being all about you and that you have successfully imposed your will upon the world, shaping it to your tastes.

Even more than with Apple technologies, this imposes a unity on the plurality, reducing the liberated metaphors back to the will of a singularity: the self. Not only have the internet and digital technologies reinvigorated the Enlightenment metaphysical ideal of a strong, sovereign self, but also it has revived the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘apparent’ worlds. It is customary to think of the digital (or ‘computer’) world as virtual reality (‘appearance’).

In the early 1990s the adjective ‘virtual’ was applied to all manner of computer games. Taking

³⁶ Vattimo (2007b), p. 48.

Sega as one example, a raft of games in the Virtua series (which referred to appearing in 3D, making a 'virtual' world), such as Virtua Fighter, Virtua Racing or Virtua Tennis indicated that the world through the screen was the 'virtual' one, which may be fun but is of a lesser value than the 'real' one. This was, though, before the internet.

We are now living in a time when we are encouraged to go online for practical reasons, such as internet banking, registering for all manner of things and to find out the best restaurant to eat at this evening.

More than this people are increasingly choosing to spend their leisure time online. Beyond this, breaking into a career is ever more dependent upon an online profile (such as a blog, Twitter account or a Facebook page); it is not good enough now to be the most innovative, rigorous or hardest working in your field; the whole world has to know about it, too. In other words, the 'real' world, the world with the most value is now online. Someone may be 'apparently' good at art, but if one 'really' wants to know who is the most successful in the art world then one would need to measure the comparable 'likes,' 'retweets' and 'links.'

Today who would be considered to be the most successful artist; the one with a 'physical' gallery opening of one hundred people, or the one with the online following of three thousand? The latter artist would have more chance for comment, relationship-building, commercial success and worldwide

appreciation with her audience. In terms of the characteristically metaphysical distinction between two worlds of value – real and apparent – the age of the internet is a continuation of this logic, of the raising up in value of one way of Being and the diminishing value of another.

A final factor to take into consideration is the revival of metaphysical ideas that have occurred through social media, particularly Facebook, arguably the most prevalent and successful form of social media. Firstly, the timeline which has been a central feature of Facebook creates a sense of linearity and progress, aspects of modernity. Vattimo may argue that as everyone has their own timeline, Facebook communicates local rationalities and perspectives on history. Nevertheless, in changes made to Facebook when the Timeline was introduced, this way of presenting oneself was forced onto users; what if one would prefer not to see one's life in terms of temporal progression, but in a snapshot or an idealised projection, or even – in Heideggerian terms – of an authentic Being-towards-death?

In conceiving everything through a linear conception of time, Facebook is making a judgement on the presentation of the self and the world that one is not allowed to contest (unless one abstains from joining Facebook, which is increasingly difficult), this is the kind of metaphysical move Vattimo deplors. Facebook also places the self at the centre of the

universe, linking to friends, interests and activities. One can search for a diverse range of things – friends, interests, places, qualifications and more besides – only to appropriate them to oneself.

On the one hand, all of the above and more (including religions, notably) become reduced to exchange value, as Vattimo argues. The highest values are devalued with the notable exception of the self, which is strengthened by the backdoor at the expense of everything else. Suddenly man is not ‘rolling from the centre towards X,’ as with the internet there is a locus to value again as the self is resurrected through fibre optics.

Social media thus creates the aesthetic that ‘more’ equal ‘better,’ where the more is an expression of, and reduced to, the self as presented through a world image. One feels the sensation of, and is perceived as, doing better if one has more friends and ‘likes.’ This repeats the logic of onto-theology, of omnipotence, omniscience and an insatiable desire for more. Genuine relationships and local rationalities (which might have a ‘less is more’ approach, or even not take quantity into account) are pushed aside in favour of the calculable. The same is true with Twitter with going viral and the amount ‘retweets.’

The content of the communication is overlooked in favour of coming out on top in the ‘attention economy.’ Being noticed is important because you feel you are important, which is attributable in part to the egoism (the Enlightenment metaphysic)

which is encouraged through the internet and social media. The effect of this is the highlighting of the metaphysic of the digital generation of the internet, a restatement of Descartes' Cogito as 'I link, therefore I am.'

Conclusion

In his work from the late 1970s through to at least the mid-1990s Vattimo argued that information and communications technology was liberating the world from metaphysical hierarchies pertaining not only to the world itself, but also from the metaphysical notion of the self in particular.

These technologies were bringing interpretations into conflict, showing them ever more to be the product of contingent, historical wills, exposing the metaphysical, Cartesian dream of absolute assurance to be a myth. To what, though, does this technological world give rise? While I am sure that Vattimo's *Übermensch* is possible as I imagine plenty of people act as disinterested, ironic mask-wearers, creating their life as a pastiche of styles in a way that avoids conflict.

However, what I have argued is that the very same technology is increasingly giving rise to a return of metaphysics, not only through reviving the distinction between the 'real' and 'apparent' worlds, but also through placing a strong sense of self (and,

one imagines, the hierarchies within it) at the centre of the universe once more. Apple technologies make the ego (the 'I') the means by which other interpretations are organised, such as the creative works of others in the order one wishes; there is something stronger, more important hierarchical (the 'I') that structure and appropriates the other interpretations so that the latter do not function as masks but as accidents modifying a substance.

Internet cookies do a similar thing, tailoring the real world (the internet, which is now of a higher value) around your individual preferences and interests. Other metaphysical traits, such as appropriation and calculation, are again brought back in through Facebook likes, retweets and the attention economy generated by the internet and the digital age.

Whereas Vattimo puts forward an irreversible ontology of decline in which the weakening of Being is an ongoing, never-ending process, the implications of the internet that I have drawn-out should at least pose a question to Vattimo's thesis.

Unlike various forms of fundamentalism around the globe which Vattimo has categorised as 'reactive nihilism' (retreating into pre-modern religious, nationalistic or ethnic groups after the death of God), the internet and the reassertion of the ego is something different as it takes the multiplicity unleashed by information and communications technology seriously but absorbs the multiplicity into the unity of the strong ego.

The will to power as art is returning in the age of the internet more in the Heideggerian sense of the use of Nietzsche's terminology, rather than Vattimo's, for the internet becomes a place in which one's representation of the world is put forward for assurance based on one's ego, and the internet duly obliges.

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