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GIANNI VATTIMO ON CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND THE MOVE FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

Abstract: Gianni Vattimo, the Italian philosopher and politician, has argued that the end of colonialism and imperialism and the rise of the society of mass communication have contributed to the emergence of the postmodern. Modernity's unilinear conception of history is no longer possible in the face of multiple cultures and subcultures coming to the microphone across countries in the West. This article considers this view in the light of the problematizing comments made by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek on the nature of culture - that it is something people do not take seriously and therefore people do not regard science as a culture. If science is apart from culture, then modernity can continue as the grand narrative of the increasing rationalisation of humankind as shown by the emancipating effects of science expressed through technology. Resources from Vattimo's broader philosophical programme are drawn upon to argue that not taking culture seriously is a postmodern condition and that science is cultural.

Key words: Vattimo; Žižek; plurality; hermeneutics; postmodernity

Introduction

Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936) is an Italian philosopher and politician who has been a professor of philosophy at the University of Turin. Working in the tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger, he is a philosopher of hermeneutics (the philosophy of interpretation), but one who situates it historically in the late-modern rather than as a meta-theory of interpretation. In the opening chapter to his 1992 book *The Transparent Society* (originally published as *La società trasparente*, 1989), Vattimo has the following to say about culture, communication, and the movement from modernity to postmodernity:

[The] giddy proliferation of communication as more and more subcultures “have their say” is the most obvious effect of the mass media. Together with the end, or at least radical transformation, of European imperialism, it is also the key to our society’s shift towards postmodernity.¹

The aims of this article are twofold. Firstly, it is expository to the degree that it draws attention to Vattimo’s views on the society of mass communication, largely neglected in secondary literature in favour of concentrating on his larger projects of “weak thought” and “hermeneutical nihilism.” The second principal aim of this article is to hold Vattimo’s above claim to critical scrutiny. More particularly, a short extract from the work *The Puppet and the Dwarf* by Slavoj Žižek will be drawn upon to question both to what extent “science” can be seen as a “culture,” and whether the proliferation of communication in the media (principally through television, radio and internet) from cultures and subcultures, linked inextricably with the transformation of imperialism, is central to the move towards postmodernity as Vattimo claims. Before this critique can occur, however, it is necessary to understand what is meant by “postmodernity” and also by extension, “modernity,” at least in Vattimo’s eyes, for these are highly contested terms.

The Modern and the Postmodern

Vattimo juxtaposes the modern and the postmodern by contrasting the values and assumptions associated with both of these terms. The modern, which began at “the end of the fifteenth century”² is associated with Enlightenment rationalism, and therefore with foundationalism. Descartes, the archetypal modern philosopher, sought to establish a certain base of knowledge on the thinking subject: *cogito ergo sum* is the most indubitable statement for an individual human subject, and it is upon this certainty that all other knowledge is founded. If one rational being can do this, then it must be universal for all rational persons. This is the logic of modernity. Modern thinkers, such as Descartes and Hume,

were interested in a range of philosophical problems, including the interaction between mind and body and induction (respectively). Nevertheless, Vattimo sees foundationalism and trust in rationality as characteristic of the modern. Foundationalism in matters pertaining to knowledge and reality also affects the modern's understanding of history and human life. The universal in ethics is epitomised by the work of Kant, particularly his idea of the categorical imperative. Universalism also affects history by making history monolithic and linear, as in the dialectic view of history in Hegel's thought, frequently commented on by Vattimo.³ Nevertheless, a general feature of modern thinkers is the assumption that history is teleological, that is, goal focussed and drawn to an end, a secularised interpretation of the Judeo-Christian eschatological legacy, particularly in Marx. A value which affects history and life more generally is the value of the modish; what is "new" supersedes what has gone before in virtue of its novelty: "modernity is the epoch in which simply being modern became a decisive value in itself,"⁴ a time in which the artist "came to be thought of as a creative genius."⁵

That which has created the most novelty in the modern age is science, with the numerous technological advances it has brought, from washing machines to computers, microsurgery to powered flight. Vattimo does not equate science with technology, but he does relate them very closely together, such as in the index to *The Transparent Society*, where "technology" is cross-referenced from "science," and some page numbers in the index under "science" pertain only to "technology."⁶ Although Vattimo refers to a "techno-scientific complex,"⁷ he does not completely reduce science to technology, seeing science in more abstract terms as well, as an ideal of rationality that has permeated the modern and has been integral to intellectual programs such as demythologisation.⁸ Technology is the product of practical science, which has a significant number of its roots in theoretical science. The foundationalist tendencies of modernity leant themselves to the development of theoretical science. Vattimo sees monotheism as "the condition in which nature can be conceived of from the unitary perspective of a physical science."⁹ Another factor in the growth of science is its mathematical character. The latter factor relates to the characteristic of science to look for "certainty," which is another feature of modernity (think of Descartes' search for the "indubitable" which led him to the *Cogito*). In accordance with the foundationalist tendencies of modernity, theoretical science has universalised the scope and applicability of its empirical methods, through Positivism, to reduce all meaning to atomic facts and logical connectors. The most aggressive form this took was the Logical Positivism of the Vienna Circle in the first half of the twentieth century.

“If the ‘modern’ placed a pronounced stress on the homogeneity of thought, culture and practice,” writes Guarino in his overture to Vattimo’s thought, “the postmodern response has been to celebrate discontinuity and pluralism.”¹⁰ Whereas the modern sees the human in terms of foundationalism, whether Cartesian and Kantian rational subjects, or in terms of the biological definition of the human, postmodernity accounts for “essential dimensions of actual historical life such as our embeddedness in determinate societies, cultures and practices, our traditioned and situated reason, our contextualised knowledge.”¹¹ As a result, “postmodernity exhumes from Enlightenment obsequies notions such as alterity and difference, rupture and breach.”¹²

History as Multivalent, and the Breakdown of the Idea of Progress

According to Vattimo, “modernity ends when – for a number of reasons – it no longer seems possible to regard history as unilinear,”¹³ and this is arguably the most important cultural factor to which Vattimo draws attention to support his interpretation of the late modern as a time in which strong structures are weakened. History loses its unilinear character in three principal ways: theoretically, demographically, and through the rise of the society of generalised communication. These points will be explained in turn, drawing in particular on his clear exposition of these ideas in the opening chapter of his work *The Transparent Society*.

For the first point, concerning the loss of a theoretical unilinear notion of history, Vattimo turns to the philosophy of history of Walter Benjamin, especially his 1938 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Vattimo interprets Benjamin as maintaining that this unilinear history “is a representation of the past constructed by dominant groups and social classes.¹⁴ The powerful – kings, emperors, nobles – make history, whereas the poor, the defeated, the disenfranchised do not get a chance to do so. “In every era,” writes Benjamin in his sixth thesis on the philosophy of history, “the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it,” for history too easily becomes “a tool of the ruling classes.”¹⁵ Vattimo acknowledges here that Benjamin was speaking in a then nascent tradition, “along a path cleared [...] by Marx and Nietzsche,”¹⁶ of seeing history as constructed, that it was not impartial but interested, and this included unilinear history, too. As unilinear history is selective and power-laden, it is “illusory to think that there exists a supreme or comprehensive viewpoint capable of unifying all others.”¹⁷ Such a realisation has profound implications for the idea of progress, for “if human events do not make up a unilinear continuum, then one cannot regard them as proceeding towards an end.”¹⁸ This implication applies to sacred eschatology, as much as to its secularised cousin, such as Marxist hopes of world revolution and the realisation of

the classless society. Other teleological, unilinear philosophies of history also fall prey to this criticism, not least Hegel's, explicitly named by Vattimo.¹⁹ What is being rejected by Vattimo here is Hegel's dialectical notion of history, of the concept of *Aufhebung*. History, on this view, is an escalating, dialectical process of conservation and destruction, of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Conceived religiously, although there is destruction and weakening of an absolute through its engagement with history, the absolute's "eventual coincidence with the subject makes it possible to speak of a definitive attainment of the truth" for Hegel.²⁰ In conceiving of history as plural, Vattimo is against anything "definitive," of there being a single truth to grasp either of, or in, history. If there is no single end, there is also no single centre, or fulcrum, to history, including the coming of Christ.²¹

The Roles of Culture and Communication in the Advent of the Postmodern

Of "greater magnitude" for changing attitudes towards the unilinear conception of history, writes Vattimo, than the merely theoretical, is demographical change.²² In the West, in modern Europe where this notion of history has flourished, "the so-called 'primitive' peoples colonised by Europeans...have rebelled, making a unilinear and centralised history *de facto* problematic."²³ Vattimo does not expand much on this point, but it is a significant one. Demographic changes due to mass immigration have led to greater realisation of other histories, other ways of thinking. The rebellion of previously ruled peoples is a common theme in history. What prevents the rebellion of people following the death of Alexander, or the fall of Rome, or in the Reformation, or after the defeat of Napoleon from being postmodern is that they were not rebelling in the age of mass communication, a point which shall be elaborated on below. Of course, a hallmark of the Reformation is the importance of the printed word. Nevertheless, it still did not give anywhere as much capability to express, and preserve, an alternative viewpoint to as many people as exists today with radio, television and – mostly significantly – the internet. In the United Kingdom there is "Black History Month," for instance, and internationally there is "Gay Pride Week." Public recognition of the link between history and identity in this fashion could be seen as evidence for the weakening of belief in a unilinear conception of history.

The other "decisive factor in both the dissolution of the idea of history and the end of modernity is the advent of the society of communication."²⁴ Vattimo has very clear ideas about what this entails, for what he is proposing is: "(a) that the mass media play a decisive role in the birth of a postmodern society; (b) that they do not make this postmodern more 'transparent', but more complex, even chaotic; and

finally (c) that it is in precisely this relative 'chaos' that our hopes for emancipation lie."²⁵ Point "c" will not be explored here. The first and second points, however, require some immediate explanation. By "mass communication," Vattimo meant "newspapers, radio, television, what is now called telematics."²⁶ *The Transparent Society* was written just before the introduction of the internet for consumers, but what Vattimo has to say about mass communication applies even more strongly now in light of the effects of widespread internet use in the West. If alternative television and radio stations gave voice to more groups, such as "The God Channel" for Christians and the "Sy-Fy" channel for those whose worldview includes the possibility of extra-terrestrials, and different news stations for different countries with their own ideals, such as CNN in America, Al-Jazeera for Arabian countries (although accessible elsewhere, too), Twitter, Facebook, blogs and forums go beyond groups to give any individual a way to express their worldview.

"Recent decades in the United States," Vattimo writes, "have seen minorities of every kind take to the microphone." As a result, this "apparently irresistible pluralisation renders any unilinear view of the world and history impossible."²⁷ Here the points about the end of imperialism (or at least its transformation), the end of colonialism (Vattimo often mentions this together with the end, or transformation, of imperialism, seemingly using the terms interchangeably despite their generally accepted terminological differences²⁸), and the rise of the society of mass communication come together. Since the end of the Second World War, people from colonies and former colonies have moved to countries such as Britain, to fill labour shortages immediately after the war, to find a better way of life, to be with relatives and – in more recent decades – to seek asylum.²⁹ Concurrently, communications technology developed significantly. With the rise of multiple radio stations, television channels and, a generation later, the advent of the internet, previously marginalised cultures and subcultures have begun to have a voice. Vattimo does overstate his case, and there have been studies to show that in places such as Canada, ethnic minorities have been invisible, stereotyped, and tokenised in the media.³⁰ It is interesting that Vattimo himself provides no concrete examples of the liberating effect of communications for minorities. Moreover, he talks about the end of imperialism, but praises the effect of communications in America. Nevertheless, communications technology such as radio have been used by minority ethnic groups and political movements, such as feminists, in places such as Norway throughout the 1980s to some effect, although this is another question about the extent to which the use of technology by such groups had an impact on the cultural consciousness of society at large. Although it is easy to overstate the "democratisation" of the media through the internet,

social media, blogging, web-site design, trending and focus groups based on internet data have enabled minorities with access to communications (which is a larger, separate, but related issue of importance beyond the scope of this article) to express their beliefs and values. Radio stations and music video channels have also given a voice to the marginalised, through protest singers such as Phil Ochs in the 1960s, to revealing to a far wider audience than would have been possible without communications technology sub-cultures angry at the status quo, such as the early rap group Public Enemy in the 1980s. Unlike, say, the use of radio by minority groups in the 1980s in Norway,³¹ these artists and bands did garner a much larger public audience and therefore may exemplify better the kind of point Vattimo has been trying to make.

A Critique of Vattimo on Culture and Communication

It is worth placing Vattimo's understanding of the relationship between culture, communication, the end of colonialism and imperialism, and the nature of reality under scrutiny. To recap, Vattimo sees the end of colonialism and imperialism and the rise of the society of mass communication as allowing "cultures and subcultures of all sorts" to step "into the limelight of public opinion."³² The "apparently irresistible pluralisation" of "cultural universes" in the information market in the West "renders any unilinear view of the world and history impossible."³³ This view of the effect of the culture of mass communication is in contrast, as Vattimo realises,³⁴ with the views of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Orwell on the subject, for these three thinkers predicted that homogenisation of society would be the result. One may argue whether the difference between these three thinkers and Vattimo on the subject need be put in this "either/or" fashion, for are not the plurality of voices on the internet curiously homogenous? Perhaps formally, stylistically this may be the case, for there is the common internet language of terms such as "lol" (laugh out loud), "imo" (in my opinion). However, the content of views certainly does vary significantly. On the "mainstream" BBC website, coverage of Prince Philip's return from hospital over Christmas 2011 involved reports of the length of his stay, the state of his health, and his demeanour when leaving hospital.³⁵ By contrast, the David Icke Forum took the mainstream news headline of the prince's health and analysed it, trying to decode secret messages concerning conspiracy theories and hidden history.³⁶

What is assumed by Vattimo, though, is that this plurality of messages coming from an infinitely plural number of cultures (although, arguably with the internet, subjectivities), has a "dissolving" power in the sense of dissolving the "unilinear view of the world and history" of modernity. If anything, Vattimo is reducing "world" and "history" to culture, and then

drowning it in its own media-conveyed plurality. The work of Slavoj Žižek may provide a useful opposing view in order to further the discussion on how far plurality has a dissolving power. Consider the following quotation from Žižek's 2003 book *The Puppet and the Dwarf*:

What is a cultural lifestyle, if not the fact that, although we don't believe in Santa Claus, there is a Christmas tree in every house, and even in public places, every December? Perhaps, then, the 'nonfundamentalist' notion of 'culture' is the name for all those things we practice without really believing in them, without 'taking them seriously'. Is this not also why science is not part of this notion of culture—it is all too real? And is this also not why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as 'barbarians,' as anticultural, as a threat to culture—they dare to take their beliefs seriously?³⁷

There are two issues from this quotation which may have consequences for Vattimo's argument. The first concerns the extent to which we take "cultures" seriously in the first place. The second issue is whether science is considered a culture. Each of these issues will be dealt with in turn.

If, as Žižek argues, cultures are not taken seriously, then to what extent will media-enabled saturation of them dissolve weaken the sense of any unilinear view of history as Vattimo assumes? Žižek does not really argue for his position, but the possibility that some people think in this way is enough to warrant questioning Vattimo's equally sweeping assumption. Although it is clear that the society of mass communication gives a voice to an infinite number of conflicting viewpoints, it is another question of whether anybody is listening to this plurality of opinions and more importantly how they are interpreting this variety; could not some people block out or see as irrelevant, or even reject the plurality around them, due to the conviction they have in the truth of their own beliefs? The example Žižek provides is "fundamentalism," but could this not be broadened out to anybody who believes in the truth of their worldview? Many religious people believe in the truth of their faith but are not "fundamentalists" in the pejorative sense of the term. For all Vattimo is interested in hermeneutics, he is not so much concerned with the depth of interpretation, of the attitude towards the plurality of interpretations, but with the age-old problem of the "one and the many": unilinear history of modernity and the many histories communicated through technology in the late-modern time period. In his book *Beyond Interpretation*, at one point he is looking for archetypal expressions of the hermeneutic position in the history of Western thought, and he cites Aristotle's *to on léghetai pollachôs* (Being is said in many ways).³⁸ Aristotle's phrase is insufficient for Vattimo because of Being's relation to substance, as well as its metaphysical character: the many inhere in the one, or the many ways are

once-for-all time (respectively).³⁹ Hermeneutics, by contrast, involves reality being constituted by many interpretations without one substratum and/or common core, as well as being contingent and historical. The issue, then, for Vattimo is not reception, but the relationship between unilinear history and the many stories of late-modernity, between the once-for-all nature of metaphysics and fact on the one hand and the contingency of “becoming” of interpretation on the other.

The search for contingency and historicity is why Vattimo prefers the doctrine of *kenosis* to the thought of Aristotle when looking back into the history of Western thought for an archetype of hermeneutics. *Kenosis* is a theological concept appropriated by Vattimo for philosophical purposes. Normally, it refers to a passage in Philippians chapter 2 in which God empties his power to be incarnated in the person of Jesus, to live and to die, then be resurrected in glory. Vattimo sees *kenosis* as a message communicated from the time of Jesus to the present day of God speaking to his prophets in various ways (*multifariam multisque modis olim loquens Deus patribus in prophetis*), foreshadowing the plurality of the late-modern,⁴⁰ and of God announcing that humans will not be servants, but friends.⁴¹ The effect of this message passed down, re-interpreted and applied through history is a message of weakening, of secularisation which Vattimo sees as both the nature and fulfilment of Christianity. Secularisation expresses itself through the reduction of strong structures; if one is God’s friend, not servant, ecclesiastical institutions that demand complete obedience are, in Vattimo’s view, out of sync with the charitable message of the gospel. Vattimo does not see *kenosis* and charity’s relevance as limited to the ecclesiastical domain due to the Nietzschean notion of the death of God. The death of God means a lot of different things for Vattimo and he conflates these different interpretations. In an interview in the collection of essays called *After the Death of God*, Vattimo links the term to the death of Christ (and is therefore linked to *kenosis*), but also to the “chemical” analysis of truth in Nietzsche’s book *Human all too Human*.⁴² When the value of truth is radicalised, it dissolves itself, as shown in the death of God – God, representative of truth, is discovered to be a lie. This is an example of finding a way out of modernity, for truth and foundations, important concepts in modernity, are not overcome – for this would be to repeat modernity – but dissolved.⁴³ “If God is dead,” Vattimo writes, “there are no meanings or values that transcend the process,”⁴⁴ leaving no hierarchy of values – everything is reduced to “exchange-value.”⁴⁵ Nihilism occurs because “even the idea of a true basis is a lie that is ripped away by the unmasking.”⁴⁶ As Vattimo sees Nietzsche’s proclamation of the “death of God” as symbolic of the death of all strong truth claims, then the message of *kenosis* – of the humbling of God until death, of his call for friendship and of communicating to people in many

ways – applies to all *pensiero forte* (strong thought). Returning to Žižek's quotation, Vattimo has, then, a way to counter his objection, for although one may (in terms of logical possibility) distinguish between culture and something one "takes seriously," Vattimo believes one should not take any belief system seriously if by "seriously" one means in a strong, exclusionary sense. Ironically, Vattimo is similar to Žižek in the sense that he would be against those fundamentalists who hold their views strongly and take them seriously, although Vattimo grounds his opinion in the history of the message of weakening he sees in the gospel, encapsulated in the idea of *kenosis*.

Moving on to the second issue which is taken from Žižek's quotation, what if science is generally regarded, at least in the West, as set apart from "culture"? Ironically, then the enabling factor of the dissemination of cultures – the technological advances which have propelled the rise of the society of mass communication – are exempt from their dissolving power. Paradoxically, then, Vattimo's argument contributes to what Lyotard calls a "grand narrative," in this case of the progress of science. At root, Vattimo's argument seems like a ringing endorsement of the increasing power of science to set people free, in this case liberating voices to be heard by the masses. This link between rationality (as expressed in the designing, making and propagating of tools of mass communication such as the radio, television and the internet) and emancipation has a strongly "modern" ring about it, having shades of philosophers as varied as Hegel, Simmel⁴⁷ and the Enlightenment tradition's current re-constructor, Habermas. However, Vattimo tries to show how the constant progress in technology undermines such a grand narrative of progress by invoking the ideas of Arnold Gehlen. For Gehlen, progress empties itself out by becoming "routine." For example, if a car company calls each one of its new cars the best driving machine money can buy, it devalues the notion of "best" when the next car comes out. Moreover, progress becomes expected, and to make money to sustain liberal capitalism, frequent and necessary.⁴⁸ Against this view, given how popular even small technological advancements are (different generations of mobile phones, for instance) and how the general attitude of people in the West towards them is of progress ("My new phone is better than my old one") the grand narrative of the progress of science and technology seems alive and well.

Vattimo would not agree with being interpreted as inadvertently supporting the grand narrative of the progress of science and technology on both Nietzschean and Heideggerian grounds. On Vattimo's reading of the death of God, science would be another "truth" which has been "dissolved" insofar as it is another expression of absolute truth, and "even the idea of a true basis is a lie that is ripped away by the unmasking."⁴⁹ Vattimo is keen on mentioning the Nietzschean phrase "there are no facts,

only interpretations,"⁵⁰ and scientific "facts" are not exempt from being seen as interpretations. The Heideggerian argument for the "cultural" interpretation of science is more complex, but it is necessary to state it here. More precisely, the argument to present is a Vattimian interpretation of Heidegger on technology. Most of the following exposition is taken from "The Question Concerning Technology,"⁵¹ although Vattimo also draws upon Heidegger's *Identity and Difference*.⁵² For Heidegger, the essence of technology is not something technological. It is more than just a means, but a way of revealing. The essence of something is not something static, for it comes from *wesen*, to "endure," to "come into presence." Moreover, the ancient Greek etymology of *techné*, with its conjunction with *episteme*, emphasises its role in knowing, revealing. More than just a means, an instrument, it will be shown why technology, modern technology in particular, is a revealing. Heidegger contrasts the ways of revealing in ancient and modern technology. Ancient technology's way of revealing is in accordance with *physis*, the nature's way of revealing. For example, a flower would reveal its scent and colour through the changing of the seasons. By contrast, modern technology reveals in a way which is a *herausfordern*, a "challenging." The latter is a demanding, a bringing out of nature. An example makes this clearer. A windmill is ancient technology, and, left to the wind, would produce energy. Modern coal mining, though, extracts the coal from the ground in a way which it would not do so if the coal was left to its own devices. This challenging is not an end in itself, but is an expediting, turning the yield to something else. The coal would power homes and factories, for instance. If the coal is not yet needed, it is stored, as what Heidegger calls "standing reserve"; it is ready for use and can no longer be seen as an object. Modern technology turns all of nature into standing reserve. Standing in reserve is a change of essence of an object. As everything in the age of modern technology is standing in reserve, it can no longer be seen as it was. An airplane cannot be seen as a mere object on a runway when one has seen it in flight; it is always standing in reserve for flying. Similarly, the Rhine is no longer a river, but an energy source for hydroelectricity. Even with tourism, one cannot see it as merely an object of nature, but a source of income from tourism. The "trend" of the interlocking things on standing reserve is called by Heidegger, *Ge-Stell* ("enframing"). This is the process of modern technology in its determination, ordering and challenging, the direction in which it is heading. *Ge-Stell* is a type of revealing which challenges, orders and determines things into standing reserve. It would be wrong to think of human beings themselves as being the ultimate cause of *Ge-Stell*. Rather, humans are challenged to challenge in turn. If the logger in the wood does not use the same technology as his grandfather, it is because he has been challenged by factors such as needing to earn a living wage, or

the demand for paper, to use modern technology that challenges. Man himself, then, is standing reserve. Enframing is revealing destiny, Heidegger believes. Freedom for man lies in openness to its unconcealment, if "he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens, though not one who simply obeys."⁵³ Insofar as enframing is part of destiny, as Heidegger would have it, man is not in danger. However, enframing, although a mode of revealing, ironically restricts other modes of revealing, of *poiesis*. By challenging, modern technology eliminates *physis*, for instance. In blocking other ways of sending/destining, enframing restricts man's freedom.

Ge-Stell, along with the death of God, for Vattimo constitutes the culminating point of the history of metaphysics. This is not the place to get side-tracked into a lengthy exposition of Vattimo's interpretation of Heidegger (a good exposition can be found in Barbiero's essay on Vattimo⁵⁴), but something should be said by way of explanation of how, contrary to the usual reading of Heidegger, Vattimo interprets him nihilistically. From the time of the Greeks onwards, Heidegger thought, Being has been unconcealed through historical openings, events, which act as horizons into which things are given; for a time, Heidegger thought this was effected through art.⁵⁵ This contrasts with the universal, permanent nature of the Kantian transcendental structures, for these horizons are historical and irruptive. Returning to *Ge-Stell*, it is "the place where metaphysics reaches its climactic moment and its highest and most complete unfolding."⁵⁶ In this enframing, man and Being "lose their metaphysical qualities"⁵⁷ for everything is challenged and therefore reduced to exchange-value as standing reserve. This is "not merely the demonic import of technology," but it,

is, instead, precisely in its ambiguity, the flash of *Er-eignis*, of the event of Being as the opening of a realm of oscillation in which the giving of itself of "something as something," the "self-appropriating" of entities each in its own definiteness, happens only at the price of a permanent transappropriation.⁵⁸

A hierarchy of values disappears when everything is equally challenged, and Being begins to show itself as eventual and contingent, not permanent and universal. Therefore, there are no foundations to be built upon, whether these be explicitly metaphysical (such as the Aristotelian division of nature), religious (God as behind everything), or scientific (dividing nature again, but this time "physically," although such a division is "metaphysical" in Vattimo's eyes insofar as it divides for all time). What is imperative to mention is that Vattimo brings Heidegger up-to-date by stating that *Ge-Stell* occurs through communications technology. This statement should not be taken in a literal sense that *Ge-Stell* occurs through the sum total of communications technology, but through the

play of images that they present. When Vattimo wrote *The Transparent Society* in the late nineteen-eighties he was thinking about satellite television and the radio, but his argument applies even more in the age of the internet. In a world of the irreducible plurality of images and voices made possible through communications technology, images “constructed and verified by science”⁵⁹ (which again underscores how, against thinkers such as Heidegger and Andrew Feenberg, Vattimo would appear to regard technology as applied science) breaks down any unilinear view of history or hierarchy of values.

Ultimately, from these conclusions drawn by Vattimo, “we must straightforwardly thrust hermeneutics toward its proper fulfilment in nihilism.”⁶⁰ In other words, thinking takes place in a tradition and cannot be grounded in any universal, underlying foundation.⁶¹ Science, like religion and any other “strong” claim, is reduced to “exchange-value”; it, too, should not be taken “seriously” insofar as “seriously” means “strongly.” If “science” is taken in its theoretical sense, it is “cultural” and is just another interpretation alongside all the others conveyed in the society of mass communication. It is an irony that science as a set of beliefs, truths or laws is consumed by its own practical application in technology, mirroring the “death of God” in Nietzsche’s thought, in which God (a term which represents “truth” in its strong sense) is consumed by the religious duty to be truthful. If science is taken seriously, it is through not having read the signs of the times in seeing it as one interpretation of the world alongside others. Although Žižek poses the question of whether science is apart from culture, ultimately, drawing upon resources within Vattimo’s own broader philosophy (it is another matter, beyond the scope of this paper, whether these are valid), it is cultural.

Conclusion

Modernity, Vattimo thinks, is characterised primarily by a unilinear history, with its attendant foundationalism and universalising tendencies. The end of history, and the beginning of the postmodern experience, occurs, according to Vattimo, when in the late-modern time of the twentieth century the combination of the end of colonialism and rise of the society of mass communication in the West has dissolved the notions of a unilinear history and a single truth. Communications technology (in the sense of radio, television, and internet) have allowed an array of cultures and subcultures to come to the microphones, forums and cable television channels to give their opinion on issues, often opposing that given in the mainstream media.

As has been shown, Vattimo’s argument as it is presented in this form is very vulnerable, especially to a contrarian in the history of ideas such as Žižek. As soon as one starts to problematize the notion of culture, then

Vattimo's argument requires greater depth to support it. Žižek, in questioning whether cultures are valued or not, draws attention to a relative weakness in Vattimo's philosophy of hermeneutics: in describing the move from the modern to the postmodern, Vattimo is not so much interested in how people interpret plurality, but whether there is plurality vis-à-vis singularity. Moreover, if science is not a "culture," a possibility Žižek raises, then Vattimo's argument reads for an unexpected, and convincing, extension of the "modern" grand-narrative of the continuing progress of reason through the emancipatory effects of science as seen in the power of modern communications technology to offer a platform for hitherto marginalised voices.

There are, however, resources in Vattimo's writings to get around these problems. Firstly, Vattimo follows Gadamer and Heidegger in situating hermeneutics historically as he is explicitly against hermeneutics as a meta-theory of interpretation. In situating hermeneutics historically, his work from the last twenty years has involved him reinterpreting the faith of his youth, which he thought he had abandoned, in terms of a message of the *kenosis* of God, of weakening, which leads to the dissolution of strong structures. This is, Vattimo is at pains to say, a transcription of the Heideggerian notion of the weakening of Being, which in turn is nothing but the same message as the Nietzschean "death of God." All three are ways of expressing the *koine* of hermeneutics in the late-modern, as the basis for *pensiero debole* (weak thought). Tradition cannot be overcome, for this would be to repeat modernity, but twisted in order to weaken in. Culture, then, should not be taken "seriously" if by this is meant "strongly," for to take culture seriously would be to act as if the death of God had not occurred, as if one had not heard the message of *kenosis*. Taking culture lightly, not seriously, then, is a feature of the postmodern experience. For those who have read the "signs of the times," the effect of receiving the plurality of messages from cultures and subcultures in the media would be a weakening of the modern, unilinear view of history and reality. Crucially for Vattimo, science is included as a culture, for it is merely a culmination of metaphysics as shown in the enframing of the world through its product, the domination of technology. Science is another expression of the metaphysical tendency towards foundationalism. While Vattimo can deploy these resources to overcome problems concerning the reception of culture in the late-modern and the status of science in relation to culture, a question remains how Vattimo's societal-cultural argument on the basis of communications technology and post-colonialism relates to his deeper, more philosophical reflections on Nietzsche and Heidegger; can somebody read the signs of the times in a postmodern sense due to the plurality of messages, or only as a result?

Notes:

- ¹ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, 2.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- ⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 75.
- ¹⁰ Thomas Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 6.
- ¹¹ Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, 6.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹³ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 2.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 247.
- ¹⁶ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 3.
- ¹⁷ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 3.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ²⁰ Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), 53.
- ²¹ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 3.
- ²² Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 4.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.
- ²⁸ For Vattimo using "imperialism" and "colonialism" together, see Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 4-5, 31-32. For the terms having different meanings, even if they are often used interchangeably, see Carolyn Gallaher, Carl Dahlman, Mary Gilmartin, Alison Mountz, Peter Shirlow, *Key Concepts in Political Geography* (London: Sage 2009), 115-116.
- ²⁹ BBC website: Short History of Immigration, accessed 05/04/12: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/in_depth/uk/2002/race/short_history_of_immigration.stm
- ³⁰ AugieFleras, "'Please Adjust Your Set': Media and Minorities in a Multicultural Society," in *Communications in Canadian Society*, 4th Edition, 1995, accessed 31/12/11. http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/articles/diversity/media_minorities.cfm

- ³¹ S. Ananthkrishnan, "Freedom in the Air: Community Radio and Minorities in Norway," *Economic and Political Weekly* 22:36/37 (September 5-12 1987): 1547-1552.
- ³² Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 5.
- ³³ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 6.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ³⁵ "BBC News article", accessed 27/12/11, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-16337357>
- ³⁶ "David Icke Forum", accessed 27/12/11, <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?p=1060468790&highlight=prince+philip#post1060468790>
- ³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2003), 7.
- ³⁸ Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 46.
- ³⁹ Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 47.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁴¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 55.
- ⁴² Gianni Vattimo, "A Prayer for Silence," in *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 89-90.
- ⁴³ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. John Snyder (Cambridge: Polity, 1988a), 167.
- ⁴⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 156.
- ⁴⁵ Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 21.
- ⁴⁶ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 156.
- ⁴⁷ Frédéric Vandenberghe, *A Philosophical History of German Sociology*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 83.
- ⁴⁸ Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 102-103.
- ⁴⁹ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 156.
- ⁵⁰ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 81.
- ⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2011).
- ⁵² Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
- ⁵³ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 230.
- ⁵⁴ Daniel Barbiero, "A Weakness for Heidegger: The German Root of Il Pensiero Debole," *New German Critique* 55 (1992): 159-172.
- ⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2011), 130-131.
- ⁵⁶ Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 172.
- ⁵⁷ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 116.
- ⁵⁸ Gianni Vattimo, "Towards an Ontology of Decline," in *Recoding Metaphysics*, ed. Giovanna Borradori, trans. Barbara Spackman (Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 1988b), 72.

⁵⁹ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 16.

⁶⁰ Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, 29.

⁶¹ Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, 29-30.

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