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The Code of Transparency



The Code of Things SGT Pablo Piedra | Photo: Emmanuel Alloa

The demand for more transparency is heard in all aspects of society, but what lies behind this term? For Emmanuel Alloa it carries an inherent paradox of being a codeless code of sorts.

Making Oneself Transparent

In 1913, the Futurist Italian poet

Aldo Palazzeschi wrote a small poem, titled *La casina di cristallo*, The little crystal house. In translation, it reads the following:

"I dream of a little crystal house...
 A house every common mortal
 could possess,
 which would have nothing in particular,
 but which would be all transparent,
 made of crystal...
 You would see me eating,
 you would see me when I sleep,
 uncover my dreams;
 you would see me defecating,
 you would see me changing my shirt."

As if he were transposing Palazzeschi's *Casina di cristallo* into steel and glass, American architect Philip Johnson built such transparent building with his *Glass House*, a landmark in modern architecture which can still be seen today in New Canaan, Connecticut. For the artistic and political avant-gardes of the early 20th century, transparency yielded the promise of a different society, which would abrogate the traditional hierarchies and eliminate secretive practices behind closed doors. Walter Benjamin, arguably still one of the most important thinkers about media, old and new, expressed this idea in the following, opinionated terms: "To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence", adding that it involves "a moral exhibitionism we badly need. Discretion concerning one's own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petit-bourgeois parvenus".

What still seemed a provocative idea in 1929, belonging to the radical avant-gardes which had to rebuke the rest of society, has definitely lost its taste of scandal today. Disclosing one's intimate life and inner thoughts has nothing revolutionary anymore, rather, it has become an unescapable necessity in an age which is increasingly taking the form of an age of confession. The contemporary age has taken the very notion of confession a step further, disentangling it from any religious dimension. It is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in the late 18th century, introduced this idea in his *Confessions*, where the role of the divine is taken over by society: "In the enterprise I have made to show myself entirely to the public, nothing of me must remain obscure or hidden for it; it must incessantly maintain myself under their eyes [...] I would like to be able, in some fashion, to make my soul transparent in the eyes of the reader, and for that reason I strive to show it to her from every point of view, to cast light upon it through the every day, so that no movement takes place within it that she does not perceive, in order for her to be able to judge herself the principle producing them". Nothing is to remain hidden from the public, whatever intimate, dark and unpleasant it may be; by fully opening one's heart, Rousseau suggests, falsity and disguise are deemed to disappear. While societal codes produce a social masquerade that remove us from ourselves, total transparency will reconnect us with our authentic being.

A Post-Ideological Society?

Significantly, the demand for more transparency which is voiced so largely today does not stop at the level of the individual, but has come to embrace society as such. In parallel to the rise of self-transparency as one of the key features of modern subjectivity, transparency is modernity's code for the promise of an unhindered permeability of persons, goods and ideas. Far of being restricted to individuals, transparency so it seems has to permeate all aspects of society in order to fulfil its ambitions. While the word itself is very old (it actually reaches back to Aristotelian philosophy), only recently has it become a centerpiece in public discourse. Indeed, these last years have seen 'transparency' becoming a highly fashionable catchword, and demands for more transparency have been voiced in domains as diverse as corporate or public administration, financial transactions, scientific research, sports contests, technology or media. Alongside with authenticity, it is known to be the most used word in CEO's annual speeches. Initially associated with the struggles from civil society for more openness at the level of top-end governance (one might think of the Wikileaks motto: "privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful"!), as by now, it largely infuses the discourses of most public and private organizations (Even before the Wikileaks scandals and the revelations by Edward Snowden, US President Barack Obama made the increase of transparency a linchpin of his presidency, with the introduction of initiatives such as the *Open Government Initiative* which was meant to increase the accountability of public administration).

Evidence suggests that transparency risen to the status of a kind of post-ideological norm in contemporary moral discourses, as in fact one would search in vain for advocates struggling for an overall increase in 'opacity'. Transparency is not only a concept that is generally considered neutral and non-partisan, hence its availability for all sorts of claims and demands, but that it is also seen as unconditionally positive. Like a windowpane whose glare decreases the more translucent it becomes, the notion of transparency signals a native non-reflectiveness, claiming for itself that there is nothing here to be seen. The perfectly transparent window is a window which completely diverts the attention from itself: the less we see the windowpane, there more we see through it. But if seeing through is synonymous with overlooking, it can easily be understood why transparency is never reflected in its own right.

The Codeless Code

It appears as a bizarre irony of history that the new overall moral code of transparency – whether for individuals or for corporate organizations required to publish regular transparency reports – began as a struggle against any kind of coding. Codes are generally rules that draw a dividing line between those who know their grammar and those who don't. As such, they tend to protect interests and cement privileges. Whether the 18th century Enlightenment philosophers or the early 20th century modernists – the demand for openness was historically part of a struggle against secrecy and transactions behind closed doors. Today, *open source initiatives* and *open data governance* continue this legacy, by fighting concealed decision-making, stealth surveillance and other types of non-reciprocal data exchange. Yet, it may be discussed to what extent such overall demand for transparency can be seen as a means of critique.

As a matter of fact, a strange inversion has taken place here: while critique was traditionally seen as an endeavor for decrypting what some preferred not to make accessible to everyone (the famous *arcana imperii*), today the struggle for total transparency seems to coincide, for a large part, in a rejection of any type of deciphering industry: the very necessity of decoding seems to be a relic of the past, in times where an irrepressible desire sprawls for an unmediated reality. Ultimately, the open source society is meant to abolish the very idea of coding and hence of the duality. The large success of realism in film and in philosophy can be seen as a symptom for a more immediate, literal access to things.

Although this seems to be a recent phenomenon, it has its antecedents. Indeed, this anti-decoding attitude was already to be found in some of the otherwise so luminous pages of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* from 1966 which anticipated so many later developments:

"Once upon a time (say, for Dante), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to design works of art so that they might be experienced on several levels. Now it is not. It reinforces the principle of redundancy that is the principal affliction of modern life. Once upon a time (a time when high art was scarce), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art. Now it is not. [...] Transparency is the highest, most liberating value in art - and in criticism - today. Transparency means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."

In this passage, Susan Sontag already formulates what was to become the new imperative, the new code of conduct – with its inherent paradox of being a *codeless code* of sorts. Following the line from this early anticipation of anti-interpretationism through the actual momentum of what is known as “new realism”, it would be worth asking oneself what this dream of a state where the things coincide with their meaning tells us about late modernity. Not least among transparency’s inborn promises, so it seems, is that of effectively and lastingly conjuring the spectres of redundancy.



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December 2015*

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