Introduction: making transparency visible[1]

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Before it is a physical fact, a verifiable quality of anything that allows light to pass through, transparency is nowadays a "destination". It is invested with moral forces, and on it depend the most sophisticated democratic ambitions and the most apocalyptic technological nightmares. Transparency is required or repudiated, found to be either insufficient or excessive, and it is said that it can illuminate the truth of objects as much as it can obfuscate it. There is, however, a small but non-negligible chance that transparency might simply be one of the many masks of the opaque, a final approximation to matter, as Thomas Mann seems to point out in the sublime passage of *A Montanha Mágica* [The Magic Mountain] (*Der Zauberberg*, 1924) in which the protagonist is shown x-ray images of his own hand: "And thus Hans Castorp saw what he expected, but what is in fact not permitted to man to see, and what he never thought he would be allowed to see: he looked into his own grave. (...) The flesh, which his being had become, was disintegrated, annihilated, reduced to a thin mist, and within it hovered, dark and adrift, the finely turned bones of his right hand, bearing, on the joint of his ring finger, the seal ring he had inherited from his grandfather" (2009, 250). As is often the case in this novel by Mann, full visibility threatens to amount to no more than this: a paring down to the bone and the inorganic, confronting us with the limits of the visible and — perhaps not by chance — of the human. Through the x-ray technique, Hans Castorp becomes aware of the fact that within his body a corpse awaits; the question is whether such "awareness" might undermine the secret and the negativity that are constitutive of the theatrical *scene* of human life, i.e., a productive forgetfulness that makes living possible. In the

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[1] This Introduction was originally written in Portuguese and cites several Portuguese translations of works written in other languages. Quotations from these sources were translated into English for the purpose of the English version of this Introduction. All in-text references to the Portuguese translations, notably page numbers, were kept as in the original text of this Introduction.

intolerable contiguities imposed by these images — whether between the living and the dead or between the human and the non-human – looms the obscene, where "the virtual added value is realized from the very outset" (Rodrigues 1985) and the distances of representation are eliminated. "And for the first time in his life [Hans Castorp] understood that one day he would die", Mann writes, alert to the inevitabilities of transparency.

There is, however, another story of subjects who allow the light to pass through them. In the descriptions above, extreme visibility seems to threaten the integrity of the individual, whom it neutralizes by depriving him of any kind of "interiority"; however, it is important to recall that there are relevant examples of the opposite movement, in which transparency appears as the first step towards the creation of an *ethic*. Let us consider, in this regard, the great scandal that Diogenes represents even today in Western thought: as pointed out by Peter Sloterdijk (1983), here is a Greek sage who insolently turned the materiality of his own body into the *medium* for a doctrine of truth, countering the "Athenian idealism of the masters", the great metaphysical abstractions, with radical self-exposure, an absolute refusal to submit to decorum and the fictions of life in society. This is a nudity that leaves no room for doubt as to its revolutionary significance: by becoming socially transparent, by committing "animalities" for all to see at the market of Athens, Diogenes presents himself as the living example of an unyielding freedom, demonstrating that it is possible to exist outside the "system of needs" that structures the social world — and this individual stance is precisely what will make him an "ancestor of the *hippies*" (Sloterdijk 2011, 212). The ever-debated boundary between the "public" and "private" domains was crossed by the *kynic* with a clearly subversive intent, very different from the one that seemed to drive, many centuries later, the lucrative industries of *voyeurism* and pornography, where that which is "spontaneous, given, natural" is sold to us "as a distant goal", "as a utopian sexual stimulus" (Sloterdijk 2011, 338).

Sometimes fatal, other times vital, and despite referring to an objective property, the notion of transparency seems to point to an enduring tension that exists in the subject and in communication. Recent developments in literature attest to this, as if anticipating (and later reflecting) the new experiences of publicity and privacy brought about by *social media*. The so-called *autofiction*, which Serge Doubrovsky defines as a fiction "made of strictly real facts and events" (2014, 120), is a notion that is often invoked today, both by the critics and, purposefully, by the authors themselves, to account for a paratextual field in which the *novel* and the *autobiography* fundamentally blend into each other and which has renewed literary production based on the premise of an unprecedented sincerity. It is, thus, a type of writing that claims to allow the life that was lived to "show through", while still displacing it and imposing upon it a certain narrativity, its rhythms and protocols, through complex mechanisms of retroaction — "the narrative about oneself is always a novelistic modelling (...) of one's life" (Doubrovsky 2014, 124). In the autofictional novel *Leave Society* (2021) by Tao Lin, one of the exponents of this literary "genre" in current times, the protagonist Li appears to be well aware of the

limitations of a type of writing aimed at creating a full record of the actions and experiences of an I, beyond the conventions of "journalistic" and "confessional" writing:

> "You can also write about our clashes," said Li's dad. "I know," said Li. "I am." Li's mother said she'd learned in college that novels needed "conflict." "It's because we bicker that I can write about us," said Li.
> (Lin 2021, 130)

The apparent transparency of the autofictional subject is not only betrayed by this impulse of narrativization, which imposes its codes upon the substance of the life that was lived and is to a great extent intensified by the fallibility of memory. It must be noted that language itself is not a *transparent* instrument of subjectivity: "if we understand the use of language to mean simply the "disclosure of what we feel or think" (...) we will be making the mistake of thinking that there is an inside, prior to the intersubjective world of exchange, and an outside, the world of communication", writes Maria Lucília Marcos (2007, 43). As a necessary condition for experiencing the world, language takes part in the constitutional alterity of the subject (which is combined, in psychoanalytical narrative, with the "unconscious"): the I that says "I" is already inscribed into language, into a realm of symbolic mediation, and sees itself at all times as "decentered" (Honneth 1992), defined by a network of social interdependences, historical contingencies and other forces. We owe to post-structuralism this reshaping of the ways of thinking about the relationship of the I with itself; it proves impossible to posit the ingenuity of a subject who, through language, would make himself/herself transparent. Once again, there is an opacity that persists. Doubrovsky points out this opacity in his distinction between autofiction and the classic autobiographical text (of which Rosseau's *Confessions* is a prime example): "The classic attitude of the subject who, through sincere and rigorous introspection, has access to his/her own depths is now an illusion." (2014, 123).

But the uncertainties that surround transparency and opacity are not only present — and certainly not in their most controversial forms — at the level of the individual. As a concept that brings together an array of political, social and moral projects, transparency is not an unattainable ideal but a specific regime of visibility that imposes itself on the life of liberal democratic communities. The praise of publicity and the spread of an attitude opposed to secrets — "of the state, self, other, and world" (Birchall 2021, 15) — may be traced back to the Enlightenment (notably to Kant). In the so-called modern communities, Reason sheds light on objects that were once unthought or purely naturalized as part of Tradition. There is the rise, especially from the eighteenth century onwards, of the supposedly universalist entity of the bourgeois audience, which begins a "fight against the will of the sovereign", claiming "the power to decide on matters that concern the governing of the nation" (Rodrigues 2011, 141). In the context of its functions of scrutiny, legitimization and criticism of political activity, this entity will appeal

to the visibility regime of "transparency": things must enter the realm of the visible in order to become the object of public knowledge, which, in turn, shall rationally inform political action. Gianni Vattimo (1992) notes, however, that the process of rationalization is not a mere instrument and that "self-transparency" — the possibility for man to become "aware of himself" gaining a complete, scientific picture of society, the "subject-object of reflexive knowledge" (p. 28) – would be the essential and ultimate utopia of the Enlightenment.

In any event, it is the combination of knowledge and power that seems to justify and provide the basis for the normative aspect of transparency, the requirement to *make visible*. In this modern framework of human experience, secrets become "dirty", i.e., potentially anti-democratic: all that is concealed invariably lies within the realms of unfairness, corruption and irrationality. This leads to ignoring the fact that transparency and secrecy mutually imply each other: "democracy asks its subjects to be transparent, to participate in the public realm, and to be knowable members of the demos; but if it wants to resist sliding into totalitarianism, it must be able to tolerate secrets qua singularity—a desire not to belong to, or to be knowable members of, the demos." (Birchall 2021, 178). What is more: this opposition obscures the fact that transparency itself is a *mediation* and, as such, an operation that entails inextinguishable opacities. We speak of "transparency" whenever a medium "disappears" as a medium to allow for a certain object to "appear", in a way that seems immediate. This means that both the *production* (to use a prior example: writing always impacts the life it intends to record) and the *context* (x-ray images acquire their real meaning and effect in a specific epistemological formation) of the object, fact or datum that appears are negated or considered irrelevant. It is in this sense that Clare Birchall also speaks of an "ideological form" of transparency (2021, 75-76), which, with its appearance of neutrality, of immediacy, has a politically relevant effect.

The preservation of the democratic ties that bind those who govern to those who are governed depends on a mutual expectation of transparency — a value that is deemed to be supremely good and that may thus be invoked in a "disinterested" manner. It is well known, however, that the relationships of visibility between those who hold the power and those over whom that power is exercised are functionally *inverted*, or at least reshaped, by the ambivalent project of Modernity. That is precisely what the famous Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary societies shows. In the old feudal regime, "individualization is greatest where sovereignty is exercised and in the higher echelons of power", since "the more power and privilege one has, the more one is marked as an individual, by rituals, discourses or visual representations"; on the other hand, in societies that find subtle forms of productivity in the complex knowledge-power of "disciplines", "individualization is 'descending': as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those over whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; and by forms of surveillance rather than by ceremonies, by (...) comparative measures that

have the 'norm' as reference rather than by genealogies that present ancestors as reference points; by 'deviations' rather than by deeds" (Foucault 2018, 222). The modern social world, a democratic world, which elects "transparency" as an emancipatory ideal, prescriptive of communication flows, is the same one that will introduce multiple surveillance devices, i.e., concrete technoscientific arrangements aimed at monitoring, calculating and, when necessary, acting upon citizen subjectivities. Furthermore, the theoretical model of "surveillance" itself, which is highly dependent on metaphors related to the territory, the police and the centralization of power, is no longer able to keep up with the current reality of distributed computer networks, which is aimed not so much at exercising surveillance over human activity but rather at *capturing* it, by subjecting it to a grammar that extracts from it a limited set of computationally intelligible possibilities (Agre, 2003). Populations are only seen "transparently" when they are converted into mere aggregate data sets and when what was once informal is decomposed, standardized and accumulated for statistical and market-related purposes — thus, from the vast heterogeneity of relationships between humans one extracts, for example, the countable unit of "contact".

In defining the overarching theme for this issue of *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* [Journal of Communication and Languages], we considered the effects experienced, across a variety of areas of human activity, as a result of this regime of full visibility without a specific focus, which has recently gained a renewed legitimacy due to the need to implement new laws, techniques and practices of visibility to face the COVID-19 public health crisis. In these historic circumstances, the (post-)Humanities could could greatly benefit from a less euphoric or perhaps even "disenchanted" analysis of the concept of *transparency*. That is precisely what Byung-Chul Han sets out to achieve in *A Sociedade da Transparência* [The Transparency Society] (2014), when he speaks of a "systemic coercion" (p. 12) that makes social facts "positive" or flattens them. Therefore, this is not a mere condemnation of post-privacy culture; the dangers the author advises against are ontological in scope. In this regard, Peter Handke's epigraph at the start of the book is revealing: "I live off what the others don't know about me". The transparent society will be, according to Han, the one that becomes incompatible with alterity, distance, the incommensurability of events, the delay of meaning and other forms of negativity. The poetics of the unsaid, too, will be abandoned in favour of "hyper-communication", which, one might add, is often mistaken for the practical implementation of the normative value of transparency. Regarding this communicational problem, it is worth recalling the fierce criticism from the anarchist collective Tiqqun (2001) of the technical implementation of the fictions of "direct democracy" in the cybernetic paradigm. According to the authors, the call for a full participation of citizens in public life aims at their full integration within the circuits of information: the transparent subject is devoid of substance, transformed into an efficient "conductor of social communication" (Tiqqun 2001). Opposed to the regime of transparency, the Tiqqun collective incites to "non-communication", to the

cultivation of "fog" and "interference" and to the establishment of "opacity zones" — these are the revolutionary tactics of which subjects may avail themselves within the cybernetic paradigm, a paradigm in which it is no longer possible for the fight for freedom to coincide with a fight for "recognition", since the processes of visibility and identification serve the purposes of the reigning social order.

It is also within the scope of a strategic criticism that Clare Birchall, in her book *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America* (2021), draws attention to the insufficiencies of transparency. For example, governmental authorities claim to be "transparent" by providing to citizens large amounts of statistical data that may be freely accessed. The disclosure of this information presupposes the existence of vigilant citizens with the necessary resources in terms of time and literacy to assess those data and draw meaningful conclusion from them, but not just that; it is also true that, by adapting such statistical material to a market logic, according to which the more informed individual is the one who is able to make the best consumption and investment decisions, this "transparency" could merely perpetuate the existing social inequalities: a utilitarian data analysis could mean, for example, "implicitly encouraging people to avoid underperforming schools rather than ensuring those schools receive more assistance" (Birchall 2021, 51). The typical defence of a *right to privacy* might prove equally inconsequential for the creation of "collective politics", if it simply means retreating to the "apolitical shadows of individualism" (p. 109). In this context, one of the alternatives that Birchall proposes is *radical transparency*; this "radicalization" does not refer to an increase in scale but to a reflexive reformulation: the concept of transparency itself must urgently become transparent as a resource for political resistance. Therefore, it will be necessary to rethink "the conditions of visibility in general", to "understand the mediated nature" of transparency and to ascribe "alternative cultural values" to it, politicizing it: "[r]adical transparency would involve workers and citizens making decisions about what kind of disclosure is the most effective in a given situation and about the scope of sociopolitical change that disclosure can precipitate" (2021, 91).

The articles that form this issue of the Journal on Communication and Languages comprise a broad range of contributions to a discussion of the conditions of possibility of transparency and the concrete circumstances to which it is applied. Sometimes the concept is explicitly employed, while other times it is implied through various related concepts that are in its orbit at varying distances — "diaphanous", "open", "objective"... Despite the multiplicity of approaches, disciplinary fields and goals, each article reflects back to us, fully visible, our own way of seeing: what stands out is the portrait of a time in which the concept of *transparent* was and still is one of the main attractors of ideas, whether they are moral, aesthetical or scientific. Therefore, reading the RCL [Journal on Communication and Languages] will reward the curiosity of all those who would still be amazed by the terrific sight of the "bones of [their] right hand".

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We owe to Maria Lucília Marcos the theme and direction of this *Journal of Communication and Languages*, and so much more. Her passing is an irreparable loss for the field of communication studies and for all the students and colleagues who had the privilege of sharing her bright presence. Maria Lucília Marcos left us a body of work that engages with the true meaning of communication, without giving in to preconceived notions about what communication should be and what it is for. To read what she wrote is also to see through death.

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