

THE TRANSPARENCY SOCIETY

BYUNG-CHUL HAN

Translated by ERIK BUTLER

stanford briefs

An Imprint of Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

THE SOCIETY OF EXHIBITION

According to Walter Benjamin, it is “more important” for cult objects to “be extant” than to “be seen.”¹ “Cult value” depends on existence, not on exhibition. The practice of locking sacred items in an inaccessible room, and thereby withdrawing them from visibility, heightens their cult value. For example, some images of the Madonna remain covered almost all year. Only priests may approach certain divine statues. Negativity implemented through separation (*secret, secretus*), fencing-off, and isolation constitutes cult value. In the society of positivity, things become commodities; they must be displayed in order to be; cult value disappears in favor of exhibition value. Bare existence has no meaning as far as exhibition value is concerned. Whatever rests in itself—that is, remains what it is [*bei sich verweilt*—possesses no value. Value accrues only insofar as objects are seen. The compulsion for display that hands everything over to visibility makes the *aura*—the “appearance of a distance”—vanish entirely. Exhibition value, which signals the fulfillment of capitalism, cannot be derived from the Marxian opposition between use value and exchange value. It is not use value because it stands removed from the sphere of utility; it is not exchange value because it does not reflect any labor. It exists thanks only to the attention it produces.

On the one hand, Benjamin observes, the exhibition value of photography represses cult value all down the line. On the other hand, he notes that cult value does not retreat without offering resistance; rather, it “finds its last refuge” in “the human countenance.” Therefore, it is not by chance that portraiture occupies a central position in early photography.

In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human countenance, the aura beckons . . . for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty. But as the human being withdraws from the photographic image, exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to cult value.²

The “human countenance” has long since disappeared from photography—along with the cult value it held. The age of Facebook and Photoshop assures that the “human countenance” has become a mere *face* that equals only its exhibition value. The face is a visage on display, “strip[ped] of its aura.”³ It is the commodity form of the “human countenance.” As a surface, the face proves more transparent than the countenance, which Emmanuel Levinas has deemed a privileged site for transcendence to emerge via the Other. Transparency stands opposed to transcendence. The face inhabits the immanency of the Same.

Digital photography wipes out all negativity. It requires neither a darkroom nor developing. No negative precedes it. It is purely positive. Becoming, aging, and dying have all been erased:

Not only does [the photograph] commonly have the fate of paper (perishable), but even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages. . . . Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes.⁴

Roland Barthes associates photography with a mode of living in which the negativity of time plays a constitutive role. All the same,

it remains linked to its technological preconditions—in this case, to its analog nature. Digital photography is the corollary of an entirely different way of living, one that dispenses with negativity more and more. It is transparent photography: without birth or death, without destiny or event. Destiny is not transparent. Transparent photography lacks semantic and temporal density [*Verdichtung*]. That is why it *says* nothing.

For Barthes, the temporal substance of “this-is-how-it-was” represents the essence of photography. The photograph bears witness to what has been. That is why mourning [*Trauer*] constitutes its fundamental mood. Barthes considers the date to be part of the photographic image “because it . . . allows me to compute life, death, the inexorable extinction of the generations.”⁵ The date inscribes mortality, transitoriness. He writes of a photo by André Kertész: “it is *possible* that Ernest, a schoolboy photographed in 1931 . . . , is still living (but where? how? What a novel!).”⁶ Today’s photography, fulfilled entirely by exhibition value, displays a different temporality. It is determined by the present which lacks negativity and therefore destiny—it admits no narrative tension, nothing “dramatic” in the sense of a novel [*Roman*]. What it expresses has nothing romantic about it.

In the society of exhibition, every subject is also its own advertising object. Everything is measured by its exhibition value. The society of exhibition is a society of pornography. Everything has been turned outward, stripped, exposed, undressed, and put on show. The excess of display turns everything into a commodity; possessing “no secret,” it stands “doomed . . . to immediate devouring.”⁷ Capitalist economy subjects everything to compulsory exhibition. The staging of display alone generates value; all the inherent nature of things [*Eigenwüchsigkeit der Dinge*] has been abandoned. They do not vanish in the dark, but through overexposure: “More generally things visible do not come to an end in obscurity and silence—instead they fade into the more visible than visible: obscenity.”⁸

Pornography destroys not just eros, but also sex. Pornographic exhibition causes estrangement from sexual desire. It makes it impossible to live desire. Sexuality dissolves into feminine simulations of pleasure and masculine performances of performance. Pleasure on display, in an exhibition, is not pleasure at all. Compulsive exhibition entails the alienation of the body itself. It becomes impossible to dwell within it. It is a matter of exhibiting it and thereby exploiting it. Exhibition is exploitation. The imperative to display destroys dwelling itself. When the world becomes a display room, dwelling proves impossible. Dwelling yields to solicitation [*Werben*], which serves to heighten the capital of attention [*Aufmerksamkeitskapital*]. Dwelling originally meant “to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace [*zufrieden sein, zum Frieden gebracht, in ihm bleiben*].”⁹ Unrelenting compulsion to exhibit and perform threatens this peace. It cannot be exhibited. The *thing*, as Heidegger defines it, also vanishes entirely. It cannot be exhibited, for it consists solely of cult value.

Hypervisibility is obscene; it lacks the negativity of what is hidden, inaccessible, and secret. Smooth streams of hypercommunication are also obscene; hypercommunication is free of the negativity of Otherness. The compulsion to hand everything over to communication and visibility is obscene. The pornographic putting-on-display of body and soul is obscene.

Exhibition value above all depends on beautiful looks. In this way, compulsive display produces the compulsion to achieve beauty and fitness. *Operation Schönheit* pursues the goal of maximizing exhibition value. Today’s (role) models convey no inner values but outer measures to which one seeks to correspond, even by violent means. The imperative to exhibit leads to an absolutization of the Visible and the External. The Invisible does not exist, for it generates no exhibition value, no attention.

Compulsion to display exploits the visible. The gleaming surface is transparent in its own way. After all, nothing more is asked of it. It possesses no deep hermeneutic structure. The face is a counte-

nance that has become transparent, which strives to maximize exhibition value. Compulsion to exhibit ultimately robs us of our visage and vision [*Gesicht*]. It no longer proves possible to be as one looks. The absolutization of exhibition value finds expression as the tyranny of visibility. The increase of images is not inherently problematic; what proves problematic is the iconic compulsion to become a picture. Everything must become visible. The imperative of transparency suspects everything that does not submit to visibility. Therein lies its violence.

Today visual communication occurs through infection, abreaction, or reflex. It lacks all aesthetic reflection. Its aestheticization is ultimately anesthetic. The judgment of taste expressed in "Like," for example, requires no sustained contemplation. Images filled with exhibition value offer no complexity. They are unambiguous—that is, pornographic. They lack all brokenness, which would trigger physical or mental reflection. Complexity slows down communication. Anesthetic hypercommunication reduces complexity in order to accelerate itself. It is significantly faster than sensory communication. The senses are slow. They impede the accelerated circulation of information and communication. Thus, transparency comes with an absence of sense. The mass of information and communication derives from a *horror vacui*.

The society of transparency views all distance as negativity to be eliminated. Distance represents an obstacle to the acceleration of the flows of communication and capital. In keeping with its inner logic, the society of transparency eliminates every form of distance. Transparency ultimately proves to be "the total promiscuity of the look with what it sees," namely "prostitution."¹⁰ It requires that things and images radiate in perpetuity. The missing distance makes perception proceed by means of tactility and touch. Tactility refers to contact without physicality, "epidermal contiguity of eye and image,"¹¹ just a breath away. Because distance is lacking, no aesthetic contemplation, no lingering, proves possible. Tactile perception is the end of the aesthetic distance of the gaze, indeed,

the end of the gaze. Lack of distance is not proximity. If anything, it destroys it. Proximity is rich in space, whereas distancelessness annihilates space. A certain distance is inscribed within proximity. Therefore its dimensions are broad. In this sense, Heidegger speaks of a “pure nearness which sustains the distance [*reine die Ferne aushaltende Nähe*].”¹² However, the “pain of the nearness of the distant”¹³ counts as negativity to be eliminated. Transparency re-moves [*ent-fernt*] everything into uniform de-distantiation that stands neither near nor far.

8. Cf. Gerd Gigerenzer, *Bauchentscheidungen. Die Intelligenz des Unbewussten und die Macht der Intuition* (Munich: Bertelsman, 2007).
9. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 344.
11. Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: New Press, 2012), 6; translation modified.
12. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 217.
13. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 37–38.
14. Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport: Greenwood, 1996), 34.
15. Ibid.

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1. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Belknap, 2008), 25; translation modified.
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 84.
4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 93.
5. Ibid., 84.
6. Ibid., 84.
7. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 84.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 147.
10. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 84.
11. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 55.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity, 2000), 168.

13. Martin Heidegger, "Who Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David Allison (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 68; translation slightly modified.

THE SOCIETY OF EVIDENCE

1. Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 191.
2. Simmel, *Sociology*, 324; translation slightly modified.
3. Ibid., 324; translation slightly modified.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53; translation slightly modified.
5. Ibid., 54.
6. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 94.
7. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959–1960. The Seminar Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 149.
8. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 135.
9. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 136.
10. Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 92.
11. Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 46.
12. Michel Foucault, *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 18; translation slightly modified.
13. Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, 240–41.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, Juli 1882 bis Winter 1883–1884, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977), 513 [vol. 7.1].
15. Quoted in Martin Andree, *Archäologie der Medienwirkung* (Munich: Fink, 2005), 189.