

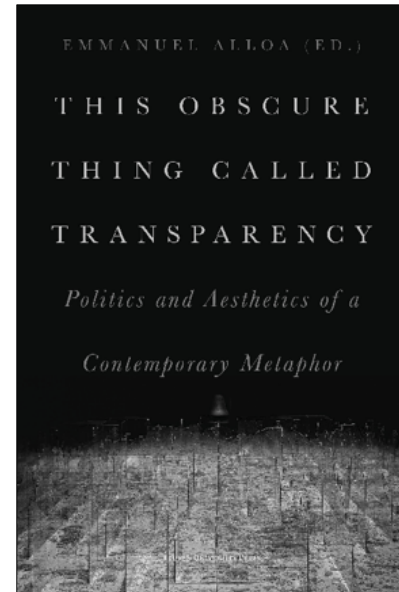
Emmanuel Alloa (Ed.), **This Obscure Thing Called Transparency: Politics and Aesthetics of a Contemporary Metaphor**, Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2022, 347 pp., \$68.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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This Obscure Thing Called Transparency: Politics and Aesthetics of a Contemporary Metaphor is a clever title that immediately suggests that we are facing a contentious and paradoxical issue. Emmanuel Alloa, its editor, had previously coordinated another volume on the same subject (Alloa & Thomä, 2018), and the aim of this one is to further explore the emerging field of critical transparency studies. As Alloa recalls, transparency is a physical optics term that designates “a certain dispositional property of materials whereby light passes through unhindered, and thus refers to a specific state of things” (p. 13). However, transparency is intended to be metaphorically applied to political and social issues’ public visibility and data availability: the ingredients and properties a processed food contains, the side effects a medicine has, the accounts from public administrations, and the profits declared by private companies. It even corresponds to complex processes that unfold over time, such as political deliberation and ongoing scientific research. In light of this, how can transparency have a dark side?



Transparency is one of those terms that would always look well printed on any flag, badge, logo, brand, seal, or insignia worthy of our trust. We have all accepted that transparency can do no harm to anyone except those who have something to hide. Everyone expects it from others and claims to practice it themselves. It seems to be a standard for public spiritedness, something so essential for the public sphere that it seems inconceivable to some that it was overlooked in past constitutions, laws, treaties, and declarations. Transparency Acts are enacted, protocols are established, rankings are published, and administrations, countries, companies, and even the general public compete in that race.

Transparency is thus associated with sincerity, openness, disclosure, accountability, and trust. However, its very omnipresence is full of nuances. Transparency is like silence: you name it and it disappears. Well, *seeing* transparency is a contradiction in terms: the less it is perceived, the more powerful it becomes. However, if transparency is always put in the limelight, then we become suspicious it is something contrived, and consequently the effect is to backfire: We do suspect that once the spotlight is switched on, the place where decision-making occurs has moved elsewhere, the authentic document has been replaced with false one, the data has been altered.

This foundational paradox in transparency has originated many others that have been made patent in our times. For instance, is it possible and even desirable to be entirely transparent? If everything were transparent, we would not be able to process it. It would be, as Byung-Chul Han (2015) has stated, “the *inferno*

of the same" (p. 2; emphasis in original). Thus, do we need selective transparency? However, in this case, who decides what should be transparent?

But transparency from whom are we talking about? We may assume we are referring to the disclosure from and accountability of the *public authorities* with respect to *the general public* (as the WikiLeaks' motto says: "Privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful"), but transparency works in many different directions. We might ask how transparent the public should be for public authorities, or for private corporations, or vice versa, and how transparent corporations should be for public authorities.

On the one hand, the agreements that dot i's and cross t's in a televised political debate, the endless lists of the main active ingredients in a drug or a processed food, the hundreds of clauses that we must accept, the legal warnings that regulate so many procedures, and the data protection protocols all amount to a torrent of small print whose official purpose is to comply with the requirement for transparency. We sign everything at the foot of documents and tick any boxes without having read the clauses. That signature symbolizes the transparency that nobody cares about anymore once all procedures and formalities have been carried out.

On the other hand, how could we object to transparency when we find out that a powerful car industry has covered up fraudulent data on the pollutants given off from their vehicles; that long-concealed sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, elite sports, or show business has come to light; that war crimes against defenseless civilians have been leaked as photographs and videos; that border police from administrations who have signed commitments to respect human rights treat suspected terrorists or migrants as criminals?

The book consists of fifteen chapters signed by renowned specialists in their fields. They address transparency from two main areas: politics and aesthetics. While the first eight chapters discuss the concept and delve into political theory, economics, law, history of ideas, and science, the second part is composed of seven chapters that address it from the perspective of architecture, literature, art history, and film studies.

The first part is the most entertaining, as it sets out both sides of the debates: the benefits of transparency (recognizing its costs) are contrasted with reports of the abuse it leads to and the defense of secrecy and even mendacity as being essential ingredients of democracy.

Who is afraid of transparency? As Alloa explains, transparency meets the criteria of a "magic concept" (Pollit & Hupe, 2011): a *broad semantic range* that encompasses different fields, a *normative attractiveness* because of positive connotations (modern, progressive, etc.), a *consensual nature* by obscuring or even denying conflicts of interest, and a *global marketability* because of its reputation and success (pp. 179–180). But on the flip side, what can we expect from a transparency self-report? Being qualified as transparent "promises a mechanical dissolution of all conflicts and tensions (. . .): the uncertainties of negotiations and the vagaries of deliberation are bound to disappear in favor of an immediacy of virtues" (pp. 180–181).

"Trumpany" is described as a distortion in which stories and rumors tinged with emotions replace information in a context of anxiety and constant updates (which has made people react by increasingly avoiding news). It is assessed whether transparency is a worthy heir, first of "publicity" and second of the rational public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) from the Enlightenment. In both cases, the answer is no. In one contribution,

transparency is taken even further back. It is linked to the moral need of confession in Christian culture. Conversely, we look at the future and discuss whether the ultimate challenge of transparency should be technological: open the black boxes and subject the algorithms to public scrutiny.

As for the aesthetic aspect of transparency, it seems strange to go back to a literal, physical, and physiological meaning of transparency, after having discussed it for over two hundred pages talking in metaphorical terms, as a political or social construct. However, we realize again that it is impossible to escape from (conscious) transparency that is not staged, even in the arts, including painting, architecture, and cinema: We are not talking about transparency itself but the veneer of transparency.

In the light of the ever-elusive transparency, the authors collected for this section analyze the works of art or the aesthetics theories of Hieronymus Bosch, Raphael, Tintoretto, Titian, Velázquez, Nietzsche, Duchamp, Proust, Benjamin, Le Corbusier, Koolhaas, Michael Powell, and Kathryn Bigelow. That is, they venture into pictorial, literary, architectural, and cinematographic creations. However, what does it mean to endow a work of art with the quality of transparency? The material of the work is opaque, a barrier between us and the world. Must the work then be transparent with respect to its own creation process? However, here is second-degree transparency because once again (even more so than in political-social metaphors), we are not witnessing a great revelation, something pristine, untouched, but a mirage of transparencies. The need for a mirror unflinchingly alters what is behind, preforming it. The creative factory produces the work and the mechanisms of its transparency as a solidary and indissoluble whole.

The splendid book coordinated by Alloa addresses all these paradoxes in transparency. The authors and approaches have been chosen so carefully that the volume is of great dialectical consistency: On average the chapters are of a very high quality and seem to talk among themselves. They address very contemporary issues: disclosure and leaks, surveillance and "sous-veillance," information overload, fake news and conspiracy theories, post-truth politics, algorithms and data-mining, and the pandemic and social distancing. It is undoubtedly a very valuable approach to a multifaceted and multidirectional motto of our time, one so full of goodwill and the desire to uphold egalitarian and democratic rationality (the right to know) as it is capable of exhibiting a dark side of proceduralism, rule obsession, and scapegoating: formalistic, hypocritical, and disciplinary.

References

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