Metropolis and Hermeneutics:
an Interview with Gianni Vattimo

by Georges Teyssot[1] (translation: Søren Tinning)

Georges Teyssot: What is the status of representation in contemporary metropolises?

Gianni Vattimo: What struck me as particularly interesting at the thematic exhibition "Beyond the City: the Metropolis" at the Milan Triennial[2] was the connection between the experience of the metropolis and the profound modification, or rather, *crisis* of representation. Visually or optically, one immediately perceives this. The experience of the metropolis is primordially lived as an experience of loss of center; here, of course, without any allusion to H. Sedlmayr.[3]

Paradoxically, but perhaps not by chance, we continue to speak of historical 'centers'. Everything relating to hierarchy and perspective in the organization of space – center/periphery, the monumental, the axis – was defined by a central perspective, which is difficult to effectuate today. After all, the crisis of representation is tied to the development of the metropolis. I think that the hypothesis has already been articulated that abstract art was born out of the experience of the metropolis.

G. T.: Is this something that has been reflected in 20th Century European philosophy?

G. V.: Philosophers, as well as painters such as Kandinsky or Klee, who engaged with these questions, had a rather essentialist approach: how to capture the 'intimate

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[1] This interview was originally published in the catalogue of the XVII Milan Triennial as: "Metropoli ed erme-neutica: un'intervista," in: *Le cittá del mondo e il futuro delle metropolis. Oltre la cittá, la metropolis*, cur. Georges Teyssot (Milano: Electa, 1988), 268–272. English translation is published here with the permission of Gianni Vattimo.

[2] Translator's note: "Oltre la cittá, la metropolis", Georges Teyssot (curator), part of *Le cittá del mondo e il futuro delle metropoli*: Esposizione Internazionale della XVII Triennale di Milano, Palazzo dell'Arte, Sep. 21st – Dec. 18th, 1988. This interview originally appeared in the exhibition's catalogue. See end of text for reference.

[3] Translator's note: Gianni Vattimo is most likely referring to: Hans Seidlmeyr, "Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit (1948)", in English: Hans Seidlmeyr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

structure' of things. For example, in *The Spirit of Utopia*,[4] Ernst Bloch conceives of abstract art as a sort of spiritual elucidation; that is to say, as an intervention of the internal into the external, as a collapse of the conventions of representation, etc. Bloch was tied to a specific climate that was characterized by its understanding of the spiritual as something fundamentally conflictual (an approach, which is not so much to be criticized, because of this focus on spirituality); an example being the intrusion of the internal into the external. This perspective, which one still finds among American theorists (and I am here thinking of Frederic Jameson), comes close to an apology of Modernity.

To be more explicit and to relate it more directly to the exhibition, we can turn to a radical Heideggerian thesis. This may help explain the tight connection between the experience of the metropolis, the crisis of representation, and the end of metaphysics. Furthermore, it entails that the crisis is not only to be conceived in negative terms of loss, of alienation.

Martin Heidegger's thought introduces a way of doing without the central and hierarchical perspective. This also has an effect on the *polis*. The figurative art of the West is the art of bourgeois society not so much in terms of social or class values as in relation to the structure of the city. In other words, when discussing the end of central representation as the constitutive experience of the metropolis and in terms of the end of metaphysics, it also means, in some sense, to defend the experience of the metropolis.

Now, how can this be an opening to something positive? This is so, I would argue, because there is no strict dichotomy between *finding oneself in the city* and *getting lost in the metropolis*. In reality, one rarely gets lost in the metropolis. There is, indeed, an intermediate stage, as much as we are accustomed to experiencing the urban; it is a space with a well-defined center and periphery, which we nevertheless fail to grasp. It brings about a kind of constant disorientation. This space is contained within a horizon, which neither allows for the possibility of the perfect insertion of the parts into the whole nor the absence of the whole altogether.

I think hermeneutics and the metropolis are similar. Hermeneutics took its point of departure from elaborating the relationship between the part and the whole. In order to understand the part, it was necessary to understand the whole. However, from Friedrich Schleiermacher to the difficulties confronting Wilhelm Dilthey, the representation of the part/whole relationship was basically conceived as a relationship of form/background [It: *figura/sfondo*]; a relationship in which the two are mutually definable. This was a utopian conception. Instead, what hermeneutics continuously came to confirm was that the whole could never be given even if we could define its parts. It manifested itself in a non-articulated manner, i.e. as a relationship that was not explicitly defined.

G. T.: Yet, do we not find a current in 19th-20th Century thought that argues that experience takes place among parts that allude to a whole, which is both absent

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[4] Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie* (1923), in English: Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

and present at the same time; a 'virtual' whole in the Freudian sense? I am here also thinking of Maurice Blanchot…

G. V.: I believe that what is called the 'virtual whole' is precisely the hermeneutic totality; i.e. a totality given only in shape of a knowledge, which is never explicitly grasped. Here, one could perhaps also speak of the virtual or of a whole that is absent/present. I prefer, however, the term *hybrid* [It: *mesticcio*]; i.e. a whole that is not a totality. The idea of totality always entails the idea of something clearly defined. When speaking about tragedy, Aristotle presents the concept of totality: beginning, middle, and end. A totality that is not defined, one can hardly call a totality.

Now, in 19th-20th Century thought, we find, for the first time, an elaboration of this whole as given in a way that had always eluded metaphysics. In the traditional hermeneutical experience, the whole was either given or not given at all: the whole was related to its parts in terms of an 'energetic'[5] clarification, of a definitive form. Contrary to this, I would argue that we are here confronted with a different experience, the experience typical of the metropolis.

G. T.: Historically, from the 16th-19th Century, the idea of the city has been characterized by the oscillation between a closed and gated model and an open and illuminated one. In the case of this last model, which can also be depicted with the popular metaphor of a spider web, the center could be conceived as something living…

G. V.: These models are interesting, because in hermeneutics the temptation of closure is always present. For example, one notices when reading Schleiermacher's hermeneutics that he seems to be led by the objective of uncovering a horizon of closure, while continuously having to acknowledge that such a horizon is not to be found. Moreover, the challenge of 17th-19th Century philological hermeneutics was to understand a work as a whole in which the parts corresponded perfectly. This way the totality would finally become clear. However, this undertaking has always been challenged by the impossibility of representing universal history as a clearly discernable whole: the parts and the whole continuously reject each other to the point that it becomes problematic to insert any historical element into the movement of universal history.

In other words, the history of hermeneutics *is* the history of the crisis of the model of closure and the continuous reintroduction of an open, reticulated, and indefinite structure. It is not by accident – although there could be more reflections on this – that Heidegger replaces the concept of ground or foundation with the concept of the ungrounded ground [It: *sfondamento*]. The foundation is the idea of attaining a *Grund*, a foundation that is capable of explaining a given system. The ungrounded ground entails the idea that this effort to attain the *Grund* – or *logos,* to use the original Greek term – has the only aim of showing the unattainability and, in some sense, the inconsistence of the model of the foundation.

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[5] Translator's note: Gianni Vattimo is most likely referring to the Aristotelian concept of *energeia*, of actuality.

G. T.: Speaking of this, I come to think of how Heidegger describes the dweller as a *Siedler*; i.e. etymologically, the one who opens a clearing in order to establish and secure himself there, hence a kind of colonizer who is settling down. Does it not seem like Heidegger here expresses a predilection [It: *pathos*] for the idea of settling down, of establishing roots? Emmanuel Levinas, for example, opposes this by arguing that dwelling is impossible without 'disengaging from the given situation', without extra-territoriality, without wandering.

G.V.: I think Levinas misunderstands Heidegger here for good – and personal – reasons. In Levinas, extraterritoriality is a coming from somewhere else. One who comes from somewhere else is extraterrestrial for the simple reason that he is not from here, he has his roots elsewhere. Levinas' God is not a mere breath of wind. He commands and makes his presence felt.

In Heidegger, as it often happens, it seems to me that we find a sort of ironic suspension of the concept of rootedness, of location: one does not experience the ungrounded ground through an encounter with another that comes from somewhere else, but through the dissolution of what constitutes a location. Are we sure that the clearing is a – how to put it? – a squared off city, where clear lines are drawn and trees are planted. Is it not rather something that fringes or disperses; i.e. something that thins out without having clear boundaries?

A close reading of Heidegger's *Art and Space*,[6] to which I am here referring and perhaps gleaning more from than he himself intended, will give a glimpse into an essential dialectic between place (*der Ort*) and region (*die Gegend*). The positioning in a place consists merely in the opening towards a region, which in German (*Gegend*) connotes a site, a region, a landscape, a background – something without fixed and predetermined limits. The real experience of place consists in letting the fourfold (*das Geviert*) occur where "earth, sky, mortals, and gods" linger *together*.[7] The unity of the four, of the fourfold (das *Geviert*), is not given in any straightforward form. It consists in 'fouring' (*die Vierrung*), that is to say a 'fouring', and as such it constitutes the reticulated center of the city with its branches taking off and ending in no specific place.

Now, even if I in many ways respect and understand Levinas' approach, it seems to me that the experience of extraterritoriality in Heidegger is a possible means of deterritorialization rather than securing one's roots. Considering his philosophical-religious background, the dominating idea in Levinas is, evidently, the idea of exodus and of belonging to another people, another land, another place. One becomes rooted to the degree one settles down somewhere. In Heidegger, too, there is an element of belonging, but it is rebutted by the idea that what one belongs to is a place that is situated in a region, which is constitutively 'fouring'.

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[6] Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (1969), in English: Martin Heidegger, "Art and Space," *Man and World* 6, 1 (February 1973): 3–8.

[7] Martin Heidegger, cf. both *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951) and *Das Ding* (1951), in English: Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," and "The Thing," both in: *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York, Harper and Row, 2001).

G. T.: In regard to the relationship between model and reference, in the age of 'the end of metaphysics', what connection is established between representation and the project?

G. V.: I am somewhat distrustful of the restrictions exerted upon the meaning of representation; i.e. towards an 'anti-representationalism' that emphasizes the limits of representation of representation itself. Saying, "once representation opts for a medium it is already limited" is like saying that "the language we speak does not represent reality very well, so perhaps we should find a more complete one". From a certain philosophical perspective, this argument rests on the idea of representation as an adequate comprehension of a state of affairs. This idea, however, no longer seems to be practicable, because it presupposes that the fundamental relation between the I and the world is the one between the subject and the object.

Effectively, this notion of representation is not refuted for theoretical reasons, not even by Heidegger. It is not like Heidegger is saying: "the state of affairs is not this subject over and against this object, it is this other one". He is not pretending to represent the state of affairs better. In my opinion, he is refusing this idea of representation for reasons that are essentially ethical. The subject-object model is in truth a type of robbery, of exploitation, of appropriation. In fact, all the modes of appropriation are expressed in words such as concept, *concepire, concapere*, comprehend, *begreifen,* and *saisir*.

The dissatisfaction with the representative model of knowledge indicates an underlying moral unease. Once this obstacle has been overcome, everything changes. It is not like representation no longer corresponds to what is occurring; only that we prefer to no longer be agents of the appropriation of the world, because we know that once this dialectic has been put in place, we may become appropriated ourselves. This is what motivates Heidegger from *Sein und Zeit* up until his last writings. On the other hand, it is no accident that the experience of the metropolis is also the experience of the dissolution of power, that is, of a power that is strong and centralized.

G. T.: Yet, the power of technology seems to be growing excessively.

G. V.: Yes, but can one still call this obvious domination of contemporary technology 'power'? I do believe the possibility exists that technology may place itself at our disposal. If that possibility would increase, then so would the interconnections that would disperse power. In spite of that, 'power' today is no longer capable of even imagining this. The *Metropolis* of Fritz Lang, the city of the expressionists, was not realized, because – aided by technology – it just multiplied the *polis* in an even more centralized way.

In his last works like *L'Usage des plaisirs* (1984) and *Le Souci de soi* (1984), Michel Foucault leaves out the figure of Bentham's *Panopticon*, which had obsessed him earlier. He did so, in order to instigate new ways of existence that are irreducible

to a central perspective – somewhat like in *Mille Plateaux* (1980) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Here one finds a hope of a multiplication of ways of living that would refuse to be reduced to the panopticon of a totalitarian institution.

Of course, I do not believe that there are any theories of the metropolis that are set and finished. On the other hand, it is not enough to put lots of energy into writing the introduction without finishing the book! The initial challenge facing everyone is to get rid of the demonizing conception of the metropolis: but then we need to move forward.

G.T. Many thinkers and writers highlight the derealization and increasing influence of the media on the experience of the metropolis as they, for example, compare the view from behind the windshield of the car with the dazed gaze at the porthole of the television set or the video console.

G. V.: In my opinion, this element of derealization has its positive aspects too. The metaphysical conception of representation is essentially determined by realism: it conceives of the concept as a means to comprehend the state of affairs like in the case of adequate propositions, etc. Somewhat paradoxically, but not hugely so, the crisis of representation corresponds to the abating of the notion of the real.

It seems to me that there is an almost complete identity between the metropolis and the mass media. Let me explain: the hermeneutic totality inside of which we always move or the metropolitan totality within which we live are always given, and yet we never possess them 'totally'. So how are they given to us? Through immersion into a world of communication. Heidegger put this in a more rational-philosophical way: prior to the particular beings, the world is given to us through a familiarity with language.

This is where we are today both with communication and language. This familiarity is never the possession of a generative grammar, as in Noam Chomsky. The world is never given to us because we belong to a language as if it was a 'natural' language, a generative grammar; it is given to us through our belonging to a system of messages. The system of messages we live in today is the system of general mass communication. Would the philosophy of Heidegger have been possible in an epoch in which images were not dominating? At the end of the day, I do not believe so.

G. T.: Apparently, Heidegger's thought is also aimed against this fundamental aspect of the Modern World; i.e. the capturing of the world by way of the image or the picture (*Weltbild*).

G. V.: The important thing in *The Age of the World Picture*[8] is that Heidegger here ontologically demonstrates that the metaphysical tradition of representation is the tradition of a 'violent' way of thinking and that the metaphysical categories therefore should be 'weakened' or abated.

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[8] Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes" (1938), in English: Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York, Garland Publishing, 1977).

I have often noted how Heidegger's text on the *Weltbild* (1938) and Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936)[9] are almost contemporary. In the conclusion of the latter, Benjamin invokes a similar abatement, where he speaks of the 'distracted perception' of the metropolitan man. Probably, this immersion of the metropolitan man into the world of mass media implicates the risk of loss. However, it is difficult to establish what exactly these risks consist of given that this immersion also entails the loss of the fundamentalist notions of essence, of human nature, of the atomized human being, etc.

It is certainly necessary to proceed with caution, but one should not be under the illusion of possessing precise criteria of measuring what goes and what does not regarding the metropolitan experience. It is necessary to try to decenter oneself.

G. T.: Between contemporary artists or architects, we often encounter an ambivalence: on the one hand, they are influenced by mass-media, they love the photogenic sceneries of California or Florida as far as these manifest the frontier of the new and they have a predilection for fragmented reality, the fleeing visions, etc. On the other hand, as they are well aware that rationalism and functionalism have largely been detrimental to even the idea of the city, they also express the wish to restore this idea by proposing a sort of *retour á l'ordre* of the urban project, of the 'grand style'.

G. V.: Actually, I find this tension in my own work. I do believe, however, that a connection is to be found in the idea of reuse; an idea, which provides another meaning to the Heideggerian phrase "that dwelling is prior to building"[10].

As it happens, we are not really in a situation of pure invention. In regard to what you just said, it seems to me that the experience of California is similar to the images one finds in the film *Blade Runner*. There is a connection between California as an enormous inventory of forms, images, and traces that are to be retrieved and reused and the California of computers, of cybernetics. Much of the work that computer experts do – according to my own rather venturous hypothesis – is the work of an archivist: they organize the information already available, systemizing it, registering its different connections, etc.

All this has little to do with the traditional sense of invention, little to do with the 'Modern' sense of projecting. However, it opens up new areas for architecture and urban planning: archiving, cataloguing and conserving the 'historical' monuments, as well as reusing artifacts, including those of the 20th Century, those built the other day, built today, born already to no avail… There are a number of experiences that open

[9] Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1936), in English: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008). See also: Gannin Vattimo, "Introduction," in *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Baltimore; The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

[10] Cf. Ganni Vattimo, "Abitare viene prima di costruire," *Casabella* 485 (1982): 48–49.

up the question of how to conceive things like ruins, traces, monuments and how to reuse them, recreate them from within.[11]

With the widespread use of computers, there can be more traces, but they will necessarily be more evanescent. More things can be conserved, but for a shorter period. Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*,[12] illustrates well how historical memory could be selective: historicism has always identified itself with the winners. In the age of the computer, this may change because the conserved no longer belongs to either the winner or the defeated. Everything becomes stored and occasionally things get lost…

I say this despite not being completely at ease in the society of the computer and mass-communication. I feel, in a Kantian sense, obliged to do so. The more I dislike these things, the more I feel the obligation to think of them radically, because there is nothing funny about the situation we are in, nothing to relish, nothing to get excited about!

At first sight, the possibility of a less selected historical memory also means that we conserve more junk, but it also means a less rigid class structure in society. All that has lived, all the traces, has the right to be conserved. In terms of value, this, of course, has a strong ambiguity but it is not simply an evil that "there no longer is selection, no longer religion, no longer art…".

It is true that we detest indiscriminate conservation but we are moving towards a world where more and more is conserved for a shorter and shorter period. Yet, I do not see why man could not imagine the possibility of experience within these new forms. They manifest radical transformations of our way of encountering time, which are integral to our experience of the metropolis. The present age is one in which everything tends to become concurrent and this changes a number of things. In the metropolis, one is always everywhere without being anywhere specific because there are no movements towards the center. In addition, one can develop many analogies between the experience of time and the experience of space.

The 'loss of the center' means therefore to contemplate reducing somewhat the presumptuousness of man. It is not that implausible to hypothesize that this readjustment is linked to the experience of the end of centrality, to the crisis of representation, to multiplicity as a condition of metropolitan life.

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[11] Cf. Ganni Vattimo, "Progetto e legitimazione," *Lotus International* 48–49 (1986): 118–25 (with English translation).

[12] Walter Benjamin, "Über der Begriff der Geschichte" (1940), in English: Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999).