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Weak Design

Gianni Vattimo and the Function of Design

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Summary

The thesis proposes the concept of weak design through the lens of Gianni Vattimo's weak thought. It explores design practices that resist traditionally dominant paradigms of functionalism and universal, solution-oriented production, advocating instead for openness, contingency and interpretative plurality. By engaging deeply with Vattimo's philosophy and conducting a theoretical analysis of case studies—ranging from postmodern design countercurrents to contemporary design approaches—it identifies a shared gesture: the weakening of deterministic notions of design tied to industrial and techno-rational logics, in order to reconceive design as a hermeneutic act—contextual, interpretative, plural. The thesis argues that weak thought can inform a weak design that cultivates subjectivities, expands imaginaries, and intervenes poetically and politically across the everyday and the yet-to-be.

Key words: weak thought, Gianni Vattimo, hermeneutics, weak design, ontological design, design ethics

Introduction

The Ontological Dimension of Design

In 2024, the city of Milan—historical epicenter of design—dedicated its famous *Arch Week* to the theme of weak architecture, inspired by the ideas of philosopher Gianni Vattimo and architect Andrea Branzi. This homage to the intellectuals focused on Vattimo's weak thought and Branzi's work on contemporary architecture. This served as a starting point and framework for a series of debates, talks and exhibitions. However, while there is substantial body of theoretical research and critical discourse around fields such as art, visual media and architecture, design, for some reason, has remained on the sidelines. Some voices are now calling for a critical examination of the traditional history of design, one that rescues forgotten (or overlooked) nuances and opens up to new interpretations. A good example of this is Alexandra Midal's work in *Design by Accident*,[1] where she rejects both linear narratives of

[1] Alexandra Midal, *Design by Accident: For a New History of Design* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019).

progress and the long-held perception of design as a mere footnote in the histories of architecture and fine arts.

Through Vattimo's *pensiero debole* and hermeneutic practice—and by reflecting on design case studies—this paper seeks to explore, from a renewed perspective, the conceptual and practical possibility of what I will call 'weak design.' As Santiago Zabala notes, "Weakening Philosophy (...) has shown that Vattimo's philosophical position is not limited to his theory of postmodernity and his reformulation of the Christian message, but is also deepened by the studies he produced in the late 1960s, such as *Art's Claim to Truth.*"[2] In this sense, Vattimo's thinking offers valuable insights for different understandings of design, and design contemporary approaches may find echo in his philosophical contribution.

Design has always played a significant role in the major shifts in the conditions of existence. "The human hand is human because of what it makes, not of what it is," says French archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek argues in *Design as an Ideological State-Apparatus* that "the very birth of humanity [occurred] out of design."[3] Philosophers Tony Fry and Adam Nocek further suggest that "design *is* ontological: it designs the very conditions of the human (*homo habilis, homo economicus, homo digitalis*)."[4] From the first arrowhead to the latest Smartphone, from the Industrial Revolution to the Digital one, the unfolding of our humanity is inscribed in the creative act of projecting ideas. It is through this action and capacity that being is humanized and historicized; it is in the deployment of the resources we have to create and build realities that we constitute ourselves as human beings.

Moreover, design is a practice that oscillates between artistic expression and technical knowledge. Throughout its history, the underlying tension between these two poles has been

[2] Santiago Zabala, "Introduction," in *Art's Claim to Truth*, by Gianni Vattimo, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), xi.

[3] Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, *Are We Human? Notes on an Archeology of Design* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 48, 68.

[4] Tony Fry and Adam Nocek, eds., *Design in Crisis: New Worlds, Philosophies and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2020).

evident. The interplay is visible from the outset, in the Arts and Crafts movement, led by William Morris, who opposed the division between art and everyday life; or in the expressionist beginnings of the Bauhaus, with figures like Walter Gropius, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy and Wassily Kandinsky; and its later transition toward a more functionalist approach, aligned with the project of consolidating Germany's national industry. In the aftermath of the modern project, however, the original balance-tension appears to have leaned in favor of the technical pole—today, toward technology.

In a key passage from *Art's Claim to Truth*, Vattimo engages with Kandinsky's views on art and its prophetic force, in the sense that it can express the spiritual epoch's content in a form that corresponds it. Thus, "'yesterday' is transformed into 'today.'"[5] Vattimo continues by translating this into Heidegger's language, in terms of art constituting the event in which Being reveals itself in the encounter with the being-in-the-world. "From this view it is not an accident that Kandinsky was, like Klee, a teacher at Gropius's Bauhaus. The Bauhaus constitutes precisely a possibly valid dimension for developing a prophetic poetics like that of Kandinsky. In fact, in Gropius's school, the prophetic force became a concrete effort to project a world."[6] Further along these lines, Vattimo notes how in the Bauhaus, "art is called upon the task of founding the environment in which the human being lives, that is, the world of human experience." This vocation can be actualized in epic form, or, "it can descend to the level of industrial design, where the cosmic nature of art is still present, though merely as a capacity to inhabit the world that is already fully given."[7]

This thesis begins with the understanding that the promise of the 'train of progress' and its linear trajectory derailed long ago, with the end of Modernity, as Vattimo argues. As a result, the modern notion of design practice—closely tied to technical and industrial production—has

[5] Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, 49, quoting W. Kandinsky, "Every Spiritual Epoch," in *Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 2 (1922–1943) (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 842.
[6] Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, 74.
[7] Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, 75.

increasingly come under question. “As functionalism was reevaluated and reinterpreted throughout the 1960s, the crisis of design’s origins led to the collapse of the model associated with the modern movement,” says Midal in this regard.[8]

Then, we may wonder: Are we going to continue designing objects in a dematerializing world? Will design shift to respond not to the demands of a material industry, but to those of an unbridled technology? Is it now a matter of moving on to designing apps, interfaces, virtual interactions, and algorithms? At the same time, how does the design of all these affect us, as human beings? What are the consequences if design is limited to being merely the discrete co-pilot of a supposedly neutral technology, driving us at exponential speed along the highway of linear, northless progress? In today’s critical context, should designers “prefer not to design”[9] as Ramón Faura suggests? What other ways of designing—more critical, sensitive, and open—could be recovered in a context where the promises of the modern project have lost their relevance?

Today, the tech industry seems to present itself as the sole bearer of the torch lighting the ‘ideal’ path for humanity. And in the speed of the Olympic race it unleashes, there is no respite for thought. The unforeseen negative consequences of the Industrial Revolution—a key, almost foundational moment in the development and professionalization of traditional design––continue to impact today, more than two centuries later. Materials once hailed as remarkable technical innovations, such as plastics or polymers like Teflon—and freely used by designers to create modern objects—are viewed with caution due to their now well-known negative effects (toward the environment, health, etc.). In a world saturated with objects, and in the midst of a new revolution—this time technological—exploring weaker forms of response that have

[8] Midal, *Design by Accident,* 194.

[9] Faura’s complete question was*: “What if, instead of coming up with new designs, we come up with a way of not designing*?” This proposes exploring strategies of silence and productive inactivity, as noted by Roger Paez and Mariana Amatullo, “Emerging Habitats: Design as a Worldmaking Agent,” *Temes de Disseny* 39 (2023): 8–19, https://doi.org/10.46467/TdD39.2023.8-19.

emerged throughout the history of design (particularly in the postmodern era), perhaps offer, through the lens of Vattimo's thought, a more promising and necessary perspective for the practice today.

This thesis is structured in two parts. The first examines in detail Gianni Vattimo's weak thought and ontological hermeneutics; the second analyzes various examples of design from the 1980s to the present, through the lens of this theoretical framework, with the aim of outlining the contours of a weak design. Both parts are bridged by an *Intermezzo* dedicated to the function of art in Vattimo's thought. By tracing historical countercurrents and contemporary discourses within design practice, it will be shown how Vattimo's philosophy offers fertile ground for understanding design within a more inclusive and pluralistic horizon—one capable of weakening universal conceptions and deterministic narratives. From this philosophical attitude and ethical stance, design may fully unfold its inclusive potential, as a practice that always seeks, creatively, alternatives. In this sense, weak design emerges as a way of thinking and making that remains open to possibility and interpretation, and that helps prevent the narrowing of the horizon of being in the world.

It could be anticipated—without detours—that the conventional notion of 'function' as it is traditionally understood in relation to the work/object of design, will be weakened. The aim is not to propose a new type of design, but rather to recover and value diverse approaches to the practice that have existed—and continue to exist—albeit in less evident ways. In modern frameworks, traditionally conceived design holds that form follows function, and that good design is clear, self-evident, and accessible (readily available). In contrast, this essay considers the hypothesis that in weak design, form might instead follow friction. The examples explored, in seeking to displace the conventional idea of function, necessarily invite the adoption of a hermeneutic approach to interpretation that can ultimately offer an experience of truth, as understood by Vattimo.

The selected examples refer to various design movements, such as Neues Deutsches Design or Droog Design, as well as to more contemporary approaches such as Critical or Speculative Design. The intention is not to indiscriminately encompass different proposals under a single new label, but rather to identify what could be a possible common denominator among them: a way of designing that, by displacing the traditional notion of function, opens up to the interpretative act. Whether through reflective provocation, estrangement, or critique of the present and the possible futures that every creative act opens, these examples depart from modern ideals of functionality, rational efficiency, and mass production/consumption. These examples demonstrate design's capacity not only to seek solutions but also to reveal conflicts and open up possibilities for meaning—thus becoming capable of generating critical and inclusive hermeneutic experiences.

Just as Vattimo states, regarding religion, that "weak thought helps us to deal with the consequences and obligations of the death of God, that is, to weaken those ecclesiastic dogmas that stand as obstacles to the faith of believers and the agnosticism of nonbelievers,"[10] weak design could perhaps offer a way to face the challenges, risks, and responsibilities arising from the notion of progress understood exclusively in terms of technical and technological advancements. Instead of relying on universalist certainties, this perspective invites design approaches that embrace ambiguity, plurality, and interpretation as constitutive axes of its praxis. Weak design thus moves away from the functional credo that normally governed its practice.

At the very core of design practice lies creativity as the motor and initiator of a dialogue between the tangible and the possible, framed between the present project, and the notion of a future realization. Considering that, as Vattimo's weak thought maintains, interpreting the world means in fact, *changing* the world, then design—understood no longer only as a technical

[10] Zabala, "Introduction," in *Art's Claim to Truth*, xii.

or aesthetic response to practical problems—reveals itself as a form of interpretation, critical exploration, and home of possibilities. In a context marked by the crisis of the modern promise of progress, the conception of design exclusively as a producer of functional objects loses strength and legitimacy. Thus, this work aims to recover and analyze those practices that, from a logic less subordinated to the interests of more dominant fields, seek alternatives.

I anticipate here a possible objection: Why then, speak of design and not contemporary art? The answer lies in the fact that, in all the cases selected, function—though weakened—does not disappear; even if questioned, it remains operative. I acknowledge that weak design may constitute a kind of conceptual quicksand, bordering contemporary art: many of these examples have been exhibited in galleries yet they can—and in many cases have—been produced on moderate scales, and used, even as they subvert the very notion of function they initially weaken. This ambivalence, far from invalidating the category, reveals its strength: weak design inhabits and explores precisely that intermediate space where the object ceases to be solely an answer and also becomes a question. So, while the examples I intend to analyze might be well justified within artistic frameworks, they are interesting in that they also present a contextual, interpretative, projective and speculative dimension tied (to a greater or lesser extent) to function and our everyday being.

A first group of selected practices operates through formal estrangement, producing objects that interrupt the user's visual and functional expectations. Designs such as Tejo Remy's distorted drawers or Frank Scheiner's *Consumer's Rest* chair work through surprise, absurdity, or ironic gesture, while being deeply connected to the spirit of the time in which they were produced. In these cases, the design provokes an experience of unsettlement, or a certain estrangement, perhaps close to Heidegger's idea of the *Unheimlich* (which might open up the question of Being). However, as architect and designer Ricardo Blanco points out, in

Consumer's Rest one can sit down[11]—function, though weakened, persists. Several of the referenced authors have expressed their disinterest regarding whether their objects are art or design. Designer/artist Joep van Lieshout regularly mentions that the important thing of his work is that it has an impact, and make people think. In 1995 he decided to stop signing as an individual artist to operate exclusively under the name of his studio: Atelier Van Lieshout. His works, exhibited in artistic contexts, are presented as fully functional furniture, kitchens or toilets. The radical gesture does not consist in eliminating function, but in demonstrating that it can coexist with a critical practice within the expanded field of art—or design.

Another work to be analyzed is that of the artist and designer Pablo Reinoso, whose work also challenges the boundaries between art and design. His *Spaghetti Benches* series starts from a functional and recognizable object—the public bench—that overflows into sculptural forms that exceed its traditional use. Although they remain '*sittable'* objects, their formal deployment generates an autonomous aesthetic dimension that allows them to inhabit both public, and exhibition spaces. Their formal exuberance, the earthly presence of wood in this work-object, does not cancel its function but rather expands it, inviting an experience of simultaneous contemplation, reflection, and use. In this way, the work is neither exhausted by its utility nor elevated as an instance of purely art.

A final group of proposals will be analysed drawing on Vattimo's post-Heideggerian approach to the idea of 'heterotopia' and his ontological hermeneutics. This includes practices advocated by designers Dunne & Raby—who "use design as a medium to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry, and the public about the social, cultural, and ethical implications of existing and emerging technologies"[12]— as well as ideas explored by Colombian archeologist Arturo Escobar in his book *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical*

[11] Ricardo Blanco, interview by Silvia Fehrman, "Nuevo Diseño Alemán: Un Elogio de la Sencillez," *Fundación PROA*, accessed May 7, 2025, https://www.proa.org/esp/exhibicion-proa-nuevo-diseno-aleman--un-elogio-de-la-sencillez--textos.php#568.

[12] *Dunne & Raby*, "Biography," accessed May 12, 2025, https://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/biography.

Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds.[13] Such practices generally pose open-ended questions about complex systems, ecological crises, forgotten voices, social injustice, and regimes of technological governance; they are not oriented toward problem-solving but toward the problematization of contexts. They see design as situated transdisciplinary between art, industry, science, and technology, understanding it operates both poetically and politically: as a domain of knowledge and a field of practice, it shapes our individual and collective experience of being in the world.

The central focus of this thesis will thus be to reflect on how design offers not only the capacity to create and shape objects but also to cultivate subjectivities and horizons of possibility. The study aims to analyze various forms of contemporary design that—through critique, humor, defamiliarization, or situated inquiry—break away from the logic of traditional design understood merely as the production of consumer goods. Drawing on these specific examples and in dialogue with Vattimo's philosophy of weak thought—which recovers, among other concepts, Heidegger's being-in-the-world, Gadamer's experience of truth, and Pareyson's notion of formativity—the research will explore how the strength of a weak design lies in its capacity to open frameworks of meaning that can engage and reveal hidden relationships and discourses. In this way, the study will examine how these practices pose open-ended questions about the present and the future, about contemporary being, and about the conditions of life under late capitalism.

There will be, therefore, both a *yes* and a *no* in relation to the traditional notion of object and function. The distance established by breaking with the assumed creates a space that allows for new perspectives. Weak design does not design "the useful" in the narrow sense of the term; rather, it focuses on objects and situations that invite us to question what is taken for granted and to reconsider what is understood as useful. In this sense, what is designed resembles more

[13] Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

an ontological device—one capable of opening up possibilities and offering alternatives within the framework of everyday life.

Weak design will then present a paradox: by weakening the functional aspect and the principles of standardization shaped by production and consumption logics, it opens up to its emancipatory potential and simultaneously frees the practice from the technical obligations that subordinate it. This paradox can also be found in Vattimo's weak thinking, where the position of a weaker attitude, ultimately proves stronger than the pursuit of absolute truths and foundational thinking—particularly in the context of our postmodern condition. By reclaiming those capacities related to the propositive, projective, conceptual and interpretative, the balance might be reestablished, divorcing design from the almost imposed marriage it maintains with industry, going back to the once intended balance between art and technique.

Why is it particularly relevant, in my opinion, to recover these practices today? The openness to multiple interpretations and the exploration of the potential—as opposed to the concrete—raises questions about existence itself. In a world where robots are designed to look like humans, we humans are constantly redesigned to be more robot-like in our own behavior and being. In this context, imagination, freedom, free will and the prospect of future possibilities lose ground. In this light, the thesis adopts the word 'weak' in the way the Italian philosopher introduces it: insofar as its strength lies in its non-conclusive but rather flexible capacity. Likewise, the idea of weak design aims to recover the same: the non-conclusive, open-ended, and emancipatory potential that design as a practice also harbors—and must hold on to. Both design and philosophy are a question and a dialogue,[14] just like the future itself, whose only possibility resides, in effect, in the non-answer, or better still, in the multiplicity of possible answers.

[14] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2. The authors reflect on the definition *"philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts."*—a definition that could closely parallel that of design.

Finally, in line with how Vattimo described his later writings, this work is also an essay—an attempt and a possible interpretation. It seeks to establish connections between the philosophy of *pensiero debole* and design practice, opening a dialogue and identifying common ground. It employs weak thought both as a guiding principle and as a kind of methodology, exploring the surroundings of the practice and its (seemingly) weaker qualities. The aim is to identify proposals that reaffirm the act of questioning and that harness creativity to foster the open space of the indeterminate, in the creation of both individual and collective realities—diverse and plural in nature.

Just as Vattimo proposes a non-foundationalist thought—one that renounces objective truth and the notion of universality, characteristic of Western metaphysics—weak design relinquishes the aspiration to a finalized, industrially reproducible object with universal functionality. Rather than offering definitive solutions, these practices initiate open-ended, participatory, and situated processes that challenge the boundaries between art, design, the poetic, and the political, in everyday life. In the same way that *pensiero debole* desacralizes truth as correspondence with an objective reality, weak design problematizes the traditional categories of modern design, as well as its role as a silent co-pilot of a technical industry transformed into a technology that organizes the world in totalizing ways. In contrast, weak design operates within the realm of contingency and relationality. In this sense, designing weakly entails doing so with a heightened awareness of the world's fragility and its systems, and of the plurality of possible worlds, voices, and interpretations.

Part I

Weak Philosophy

SECTION ONE

Brief Introduction to Weak Though

Chapter 1

The Notion of Weakness: A Preliminary Reflection

"Well, little one," said a Tree to a Reed that was growing at its foot,
"why do you not plant your feet deeply in the ground, and raise your head boldly in the air as I do?"
"I am contented with my lot," said the Reed. "I may not be so grand, but I think I am safer."
"Safe!" sneered the Tree. "Who shall pluck me up by the roots or bow my head to the ground?"
But it soon had to repent of its boasting, for a hurricane arose which tore it up from its roots,
and cast it a useless log on the ground, while the little Reed, bending to the force of the wind,
soon stood upright again when the storm had passed over.

—Aesop[15]

One of the most important contributions of the Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo is perhaps his philosophy of *pensiero debole*. The possible application of this concept to an infinite number of fields proves that it can be a valuable tool (a tool, not a theory) for navigating the current times. Before delving into his weak thought—as it is called in English—it is interesting to briefly pause on the first word of the concept: weak. Just like in Aesop's fable, where the reeds smartly sway and bend in the face of the inclement weather, thus surviving the storm, so shall weakness be understood in Vattimo's philosophy: it is precisely in weakness that strength resides, in its flexible, non-rigid, non-static nature. On the contrary, the strength of the oak tree understood in terms of rigidity and immobility, results to be fatal. While the oak stands still with firm pride, sinking its roots deep into the earth, and boasting arrogantly about the supposed fragility of the reedbed's structure, the latter, with flexible humility, manages to overcome the external adversities. It is in this way that Vattimo's weak thought calls for a flexible, non-rigid attitude, capable of withstanding the vicissitudes of the present, facing and enduring the inexorable passage of time.

[15] Aesop, *The Fables of Aesop Selected, Told Anew, and Their History Traced*, ed. J. Jacobs (Project Gutenberg, 1992).

In this sense, the strongest are therefore the weak: those who can adapt intelligently to different circumstances, those who can adopt a non-static attitude in order to resist the storms. "What doesn't bend, breaks," goes the saying. Aesop's fable is a fitting starting point, not only because it depicts with beautiful and simple poetry the strength of the weak and the fragility of the rigid, but also because it is precisely the passage of time, with its inevitable changes, that shatters the illusion of what is claimed to be immutable.

The oak's disdainful boasting and the reeds' patient reliance on modesty, bring to this confrontation between the apparently strong and the apparently weak, the question of attitude––which is more than a mere nuance. Vattimo's weak thought must be understood in this very way: as an approach, or an attitude, to face and understand the ever-changing unfolding of history, particularly in the context of the postmodern era. In the fable, the passing of time demonstrates that the oak tree's pride and arrogance were premature, and that in its vanity, it was incapable of recognizing the intrinsic threats to its inflexibility, lurking in the future.

Aesop's fable will serve not only as a starting point, but will also act as a guiding conceptual axis. It may be revisited at times in the exploration of Vattimo's weak thought, particularly in terms of an attitude in the face of change and difference. As the reflection progresses, and issues such as hermeneutics, interpretation, truth, violence, possibility and freedom come into play, the fable will serve as a thread to recover simple images that can illustrate these complex concepts. Like any good fable, its timeless and open-ended nature allows for multiple interpretations —something highly pertinent to the topic at hand.

Chapter 2

A Philosophical Attitude

In order to deepen Vattimo's philosophical proposal, it is necessary first to explore the origins of his thought, examining the causes and context in which he began to develop it. This will so reveal some of the main authors and discourses upon which Vattimo draws. Consequently, the meaning of his weak thought, its applications and functions, can be articulated in greater detail and with more rigor. This process enables a mapping of the web of elements that, in light of his philosophy, lead to the end of modernity and the onset of the current postmodern era—a time that, for the author, demands adopting a more flexible attitude towards thought. By identifying these elements as causes and constructing a detailed description of the end of modernity, it will be possible to identify the need for a new way of thinking—one that not only helps to understand the implications of the present, but that also offers a path of resilience and resistance; in short, a way of being, today—an attitude.

In discussing the end of the modern era, Vattimo links, from the very beginning, the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return with the Heideggerian overcoming of metaphysics. According to the author it is essential to start by considering the emergence of these two ideas, as they are the first signs of the genesis of new conditions of existence in the late industrial world: "the scattered and often incoherent theories of post-modernity only acquire rigor and philosophical credibility when seen in relation to the Nietzschean problematic of the eternal return and the Heideggerian problematic of the overcoming of metaphysics,"[16] he states.

Nietzsche's proclamation that 'God is dead' marks the collapse of faith in absolute values. This collapse of structures and foundations resulted in a profound existential void for

[16] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 1.

the Western world. In parallel, Vattimo draws on Heidegger's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition, which—through its foundational character—evolved into a total organization of the world. By linking the collapse of absolute truths and fixed structures, on the one hand, with the Nietzschean notion of nihilism and the Heideggerian idea of the forgetting of Being in favor of entities, Vattimo identifies the decline of the modern epoch. From this perspective, and by understanding this crisis not only as a breakdown but also as a breakthrough, Vattimo will adopt with his weak thought a stance that is both critical and positive, as an opportunity to create new values and meanings.

The fall of dogmas and traditions leaves the human being devoid of containment and shelter, but it also confronts them with a new kind of freedom—in terms of a challenge and a responsibility. The notion of overcoming implies an effort to transcend, (and though 'overcoming' risks becoming just another metaphysical gesture, the point I want to underline is that as a gesture, it implies an intention, an attitude). "Is a matter of pushing, or pulling"[17] says Vattimo, who will focus on the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*. Additionally, Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, taken as a test, points also to an attitude of resilience: a way of facing life that transforms helplessness into, perhaps—why not—a sort of catharsis, in terms of a "positive opportunity"[18] for transformation, insofar as it "enables us to distance ourselves from the mechanism of modernity."

In the foreword to *Nihilism and Emancipation*, Richard Rorty explains that Vattimo sees weak thought as an attitude linked to humility, as it is "(…) an antidote to the pridefulness characteristic of those who claim to be obeying unconditional, ahistorical, transcultural, categorical imperatives. Adopting this 'weak' attitude toward our moral obligations is, he

[17] Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 213.
[18] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 104.

thinks, the culmination of a long-drawn-out process of secularization."[19] This is also why Vattimo later reflects on the Christian notion of *pietas*.

Weak thought then "begins by interpreting nihilism as a weakening of the structures of metaphysics and a dissolution of the concept of being as an objective foundation."[20] Hence, weak thought "(…) is nothing other than the knowledge, acceptance, and recognition that philosophy, after the deconstruction of metaphysics, cannot capture the ultimate essence of its objects but must comply with a multiplicity of interpretations."[21] To address knowledge, acceptance, recognition, and interpretation, is to enter into the philosophical universe of the author, where the notion of philosophical attitude, hermeneutics and action are closely intertwined.

Postmodernity thus represents a unique and inaugural moment in which a new way of thinking, acting and doing must emerge—one that does not seek foundational character (as that would mean falling back into the search of a new truth, thereby repeating and perpetuating an exhausted logic), but that, on the contrary, aims for a weaker alternative.[22] Franca d'Agostini explains how weak thought is a "philosophical attitude of human beings in leaving a certain (modern) age of reason."[23] Like this, weak thought represents an approach more akin to an attitude; a way rather than a content. We thus find ourselves on a terrain more contiguous to praxis: an attitude is already an active proposal *for*, not merely a conclusive response *to*.

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[19] Richard Rorty, "Foreword," in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics and Law*, Gianni Vattimo, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xix.

[20] *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 7; see also Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy. The Gifford Lectures*, trans. Robert T. Valgenti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 213.

[21] Zabala, "Introduction," in *Art's Claim to Truth*, xii.

[22] The idea of alternative is, in itself, a weak approach, since it represents a path that for some reason was not the main one.

[23] Franca d'Agostini "Weak Thought/Pensiero Debole," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 204.

SECTION TWO

Crisis

Chapter 3

Crisis of Progress, History and Truth

In *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo adopts a critical stance toward the humanist legacy, referring to it as 'inheritance.' The very consideration of something as *given*—as handed down by previous generations—reveals an interruption, a break in the unified, continuous flow of what Vattimo calls the history of thought, in terms of a progressive and overcoming process. This rupture in the course of history, rather than signaling its ultimate end, implies in fact its complete dissolution as a continuous narrative. The modern view of history as an arrow running upward in a progressive process—grounded in the premise of unceasing development—not only reaches its endpoint; it shatters entirely. Thus, the end of history in postmodernity implies abandoning one of the most defining concepts of the modern era: the idea of time and history as a unified, ascending process, in which the new is always better. History is then no longer a process of improvement—a promising, positive, constant advancement. While "modernity is that era in which being modern becomes a value, or rather, it becomes the fundamental value to which all other values refer,"[24] the postmodern, on the other hand, is characterized "not only as something new in relation to the modern, but also as dissolution of the category of the new —in other words, as an experience of 'the end of history'—rather than as the appearance of a different stage of history itself (…).[25] The appropriate concept to describe this passage would be '*post-historie'* introduced by Arnold Gehlen: "Gehlen argues that *post-histoire* designates the condition in which 'progress becomes routine:' human capability to order nature through technology has increased and will continue to increase to such a point that, even while ever-

[24] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 99.
[25] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 4.

newer achievements have become possible, the increased capability to order and arrange simultaneously makes them ever less 'new.' In a consumer society continual renewal (of clothes, tools, buildings) is already required physiologically for the system simply to survive. What is new is not in the least 'revolutionary' or subversive; it is what allows things to stay the same,"[26] explains Vattimo. "There is a kind of profound 'immobility' in the technological world which science fiction writers have often portrayed as the reduction of every experience of reality to an experience of images (no one ever really meets anyone else; instead, everyone watches everything on a television screen while alone at home)."

Today, the speed of technological transformations challenges us. Heidegger, as cited by Vattimo, notes how "(…) the crisis of humanism—inasmuch as it is linked to the culmination and the end of metaphysics—is related in a far from incidental way to modern technology."[27] Vattimo also draws on Husserl, who links the crisis of humanism to the process by which human subjectivity is lost in favor of the mechanisms of first scientific, and then technological objectivity. Yet, Vattimo points out that very mechanisms which appear to threaten the subject, are set in motion by the subject itself. Martin G. Weiss notes that "the hermeneutic tradition Vattimo follows commonly opposes the allegedly scientific model of truth,"[28] which typically understands truth as *adequatio* between thought and reality. For Vattimo, truth and reality are event and interpretation. There is no objective reality to be attained, independent of all interpretation, nor does interpretation culminate in a final definitive truth / reality.

However, in an increasingly techno-determined world, the "it is scientifically proven" assertion stamp seems to be a new "amen." The subjunctive mood of this desiderative prayer is strangely transformed into the indicative mood—serving as a full affirmation that seals and establishes "reality" (from "so be it" → to "so it is"). In *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo offers

[26] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 7.
[27] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 33.
[28] Martin G. Weiss, "Science," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 176.

a critical reflection on the practice of the sciences in contemporary societies, where they are increasingly conditioned by political and economic interests. Politics itself today seems tied to the interests of the capital driving technological development. Furthermore, regarding politics, Vattimo speaks of technical governments where, as Iannantuono writes in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, everything seems to be "(…) in the hands of technicians and experts obsessed with numbers and fiscal balances, who govern with procedural engineering rules and regulations,"[29] distant from the popular will. For Vattimo, Europe adopts a model of governance that reduces public debate into mere technical management, driven by technological rationality and bureaucratic control. As it is often the case with technology, this is thus veiled in an opacity which renders the center of power invisible to citizens (users, in tech-language). For the Italian philosopher, everything is mainly oriented towards optimizing the economy and regulating the interests of financial and economic actors under the principle of the mercantilely 'useful' or 'useless,' organizing society and its resources in terms of technical management to direct these processes efficiently. This relates to metaphysics, which provides the foundation for legitimizing those who hold political power by appealing to truth as the correspondence to an objectively given order. "In our late metaphysical world, determined by the triumph of technology and the technical, science and power reciprocally sustain themselves (…) in which scientists appear as respected officers perfectly integrated in a total *Verwaltung* or administrative/organizational system, and science, or what presents itself as science, itself becomes an instrument of oppression."[30] Almost as a new form of preaching truth, techno-science manages to be elevated in a messianic key, wrapped in a halo of sacredness. The aim isn't to dismiss any authority merely for the sake of its status, but rather to reintroduce a subtle nuance: the scientific method is based on proving or falsifying hypotheses. The truth that

[29] Giuseppe Iannantuono, "Europe/European Parliament", in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 44.

[30] Gianni Vattimo*, Being and Its Surroundings*, ed. Giuseppe lannantuono, Alberto Martinengo and Santiago Zabala, trans. Corrado Federici (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 46.

supports a hypothesis remains 'truth' only until new discoveries overturn it. So how does the hypothetical become categorical? Time can elevate or overthrow truths—scientific, metaphysical, religious. Space—a shift in position or perspective— can do the same.

For Vattimo, the present era is characterized by the loss of universality and unity in the idea of history—notion that finds its origin in the reading of the 'death of God' and in the reduction of Being to value. This also pertains to the so-called 'history of thought,' which can no longer go in search of final, eternal or universal explanations. The notion that truth and meaning as absolutes, are contingent upon power and positionality, is shown in these two well-known sayings: "It's all a matter of perspective," and "History is written by those who win." Vattimo emphasizes historicity's role to understand this dynamic. Throughout history—from Aristotle to Copernicus, from Galileo to Kepler, to take a classic example—the notion of how we perceive the world and how we perceive ourselves in it changes, and what we think about each of these discoveries—our interpretation in light of new insights—can also vary. For many years, Columbus's arrival in the West Indies was called "the discovery of America." Today, it is understood that this expression is neither accurate nor fair, as it reflects a Eurocentric view that overlooks the fact that America—its lands and peoples—existed long before the arrival of the colonists. They were not "discovered," as if hidden under a rock, they were also occupied, their cultures subjugated and their territories exploited. So, today's Individual has come to the realization that "the history of events—whether political, military, or theoretical—is but one history among many,"[31] concludes Vattimo.

Therefore, by recognizing that 'The history' is written by those who 'win' and that "the task of constructing a 'universal history' has paradoxically become impossible,"[32] two conclusions can be deduced: history is a narration, an interpretation, and, consequently, there is another history, or many others, different from the triumphant version that managed to

[31] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 8.
[32] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 9.

prevail. It is not possible to claim a monopoly on truth. Vattimo often recalls Nietzsche's phrase "there are no facts, only interpretations," to which he always adds the clause "and this too is an interpretation." Thus, in light of the "end of colonialism and the coming of globalisation, we (…) witness the multiplication of histories and narratives, which can no longer be reduced to a unitary and universal use of reason."[33] The issue, Vattimo reflects, is to "establish the extent to which the experimental and technical sciences are aspects of the Western culture that postcolonial countries are no longer disposed to identify with the one, true human culture."[34]

With the end of metaphysics, history and truth are no longer conceived as absolute notions. Nor is Being, which, under the metaphysical framework, had been understood as pure presence, governed by the notion of *Grund*. Consequently, the concept of the subject is also dismantled. And the object—traditionally bound to the subject within the subject-object structure—collapses as well. This signals the breakdown of reason itself. "Heidegger connects the crisis of humanism to the end of metaphysics as the culmination of technology and the moment of passage beyond the world of the subject/object opposition,"[35] explains Vattimo.

In *A Farewell to Truth*,[36] Vattimo bids farewell to the notion of truth as the faithful reflection of an objective reality—a notion proper to the metaphysical tradition, which presupposes a clear-cut division between subject and object. The very subject understood as the transcendental one of Locke, Hume, and Kant—in whose veins, as Dilthey puts it, "no blood runs"—no longer exists. The fall of metaphysics and the advent of the *Ge-stell*, disclose an abyss in which, primarily, the sensation of dissolution, fragmentation, and complete loss of confidence erupts—all firm foundations that once served as a base are lost, and any possible anchoring in a stable center, vanishes.

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[33] Silvia Mazzini, "Enlightenment," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 70.

[34] Vattimo*, Being and Its Surroundings*, 48.

[35] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 45.

[36] Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Chapter 4

No God in the Cloud, Only Data

Religion, Technology and Power

> *"Only modernity, in developing and elaborating in strictly worldly and secular terms the Judaeo-Christian heritage – i.e., the idea of history as the history of salvation, articulated in terms of creation, sin, redemption, and waiting for the Last Judgement – gives ontological weight to history and a determining sense to our position within it."*
>
> — Gianni Vattimo[37]

In *Is Religion an Enemy of Civilization?*[38] Vattimo reflects on the authoritarian and absolute character of religions as bearers of Truth (with a capital "T," understood as the only valid one, singular and exclusive). Interpreting Nietzsche's 'death of God,' he clarifies that the God to whom the German thinker refers is the moralistic God—and with Him, moral religions also perish (deservedly so). In other words, the moral conception of religion as the source of the rational order of the world. "Religions have not only promised the union of virtue and happiness, as Immanuel Kant would say, that is, the final triumph of justice; as in the case of the moral God, they have powerfully helped to establish and keep the 'just' order in this world, becoming strong institutions and rigid hierarchies enforcing morality."[39] The institutionalization of beliefs gives way to the constitution of a centralized power which, in order to preserve itself, imposes and leaves no room for doubt. As Vattimo notes, this occurs not only in Catholicism but in any religion where the clergy is differentiated from the laity. The religious institution, in any case, is largely concerned with guaranteeing its continuity and ensuring its survival. A similar phenomenon, one might argue, occurs in the case of technology, where the *Ge-stell* system—the global, predictable, and planned machination that Vattimo translates as

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[37] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 4.

[38] Gianni Vattimo, "Is Religion an Enemy of Civilization?," in *DIA-LOGOS: Ramon Llull's Thought and Artistic Practice*, ed. Amador Vega, Peter Weibel, and Siegfried Zielinski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 15–22, based on a talk given at the conference *Human Rights and Their Possible Universality: 19th Conference of the Academy of Latinity*, February 2009, Oslo, Norway.

[39] Vattimo, "Is Religion an Enemy of Civilization?" in *DIA-LOGOS*, 15.

"imposition"—marks the end of history insofar as its operation demands, orders, that nothing interfere with the regular activity of the machine.[40] Both humanity's relationship with God, mediated through institutions, and with the machine, as a closed system of imposition, enable the establishment of hierarchies that determine either the interpretation of existence or the way of proceeding through it, and which simultaneously rely on that imposition in order to exist. The modern fear of the machine—and technology—is nothing but another version, strangely renewed, of the medieval fear of God. Both fears stem from power's need for mystery and distance—impenetrable and unshakable. We fear what we do not know, and what we do not understand. The aura of mystery surrounding the idea of God, with the unquestionable message delivered by the canonical voice of the Church, resembles the lack of understanding we have today of the complexity of a technology that is behind the many devices that are part of our daily lives. God was prayed to, but feared. Today we all, to a greater or lesser extent, depend on technology, yet we fear its ever-expanding power, and do not fully grasp its workings or consequences. One could say that the *Ge-stell* of our times, in its complexity, renders the option to question technology nearly impossible to those lacking the specialized knowledge or technical language, required to examine or challenge its functioning. As Vattimo notes, the very prefix *Ge-* signals a repetition that complicates the question, "to the extent that it develops like an ensemble of totally integrated apparatuses, technology appears to us as a 'world' that increasingly eludes the possibility of our controlling and understanding it."[41] Though often seen as accessible, techno-positive discourses overlook the fact that technocapitalism is premised on (and thrives through) the existence of hierarchies of accessibility. Autonomy of thought and action, which involves rejecting a predetermined interpretation and delving into complexity, requires critical capacity and implies a freedom that challenges these hermetic systems. Hierarchies, by establishing inequality, consolidate a power that is ultimately terminating and

[40] Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 112.
[41] Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 108.

categorical towards interpretation and action (whether of biblical texts, reality, or possibilities). The single, closed, imposed interpretation constrains individual freedom, and, ultimately constitutes a form of violence. In the drive for self-preservation, religions and their institutions have not always been a guarantee of peace or assistance to humanity; they have often caused division and conflict. And the promise of equality held by technology, i.e., a fully connected world, has not been realized. "The difference between the developed and underdeveloped countries in the world today is measured by the degree to which computer technology has penetrated into their respective economies,"[42] says Vattimo in this regard. Rather than free, we appear as renewed 'Chaplins' from *Modern Times*, dependent and enslaved under the imperative of efficient production, paired with the sense of lost agency.

In a globally interconnected world, religions have shown that they can be a source of conflict between culturally different worlds. The crusades further back in history, or the current situation in the Middle East, for example. And technology—embraced by many as the religion of postmodernity—has deepened the gap between the few who grow ever wealthier, and the many who become increasingly impoverished. It does not seem convenient that then, the space traditionally reserved for hope and freedom—both physically and symbolically—is overtaken by the power of technology. Silicon Valley is not the Promised Land.

But why is it that today, in the midst of postmodernity, where structures fall and absolute truths crumble, that technology is capable of establishing itself as a new strong and almost absolute voice, to which, like God's all-seeing gaze, no one seems to be able to escape? If the postmodern subtracts the notion of absolute truth, why does technology today manage to present itself as omnipotent (with clear absolute power), omniscient (not even a conversation today can remain private), omnipresent (who could escape from it), and even limitless? As Ashely Woodward explains, "for Heidegger, the essence of technology (…) must be understood

[42] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 15.

ontologically (…) [he] sees a correspondence between modern machine technologies and the epoch of modern metaphysics. The latter is characterised by the distinction between subject and object, and the project of domination and manipulation of the world of objects by the mastering subject. The essence of modern technology is, then, the 'enframing' *(Gestell)* of all beings."[43] Vattimo connects this Heideggerian notion with Theodor W. Adorno's concept of 'administered societies' *(verwaltete Gesellschaft)*, in which entities are reduced to mere objects—manipulable, controllable, exploitable, and disposable. "But technology, with its global project aimed at linking all entities on the planet into predictable and controllable causal relationships, represents the most advanced development of metaphysics (…) they are but different moments of the same process."[44] *Gestell*, at first, represents the culminating point of metaphysics, where entities are reduced to mere calculation, objects of technical manipulation, and Being falls entirely into oblivion.

Thus, the degree of penetration of technology into existence has substantial effects. This penetration, both gradual and incisive, is historically tied to the Christian idea of salvation, which becomes transformed into the secularized notion of progress, as Vattimo explains: "for Christianity, history appears as the history of salvation; it then becomes the search for a worldly condition of perfection, before turning, little by little, into the history of progress. But the ideal of progress is finally revealed to be a hollow one, since its ultimate value is to create conditions in which further progress is possible in a guise that is always new. By depriving progress of a final destination, secularization dissolves the very notion of progress itself, as happens in nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture."[45]

Vattimo notes how history—as a unitary course of events—is read by the modern individual through the news in the newspapers, as a sort of morning prayer. Following this

[43] Ashley Woodward, "Information technology/Gestell," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 44.
[44] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 40.
[45] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 8.

scene, the morning ritual of the postmodern subject would no longer be the cup of coffee and the newspaper, but rather, the lazy stretching of an arm towards the bedside table to pick up the smartphone, that will allow the world enter through its screen. The entire postmodern 'reality' rests in the palm of their hand, yet, it has never been so elusive and hard to grasp. Social networks and digital platforms have become the morning— and evening prayer, for the devoted postmodern subject. With the new media, "(...) everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity, thus producing a de-historicization of experience,"[46] explains Vattimo. The fragmentation of reality that flows through the screens, designed to undermine the intimate space of reflection and critical thinking in favor of perpetuating the endless *scroll*, exacerbates the individual's feeling of anxiety and orphanhood, hindering the ability to construct meaning. Moreover, the state of global inequality and the succession of ongoing crises (economic, environmental, social, and cultural), complicate this panorama of distress, fostering a context in which any strong discourse that manages to arise above the noise, may appear as a lifesaver in the midst of the storm. Why is it that, in an age where technology reigns and the virtual media ecosystem dominates, extreme populisms seem to be multiplying? In *Being and its Surroundings* Vattimo links intensely computerized societies, in a globalized world of increasing totalitarian regulation, with the conditions that enable the deeper entrenchment of what many have called the *pensée unique* (single thought).[47] The virtual arteries through which everything runs, favor the spread of the most dangerous virus: the single interpretation (reduced into a few characters) that we see on our networks, and that, thanks to algorithms, show us again and again an ideologically curated uniform sea, where we are repeatedly shown only what we want to see, and hear only what we want to hear—much like in Hans Christian Andersen's traditional tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. And thus, often fed discourses of resentment and hate.

[46] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 10.
[47] Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 56.

With the 'death of God,' everything is reduced to an exchange value. Then, "by a perverse kind of internal logic, the world of objects measured and manipulated by techno-science (the world of the real according to metaphysics) has become the world of merchandise and images, the phantasmagoria of the mass media."[48] Thus, in order to understand capitalism and consumer society, it is essential to "(…) understand the role of 'Western techno-scientific culture (…) [and how it is] inextricably bound to the system of capitalist exploitation and its imperialist tendencies."[49] As with religious institutions, technology (or, as Vattimo puts it, the system of techno-scientific machination) and capitalism's financial system—all these closed, integrated, and oppressively functioning systems—focus on self-preservation. Hence, violence is imposed by the framed democracies of liberal capitalism[50]–or in the name of progress, or in the name of God. These systems ensure things "stay the same."[51] How, then, is the possibility of freedom conceived in a context shaped by this rationalization of the world? How can freedom be preserved in a metaphysically organized society, where existence is reduced to mere efficiency under the guise of supposed objectivity? "Today the threat is constituted by the neutralizing forces of globalization in which mastery is hidden under the mask of economic rationality and technoscience seen as the only hope for 'progress' and for 'peace.'"[52]

Another consequence of digital disorientation is what Vattimo, drawing on Heidegger, refers to as the 'lack of emergency' *(Notlosigkeit).* Today, information overflows and saturates, fostering a predisposition toward overexposure. The incessant stream of data paradoxically generates a resignation, "one that remains undisturbed even when there is an economic crisis like the one that we are experiencing now."[53] Citizen participation in democratic elections

[48] Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 8.
[49] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 31.
[50] As argued by Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala in *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 64.
[51] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 7.
[52] Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 228.
[53] Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 126.

declines and not because people are doing well. The worst emergency is the lack of emergency: this is "the triumph of an objectivist metaphysics; the way things are can be the only horizon possible,"[54] which, at the same time, means "the total reduction of Being to the thing, the forgetting of Being itself, which also means the forgetting of all the problematic aspects of experience."[55] A generalized and systemic conformism is established in the face of what is apparently presented as unchangeable, inasmuch as the existing order and its interpretation appears as the only possible reality.

In this context, reducing possibilities might offer a sense of order rather than loss of freedom: someone 'choosing' one possibility over others, or simplifying reality through a Manichean discourse, alleviates the arduous task of living in and understanding the present. According to Vattimo, "the fear of technology is the fear we feel in the face of a mechanical universe that promises a sense of security to the extent that it rules out authentic historicity."[56] Thus, discourses of hate, violence and calls for 'a return to order' that circulate through digital networks, gain traction. The absolute, as a closed totality, is closely tied to violence, as the darkest chapters of Western history attest. d'Agostini emphasizes that "the metaphysical tradition has used truth as a germinal principle of violence, repression and institutional deception."[57] In a different way, but in a similar spirit, Uruguayan musician Jorge Drexler sings in his song "Frontera:" "*el mundo está como está, por causa de las certezas / la guerra y la vanidad, comen en la misma mesa*" ("the world is the way it is because of certainties / war and vanity dine at the same table").[58]

In *Of Reality*, Vattimo expresses his concern regarding the widespread feeling that the only way to address issues such as terrorism or the financial crisis, for example, would be

[54] Vattimo, *Being and its Surroundings*, 33.
[55] Vattimo, *Being and its Surroundings*, 63.
[56] Vattimo, *Being and its Surroundings*, 112.
[57] Franca d'Agostini "Truth," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 193.
[58] Jorge Drexler, "Frontera," from *Frontera* (CD, Virgin/EMI España, 1999).

through the so-called 'new realisms.' "These metaphysically framed political systems hold that society must direct itself according to truth (the existing paradigm), that is, in favor of the strong against the weak. Only the strong determine truth, because they are the only ones that have the tools to know, practice, and impose it"[59] writes with Zabala. The relationship that the philosopher draws between truth and power/authority is clear: a politics grounded in truth can only be an authoritarian one. In the contemporary industrialized world, the regimes that embrace this type of dominance are generally neoliberal democracies (also called techno-feudalisms), hence, "the Western democracies that host the majority of the world's multinational corporations have developed into lightly disguised oligarchies whose political systems entrench and support a class defined by its outlandish and ever-increasing wealth."[60] The issue with economic liberalism doesn't lie in its support for individual freedoms, but rather in "it's particular view of freedom (…) [which] has already decided who we are."[61] In *Being and its Surroundings*, Vattimo draws a sharp parallel between the case of the post-Soviet Russian economy, with its increasingly wealthy and arrogant oligarchs, and what is happening in the once social-democratic West which "today is totally a slave to market ideology."[62]

Perhaps, in today's landscape, the generalized state of crisis and the godlike omnipresence of virtual communication undermine the possibility of adopting reflective, interpretative, and active stances. This drives individuals to displace the search for meaning outside themselves, seeking certainty, answers, or closed solutions from external referents that impose a predefined reality. Frequently, in the hands of a new messiah—which may take the form of technology, with its closed answers or, in the political sphere, a strong leader, promising to make things "great again."

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[59] Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 12.

[60] William Egginton, "Realism/New Realism," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 163.

[61] Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 53.

[62] Vattimo, *Being and its Surroundings*, 83.

SECTION THREE

Opportunity

This third section focuses on analyzing how, despite the consequences brought about by the end of modernity, Vattimo identifies—at the very heart of the crisis—suggestive possibilities for emancipation. The death of everything (truth, history, God, subject) serves as the starting point for a new kind of thought—for a *pensiero debole*.

The fall of absolute truths, the disintegration of the unitary conception of history, the end of metaphysics and the death of God, the loss of the notion of progress and the predominance of a technical-informatics apparatus turned into a mechanism of control and total organization of the world, do not imply, for the author, a definitive closure. On the contrary, his proposal of weak thought and of an ontological, anarchic hermeneutics emerge as a necessary attitude in the face of this panorama, allowing it to be positively reconfigured.

For Vattimo, in the crisis itself, we can glimpse the cracks through which light can filter again. Thus, through a weak, positive nihilism, the possibility of accessing a more authentic form of existence opens up. Crises, far from representing collapse, can also be an opportunity for transformation.

Chapter 5

Being in Time

To engage in postmetaphysical thought, it is essential to recognize that Being can no longer be conceived simply as what is—namely, presence—but rather as what occurs or unfolds. Drawing on Heidegger and Nietzsche, Vattimo underlines how then, in the post-modern conditions of existence it is "possible to gain access to the positive opportunities for the very essence of man."[63] In other words, now, a different possibility—a positive, promising one—emerges. And

[63] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 11.

so, the task is not to return to lost values, but rather, to take seriously—from within a consummated nihilism—the new opportunity: the history of metaphysics, at this terminal stage, presents two dimensions. On the one hand it is acknowledged that the ontological difference has been forgotten; on the other, this very recognition reopens the question of Being. This inaugurates an interpretative process that harbors the very possibility of emancipation.

But this interpretative process must possess particular qualities in order to avoid becoming, once again, an absolute metaphysical gesture. The weakening of thought—the more flexible and attenuated attitude described at the beginning of this work—is thus the quality that is required. Vattimo distances himself from those thinkers who seek to leave metaphysics behind through a decisive, definitive overcoming (*Überwindung*), or total destruction. He finds it essential to resist approaches that, in their eagerness to leave behind and dismantle what is no longer viable, resort to methods that derive from the very metaphysical structures they intend to reject, and which ultimately, for Vattimo, reproduce what they aim to transcend. In contrast, he aligns himself with what Heidegger terms *Verwindung*, and in the gradual decline of metaphysics, he turns towards the notion of convalescence. In a positive turn, the death of metaphysics becomes a transit towards a new perspective—one that, instead of an end, opens a horizon. Vattimo calls this process, 'the interminable weakening of Being.' Resignation thus becomes acceptance of the end, which, in a positive shift, is transformed into gentle agony that contains the possibility of recovery.

As Daniela Angelucci explains, "Vattimo arrives at an 'ontology of decline,' of weakening, and at a dismissal of the traditional concept of the subject."[64] It is the humanist tradition that assigns to man the role of subject, of being conceived as *Grund*, full presence. Thus, in the search for a thought that remains emancipated from the conception of Being as eternal form and from the mythological quest for an objective truth, Vattimo proposes an

[64] Daniela Angelucci, "Media," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 128.

'ontology of actuality,' since all of our "philosophical precepts will not be able to claim eternal validity; accordingly, philosophy can only become an 'ontology of actuality.'"[65] The concept 'ontology of actuality' is taken from Foucault, although Vattimo uses it in a Heideggerian sense, where ontology "denotes the thought of Being in both senses, subjective and objective, of the genitive"[66] meaning the question of Being, but also the type of thinking that Being itself initiates or discloses. With reference to the notion of 'actuality,' Vattimo states "(…) I use this term to refer to the common condition of our life at present."[67] Thus, the definition of actuality and the notion of historicity are central to Vattimo's thought. He explicitly distances himself from thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard or Deleuze—whom he considers to be never fully free from metaphysical assumptions: although initially captivated by Lévinas, Vattimo later questions "(…) what is the place of history in Lévinas? Here he resembles Derrida, another thinker who has no conception of history"[68] referencing concepts such as 'the Other' or '*différance.*'[69] He does not even subscribe to the idea of post-structuralism; his historical, hermeneutic stance leads him instead to speak of postmodernity. For Vattimo, all thinking—or more precisely, interpretative—activity must acknowledge and be conscious of the moment and context in which it is situated. With the fragmentation and dissolution of unitary history, the ideal opportunity arises to defund thought by paradoxically 'grounding' it in the acknowledgment of its inescapable historicity. This is why, for him, the ontology of actuality constitutes the interpretation of the present situation, made evident insofar as Being possesses an epochal character. "Being is not an object, it is the aperture within which alone man and the world,

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[65] Rogi Thomas, "Ontology of actuality," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 142.

[66] Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 23.

[67] Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 23.

[68] Gianni Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality: A Biographical-Theoretical Interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone," trans. Nicholas Walker, Iris: European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate 1, no. 2 (2009), 339.

[69] As Clayton Crockett explains, these notions still retain a trace of transhistorical metaphysics. See Clayton Crockett, "Poststructuralism," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 161.

subject and object, can enter into relationship. Since the aperture does not confer stability on the object (which arises only within specific apertures), Being should be thought of as 'event': Being 'is' not, properly speaking, but rather 'comes about,' happens."[70] In other words, "Being is not, except as *epoché* (…) Being is nothing but its history, its epoch,"[71] where "the epoch of Being constitutes its only mode of being, and therefore is a positive way of approaching it." Thus, we can interpret what Being means today not through fixed or closed systems, but in the knowledge of our concrete historical situation and position. The erosion of absolute truths, of eternal essences, has to do with this: Being reveals itself in its epochality, in different historical epochs and in different ways. Being is in the end, "its ahistorical historicity."[72] According to David Webb: "Being is disclosed historically and through language, and therefore to think ontologically is to think historically, to think historically is to think hermeneutically, and hermeneutics involves an interpretation not of meaning, but of the event by which Being is disclosed in the world."[73] Thus, a new hermeneutic relationship emerges between the individual, their thought, and existence, accompanied by a true understanding of their own historicity.

[70] Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 6.
[71] Vattimo, *Art 's Claim to Truth*, 23.
[72] Rogi Thomas, "Being," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 38.
[73] David Webb, "Heidegger Martin," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 90.

Chapter 6

Death, Condition of the Possible

Starting from the consideration that Being is not a fixed or eternal entity, but rather that it *happens*, it can be said that it occurs in time, as event that unfolds in temporal existence. Its eventual character is emphasized insofar as it reveals itself discontinuously, appearing as momentary flashes, in which in Being unveils in a certain mode. This fragmentary appearance of Being points to the finitude of the interpreter: it always discloses itself from a situated, historical perspective, where history, is no longer conceived as a linear chain of consummated facts, but a process that is continually actualized in the present. This revelation, postmodern and hermeneutical, happens through broken transmissions. "Being is nothing other than the transmission of the historical/*geschicklich* opening that constitutes for every historical being (…) the specific possibility of access to the world."[74] Being events itself through history and so, on the one hand, it happens when we "historicize" ourselves, but at the same time, none of its manifestations results final or ultimate. "Being maintains itself through its perpetual self-interpretation."[75] Thus, "The experience of Being is always an *Andenken* and a *Verwindung*, inasmuch as it is an experience of the reception of, and response to, these transmissions."[76] *Andenken* (remembrance) is for Vattimo the appropriate mode of approaching the abandonment of the notion of Being as foundation, without completely leaving behind the relation to the past. In this way, there is a positive access to a weak sustenance, not as a foundation, but in terms of 'recollective thought.'[77] If we only consider the question of difference between Being and beings, outside the metaphysical context, we would be treating difference precisely as a metaphysical precept. For Vattimo 'difference' is the event that enables the end of metaphysics,

[74] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 176.
[75] Thomas, "Being," 37.
[76] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 176.
[77] Gianni Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, trans. Cyprian Blamires and Thomas Harrison (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 125.

and that belongs to a specific epoch and mode of Being. Like this, difference as an event, is an overcoming process, a 'being in between,' in an endless development, that never reaches an end point. According to Silvia Marzano, "'being in between' means that Being itself never ends its ending; the history of Being is a history of 'consumption,' of an endless weakening, a manifestation of Being's temporal essence: ephemerality, caducity, birth-death."[78] Difference, then, corresponds for Vattimo to *Verwindung*. In this sense, the inherited structures of metaphysics are not discarded entirely, but are instead bent toward the formulation of a 'weak ontology.' And, as Marzano points out, "the Dasein thinks Being as difference when it projects itself towards its own death. However, death is not 'the shrine of nothingness,' as it is for Heidegger, but a process of decline and of the disappearing of the violent structures of metaphysics towards a 'weak ontology.'"[79] Death is not nothingness, but the possibility that enables the process of weakening and opening.

Reflective thinking allows the attentive recollection of the past to combine existence and interpretation, in so far as "true authentic existence thinks the past, (…) not as past, dead and irrevocable, but as 'having been,'"[80] explains Vattimo. In *Being and Its Surroundings*, he revisits Heidegger's notion of authentic experience, while also drawing on Gadamer to show that hermeneutics convincingly reveals how the interpreter—or the community of interpreters—always operates within inherited frameworks, wherein understanding emerges through the continual integration of past and present. "This is why 'understanding,' Gadamer says, is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated."[81] The interpreter always understands, from within a historically situated and culturally informed position,

[78] Silvia Marzano, "Difference," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 63.

[79] Marzano, "Difference," 63.

[80] Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics,* trans., ed., and introd. Peter Carravetta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), PDF page 118.

[81] Zabala, "Introduction" in *Art's Claim to Truth*, xxi.

inevitably embedded in their context. To assume historicity, then, is not only to notice what has been inherited, but to interpret it. To actively include it in a project, as Gadamer would say. Being is then the limitless progression of finite expressions, and so Dassein, can recognize Being as difference when, while understanding that the past has not *passed*, it projects itself towards its own death. "The authentic relationship with the past is opened up by the awareness of one's own mortality, a condition that assumes as only mortal even the traces and the models which have been handed down through history,"[82] Vattimo states. "Among all the possibilities that constitute Dasein's project, that is, its being-in-the-world, dying is the only possibility that Dasein cannot avoid,"[83] writes later in *The End of Modernity*. Heidegger's being-toward-death is intrinsically connected to the project of Dasein, insofar as it must remain in open contact with its own mortality, in order for it not to be enclosed within totality. In other words, Dasein would become total by ceasing to be process, abandoning its constant becoming. Then, "historicity, the opening up of human existence, the refusal to let it be reduced to the eternal structure of true Being (…) all these signify mortality."[84] Historicity means mortality, and an authentic existence, then, radically assumes its finitude. From Vattimo's perspective, being is characterized as a sort of constant oscillation between its historical manifestations—a shifting openness connected both to the abyss of our being mortal and to a weakened, hermeneutic remembrance *(Andenken)* of the past. This oscillation underlies the notion of 'the weakness of Being:' it is not a firm and immutable foundation, but an interpretative temporality, which always reveals itself as possibility. Subsequently, for Vattimo, "the weakened subject should thus also be open to a less melodramatic relation with his own mortality:"[85] it is precisely the possibility of death that enables any other possibility. In other words, the continuous horizon of the possibility of death constitutes the authentic condition of all that is possible.

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[82] Vattimo, *Beyond the Subject*, PDF page 118.
[83] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity,* 116.
[84] Nihilism and emancipation 74
[85] Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference,* 6.

Chapter 7

Hermeneutics as a Contemporary *Koiné*

Being—linked to one's own mortality, and thus to one's historicity—is deeply related to the question of language. For Heidegger, the notion of death, upon which the possibility of authentic existence depends, is itself the very experience of the connection between mortality and language. However, as Vattimo reflects, "the essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought." [86] It is a connection that is not entirely evident.

Vattimo understands language as "the locus of a total mediation of every experience of the world."[87] What this suggests, is that access to Being is mediated in language. Experience is not *explained by* language, but experience *is through* language. In this sense, "like Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Vattimo regards language as the house of Being."[88] It is important to note that the consideration of language is always approach within an existentialist framework, since also for him, "(…) the 'forgetting of Being'–that is, metaphysics–advanced because philosophy mistook language as a criterion of things rather than a clarification of what emerges in experience."[89] Language is that through which interpreting and making sense of experience from a concrete historical situation happens, linked closely, at the same time, to the notion of 'recollection.' Hence, language is not a representation of a universal reason exercised by the subject, but, instead, it is an intersubjective, historical phenomenon. As Davide Monaco points out, "the world is formed of language games that are essentially dialogical and thus intersubjective and historically becoming. The individual is immersed in a web of intersubjective relations that he or she does not enter into by choice, but which for him or her constitute the condition of possibility of any level of access to objectivity."[90] In other words,

[86] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 69.
[87] Thomas, "Being," 39.
[88] Thomas, "Being," 39.
[89] Thomas, "Being," 38.
[90] Davide Monaco, "Analytic and Continental Philosophy," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 26.

language is not a device employed by subjects to describe reality, but constitutes the very way of accessing it, through the network of intersubjective relations in which she/he is always already thrown. This is again reflected in Nietzschean aphorism frequently cited by Vattimo: "There are no facts, only interpretations," in parallel with Gadamer's assertion: "Being that can be understood is language." Language, understanding and interpretation are thus irreducibly historical, and cannot be dehistoricised or abstracted from their temporal-cultural contexts.

Language and historicity are also related, insofar as Vattimo considers language as *Ereignis*, the event of appropriation through which Being comes into presence. Language is then the site where the interplay between Being and understanding unfolds; is they very way in which Being happens, in which its disclosed, through a process of transmission and reception. Subsequently, as Libera Pisano explains in her analysis of Vattimo's *After Christianity*,[91] "if language is the way in which being 'happens'–which 'eventuates in history,' it eventuates in 'historical languages'–then human understanding does not take place outside the linguistic articulation of the world. Therefore, human understanding cannot be absolute, but is always limited and situated in a historical perspective."[92] Truth, then, should not be conceived of as an objective correspondence between the enunciated statement and an independent external reality, as Vattimo argues, but rather as a production that occurs within the framework of a specific linguistic and historical horizon. This is also why he writes about the 'weakening of the real.'[93] With this hermeneutic framework, truth is a situated emergence contingent upon the grammatical, semantic and cultural structures shared by a linguistic community at a given time and place. Consequently, the criterion of truth is neither absolute nor universal, but relative to the historical conditions that shape meaning. This opens up the prospect of conceiving truth as

[91] Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

[92] Libera Pisano, "Language," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 116.

[93] Gianni Vattimo, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, with Piergiorgio Paterlini, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 156.

a horizon of permanent possibility. And it is from this perspective, that the modern subject can weakly re-emerge, after the fragmentation, loss of confidence and metaphysical fall: "the weak subject emerges from the reflective interrogation of contemporary, social pluralism."[94] Thus, as Vattimo explains, it is precisely from a nihilism that understands that any "argumentative process is always historically and culturally situated,"[95] that an ethical commitment to responsibility and the necessity of interpretation can arise.

"By recognising that Being is event we can enter actively into history, instead of passively contemplating its necessary laws," Vattimo writes in *Belief*.[96] So, the very function of interpretation, mediated through language, destabilizes the univocal notion of reality and history, wherein—as previously discussed—truth itself is also a matter of interpretation. From Vattimo's perspective recognizing this opens the way to an ethics of tolerance and respect, necessary for a hermeneutics of interpretation—a hermeneutics that does not treat interpretation as a mere act of knowledge, but as the very mode through which knowledge unfolds. Consequently, Vattimo's nihilistic hermeneutics places language, Being, and history at its core, articulating from there a vision of emancipation, a notion that is inseparable from the interpretative act itself.

This is why Vattimo refers to hermeneutics as a possible *koiné* of the present age. In light of his thought, hermeneutics should be our shared language, the philosophy of our times, since, what remains after losing all metaphysical foundations is the history of interpretations; the necessary, ongoing act of pure and perpetual interpretation. In response to possible criticisms regarding whether this *koiné* can, as *koiné*, be universalized, Vattimo turns to the thought of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his reflections on textual

[94] David Rose, "Subject/Weak Subject," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 183.

[95] Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvi.

[96] Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 78.

interpretation, Schleiermacher emphasizes that there is no definitive or absolute method for understanding a text. Interpretative tools (such as contextualizing the author, the historical period or the language) are insufficient to guarantee a final or 'true' interpretation. Instead, he proposes a more fragmentary and provisional view of interpretation, we may say a 'weaker approach,' in line with Vattimo's philosophy. As David Rose writes, this allows Vattimo to develop "hermeneutics into the *koiné* of postmodernity because no other philosophical position can express the pluralism of a fragmented and informational society; the perspectives which make possible our apprehension of reality are not transcendent but 'always qualified' and tied to 'historical- cultural, linguistic, categorical horizons.'"[97]

From this hermeneutic vision of the world, whose emergence corresponds to the characteristics of the current era, Vattimo develops his *pensiero debole*. As stated in the introduction to *The End of Modernity*, "'Weak thought' may be best understood as a style of thinking rather than a fully developed, self-consistent philosophical system."[98]

[97] David Rose, "Postmodernism/Postmodernity," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 160.

[98] Jon R. Snyder, "Introduction," in *The End of Modernity*, liv.

Chapter 8

Interpretation as Political Practice

"The need for a 'hermeneutic *koiné*' that is, the horizon of comprehension of different discourses, is also linked to Vattimo's concrete commitment to politics," writes Pisano.[99] At this point, the primary distinction from the hermeneutics developed by Gadamer or by Ricoeur becomes apparent: in Vattimo, the focus of hermeneutics is placed on the emancipatory implications embedded at the very core of the interpretative act—an emphasis that reveals in his hermeneutics a nihilistic vocation, radically anti-metaphysical. In *Hermeneutic Communism*, Vattimo and Zabala highlight the anarchic vein that runs within hermeneutic practice. Not because it has no basis (it needs and includes inherited traditions), but because it questions the idea of being able to reach an ultimate and absolute certainty.[100] This emancipation from absolutism has clear political implications, inasmuch as emancipation is "the realm within which freedom is effectively possible."[101] Thereby, the practical, almost militant scope of hermeneutics can be identified: interpretation is action, and not a disinterested act detached from a reality in which it is imbued. In fact, for Vattimo, democracy itself is a constant and collective hermeneutic practice. Democracy is "neither an ancient model to conform to, nor an idea to realize: (…) is a weak conflict of interpretations,"[102] Silvia Mazzini summarizes. From this perspective, democracy is not conceived as the attainment of consensus, but rather as the ongoing process toward it. This suggests an implicit—yet imperative—recognition of dissent as a constitutive element. A plurality of diverse, and often conflicting perspectives are essential for arriving at consensus *through* democratic means. Such consensus does not represent truth, reality, or any other metaphysical ideal, but rather a contingent agreement among divergent

[99] Pisano, "Language," 117.
[100] Vattimo, Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 79-87.
[101] Vattimo, Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 41.
[102] Silvia Mazzini, "Democracy," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 58.

voices and viewpoints. "¿Do we need to acknowledge a truth to reach an agreement, or do we say that we have reached the truth when we reach an agreement?"[103] reflects Vattimo in this regard.

In this key, Vattimo and Zabala propose the notion of 'hermeneutic communism'—a formulation of a communism that, weakened in its metaphysical precepts, presents itself as an alternative that harbors plurality, open to all voices, particularly the weaker marginalized ones, which are normally the victims of the capitalist system in its oppressive version. As previously discussed, the notion of absolutism is inherently tied to the emergence of violence and totalitarian regimes. "The only possible Philosophical definition of violence seems to be the silencing of all questioning by the authoritative peremptoriness of the first principle,"[104] states Vattimo in reference to violence as the annulment of dissent, that is to say, of other voices in *Belief.* Thus, "a politics grounded in 'truth' can only be a politics of authority."[105]

Hermeneutics, as contemporary philosophy (post-metaphysical and anti-dogmatic), emerges as a practical philosophy of our time. *Pensiero debole*, functions as both a mode of thinking and attitude, while hermeneutics becomes its form of praxis, clearly oriented towards the ethical-political sphere. Once again, the multidimensional crisis unleashed by the end of modernity represents, for Vattimo, an opportunity to embrace the eventual historical character of Being, and the interpretative nature of truth. This perspective invites us to adopt the hermeneutics of constant interpretation as a practical philosophy—one capable of informing democratic and emancipatory projects that have, in their ethical vision, respect for pluralities and the aim of freedom.

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[103] Vattimo, "Is Religion an Enemy of Civilization?" in *DIA-LOGOS*, 21.
[104] Vattimo, *Belief*, 65.
[105] Vattimo, *Of reality*, 172.

Chapter 9

Weakening Determinism, Opening Faith

The hermeneutic imperative, then, is driven not by theoretical considerations, but fundamentally ethical ones. In this regard, in the introduction to the conversation on the future of religion between Vattimo and Richard Rorty, Zabala points out: "wherever there is an authority that, in the guise of a scientific or ecclesiastical community, imposes something as objective truth, philosophy has the obligation to proceed in the opposite direction: to show that truth is never objectivity, but always interpersonal dialogue which takes effect in the sharing of a language."[106] On the basis of a common language, the current philosophical focus should center on the sustained defense of a pluralistic dialogue—one that oriented towards the search for consensus (and not truth), fosters less violent and more inclusive spaces. It is precisely here where weak thinking is inscribed, insofar as it makes possible the rescue of alternative and weaker voices and perspectives, by opening up to the plurality of historical and cultural interpretations, past, present and future. "'Weak' in the expression 'weak thought' stands for 'synchronically pluralistic' and 'diachronically ever-changing,'" summarizes Franca d'Agostini.[107] This combination of pragmatism and coherence, as d'Agostini argues, meaningfully brings together Nietzschean nihilism and the Christian notion of *pietas*. The ethical dimension of listening to silenced voices and acknowledging that one's own perspective is neither absolute nor singular, resonates also with the notion of *caritas* and humility.

"For Vattimo the history of salvation (Christianity), the history of metaphysics (Heidegger) and nihilism (Nietzsche) are therefore closely interrelated (….).[108] Vattimo interrogates what remains of Christianity once metaphysical thought has been consummated in

[106] Santiago Zabala, "Introduction," in *The Future of Religion*, by Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 8.

[107] d'Agostini "Weak Thought/Pensiero Debole, 203.

[108] Gaetano Chiurazzi, "Interpretation," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 108.

postmodernity. As previously discussed, he does not align himself with dogmatic or absolute interpretations and institutional forms of religion; however, he does not reject religiosity as a whole. In seeking to 'rediscover' faith, Vattimo centers his attention on the Christian doctrines of incarnation and the act of *kenosis*. For him, *kenosis*—understood as self-emptying—is evidence of the weakening of an absolute God who empties himself, relinquishes his power, and abandons the vertical authoritarian relationship with humanity. The Christian message, according to Vattimo, lies precisely in this gesture: Jesus, as the incarnation of God, embodies a message of humility, charity, and the dissolution of unquestionable sacred power. It is, in essence, the authentic process of weakening. In this interpretative turn, Vattimo presents secularization as the natural culmination of the historical unfolding of Christianity, as its most coherent consequence. Just as he reclaims a form of 'positive' nihilism, he also interprets secularization in affirmative terms. In response to the loss of meaning due to 'the death of God,' positive secularization emerges as a path towards freedom and dialogue, guided by the principle of *caritas*. In other words, the weakening of the Heideggerian Being parallels the weakening of the Christian God—understood not as a disappearance but as a liberation from dogmatic religiosity towards spiritualization. This interpretation of secularization is inspired by Vattimo's reading on Joachim of Fiore, Heidegger, and René Girard's religious anthropology.[109] For Vattimo, ultimately, the church should preach more about *caritas* instead of *veritas*. *Caritas* represent for Vattimo precisely the goal, and also the limit of secularization.

Understood in this way, the process of secularization would not undermine Christianity, but on the contrary, fulfills its profound vocation: to liberate the human being from every kind of domination,[110] through and thanks to the "Christian commandment of charity."[111]

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[109] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 38.

[110] Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, with John D. Caputo, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 37.

[111] Vattimo and Rorty, *The Future of Religion*, 54.

Something similar occurs with the question of technology and informatics. In the same way that Vattimo understands secularization as "the very essence of Christianity,"[112] or its complete realization, the end of metaphysics is paradoxically the very essence of *Gestell*. It is not always the executioner who executes the sentence: sometimes it is he who reveals the way of escape. The *Gestell* is then a sort of beginning of *Ereignis*: "The essence of technology is, then, at one and the same time the culmination of the metaphysical forgetting of Being and the prelude to its remembrance," [113] explains Vattimo. Somehow, the fragmentation of reality and the explosion of data and information generated by modern media multiply facts but, simultaneously, multiply interpretations. Vattimo does not celebrate the administrative and controlling power of technology, that tends to objectify individuals; but he does observe, within it—within this world that has turned into a fable—a (weak) glimmer of possible liberation. This liberation, for instance, can be seen in the gradual dissolution of rigid metaphysical categories such as subject and object. The culminal point of forgetting Being thus becomes, paradoxically, the beginning of *Ereignis*, where the event of Being might emerge. In the 'chaos' of the media (and today the digital and social networks as well) resides a fragile hope for emancipation, insofar as we are compelled, almost inevitably, to become interpreters of actuality.

The same is understood in relation to science and its pretension of objectivity. "It is modern science, heir, and completion of metaphysics, that turn the world into a place where there are no (longer) facts, only interpretations," [114] Vattimo writes. In Nietzsche's fabled world, Vattimo finds a weakened nihilism that, imbued with an optimistic tint, opens an emancipatory path, insofar as it entails the recognition that all discourse—including that of modern science—does not yield unquestionable truths, but rather points of departure; at most, data that is inherently meaningless: it is necessary to interpret it in order for it to gain relevance. With

[112] Vattimo, *Belief*, 50.
[113] Gianni Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference*, 172.
[114] Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 26.

respect to the criticisms that may arise regarding his perspective, it is crucial to clarify that Vattimo's position is not one of relativism: the hermeneutic process of interpretation is indeed infinite, yet it is not arbitrary—it is guided, historically and culturally situated, it has limits, and has shared horizons of consensus objectives (rather than absolute conclusions). In this way, Vattimo moves away from the idea that "everything is the same." This is precisely why he speaks of a weakened and affirmative nihilism: not as a collapse into meaninglessness, but as a guiding principle and formative process, marked by the oscillation between multiple, contingent, interpretations.

Weak thought thus constitutes a responsible, necessary and proactive stance against all forms of totalitarianism and absolutism—whether religious, political, technological or otherwise. It offers a mode of thinking that, like Aesop's reeds, adopts a flexible and resilient posture, constantly aware of its own historicity and committed to the gradual reduction of violence and any kind of imposition. At its heart lies the recognition that truth is never encountered in an outside 'real' world, but in the experience of interpretation and as an agreement. Thus, it emerges through a hermeneutics practiced as the philosophy of irreducible otherness—a practice of interpretation that is inclusive of pluralities, historically situated, ethically responsible, autonomous, and, therefore, as a result, genuinely emancipatory.

Intermezzo

The function of Art in Vattimo's Thought

Although Gianni Vattimo never formulated a philosophy of art explicitly, the question of art holds a central place within his thought. From the outset of his intellectual trajectory—particularly in his early engagement with aesthetics—art emerges as a recurring theme and becomes essential in the configuration of his ontological hermeneutics and in the articulation of *pensiero debole*.

Vattimo addresses art from a hermeneutic perspective. Thanks to the symbolic potential that art offers and its ability to enable infinite and multiple interpretations, the artwork becomes a privileged vector of the experience of truth and emancipation. By offering a plurality of meanings, art illustrates the non-foundational character of truth, multiple and interpretative. Therefore, as he states in *The End of Modernity*, the meaning of Being in our epoch "occurs first and most clearly in aesthetic experience."[115]

From this perspective, postmodern art stands out as a model of truth, freed from traditional aesthetic canons and the eternal aspirations formerly upheld, and positions itself as a possible means of interpretative freedom and historical openness. Vattimo additionally considers art to have a premonitory character: its decline—and not the 'death of art'—heralds the decline of truth conceived as absolute. Nonetheless, within that very decline, art reveals its ontological richness and emancipatory potential, precisely through its continual interpretability. Thus, "the death of art is not so much an end but a decline,"[116] and also, "an explosion of aesthetics."[117]

This conception aligns with the postmodern experience of existence, characterized by the coexistence of multiple truths, contexts, and interpretations, where freedom finds refuge in

[115] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 45.
[116] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 58-63.
[117] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 53-54.

the interpretative capacity and ethical responsibility to engage in critical (or positively nihilistic) and hermeneutic thinking. In relation to postmodern chaos as a constant invitation to interpretation, Vattimo speaks of an 'aesthetics of oscillation;' thus, we find ourselves facing a "continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation."[118] Vattimo connects the liberating power of art and this oscillation by drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of *shock* and Martin Heidegger's notion of *Stoss*. *Shock* disrupts and de-automatizes perception, opening up a historical experience with political and critical significance; *Stoss* interrupts technical-calculative thought, opening the possibility for the event of Being. For Vattimo this which disorients yet simultaneously ruptures everyday inertia—a kind of disorienting yet awakening jolt—is key quality of the contemporary artistic experience. For him, "the artist therefore ontologically creates a historically connoted world, potentially more directed towards the future than the past, into which the viewer, after perceiving the shock (*Stoss*) of Heideggerian memory, is welcomed, perceiving the previous world as substantially distant and alien. The foundation of this new world produced by the work of art, by its material expression, is new for the artist, for the viewer and for the interpreter, who, endowed with previous knowledge, adapts his or her own knowledge to the new stimuli produced by the new work-world."[119]

Thus, since Vattimo's reflection on art centers on the experience of truth that the artwork enables, for him, "art no longer appears centered on 'the work,' but [on] the experience of the work."[120] This means that the philosopher weakens the centrality of the art object in order to emphasize the breadth of interpretations—open and plural—that any artwork elicits. It is in this openness, Vattimo suggests, that the ontological richness of art resides. As Christine Ross summarizes, Vattimo "does not analyse artworks; his approach is predominantly aesthetic. His

[118] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 10-11.

[119] Ivelise Perniola, "Poiesis/Poesis" in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 151.

[120] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 58.

interest focuses on the European philosophical tradition of aesthetics (from Kant to Gadamer) and what he calls 'the experience of art.'"[121]

From this perspective, Vattimo establishes a close relationship between art, interpretation, truth, and freedom, where, as Zabala summarizes, "(...) art's ontological bearing (indicated by Heidegger) requires an interpretative process (delineated by Pareyson) that constitutes its truth (as Gadamer explained), which becomes the goal of art after the end of metaphysics."[122] As he notes, truth can be conceived as the hermeneutic consequence of the ontological dimension of art. Ultimately, "(...) art's function is not to fulfill, perform, or entertain the demands of the public but, on the contrary, to require from the public an interpretation that allows the work's ontological truth to come out."

The encounter with a work of art—and, as Alessandro Bertinetto explains, with any aesthetic object or artifact— "impacts on those who experience them, both because they make it possible to imaginatively experience ways of life other than everyday ones and because they disclose different worlds, understood in terms of other ways of 'feeling-with,' that is, of producing a 'common sense,' thereby showing the contingent relativity of real-life contexts."[123] The hermeneutic framework through which aesthetic experience is presented in Vattimo, draws upon Kant's notion of *sensus communis*, insofar as the aesthetic judgment "is exercised with a view to a sort of ideal community that is always still in the process of constituting itself."[124] Thus, the aesthetic experience "is the experience of belonging to a community."[125] However, as Vattimo explains in the chapter "From Utopia to Heterotopia,"[126] this aesthetic experience in mass society no longer signifies a universal reconciliation; rather, the communities it constitutes

[121] Christine Ross, "Postmodern Art/Aesthetics," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 155.

[122] Zabala, "Introduction," in *Art's Claim to Truth*, xiii.

[123] Alessandro Bertinetto, "Sensus Communis (Common Sense)," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 182.

[124] Vattimo, *Art 's Claim to Truth*, 131.

[125] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 68.

[126] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 62-73. The concept of 'heterotopia' is taken from Michel Foucault and reinterpreted in a post-Heideggerian key.

are plural and incommensurable. Christine Ross explains that in Vattimo's thought, "postmodern art, deprived of the emancipatory and transformative power dreamed of by early avant-garde movements, still has a weak emancipatory sway enabled by its *Verwindung* activity: it ungrounds metaphysics by disclosing the loss of the main metaphysical attributes of modern art and aesthetics—the creative genius, authenticity, originality, beauty, formal harmony and unity; it sets truth to work by prolonging these attributes so as to twist them, by putting art directly in question, thereby raising the question of its limits, its tools, and its position in society."[127] Art thus becomes a site of convalescence (*Verwindung*), a fragile yet meaningful way of relating to Being, truth, and history.

For Vattimo, contemporary art aligns itself with a project of transformation. The philosopher highlights examples such as Alfredo Jaar's *The Rwanda Project* as works that call for the emancipation from the static and objectivist character of metaphysics. These artworks function as direct appeals to viewers, urging them to take a stance, to act, and to respond.

In the second part of this essay, through the analysis of examples of postmodern design, I will attempt to outline a modality of post-metaphysical design that, following the principles Vattimo sees in contemporary art through his weak thought, enables an alternative way of conceiving design. By examining these examples, I aim to highlight the ontological potential that a weak design could offer, by virtue of its capacity to project worlds, disrupt or transform established symbolic orders, and challenge dominant narratives by engaging creatively with alternatives.

[127] Ross, "Postmodern Art/Aesthetics," 156.

Part II

Weak Design

Brief Introduction to Weak Design

Just as Vattimo argues that "we rebel against metaphysics because in it we recognize the basis of the total organization of the world within which we ourselves could no longer call Being,"[128] weak design likewise rebels against its metaphysical heritage. The weakening of design thus unfolds in parallel with the weakening of Being, as articulated by Vattimo and explained in Part I of this work. Weak design does not aspire to conceive closed, universal, eternal, transcultural, or ahistorical objects. On the contrary, is constituted by those practices that recognize that their strength lies precisely in their functional fragility, instability, and openness to hermeneutic aesthetic experience, always situated within historical contexts. In this sense, weak design is not defined as a specific type of design, but rather as an attitude—in response to technical, productive, and functional imperatives, it proposes an alternative approach grounded in the idea that design is, ultimately, a creative quest for *other* possibilities *of*. Its value resides in its symbolic and interpretative openness, and in the emphasis it places on the process of projecting alternatives rather than on the realization of a fixed, material, and merely functional outcome. So just as Being never ends its ending, weak design is conceived as an open-ended creative process. The death of the traditional object—much like the death of art—does not signify its disappearance, but rather its decline to diffuse, and ambiguous designs. Weak design, then, constitutes a mode of thinking and making that opens the horizon to possibility and interpretation. The weak designer embodies a creative and critical stance aimed at resisting all forms of imposed determinism. This weakening is, ultimately, an "assumption of responsibility."[129] In this way, design—understood in its weakened form—takes on its political and emancipatory dimensions. Possible cases exploring this notion will be discussed below.

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[128] Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 214
[129] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 40.

Chapter 10

Form Follows Friction

10.1 *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* Chest of Drawers, Tejo Remy, 1991.

(Fig. 1 and 2) *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, Tejo Remy, 1991.

You Can't Lay Down Your Memory (1991) by Dutch designer Tejo Remy, is made from used wooden drawers bound with a cinch strap. Created within the context of early 1990s Dutch design, Remy's design practice is specifically associated to the Droog Design movement. The collective emerged as a critical response to the functionalism and formalism characteristic of modern design, opting for an aesthetic based on the valorization of imperfection. Movements like Droog resorted to conceptual, ironic and experimental approaches, valuing reclaimed materials and narrative depth. Remy's design—constructed from recycled furniture and assembled without apparent formal hierarchy—functions as a visual manifesto against the homogenization of taste and the strict rationality of function. It affirms, instead, the singular and the suggestive in the everyday object. "As a critique of consumerism, Tejo Remy collected found drawers, giving them new enclosures and loosely bundling them into a chest. By viewing

everything as potential material, Remy incorporates existing information, circumstances, or found objects into new contexts, often fostering social connections and telling the story of a particular place. He transforms the familiar while preserving its essence,"[130] the Droog Design Archive website states. It could be argued that Remy works from the understanding that we are embedded in political and social 'realities,' that are "nothing but the crystallization of prior existential decisions,"[131] as Vattimo would argue, and which Remy's work seeks to reveal. The questions that arise from Remy's design—and at the same time, those that bring the design itself into being—are directly related to the socio-historical moment from which the object emerged. In other words, this chest of drawers responds to concerns rooted in the context of production and hyperconsumption in which it was created. Remy's design is both a product of its time and a catalyst for reflection on that very moment. It turns toward the sociocultural context from which it emerges, insofar as it establishes a dialogue with it.

The chest of drawers "symbolizes the way our memory functions,"[132] says the designer himself. "Socrates devised a system for training your memory. You take a house and you use that house to position events in a certain locations. By linking these events to that particular location, you can always recall them." Each drawer possesses its own identity, making it possible to store something specific in each one ('papers in this drawer, something precious in that one,' he exemplifies), thereby facilitating the act of remembering. Yet, "since memory is also a bit messy for me, I had to tie it all together," Remy remarks with irony.

The designer works with found drawers rather than new ones, inspired by the idea that while most people are busy building their ideal worlds, he—like Robinson Crusoe—creates

[130] "Chest of Drawers by Tejo Remy," Droog, accessed May 16, 2025, https://www.droog.com/projects/chest-of-drawers-by-tejo-remy/.

[131] Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 79.

[132] ARTtube, Tejo Remy about *"You Can't Lay Down Your Memory,"* directed by Kris van Veen, commissioned by Centraal Museum, video, 1:54, YouTube, October 15, 2018, https://youtu.be/WLA1QpLcRp8.

from what already exists, available within reach. Asked if the piece is functional, he responds wryly: it is quite practical that each drawer can be used for something special.

Remy's piece, imbued with material memory and apparent dysfunctionality, embodies a critique of the notion of design as a closed and normative system. Instead, it proposes an open and critical approach to design, aligned with the cultural shifts of its time.

The following are other variants produced in subsequent years under different commissions and contexts:

(Fig. 3) Designed in 1991, fabricated 2008. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

(Fig. 4) Edition no. 55 of 200. Auctioned by Los Angeles Modern Auctions, March 1, 2015.

(Fig. 5) Part of the design collection of the MoMa and Museum of Art and Design, New York.

On further examination, this example proves particularly interesting due to the apparent visual chaos perceived at first sight and the order that, paradoxically, this chaos conceals. Within its anarchic configuration, each drawer can be easily recognized and recalled, aiding the memory of what is stored in each—perhaps even more effectively than any conventional chest of drawers. In a way, just as Vattimo finds opportunity in the chaos of postmodernity, there may be more 'functionality' in the apparent disorder of this chest of drawers than in the configuration traditionally expected of such an object.

The reading of Remy's chest of drawers proposed here is grounded in the analysis of the manifestos and statements of both the Droog collective and the designer himself. However,

even without these discourses, the chest of drawers alone exhibits a formal ambiguity that pushes the object beyond the utilitarian function one might expect, simultaneously opening space for a historically situated critique through humor and/or, open interpretation. The chaotic—visually speaking—nature of the object produces a disorientation that enables a plurality of interpretations. Is it a work of art? Is it a chest of drawers? Does it function? What is it?

Drawing on Benjamin, Vattimo describes aesthetic experience as one of distraction (*Zerstreuung*). where art breaks through the apathy caused by constant stimuli with the aforementioned shock effect. Remy's chest acts in an analogous way: it suspends the natural familiarity with the world—by altering the object's expected morphology—weakening its usual function, thereby generating a disruption that opens up towards new meanings. The visual ambiguity enables the hermeneutic event and the possible ethical reflections that arise from interpretation—or whatever meanings the observer may find. The destabilization caused by the chest of drawers is twofold: On the one hand, the lack of stability is clearly perceived, with the drawers arranged like a house of cards on the verge of collapse. Its visual impact is forceful by evidencing its structural fragility—it may crumble at any time. On the other hand, this instability unsettles the observer/user. By exposing its structural weakness and revealing the absence of the expected, the stability of the object metaphysically understood crumbles. In doing so, it weakens the traditional subject-object relation too, mediated by the automatism of a purely and narrowly functional interaction.

In sum, this example could be a mode of weak design, resisting the modern imposition 'form follows function.' Instead, it opens a space for the problematization of issues, reflected in the array of interpretations that emerge within the historical framework in which the object is inscribed. At the same time, function does not disappear; rather, it convalesces. It remains present in a weakened form. "From architecture to the novel to poetry to the figurative arts, the

post-modern displays, as its most common and most imposing trait, an effort to free itself from the logic of overcoming, development, and innovation,"[133] states Vattimo. "From this point of view, the post-modern corresponds to Heidegger's attempt to prepare a post-metaphysical kind of thought which would not be an *Überwindung* but rather a *Verwindung* of metaphysics." Remy's chest of drawers is neither just a stack of old drawers nor a typical chest. It is neither a singular work of art nor a mass-produced item. It fulfills a function, under its own rules, within the very world it creates. In any case, within the scope of this study, it is perhaps, a first example of a weak design.

10.2 *Consumer's Rest* Chair, Stiletto Studio, 1983.

(Fig. 6, and 7) *Consumer's Rest*, Stiletto Studios, 1983.

Another example that places at its center a critique of capitalism and the hyper-consumption it fosters is the *Consumer's Rest* chair by Frank Schreiner, a designer linked to the Neues Deutsches Design movement of the 1980s. Much like Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, *Consumer's Rest* is based on a standard item, the supermarket trolley—an everyday, mass-produced object—reinterpreted and endowed with a new function. Influenced by punk culture

[133] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 105-6.

and the Neoist movement, Schreiner transformed the shopping cart into a lounge chair for the extreme consumer, exhausted from consumption. Through minimal interventions, Schreiner reinterprets the cart, which is primarily "a satirical commentary on the consumerism of the 1980s"[134] but, unlike Duchamp's *Fountain*, Schreiner's design remains usable. As architect and industrial designer Ricardo Blanco notes, one can actually sit in *Consumer's Rest*.[135]

In addition, to reinforce its character as a hybrid object—or, why not, as a weak design—it is worth noting that *Consumer's Rest* and and its child-size version, *Short Rest*, have been made by German carts manufacturer Brüder Siegel since 1990. The Museum of Modern Art in New York included this miniature version in its exhibition *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900-2000* (figs. 8 and 9).[136]

(Fig. 8) *Short Rest,* 1989. (Fig. 9) Photo by Maria Zastrow, 2010.

[134] Rachel Brill, "A Rest for the Weary Shopper," *Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum*, April 12, 2014, https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2014/04/12/a-rest-for-the-weary-shopper/.

[135] Ricardo Blanco, interview by Silvia Fehrman, "Nuevo Diseño Alemán: Un Elogio de la Sencillez," Fundación PROA, accessed May 7, 2025, https://www.proa.org/esp/exhibicion-proa-nuevo-diseno-aleman--un-elogio-de-la-sencillez--textos.php#568.

[136] *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900–2000*, exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, July 29–November 5, 2012, archived March 1, 2014, accessed June 1, 2025, https://wayback.archive-it.org/4387/20140301000501/http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/centuryofthechild/#/timeline/power-play/melina-short-rest.

Like Remy's drawers, this design intentionally alludes to the time and context from which it emerges. The object, in addition to providing seating, becomes an observation on the contemporary self and life under late capitalism. As Michael Erlhoff writes in the preface to *Designed in Germany, Since 1949*, "it seems that suddenly everything has been set in motion. Borders are shifting, blocs are crumbling, walls are becoming transparent, and received patterns of order are being subverted. Fixed spaces and containing structures are disintegrating into mobile elements or are becoming fluid (…) all of this will have a highly tangible impact, particularly on all questions concerning organization and form, and thus on design."[137]

Gwendolyn Ristant argues that the German *Neue* Design features "familiar things in an unfamiliar light, so that irritation will allow us to gain a new experience of objects."[138] What is relevant in the two examples gathered in this first group titled "Form Follows Friction," is precisely the critical, historically situated, and conceptual dimension embodied by the objects that irritate, provoke or destabilize. In this sense, "the emotional content we associate with any object depends on more tan the object alone. Hidden associations may be revealed when one object is related to another, or otherwise taken out of its familiar context, or when even a single detail is removed or altered. If the resulting visual metaphor is sufficiently powerful, even the most ubiquitous artifact may be transformed into an object of emotional rather than practical utility,"[139] Mildred Constantine and Arthur Drexler write. This, as they explain, "challenges our inference to such commonplace objects." In this sense, the selected cases exemplify the aesthetic experience as the *aesthetic consensus* that Vattimo describes as 'feeling-with.' As Alessandro Bertinetto notes, "Vattimo argues that aesthetic groups of communities are social, historically situated and factually plural."[140] In Vattimo's words, the ideal character of the

[137] Markus Erlhoff et al., *Designed in Germany, Since 1949*, 1st ed. (Munich: Prestel, 1990), preface.
[138] Erlhoff et al., *Designed in Germany, Since 1949*, 209.
[139] Mildred Constantine and Arthur Drexler, *The Object Transformed* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 4.
[140] Bertinetto, "Sensus Communis (Common Sense)," 182.

community of taste "is rooted in what the community to which we belong factually is (…) the ideal is precisely the ideal that this community makes of itself."[141] This reveals the hermeneutic key in the understanding of aesthetic experience in Vattimo, where the aesthetic judgment does not refer to the object but rather "it refers to the subject as a member of a community."[142] Ultimately, these examples open to alternative forms of 'feeling-with'—that is, of engaging with other worlds as 'events of being.'[143] Questions of whether the chair or chest of drawers are conventionally beautiful or efficiently functional, recede into the background.

It is worth highlighting Vattimo's analysis of utopia as a 'projection of the future,' insofar as human beings, by grounding their actions in realist tendencies, are capable of transforming and creating both themselves and the world. In a parallel way, by grounding their expression in (weakened) functional tendencies, these objects can become vehicles for transformation without ceasing to be a chair or a chest of drawers—albeit in a highly distorted form.

Under this first category, which weakens function by opening up interpretive possibilities within a historical context that deliberately and conceptually informs the formation of the object, several other design countercurrents that emerged between the 1960s and 1990s could be included. As Midal explains, throughout 1960s the entrenched functionalism in design began to be "reevaluated and reinterpreted"[144] from multiple angles. In Italy, for example, groups such as UFO, Zziggurat, Archizoom Associate and Superstudio were labeled by art critic Germano Celant under *Architettura Radicale*, representing an attempt to weaken the timeless notion of architecture characteristic of the modern project, in favor of the transient and ephemeral. This approach parallels what several designers did by undermining the universalist

[141] Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, 132.
[142] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 67-68.
[143] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 71.
[144] Midal, *Design by Accident*, 194.

premise 'form follows function,' as adopted, for instance, by the Bauhaus. Two notable figures from the Italian movement that could be mentioned are Joe Colombo and Andrea Branzi.

Branzi was a founding member of Archizoom Associati and one of the leading figures and ideologues of Italian Radical Architecture. As Pablo Martínez Capdevilla explains, "after the dissolution of the group, he [Branzi] moves to Milan to devote himself to design, gradually abandons the political framework and Marxist ideology that had marked his radical years, and incorporates very early to his discourse the philosophical postmodernity as formulated by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979, and soon after, by Gianni Vattimo."[145] Branzi works on what he terms 'models of weak urbanization,' as outlined in his 1995 text *Agronica*, where he structures his weak models through a series of principles—two of which resonate particularly with the previously presented designs: the separation of technology and form, and the separation of function and form. Similarly, back in 1969 Joe Colombo aimed to redefine design through a threefold framework characterized by the collapse of functionalism, the unrealized promise of industrialization, and the reconfiguration of architectural competencies amid a period of crisis.[146] Likewise, other movements such as *AntiDesign*, *Counterdesign*, *Invention Design*, *Evasion Design*—each with their own manifestos, to varying degrees—began to criticize the predominant model of production as assistants to a capitalist system they refused to endorse. They called upon their users to engage actively, empowering them to act and escape the apathy permeating modern life. In June 1969, in a publication of *Domus*, the group *Superstudio* wrote:

> Every object has a practical function and a contemplative one: and it is the latter that evasion design is seeking to potentiate. Thus, there is an end to the 19th-century myths of reason as the explanation of everything, the thousand variations on the theme of the four-legged chair, aerodynamic shapes, and the sterilization of dreams. (…)

[145] Pablo Martínez Capdevila, "Towards a Weak Architecture: Andrea Branzi and Gianni Vattimo," *Cuadernos de Proyectos Arquitectónicos*, 6 (May 2016): 147–150.

[146] Joe Colombo, "Sistema programmabile per abitare," *Casabella*, no. 333 (February 1969), 23–33.

> [the "be in"] means involving all the users of our products and creating an operative area. (…) Such total involvement may be achieved in two ways: by supplying products that are poetically functional or by supplying patterns of behaviour. In the first case you supply multi-significant (ambiguous) products, objects of universal use, and each user puts them to the use he thinks fit. In the second case you supply the rules of a game to be played with all kinds of objects, or containers that can be filled with all kinds of things.[147]

With the 'death of the object,'[148] which it loses its traditional values—novelty, efficient functionality—a poetic world of meanings emerges, under its own rules. As Vattimo observes with the 'decline of art,' its weakening acquires the sense of the perishable and declining temporality, becoming a symbol of birth and death, of the "mortality of Dasein."[149] "This is the post-modern experience of art (…) the way in which art occurs in the era of the end of metaphysics."[150] Similarly, these counter-currents may be transversally intersected by a weak design, which ultimately refers to Dasein's mortality. As Vattimo explains, the distinction between reflexive/explanatory and productive/creative disciplines is weakened.[151] These designs, on the one hand, enable to question the character of their epoch, while on the other, they open up or find, their hermeneutic horizon. The *shock* previously mentioned finally "take[s] the form of creativity and freedom."[152]

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[147] Superstudio, "Design d'invenzione e design d'evasione," *Domus*, June 1969; published in English as "Evasion Design and Invention Design," in Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (Milan: Skira, 2003), 116-117.

[148] Ugo La Pietra, "La cellula abitativa: Una microstruttura all'interno dei sistema di communicazioni," *In*, no. 6 (June–July 1972), 18–31. The issue was dedicated to 'the death of the object.'

[149] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 69.

[150] Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 106.

[151] Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, 131.

[152] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 60.

Chapter 11

Overcoming Functionality

Spaghetti Benches, Pablo Reinoso, 2006.

(Fig. 10) *Curly Bench*, 2019. Photo by Rodrigo Reinoso.

"My series of *Spaghetti Benches* is a reflection on the overcoming of the notion of object, the fact that a bench develops in an unexpected way as if the object was invested with its own will, a will of emancipation from its own nature,"[153] writes Pablo Reinoso on his Facebook page. In a recorded interview, he further explains that his work is an object with a function, which he authorizes to move beyond that function, or to playfully emancipate itself from it.

In pieces that seem to be alive, Reinoso entangles utilitarian design by stretching wooden slats that move away from their architectural duty in pursuit of liberated, organic growth. He starts from an object and seeks for "it [to] become vegetal."[154] The formal exuberance—and more precisely, the material presence of wood or iron—erupts in excess. In

[153] Pablo Reinoso, Facebook video, March 11, 2020, accessed June 1, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/PabloReinosoArtista/videos/my-series-of-spaghetti-benches-is-a-reflection-on-the-overcoming-of-the-notion-o/223948198795584/.

[154] Xippas Galleries, "Studio_In_Sights: Pablo Reinoso," YouTube video, 6:46, posted 25 Jan. 2022, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MikEF_7hzg.

these objects/sculptures, the tension with the world, their presence, and their resistance to just pure function unfold in a distinctly Heideggerian key. Reinoso's benches retain their function as seating—many are installed in public spaces—yet their form disrupts conventional notions of the typical plaza bench.

According to Reinoso's website, he "used public benches, which are anonymously designed and travel across cultures with an out-of-time, old-fashioned quality, as a starting point for his reflections."[155] In line with his work on Thonet chairs, Reinoso once again explores the seat as an object, "yet this time it is no longer the object but matter that frees itself from its function and pursues its fate of wood, tree, plant. Reinoso stages benches that, after having accomplished their task as furniture, revert into growing, climbing branches" as read on his site. After having fulfilled their conventional function, they are reborn as dynamic branches capable of growing and ascending, allowing them to sprout beyond its utilitarian roots—perhaps, in fact, returning to their roots.

(Fig. 11, left) *Simple Talk* (R) and (L), 2017.
(Fig. 12, right) *Fourviere Bench*, 2015. Created for the Fourvière Hotel, Lyon, France.

[155] Pablo Reinoso, *Spaghetti Benches*, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.pabloreinoso.com/art#/collection/3.

"Everything I do is based on life," says Reinoso. "It has to do with life, with the living, with existence."[156] For the artist, the *Spaghetti Benches* are benches that escape their intended purpose and reclaim their vegetal dimension. They are, on one hand, an expression of life—and on the other, perhaps, an invitation to dwell and to reflect. By escaping pure functionality and becoming expressive, with their open, fluid forms, the *Spaghetti Benches* invite both users and viewers not only to sit, but *to experience the bench as presence*—encouraging pause, reflection on the material, the space, and on life itself, and perhaps fostering a more meaningful relationship with the surrounding world. Once again, in their 'non-efficient' functionality, they paradoxically become more effective than any conventional bench; they offer a true moment of repose, recreation, and reflective distension, capable of momentarily halting daily routine. It could be said that Reinoso's *Spaghetti Benches* reveal Heidegger's earth through their material impenetrability, resisting mere functionality and rational comprehension, enabling a reflexive and immersive encounter with the object.

(Fig. 13) *Double Talk*, 2017, Château de Chambord

[156] Xippas Galleries, "Studio_In_Sights: Pablo Reinoso."

The function—the object—does not disappear, but it undergoes a *Verwindung*: a transformative distortion that points toward a transformative continuity—a persistence within tradition (the public bench remains recognizable)—and at the same time, discontinuity—a clear differentiation, a rupture in form and meaning "thus contributing to the constitution of a sense that supposes neither a substantial permanence nor a radical fracture."[157] They are not merely benches, they are not solely sculptures, but phenomena in which material presence and human use intertwine in a poetic tension—much like the branching forms of the benches themselves—echoing Vattimo's ideas on art and the event of being. The function does not disappear but transcends into poetic, imaginative and suggestive forms, allowing the object to embody a sense of liberation that might momentarily even collaborate with the possible unfolding of the event of Being.

In a very different manner, and responding to distinct motivations, these three examples from previous decades may be recovered

(Fig. 14) *Conoid*, George Nakashima, 1960s. (Fig. 15) *Animali Domestici*, Andrea Branzi, 1985. (Fig. 16) *Tree Trunk Bench*, Jurgen Bey, 1999.

[157] Chiurazzi, "Interpretation," 107.

Chapter 12

Design and Heterotopia

"The utopia of the sixties is in some sense coming to fruition beneath our very eyes, albeit in a distorted and transformed fashion (...) in the sense of an unfolding of the capacity of the aesthetic product -nowise the work of art- to 'make world,'"[158] Vattimo writes in "From Utopia to Heterotopia." The utopia of establishing design as a project tied to ideals that sought to unify art with everyday life—particularly characteristic of the early to mid-20th century (for example, in the Bauhaus school, the Ulm School, or even the precursor Russian Vkhutemas school)—eventually collapses, giving way to countercurrents that, as illustrated by the cases presented, detach from univocal beliefs about beauty and the industrialized production of consumer goods. As Vattimo notes in this passage, with the rise of mass culture and the pluralization of aesthetic values, aesthetic experience no longer unifies under a single umbrella but instead multiplies worlds. Building on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, Vattimo describes this new aesthetic condition as one of plurality, ambiguity, and non-universal community. Thus, the beautiful becomes the experience of belonging to a particular community, among other possible ones. From this perspective, heterotopia is viewed as the distorted and fragmented realization of the aesthetic utopia: no longer unified, but plural—revolutionarily weaker, yet perhaps more inclusive. It is fitting to reproduce Vattimo's complete passage on heterotopia:

> The most eye-catching feature of the passage from utopia to heterotopia is the liberation of ornament and the lightening of being which is its ontological significance. (…) the discovery of the ornamental character of the aesthetic, the ornamental essence of the beautiful, is the very meaning of the heterotopia of aesthetic experience. The beautiful is not a site wherein truth is manifest and finds sensible, provisional, anticipatory and educative expression, as the tradition of metaphysical aesthetics has often wished were

[158] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 66.

> the case. Beauty is ornament, in the sense that its essential significance, the interest to which it responds, is the extension of life's world through a process of referrals to other possible life worlds. These, however, are not merely imaginary, marginal or complementary to the real world, but comprise and constitute the so-called real world in their reciprocal play and as their residue.[159]

A thorough understanding of Vattimo's exposition regarding other possible worlds is crucial for comprehending the forthcoming examples; this perspective finds clear resonance in the work that designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby both recuperate and actively disseminate through their teaching and practice. Dunne and Raby are professors of Design and Social Inquiry at Parsons School of Design / The New School in New York and previously at the Royal College of Art in London. They are also the founders of the design studio Dunne & Raby and authors of the books *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming,*[160] and *Not Here, Not Now: Speculative Thought, Impossibility, and the Design Imagination*.[161]

Rather than seeking functional solutions to well-defined problems, Dunne and Raby advocate for practices that aim to destabilize certainties, imagine alternative worlds, and foster critical imagination. In this sense, their projects operate according to a heterotopic logic: they do not seek to transform reality based on a universal model, but rather to open alternative spaces for reflection within the very fabric of everyday life. The proposals presented in their books can be read as applied heterotopian exercises, in the sense that Vattimo describes it, where design functions as an interpretative event capable of opening possible worlds without seeking to establish them.

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[159] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 71.

[160] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2013; republished 2024).

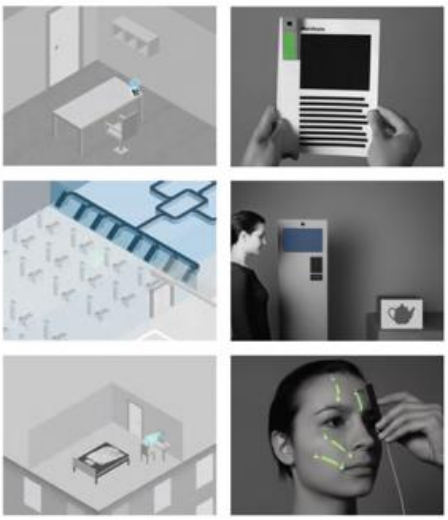
[161] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Not Here, Not Now: Speculative Thought, Impossibility, and the Design Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2025).

A	B
Affirmative	Critical
Problem solving	Problem finding
Provides answers	Asks questions
Design for production	Design for debate
Design as solution	Design as medium
In the service of industry	In the service of society
Fictional functions	Functional fictions
For how the world is	For how the world could be
Change the world to suit us	Change us to suit the world
Science fiction	Social fiction
Futures	Parallel worlds
The "real" real	The "unreal" real
Narratives of production	Narratives of consumption
Applications	Implications
Fun	Humor
Innovation	Provocation
Concept design	Conceptual design
Consumer	Citizen
Makes us buy	Makes us think
Ergonomics	Rhetoric
User-friendliness	Ethics
Process	Authorship

(Fig. 17) "*Speculative Everything* began as a list we created a few years ago called A/B, a sort of manifesto. In it, we juxtaposed design as it is usually understood with the kind of design we found ourselves doing. B was not intended to replace A but to simply add another dimension, something to compare it to and facilitate discussion. Ideally, *C, D, E,* and many others would follow."[162]

One of the several examples they highlight under this mode of design is, Hopfengaertner's *Belief Systems* (Fig. 18). "Hopfengaertner asks what would happen if one of the tech industry's many dreams comes true, if all the research being done by separate companies into making humans machine readable were to combine and move from laboratory to everyday life,"[163] they write. Hopfengaertner developed six speculative scenarios exploring various dimensions of a bleak, hyper-technological world. In one scenario, a person wishes to buy a teapot. Approaching a machine, they make the payment, and immediately images of millions of teapots appear on a screen. Amid the relentless flow of images, the system suddenly stops on one: the one desired by the user, as indicated by the machine, which is programmed to read and analyze in detail all microexpressions, thus detecting and informing the user's desire. In another scenario, a person studies and trains the muscles of their face to learn to control them, in order to neutralize any expression of feelings so as not to reveal themselves to machines—dehumanizing themselves to, paradoxically, preserve their humanity.

[162] Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, xi.
[163] Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 38.

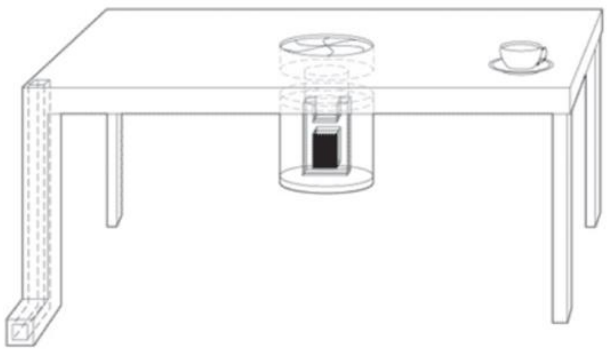


(Fig. 18) Bernd Hopfengaertner,
Belief Systems, 2009.

"Combined algorithms and camera systems that can read emotions from faces (…) neurotechnologies that cannot exactly read minds but can make a good guess at what people are thinking; profiling software that tracks and traces our every click and purchase," explain Dunne and Raby.

Another example featured by Dunne and Raby is the design project *Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots*, developed by designers Auger and Loizeau. Drawing on contemporary research into microbial fuel cells—a technology that generates electrical energy from organic matter—Auger and Loizeau imagined everyday devices that would operate according to the logic of these investigations within the domestic environment. The proposal consisted of a collection of five partially functional prototypes simulating a potential domestic robot based on this principle. Each robot assumed the form of a contemporary household item or appliance, performing routine tasks such as lighting a room or showing the time. However, beyond presenting the appearance of a functional domestic object, these devices operated according to a disturbing internal logic: they captured living organisms—flies, mice, spiders—and converted them into electrical energy through microbial fuel cells to sustain their autonomous operation. For example, the *Flypaper Robotic Clock* features a rotating adhesive strip that traps insects, which are then broken down by the fuel cell to maintain the operation of both the motor and the LCD clock. Each robot incorporated a microbial fuel cell that converted the organic matter captured by the device into electrical energy: a mechanized iris integrated into a table that traps mice; a lampshade with perforations allows insects to enter but not escape; a small robotic armature collects flies from the webs that spiders build within it.

These novel energy-recycling machines simultaneously introduce a somewhat unsettling spectacle into the domestic environment. As Dunne and Raby write, "the project was extremely successful in generating debate online, in the press and even on TV about the implications of using microbial fuel cells to power domestic robots."[164] The prototypes were developed within the framework of Material Beliefs, a two-year interdisciplinary research project based at the Interaction Research Studio in the Department of Design at Goldsmiths, University of London, and funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). The project brought together a network of designers, engineers, scientists, and social scientists to explore the potential implications of emerging biomedical and cybernetic technologies. Its aim was to produce prototypes, exhibitions, and public discussions that would move scientific research out of the laboratory and into public spaces. Rather than focusing on the definitive outcomes of science and technology, Material Beliefs approached research as a set of ongoing and unfinished practices. Collaborative efforts led to the design of prototypes that materialized these speculative outcomes in tangible form. These prototypes were exhibited, transforming emerging laboratory research into a platform for public engagement and reflection on the relationship between science and society.



(Fig. 19) *Coffee table mousetrap robot* Auger-Loizeau, 2009.
(Fig. 20) *Flypaper Robotic Clock*, Auger-Loizeau, 2009.

[164] Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 50 .

This way of design approaches research as a processual, open-ended, and unfinished practice. In this case, for example, the collaborative process generated not only scientific data and academic publications, but also a wide array of 'parallel outcomes': interviews, discussions, video recordings, photographs, sketches, and collective ideation. The speculative prototypes were not intended to represent future products, but rather to propose provocative and alternative visions of the role of biotechnology and cybernetics in everyday life. When exhibited in public settings, such artefacts functioned as critical devices capable of stimulating debate about the value, purpose, and implications of emerging hybridities between the human and the technological. These objects do not operate as predictions, but as events that invite reflection and public dialogue through the fragility of the ever-possible alternative. This openness to dialogue signals a refusal to impose a single outcome and interpretation on unfolding 'reality,' and instead mobilizes imagination, speculation and critical thinking to reveal parallel and latent possibilities. As Dunne and Raby explain, "speculating through design by presenting abstract issues as fictional products enables us to explore ethical and social issues within the context of everyday life."[165]

Designer, researcher, and engineer Julian Bleecker situates this kind of speculative practice under the term Design Fiction, where design and science fiction work together to tell stories about fictional objects.[166] The narrative dimension within design resonates with the connection that Vattimo establishes between philosophical thought and the category of narration, to which he believes philosophy properly belongs to. In explaining the aesthetic experience in Vattimo's thought—particularly through literature—Gabriel Serbu notes that "[literature] is bound to recover its 'ontological bearing' on reality and its consequent claim to truth, which implies a permeating of the aesthetic into the ethical and the epistemic. This does not mean that a work of literature possesses the capacity to reveal some previously hidden,

[165] Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 50 .
[166] Julian Bleecker, *Design Fiction: An Introduction* (Los Angeles: Near Future Laboratory, 2022).

objective aspect of the external world. What the work does, rather, is ground a world of its own during the process of reading or interpretation."[167] This same passage could be translated into the encounter with a design artifact created according to the principles explored in this chapter. Although Serbu continues to refer specifically to literary works, I propose here an exercise, reading it through the lens of design, in order to demonstrate the parallelism and the potential applicability of Vattimo's aesthetic experience to this field: "the encounter with the work in its singularity thrusts the reader [user, expectator, interpreter] into a dialogic tension between recognition and defamiliarization so that the already existing world of meanings – to which the reader belongs and which makes the encounter possible in the first place – is altered in unpredictable ways." This is precisely the aim of designing heterotopically— by means of fiction, narration, and speculative scenarios.

[167] Gabriel Serbu, "Literature/Narration," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 119.

Chapter 13

Ontological Design

In *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar reconceives design as a tool for advancing social and environmental justice. The concept of the pluriverse, which Escobar adopts from the Zapatista movement in Mexico, refers to the possibility of coexistence of multiple worlds within a shared space. This stands in contrast to the hegemonic notion of the "One-World World" promoted by neoliberal globalization, a model that prioritizes economic gain, disregarding its harmful effects on communities and territories. This dominant framework erases pluralities and forecloses other possible ways of being, a dynamic that might be encapsulated in Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim, "there is no alternative."

In the idea that this hegemonic model has been largely enabled by destructive modern design practices, Escobar advocates for the adoption of pluriversal forms of design. However, "to pose the question of a redirection of design in a fundamental manner, it is necessary to venture into the cultural and philosophical tradition from which it arises and within which it functions with such ease. Contemporary philosophy and cultural theory abound in critical analyses of this tradition, usually under the guise of the critique of metaphysics (the illustrious tradition from Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger to Gianni Vattimo and Michel Foucault) or the critical analysis of modernity (Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Charles Taylor, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour),"[168] Escobar outlines, with the additional note that contributions from the fields of cultural studies, as well as postcolonial and decolonial theory must be also taken into account. He aligns with Vattimo in rejecting absolute, closed conceptions of the subject, and the violence inherent in imposing a single truth as a tool of political power: "the notions of the individual, the real, and the economy as having intrinsic

[168] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 80.

existence by themselves, independent of the relations that constitute them, and of us as observers, are instances of 'folk essentialism,' as Kriti Sharma wonderfully puts it (…) It is precisely this impression of reality that we need to probe more deeply to arrive at a view of their ineluctable contingency."[169]

In *Il soggetto e la maschera*,[170] Vattimo argues for liberating the Dionysian from the 'steel cage' of instrumental reason, which reduces human symbolic power to a utilitarian form of relation with the world. This leads to "the need to set an alternative development of the productive forces, that is at the same time the irruption of the possibility of giving life to new worlds and new stories."[171] This critique anticipates his hermeneutic communism, a non-dogmatic, post-metaphysical rethinking of the political. From Escobar's perspective, this need could also be addressed through design. Often constrained to respond in an aesthetic and innovative ways to the demands of industrial and technological production and developments driven by markets, design could also take up the challenge of imagining alternatives as an emancipatory attitude. In doing so, design would both emancipate itself—and act as a means of emancipation—from the extreme instrumentalization described by Vattimo.

The concept of ontological design was first formulated in the 1986 book *Understanding Computers and Cognition*[172] by American computer scientist Terry Winograd and Chilean engineer and politician Fernando Flores. Addressing why design should be considered ontological, they state: "we encounter the deep question of design when we recognize that in designing tools, we are designing ways of being"[173] understanding design as "the interaction between understanding and creation." Thus, "design is ontological in that it is a conversation

[169] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 91.

[170] Gianni Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (Milano: Garzanti, 1974).

[171] Stefano Azzarà, "Marxism/Italian Marxism," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 125.

[172] Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986).

[173] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 133.

about possibilities" and "the broader question of how a society engenders inventions whose existence in turn alters that society." Design contributes to—and shapes the very nature of—whatever means to *be*. Anne-Marie Willis, an early voice in ontological design, argues that humans both design the world they inhabit and are simultaneously shaped by that very world they design and inhabit. In *The Design Philosophy Reader*, she warns that "any enquiry into 'the conditions of now' will be deficient if it does not take cognizance of the extent of design as well as what Albert Borgmann, a philosopher who *has* engaged design front-on, calls 'the depth of design."[174] This stance for addressing the present aligns with the 'ontology of actuality' proposed by Vattimo and brings design into the conversation. Situating his thought alongside these theoretical currents that underscore design's capacity to address possibilities, is relevant because—as Vattimo particularly emphasizes in his political writings— "what is possible and realistic always coincides with the interest of the most powerful segments of the global order."[175] With irony and humour Escobar explains how design configures the conditions of possibility for being, relationality, and ways of life, by comparing the Amazonian Indigenous maloca[176] to a typical U.S. suburban house: "give me a maloca, and I will raise a relational world (including the integral and interdependent relations between humans and nonhumans); conversely, give me a suburban home, and I will raise a world of decommunalized individuals, separated from the natural world."

Escobar advocates for a "design philosophy that emphasizes the engaged, experimental, and open-ended practices of design research, including prototyping and scenario building."[177] Winograd and Flores convey this same idea when they speak of 'breakdowns' instead of 'problems'—"breakdowns are moments in which the habitual mode of being-in-the-world is

[174] Willis, *The Design Philosophy Reader*, introduction.
[175] Mazzini, "Democracy," 59.
[176] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 134. A traditional communal dwelling capable of housing several dozen people under one roof. With specific norms of cohabitation and spatial organization, it embodies a way of inhabiting rooted in collectivity, interdependence, and connection with the natural environment.
[177] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 113.

interrupted; when a breakdown happens, our customary practices and the role of our tools in maintaining them are exposed, and new design solutions appear and are created; we can intuitively feel the appropriateness of this notion for the myriad cases of ecological breakdown in contemporary situations,"[178] says Escobar. These breakdowns can be linked to the notion of emergences—or the lack thereof—as presented by Heidegger and further developed by Vattimo and Zabala. We are currently experiencing breakdowns on a global scale—climate crisis and biodiversity loss, to name two. For Winograd and Flores, this calls for not just technical fixes (Vattimo's critic on 'technical governments' can be echoed). Rather than problems to be solved, these disruptions should be seen as ontological events—moments that reveal how our world is built and offer the possibility for redesigning our tools and ways of living.

Philosopher Tony Fry has devoted himself, since the late 1980s, to questions of design, politics, and the environment. An advocate for an ontological theory of design, he has focused much of his work on the oscillation between design as a 'futuristic' activity, expanding possibilities, and its potential 'defuturizing' side, which can narrow perspectives. "While the planet is singular, world is plural—for it is formed and seen in difference—as are we."[179] "The sensitivity to difference is crucial here, since it refers to the pluriverse and contributes to the argument that what needs to be sustained is precisely the pluriverse," adds Escobar.[180] In this sense, the way to preserve such a pluriverse is perhaps through weak thought, since, as William Egginton writes, "Vattimo's 'weak thought' is a thought of the weak and for the weak, because it seeks to reveal the dynamics of power implicit in philosophical and political discourses that dissimulate their own submission to power."[181] Those who interpret, an seek for alternatives—those who, I may add, bring the pluriverse into evidence—are those dissatisfied with the status quo: the weak and disregarded. Hence the relevance of weak thought for the preservation of a

[178] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 113.
[179] Tony Fry, as quoted in Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 117.
[180] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 117.
[181] Egginton, "Realism/New Realism," 163.

pluriverse.

In his rethinking of design, Escobar proposes a framework grounded in social, environmental, and cultural justice. Instead of enforcing a Eurocentric model of development, design should embrace the plurality of worlds, knowledges, and ways of life that exist—particularly in the Global South. As he states in the preface, "between 'the life of form' and the 'form of life' an entire design space opens up" that as Tony Fry would put it, it includes the "world- within-the-world" of human creation.[182] Escobar defends a pluriverse where multiple realities coexist, relying on an ontological approach to design. The designer, the designed and the surrounding world (all *in-the-world*), are relationally linked in a continual hermeneutic act.

From the perspective of weak thought and the hermeneutics proposed by Vattimo, these approaches to design might be seen as different ways of weakening the strong, totalizing, and universalizing discourses of the practice. As Zabala explains "(…) 'weak thought' is not meant to facilitate only Being's recollection, but also its practical interpretation as an event that happens, in other words, as a 'historical process in which we ourselves are involved.' This involvement does not call for a practical or theoretical rejection of the 'real world,' but rather for an ethical dissolution that 'appeals to our freedom,' to 'reduce violence and the supremacy of entities that pretend to be true Being.'[183] Escobar's vision of design may find strong echo in this stance, since it integrates the critical view of the practice with feminist, decolonial, post-developmentalist and environmentalist perspectives. Like Vattimo, Escobar challenges dominant structures and advocates for moving away from rigid, dominant frameworks. He fosters an expanded understanding of design, conceived as a component of complex, evolving system of objects, processes and socio-material practices that also seek to reduce violence.

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[182] Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, xvi. Escobar refers here to Brian Goodwin, *How the Leopard Changed Its Spots: The Evolution of Complexity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; repr. 2007), and to Tony Fry, *Becoming Human by Design* (London: Berg, 2012).

[183] Santiago Zabala, "Gifford Lectures," in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 80.

Conclusion

Weak Thought as a Guiding Thread

Since the late 20th century, emerging practices have progressively undermined the rigid formulas and modernist frameworks that once dominated design thinking and practice. The long-standing mantra "Form Follows Function" has gradually lost its authority, making room for alternative gestures: "Form Follows Fiction", as articulated by architect Bernard Tschumi; "Form Follows Feeling," [184] in the words of Danish designer Hella Jongerius; "Form Follows Failure," [185] introduced by civil engineer and designer Henry Petroski; and "Form Follows Friction," the term I used in this work to describe a set of design practices that seek to illuminate critical tensions embedded in the unfolding of everyday life.

All these design approaches, in my view, share a common characteristic: they deliberately weaken an object's efficient functionality in order to emphasize other dimensions—be they emotional, cultural, social, political (or otherwise)—situated in the present or in a possible nearby world (contextual and contingent). With the weakening of functionality, the traditional notion of the object (and by extension, the subject) is also disarticulated. Like Vattimo's weakening of the art object, so does weak design operate with respect to its 'object' of design. By embracing weaker notions—artefacts, prototypes, sketches—as contingent materialities valued within interpretive, situated frameworks, we can also encounter the aesthetic expierence as a hermeneutic act that opens up worlds.

In response to criticism that he had designed a defective juicer (fig.20), the famous designer Philippe Starck would have responded, mischievously, that he did not design a defective juicer, but a "conversation piece." [186]

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[184] Vitra, "Polder Sofa: Hella Jongerius, 2005/06," in *Vitra Office Furniture Collection*), 20.

[185] Henry Petroski, "Form Follows Failure; Invention Is an Unending Succession of Imperfections. A Case in Point: The Beer Can," *Invention & Technology Magazine* 8, no. 2 (1992).

[186] Norman, D.A. *Emotional Design; Why we love (or hate) everyday things*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

(Fig. 20) *Juicy Salif* citrus reamer, Philippe Starck, 1990.

After detailed examination of Gianni Vattimo's philosophical thought in part one of this thesis, this second part draws on design examples ranging from the 1980s to the present, in order to outline the contours of what I refer to as weak design. In exploring countercurrents in design history, and presenting discourses that reframe the practice from alternative perspectives, Vattimo's weak thought offers a valuable lens through which to recognize a longstanding aspiration: the search for a more just and ethical practice—one that weakens industrialized production and mass consumerism, embraces plurality, and refuses to narrow the horizon of existence. A practice that therefore becomes less violent. From this philosophical position—or more accurately, from this attitude—design can embrace its inclusive potential: its natural tendency to remain open to other ways, its natural capacity to continually seek alternatives, as other ways *of*.

Faced with a given problem there are countless possible solutions. Even traditional design methodologies acknowledge this through iterative processes and diamond-shaped frameworks where multiple proposals are generated and refined before converging on a final design (in an opening-closing-opening-closing projectual cadence). This is precisely where the strength of design lies—and, in my view, where it should concentrate, especially amid the crises we face today: on emphasizing the plurality of potential paths and demonstrating that the chosen

solution is never the only correct one, but rather one among many, ideally selected through a fair and inclusive consensus. Design inherently points to the future, projecting ideas and possibilities; hermeneutics, too: it points to an open horizon "that prevents the conversation from coming to a halt, in the name of the presumed peremptoriness of facts."[187] Weak design operates in this same spirit.

The intention is not to encompass all these designs under a single new identity, but rather to reflect on the subtle continuum that may connect them. It is no coincidence that these diverse approaches to design become relevant after the aftermath of the collapse of the modern project, the end of metaphysics, the 'death of God.' Alongside examples such Droog Design or Neues Deusche Design, other currents—namely Anti-design, Controdesign, Evasion Design, Design Fiction, and others—could equally be examined. Regarding this proliferation of movements and terminology, Dunne and Raby write (particularly on the so-called Critical Design): "we coined the term 'critical design' in the mid-nineties when we were researchers in the Computer Related Design Research Studio at the Royal College of Art. It grew out of our concerns with the uncritical drive behind technological progress, when technology is always assumed to be good and capable of solving any problem. Our definition then was that 'critical design uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and givens about the role products play in everyday life.' It was more of an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a methodology. Its opposite is affirmative design: design that reinforces the status quo."[188] In this definition, I find direct parallels with Vattimo's concept of weak thought, as discussed in Chapter two, understood as an open attitude that rejects to be a new philosophy of definitive, closed answers. "Critique is not necessarily negative; it can also be a gentle refusal, a turning away from what exists, a longing, wishful thinking, a desire, and even a dream. Critical designs are testimonials to what could be, but at the same time, they offer

[187] Chiurazzi, "Interpretation," 107.
[188] Dunne Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 34.

alternatives that highlight weaknesses within existing normality" Dune and Raby conclude. As the authors point out, the term 'Critical design' might be mistakenly associated with critical theory and the Frankfurt School. However, it fundamentally refers to an attitude of skepticism toward the given—an ongoing questioning. In a similar vein, Vattimo explains in *Art's Claim to Truth* that critical reflection, as an essentially narrative act, seeks to preserve openness by directing encounters toward future interpretations, rather than closing them off through reduction to a single, definitive reading.[189]

Thus, the notion of a weak design finds in Vattimo's thought the foundations for—paradoxically—not becoming a foundational, resolute, universalist, or ultimately violent practice. As designer Rick Griffith points out, "good design should have no victims."[190] And as Vattimo explains "it is in this forgotten, defeated, and different history that one can find the victims."[191] Weak design, then, tends to advocate for a situated ethics of design—one that is neither universal nor deterministic.

Weak design, as Dunne and Raby say about the practices described in their book, "might borrow heavily from art's methods and approaches, but that is it."[192] While art is expected to be 'shocking' and 'extreme,' design should remain close to the everyday: "that's where its power to disturb lies (…) if it is too weird, it will be dismissed as art, and if too normal, it will be effortlessly assimilated. If it is labeled as art it is easier to deal with but if it remains design, it is more disturbing; it suggests that the everyday life as we know it could be different, that things could change"—(speaking of critical design that imagines alternative futures).

It is therefore clear that reflecting on the agency of design from an ontological perspective requires a more nuanced understanding of the concept of 'use', as proposed by

[189] Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, 110–16.
[190] MoMA, "Pirouette Abecedarium," *Pirouette: Turning Points in Design* event (February 21, 2025, The Museum of Modern Art, New York).
[191] Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 16.
[192] Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 43.

Mark Titmarsh and Tonkinwise when rethinking the interrelationships between art and design.[193] From Gatt and Ingold's perspective, designers should follow "the ways of the world as they unfold."[194] It argues for a type of *flexibility* that "lies not only in finding the ways of the world's becoming—the way it wants to go—but also in *bending* it to an evolving purpose. It is not, then, only a matter of going with the flow, for one can give it direction as well."[195] The use of the term 'bending' and the flexible attitude described here might evoke Aesop's fable of the reeds, introduced at the beginning of this thesis to illustrate Vattimo's philosophical stance. Furthermore, it is important to recall how the Italian philosopher also advocates for a positive nihilism, arguing that such a stance, and the hermeneutic act, is not a circular logic in which 'everything is the same.' "Designing for life is about giving direction rather than specifying end points (…) to realist ears, this sounds like phenomenological utopia, perhaps nonsense, even more so if one attends to this notion's sequitur: 'Design, in this sense, does not transform the world, it is rather part of the world transforming itself.'"[196]

As Vattimo explains, the ornamental can turn toward a hermeneutic field that opens the door to other possible worlds. Similarly, weak design may assume a new function: that of enabling and preserving, in various ways, spaces where perspectives may unfold and conversations may be activated. Gadamer explains that hermeneutics is a 'path of experiencing,' and Zabala clarifies "(…) like art, [and we might now add, like weak design] hermeneutics does not seek compromises but interpretations, reactions, and, most of all, interventions."[197]

Weak design may be understood as an approach, as a new way of engaging with the

[193] Mark Titmarsh and Cameron Tonkinwise, "Art vs. Design: Saving Power vs. Enframing, or a Thing of the Past vs. World-Making," *Studio Research* 1 (2013), 6–17.

[194] Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold "From Description to Correspondence: Anthropology in Real Time," in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, ed. Wendy Gunn, Ton Otto, and Rachel Charlotte Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 145.

[195] Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse*, 215.

[196] Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse*, 215.

[197] Santiago Zabala, *Only Art Can Save Us* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 11.

practice. To define it through a rigid methodology or a definitive description would be to constrain it, reducing it to a closed formula. Instead, it could be conceived as a constellation of practices that embrace the flexibility of both doing and thinking, actively exploring design's margins and boundaries.[198] These practices should be aware of their own agency, their limits, and the most fragile discourses, seeking to emancipate design from the limiting expectations of 'real' functionalism, industrial production and mass consumption, while avoiding entrapment in deterministic universal attitudes. It could be, in a sense, a tendency to stay away from any tendency. In the gesture of opening up the conversation, weak design may not only create open space to relegated discourses, but also, allow design to become a collaborating agent in making visible those invisible emergencies of which Heidegger, Vattimo and Zabala speak—not with the aim of rescuing us 'from' them through final solutions, but rather to rescue us 'in' them. For Vattimo, religion and art, through the lens of his weak thought, could contribute to this task. Likewise, I believe that a design practice that assumes this weakened attitude can play a similar role.

This essay seeks to present an ontological approach to the question of design—or, at the very least, to shed light on the various weak practices that exist within its broad definition and history. These weak alternatives emerge more clearly in the aftermath of the collapse of grand narratives and absolute truths. Weak design thus implies a departure from the canonical industrial object: closed, finished, universal and stable. All of this clearly parallels the condition of contemporary being, which Vattimo describes as transitory, fragile, and unstable. The aim is not to subsume diverse design practices under a new term that grants the discipline a renewed identity, nor to import external concepts into the field. Rather, it is to illuminate what has already been occurring within design through the lens of Vattimo's aesthetic thought and its

[198] See also *Design in the Borderlands* eds. Eleni Kalantidou and Tony Fry (London: Routledge, 2014), which presents a design philosophy with affinities to some of the ideas discussed here, though not directly referenced.

possible correlations. As Capdevila writes regarding Branzi's attenuated architecture, this work seeks to establish connections, to consolidate intuitions, and to support an agenda of weakening certain rigid notions within the discipline—understanding this weakening as a positive opportunity. Just as Vattimo finds opportunity within crisis, weak design also emerges as an alternative to a design model that, for some, has already reached exhaustion. It represents the possibility of recognizing other ways of practicing design—both historically and in the present—where design becomes a tool that is, perhaps, seemingly weaker, yet genuinely powerful in its capacity to foster, promote, provoke, precipitate, unleash, and sustain the possibility of being and acting freely.

Thus, weak design—its practice and its outcomes—may assume a new function. In its varied forms, it could offer the possibility of enabling a space for the event of Being. This may be revealed through a dialogue that, depending on the historical context, engages aesthetic, political, social, ecological, technological, and ethical questions in a poetic manner. Weak design provides fertile ground for sustaining an interpretative relationship that holds the potential for freedom, transformation, and action in the face of a world that appears increasingly predetermined by monolithic narratives.

Weak design could be a sort of culmination of traditional design, where the opportunity arises to embrace a weaker gesture, perhaps of withdrawal: a subdued, incomplete, gently active retreat, that poetically signals the opening (or closing) of possibilities. From the formal perspective, it may foster contemplation / reflection / critique / use. From a methodological or conceptual viewpoint, it might not only aim to solve problems, but also to pose them. Recovered by both Heidegger and Vattimo, Hölderlin's verses evoke: "full of acquirements, but poetically, man dwells on this earth." In preserving that poetic dwelling may lie, now more than ever, the task of design. Of a weak design.

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