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Author(s)

de Vries, Patricia

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Black Transparency in the Era of Post-Truth

Patricia de Vries

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.
Wisława Szymborska – *Utopia*

Review of Metahaven (2015) *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 205 pp.

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries announced ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year after it had witnessed a spike in its usage in the context of a politically charged year. Metahaven’s *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance* (Sternberg Press, 2015) could be read as an elegy for this award-winning word, which allegedly describes our current predicament. Over the last decade, Metahaven, an Amsterdam-based research and design studio staffed by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden and founded in 2007, has become an international brand, generating its own genre in design with a particular mix of politics with avant-garde aesthetics and graphic design. This has led to multiple international exhibitions, presentations and publications of essays and books. *Black Transparency* – part zine, part literature review, part essay – probes how transparency as a principle intersects with spin, political activism, design, architecture and internet (pop) culture. In the book, the authors reflect on the implications of “the geopolitical architecture of “planetary-scale computation,”” a concept taken from Benjamin Bratton with which Metahaven refers to the “overlaying of the world with digital

networks” (3). The internet in this centralized structure, has become a geopolitical disruptive weapon (90). Metahaven grieves the loss of the early internet, and expresses hope for a “relocalized internet governed by its citizens” (112).

The politics at play in *Black Transparency* are a mixture of positions. A nostalgic approach to the internet, combined with a high premium on transparency. Add a dash of libertarian paranoia towards the establishment, sautéed with a ‘fix the internet’ attitude of the hacker culture. Parts of the book read like an ambivalent, and at times stammering, farewell letter to a lost love. The jilted party is the transparency movement, more specifically, the whistleblowing platform WikiLeaks: “[w]hat once was an “intelligence agency of the people” gradually became transparency’s shipwreck” (48). Metahaven has been championing WikiLeaks since 2010, in part through a visual investigation of the politics and aesthetics of transparency. In 2011, they designed WikiLeaks merchandise: buttons, band-inspired T-shirts with file names leaked by WikiLeaks, and translucent silk scarves with ‘WikiLeaks’ printed on them. The profits were donated to WikiLeaks. *Black Transparency* includes images of the merchandise, as well as info-graphics mapping out the ascent of WikiLeaks onto the geopolitical stage, and the celebrity-cult that surrounded it at the height of its fame in 2013.

At the core of *Black Transparency* lies the authors’ critique of the modern state: nominally democratic governments conceal their fundamental reliance on secrecy. Secrecy is spelled out as “an informational privilege enjoyed by those in power” (2). The state’s informational privilege has increased thanks to “preemptive electronic surveillance of potentially every global subject, [...] expanding the state’s monopoly on violence into precognitive policing of all thought and action” (3). The state’s spying capabilities are aided by our fondness of everything “smart,” and our yearning to be seen. The modern surveillance state signifies a structural change in the governance of democratic societies, Metahaven contends (3). It “recedes into neo-feudal rule by tech-overlords and extra-legal sovereigns” (57). The horseman of this neo-feudalism is the public-private nexus, a “Holy Alliance that binds old-style *arcana imperii* to the latest cloud technology” (57).

Against this backdrop of “unprecedented online surveillance by governments” black transparency is a “frontal attack” on the autonomy of a state “that wants more control” (2,3). What makes black transparency ‘black’ is the *method* of disclosure; how information becomes available is “of decisive importance to its political impact” (1). “[D]emocratic change” can be effected when the disclosure of information is uninvited, unexpected, and seemingly spontaneous. The “*involuntary transparency*” of black transparency sides with the unpredictable and anonymous disclosures of organizations like WikiLeaks, and whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning (xiii). It is designed to reveal “truths that are hidden under the cloak of state secrecy” (38). Black transparency reveals its secrets with the aim of embarrassing and destabilizing the security complex of the state (6), and does so “in defense of the public” (4). Black transparency reveals three things at once: the secret itself, the frantic panic of its keepers once the secret is released, and, thirdly, the spin around its disclosure (62). The ‘black’ in black transparency further means “more or less, “in darkness” as opposed to “in the light,”” (4), with which they mean to remain hidden, unidentified, and opaque. All antidotes to global surveillance go under shades of black, Metahaven argues (3). The examples given are: the Blackphone, Dark Wallet, cryptography, the Dark Web, and #BlackLivesMatter. In an age of mass surveillance, an allegiance to (encrypted) anonymity is seen as an act of resistance: anonymity for the powerless, transparency for the powerful. In the opening pages of *Black Transparency* Metahaven argues that “there is no transparency without enlightenment,” and “under transparency the state loses the informational privilege [secrets] that allows it to maintain itself” (xiv). However, already in the introduction of the book they foreshadow black transparency’s demise: “Symbolically, black transparency meets its end in Russia [...] where nothing is true and everything is possible” (6).

Black Transparency has been a few years in the making – two of the six chapters have been published on *e-flux* in 2012. The book as a whole reflects how transformative those years have been for Metahaven. The first chapters sing of a love of WikiLeaks, echo the – by now – worn-out slogans of the transparency movement, and the old Enlightenment meme that truth shall prevail. The last three chapters argue that we have become captives of cloud computation, surveilled by centralized

corporations, and that spin and propaganda appears to be more powerful than truth. But before we get there, we need to read through a fairly long tribute to the transparency movement. In the chapter titled “There is no Organization, There is Only You”, Metahaven contends that “Information is Power” (27). “Knowledge is Power” (24). “Transparency is Absolute Power” (24). If we are to believe Metahaven, transparency is designed to “confront liberal democracy with its hypocrisy” (31) and uncover the world’s injustices and conspiracies (26). It lays bare the “secret machinations of the powerful” (56). Transparency, they claim, holds power accountable through “action driven by understanding” (37). Informing the public, as a means to “undercut the government” can cause “far-reaching forms of democratic change,” Metahaven suggests (2). These parts of the book may leave the reader desiring for a more tightly edited plea to this modernist Enlightenment value.

As a counterpoint, there is a wealth of critical literature both on WikiLeaks and on the transparency movement that could have been engaged with. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for instance, questions the naïve assumption that knowledge in the form of exposure will motivate people into action. “It’s strange that a hermeneutics of suspicion would appear so trusting about the effects of exposure,” she writes (Sedgwick 2003, 138f). “[A]s though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction” (139). Mark Fenster makes a similar point. He critiques the cybernetic assumptions of the transparency movement in which “the state is defined by its “streams of information”” (Fenster 2015, 153). Disclosure is here understood as “the transmission of information from state to public, and assumes that transmission will banish public ignorance, magically transform public discourse, and allow the true public to appear and triumph” (152). In an article in *New Republic*, Lawrence Lessig is concerned with the ideological signature of transparency. People’s responses to information are inseparable from their interests and desires, he asserts. “What we believe will be confirmed, again and again” (Lessig 2009). Information is mediated, as Richard Grusin argues, and “mediation is itself immediate”, “life itself is a form of mediation” (Grusin 2015, 132). In *Publicity’s Secret* (2002) Jodi Dean claims that transparency and secrecy form a false dualism. She critiques the reduction of politics into revealing what is concealed –

considering that great miscarriages of justice happen in plain sight, in the realm of the hypervisible. Clare Birchall complicates the intractable relation between transparency and secrecy. “[T]ransparency can have the same effects as secrecy, and secrecy can flourish in “transparent” realms” (7). Furthermore, Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens argue in “Twelve Theses on WikiLeaks” that the black box strategy of transparency activists, aiming to be opaque in order to force transparency upon others, amounts to “little more than *Mad* magazine’s Spy vs. Spy cartoons” (Lovink and Riemens 2010). The first chapters of *Black Transparency* might have felt less dated if it had addressed how Metahaven’s notion of ‘black transparency’ is situated in a wider body of knowledge.

Power and knowledge do not form an automatic nexus that can be triggered by more information. The cybernetic notion that with the right information systems will adapt and change is unfortunately flawed. We often become caught up in rationalizations that only confirm what we think we know; we see what we believe. Bringing more information to the surface does not necessarily produce truth, let alone instigate structural transformation. Can political life be reduced to information? Is it knowable, or, for that matter, inherently teleological? According to transparency advocates, with the right information you can make purposeful adjustments, even systemic changes, to our political realities. Disclosures decrease the ability of a regime to hold on to power. This, too, expresses a fear of contingency and losing control. Equally problematic is the quasi-missionary propensity to bring to light the dark secrets of government, inform the uninformed masses in order to make the world a better place. This conjures spirits of truth-bearing institutions imposed on societies. Instead of challenging their own will to know, or the kind of subjectivity transparency produces, Metahaven swaps one absolute for another, and, as this part of the book stands, comes close to propagating the very kind of practices they aim to discredit.

The plot thickens in the final chapter of the book “When Pixels Become Territories”, in which black transparency finds its end. The chapter reflects on the image economy surrounding the 2014 war between Ukraine and Russia. Metahaven argues that the conflict was for an important part fought “on internet server farms”

(155). The war was characterized by “alternative explanations,” (162) “energized, recreated, and post-produced through social media, image manipulation, fiction writing and role playing” (155). During the conflict, Russian workers at the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) were paid to post thousands of pro-Russian comments on Western media articles about the war. In the summer of 2014, *The Guardian* reported of 40K comments a day on its Russian and Ukraine related articles. Some of the other unlikely foot soldiers in this proxy cyber-war were a Moscow-based design studio, a Vietnamese amateur illustrator, a WikiLeaks retweet of a conspiracy theory, some leaked documents, a nationalist anime YouTube music video chock-full of political spin, in addition to coverage on the are by a labyrinth of state-owned Russian media outlets. In this dazzling, premeditated, networked mess, it is impossible to make sense of truth, Metahaven decries. Their inspirator, WikiLeaks, is “allied with a power that should be its target,” they lament (164). “Planetary-scale computation [...] is transforming geopolitics in ways we are yet to understand,” Metahaven claims (155). “[T]he world in general never appeared as opaque as now,” they insist (6). Empowered by networks of planetary-scale computation, “[f]antasy and reality, fiction and fact, are made equivalent” (164). Such a post-truth condition, in which “nothing is true,” is “immune to black transparency’s most fundamental critique of the state” (164). Black transparency has become “part of an order where fantasy and reality coexist” and cannot provide a way out of this conundrum (167).

What we are left with is propaganda, Metahaven maintains. And indeed, memewars, fake-news, alternative facts, ransomware, and conspiracy theories about foreign hackers proliferated during the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum, and further accelerated during the 2016 US election. Our lives today are dependent on computational systems that are deeply connected, interconnected, embedded and integrated. The under-examined yet palpable capabilities and fragility of these networked systems have caused some to feel more vulnerable. Has the Enlightenment model of politics come to its logical end? Has the post-truth society outpaced the information age? Have the central mediators of authority of the twentieth century run aground?

Metahaven sets out a zealous set of stipulations and questions. Confronted with their own assumptions of certainty, stability and truth, Metahaven seems anxious to see whistleblowers and transparency activists end up in a knife-fight with ‘alternative facts’ and fake news ready to be believed and widely shared on media platforms by their ideological cohorts. If spin and memes are more decisive than factual content, how can we make sense of truth? And who has the power of interpretation?, Metahaven asks in their *cri de coeur*.

Perhaps we need to ask a different question. For many “minorities” – a tremendous misnomer, as minorities form a majority – the basic institutions of authority of the twentieth century failed to provide a common ground to begin with. They know what it means to be exposed to reactionary power politics – and for that matter to racism, classism, and sexism. For decades, feminists, postcolonial, queer and gender theorists, poets, and artists alike have been challenging the presumed universal subject of Enlightenment. For decades they have been deconstructing the power structures inherent to knowledge production. For decades they have questioned the androcentric, ethnocentric and ideological assumptions of what constitutes Truth in the first place. “‘The modern liberal subject’: by now it seems, or ought to seem, anything but an obvious choice as the unique terminus ad quem” (Sedgwick 2003, 139). Instead of linearly opposing the power structures of Truth, instead of swapping one Truth for another (*mine is better than yours*), these thinkers have pointed to the historical contingency of all ‘facts’, and continue to defend complexity, arguing for the need of new ontologies and epistemologies, and radically inclusive narratives. What is more, as Audre Lorde, who pulled no punches, argues in *Sister Outsider* (1984): “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984, 112). It may temporarily beat the master at his own game, but it will “never bring about genuine change” (112). And if this makes you feel uncomfortable, you are too attached to the master’s house, Lorde maintains (112).

Black Transparency ends with an anecdote on Pussy Riot’s anti-Putin ‘Punk Prayer’ performance in a Moscow cathedral in 2012. Metahaven considers the Russian feminist punk band the logical successor of black transparency. Pussy Riot’s interventions “trigger responses that are themselves disclosures,” Metahaven contends

(168). To what end?, we may ask. Post-truth is not remedied by disclosures, by generating more proof as alternatives to the alternative facts, nor by fighting propaganda with propaganda, truths with counter-truths. Reality is irreducible to ‘facts.’ Are we willing and able to step out of the power structures that produce post-truth, even if this means a loss of power? Are we willing to compromise (our) Truth? Compromise does not mean one cannot have (and fight for) strong convictions. Compromise means increasing your ability to relate, and this entails taking into account your obligation to and interconnection with other people and things, known and unknown.

Any counter-strategy that could attend to networked propaganda, the optimization of bias, trolls, meme-wars, echo chambers, and other machinations of power, would first have to make peace with the uncertain, the unfounded – without actual examples, without field guides, pointing to uncharted territory beyond rules. Perhaps we should ask: how to shift the focus, not to bring in the promise of greater transparency or Truth, but to recognize blackness as an inherent condition of truth? How to position ourselves as open to other ways of seeing and knowing? To do the work of dismantling the master’s house means first admitting the loss of mastery.

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Biography

Patricia de Vries

Patricia de Vries is a PhD candidate at Erasmus University Rotterdam, a lecturer and researcher at the Institute of Network Cultures, and editor at Felix & Sofie. She reads and writes about algorithmic epistemologies in the arts. More about her can be found at networkcultures.org/contesting-capture-technology