

# The High, The Low and The Weak

(An Interview with  
Gianni Vattimo)

This interview was conducted in August 15, 2012, in Turku, where Vattimo had just given a lecture at *Abogaora* 2012: The Power of the Sacred and the Secular. (For an overview of Vattimo's weak thinking and its role in the aesthetics of popular culture, see the article "A History of the Aesthetics of Popular Culture" in this book.)

Max Ryyänen (MR)

To use a word typical for popular culture, I can say that I'm a big fan of weak thinking, *pensiero debole*, and that the original book on the subject, *Il pensiero debole*, which you edited 1983 with Pier Aldo Rovatti, should be more widely read. It includes diverse perspectives related to the decline of the power of modern metaphysics. Many distinguished scholars joined you — among others Umberto Eco — but what do you think about the concept now? It was a contender for what our era is about, and you published it just 4 years after Lyotard's classic essay on postmodernism. But yesterday you talked about weakening as something more private, and experiential. Is the classic scheme of *pensiero debole* still relevant for you?

Gianni Vattimo (GV)

I remain faithful to weak thinking. In years, however, many of its leading proponents, including those who helped with the editing of the book, have distanced themselves from its basic ideas. Some of them, you could say, have really changed their world views. The same is true for Eco who is now more famous. He supported our ideas at first, but later opposed them.

What is weak thinking now and what could it mean in this era? Some of us have grown maybe even more disillusioned regarding respect for authority and other forms of strong metaphysics. The same can be said of the fact that the media does not only distribute to the masses, it also benefits from the content created by the masses. The new media brings everything together. I understand that for some this new world seems to be a horrifying embodiment of Goebbels' ideas about the role of the radio, or Adorno's visions of the decadent crisis of Western Culture.

MAX RYYNÄNEN

A crisis that is very central for us is of course the way one person, Berlusconi, has been able to dominate our mainstream media. We have come to a point where someone really has too much power in this sense.

I have grown to see new sides of the whole way of thinking about 'weak'. I have even become more interested in the weak. I have become a communist. So aside from the strong structures of modern metaphysics, institutions which have power, there is this other history we have to dig up, the stories which are behind the history of the winners. I am thinking about Benjamin here. Losers are important. This political decline is important. So besides the weakening of rationality, power and other phenomena, where we have had a need for weakening, we must also remember that the current economic crisis was caused by so-called rational people, the winners of the economy, while the poor are the ones who suffer most from it. Banks and bankers win; this was done in neo-capitalism, with old rational ideals. When globalization began, the difference between the winners and the losers was not as great as it is now. This economic and social differentiation is something we have to think about. Weak thinking is philosophical discourse, but, okay, it is discourse where we think that human emancipation cannot go further in a violent way. We need to find adequate ways for discussing and conducting politics. Sadly, philosophy cannot help with social issues, but it can help us to go through the process of this weakening of modern structures.

MR

You have written about high culture institutions, the *bene culturali*, for example in museum studies, e.g., about their having to rethink their role in a less hierarchical way. But don't you think that all this pedagogical movement in museums is often about not accepting the taste of the people, but trying to find strategies to impose high culture upon them. The same could maybe be said about camp. It is an interpretation game where you find ways of claiming that other people's taste is low so that you can laugh about it. It seems that culture finds new ways to keep up with hierarchies. So are we getting rid of high and low, or is it just an illusion?

GU

I am not that pessimistic. I have the impression that high and low are disappearing. I would emphasize that the administration of cultural goods has changed. Museum people think more about how to enjoy these goods which they administrate and exhibit. This is also a question of economics. Since a lot of money is invested, people are motivated to make art accessible for everybody.

About art... Well, I have the feeling that it is more and more about the production of events and happenings, not objects. In this situation it is very difficult for artists to survive. Basically you want to produce a happening, a type of a Woodstock, whatever, and this is an interesting evolution. The artist becomes more and more like a social worker. Think about Living Theatre in New York, or other forms of social action carried out in neighborhoods by artists... It's not that bad! Right? It's a form of popularization of artistic activity, yes, but it doesn't have to be seen as negative.

I remember a sentence by Nietzsche: We are no longer in the epoch of the works of art. Works of art, by the way, also cost too much. I'm on the board of a museum in Turin, and it is really hard to organize exhibitions because they're so expensive. Insurance and everything...

Anyway, in Italy one exhibition contained four thousand pictures. It was a scandal. No discrimination! On the other hand, this democratization is interesting. You can at least find no aspirations to make differences in the old sense here! Probably high culture, highbrow art, could be damaged a bit by that, but if you take recent developments, for instance, in poetry, literary poetry, you can say that art has become even more segregated from the rest of the society. Highbrow poetry is generally understood only by other poets. It has become a specialized language. Where do you find poetry? Not on the radio. There is Paolo Conti. Poets are experts in this cryptic, specialized business, which resembles quantum physics. This is not only positive...

The erosion of the division between high and low is also blown away because you lose elitism. As a result, it is hard to find the proper atmosphere in some art museums because they are full of people and

screaming children... But it also works in a positive way, this democratization process, and art benefits from it.

MR

I've also been thinking about what you said about secularization in your speech yesterday. You talked about Hegel. He also touches on the theme of the secularization of art. But the sacred... If one reads Benjamin one finds the idea that the old art system is a negative theology of art. But if art does not give us the experience of the sacred, where will we go to get it, we who are not religious?

GV

Secularization means that our life is constituted around the sacred. You were born a Christian then you become secular. All civilizations had sacred origins. Then step by step we take a different path, but we still need a nucleus to come back to and get inspiration. This reminds me of the verse of Hölderlin, in which he says that only for a moment man experiences the plenitude of divine, and that life is a dream of these moments.

It is true that we need the sacred. But since its institutional presence like churches and bishops is something that scares us, and ordinary people cannot come close to these authorities, it is true that there is a problem if we cannot find the sacred some other way. We need rituals. These are moments when we become who we are, they are fundamental for us. And I believe that you are correct. We also need divine experiences outside the institutional life of religion. Secularization includes these moments, e.g., of the sacred. Subjective experience... more mysterious.

MR

But what about popular culture? It is a theme you also delved into in your *La società trasparente*. Heidegger said it is not a real world (in his 1957 *Gelassenheit*), but today many people are happy to have sacred moments with (let's take this issue down from obvious idols like Elvis), TV series as sacred and important moments in their life. Is this only banal?

GV

It is definitely not only banal. All stars, from singers to politicians — think about Fidel Castro — are our loved ones. You have to love someone! In this type of love you love them even though you don't know them or love them as persons. We all have this experience in some way. The problem with popular culture might be the cult of people who don't ultimately provide much of a reward. I am thinking about some sports heroes. On the other hand: without the cult of the politician you cannot make a revolution! We might even need to restore the personal authority of politics!

MR

We spoke about institutions earlier in this interview. I am thinking about one which is really in crisis, and it is the university. You might have lived through a golden era in your life work, in some sense. But what about universities today? To me, the new university looks like Adorno's pure culture industry. This suffocating weight of administration, the fabrication of referee articles... very mechanical. And more mass culture than ever! I believe that philosophy might have to go underground. What do you think about this idea? Do we need more non-academic philosophy?

GV

This is the future, I believe, but it is really hard to escape the laws of the market. Students try different strategies. Some become philosophical counselors. This is a bit like psychoanalysis for poor people who are not so desperate that they need a real shrink three times in the week. This is nice, but it does not provide enough money for us.

It is important to get back to thinking about the basis of philosophy in schools. Doing that well might be important for democracy, basic teaching and how we succeed in it. Another thing is that many write for journals and newspapers.

MR

For popular culture media?

Yes. Many philosophers do this. I used to write for Italian newspapers, but perhaps people see me as an extremist and it has become hard. But public schools, they are important, the best way now to develop philosophy's role in society.

Philosophers are elitists, artists living out their art. Not enough work outside the world of philosophy. And state schools need to work against privatization, because privatization leads to more technology and less philosophy. Private universities have different interests than older ones. There is so much to do!