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# (T)error and poetry

Franco Berardi

## 1. The century of the future

Ninety-nine years ago Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published the first *Manifesto of Futurism*; the same year, Henry Ford opened his first automobile factory in Detroit. It was the beginning of the century that believed in the future. The Manifesto asserted the aesthetic value of the machine – that is, the ‘external machine’, not to be confused with the internalized and recombining machine of the bio-info era. Futurism exalted the machine as an external object, visible in the city landscape, but now the machine is inside us: we are no longer obsessed with the external machine. Instead, the ‘info-machine’ now intersects with the social nervous system, the ‘bio-machine’ interacts with the genetic becoming of the human organism.

The *Futurist Manifesto* declared the aesthetic value of speed. The myth of speed sustained the whole edifice of the imaginary of modernity, and acceleration played a crucial role in the history of capital – that is, the history of the acceleration of labour time. Productivity is the growth factor of the accretion of relative surplus value determined by the speed of the productive gesture and the intensification of its rhythm.

Ninety-nine years on, speed has been transferred from the realm of external machines to the information domain. In this process speed became internalized and transformed into a psycho-cognitive automatism. In the century of the future, the machine of speed accomplished the colonization of global space; this was followed by its colonization of the domain of time, lived experience, the mind and perception, which thus sanctioned the beginning of the century with no future.

The question of the relationship between an unlimited expansion of cyberspace and the limits of cybertime, of the time of the mind, and of social attention opens up here. At the point of the virtual intersection of the projections generated by countless issuers, cyberspace is unlimited and in a process of continuous expansion. On the contrary, cybertime, that is, the ability of the mind to process information in time – is anything but unlimited: its limits are those of the human mind and are thus organic, emotional and cultural.

Subjected to the infinite acceleration of the info-stimuli, the mind reacts with either panic or desensitization. Sensibility is the faculty that makes empathic understanding possible, the ability to comprehend what words cannot say, the power to interpret a continuum of non-discrete elements, non-verbal signs and the flows of empathy. This faculty, which enabled humans to understand ambiguous messages in the context of relationships, might now be disappearing. We are now witness to the development of a generation of human beings lacking competence in sensibility, the ability to understand the other empathically and decode signs that are not codified in a binary system.

## 2. Deregulation

Futurism and the avant-garde set themselves the task of violating rules. *Dérèglement* was the legacy left by Rimbaud to the experimentation of the 1900s. *Deregulation* was also the rallying cry of the hyper-capitalism of late modernity, paving the way for the development of semio-capital. In the totalitarian period of the external machine and mechanical speed, having previously used the state form to impose its rule on society, capitalism decided to do without state mediation as the techniques of recombination and the absolute speed of electronics made it possible for control to be interiorized.

In the classical form of manufacturing capitalism, price, wages and profit fluctuations were based on the relationship between necessary labour time and the determination of value. Following the introduction of microelectronic technologies and the resulting intellectualization of productive labour, the relationship between different magnitudes and different productive forces entered a period of indeterminacy. *Deregulation*, as launched by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, marked the end of the law of value and turned its demise into a political economy. In his main work, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard intuitively infers the overall direction of the development of the end of the millennium.

The principle of reality coincided with a certain stage of the law of value. Today, the whole system has precipitated into indeterminacy and reality has been absorbed by the hyper-reality of the code of simulation.<sup>1</sup>

The whole system precipitates into indeterminacy as all correspondences between symbol and referent, simulation and event, value and labour time no longer hold. But isn't this also what the avant-garde aspired to? Doesn't experimental art wish to sever the link between symbol and referent? In saying this, I am not accusing the avant-garde of being the cause of neoliberal economic deregulation. Rather, I am suggesting that the anarchic utopia of the avant-garde was actualized and turned into its opposite the moment society internalized rules and capital was able to abdicate both juridical law and political rationality to abandon itself to the seeming anarchy of internalized automatisms, which is actually the most rigid form of totalitarianism.

As industrial discipline dwindled, individuals found themselves in a state of ostensible freedom. No law forced them to put up with duties and dependence. Obligations became internalized and social control was exercised through a voluntary albeit inevitable subjugation to chains of automatisms. In a regime of aleatory and fluctuating values, precariousness became the generalized form of social relations, which deeply affected the social composition and the psychic, relational and linguistic characters of a new generation as it entered the labour market. Rather than a particular form of productive relations, precariousness is the dark soul of the productive process. An uninterrupted flow of fractal and recombining info-labour circulates in the global web as the agent of universal valorization, yet its value is indeterminable. Connectivity and precariousness are two sides of the same coin: the flow of semio-capitalist production captures and connects cellularized fragments of depersonalized time; capital purchases fractals of human time and recombines them in the web. From the standpoint of capitalist valorization, this flow is uninterrupted and finds its unity in the object produced; however, from the standpoint of cognitive workers the supply of labour is fragmented: fractals of time and pulsating cells of labour are switched on and off in the large control room of global production. Therefore the supply of labour time can be disconnected from the physical and juridical person of the worker. Social labour time becomes an ocean of valorizing cells that can be summoned and recombined in accordance with the needs of capital.

### 3. Activism

Let us return to the Futurist Manifesto: war and the contempt for women are the essential features of mobilization, which traverses the whole parable of historical vanguards. The Futurist ambition really consisted in mobilizing social energies towards the acceleration of the productivity of the social machine. Art alimeted the discourse of advertising as the latter fed into mobilization. When industrial capitalism transposed into the new form of semio-capitalism, it first and foremost mobilized the psychic energy of society to bend it to the drive of competition and cognitive productivity. The *new economy* of the 1990s was essentially a *Prozac economy*, both neuro-mobilization and compulsory creativity.

Paul Virilio has produced important works that show the connection between war and speed: in the modern forms of domination, the imposition of war onto the whole of social life is an implicit one precisely because economic competitiveness is war, and war and the economy share common ground in speed. As Walter Benjamin wrote: 'all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.' The becoming aesthetic of life is one aspect of this mobilization of social energies. The aestheticization of war is functional to the subjugation of everyday life to the rule of history. War forces the global masses to partake in the process of self-realization of the Hegelian spirit, or, perhaps more realistically, to become part of capitalist global accumulation. Captured in the dynamics of war, everyday life is ready to be subjected to the unlimited rule of the commodity. From this standpoint, there is no difference between fascism, communism and democracy: art functions as the element of aestheticization and mobilization of everyday life. Total mobilization is terror, and terror is the ideal condition for a full realization of the capitalist plan to mobilize psychic energy. The close relation between Futurism and advertising is an integral part of this process.

In his *Art and Revolution* (Semiotext(e), 2007), Gerald Raunig writes of the relationship between the artistic avant-garde and activism. His work provides a useful phenomenological account of the relation between art and political mobilization in the twentieth century, but it fails to grasp the absolute specificity of the current situation – that is, the crisis and exhaustion of all activism.

The term 'activism' largely became influential as a result of the anti-globalization movement, which used it to describe its political communication and the connection between art and communicative action. However, this definition is a mark of its attachment

to the past and its inability to free itself from the conceptual frame of reference it inherited from the twentieth century. Should we not free ourselves from the thirst for activism that fed the twentieth century to the point of catastrophe and war? Should we not set ourselves free from the repeated and failed attempt to act for the liberation of human energies from the rule of capital? Isn't the path towards the autonomy of the social from economic and military mobilization only possible through a withdrawal into inactivity, silence and passive sabotage?

#### 4. Lenin's depression

I believe that there is a profound relationship between the drive to activism and the male depression of late modernity, which is most evident in the voluntaristic and subjectivist organization of Leninism.

Both from the standpoint of the history of the workers' movement in the 1900s and from that of the strategic autonomy of society from capital, I am convinced that the twentieth century would have been a better century had Lenin not existed. Lenin's vision interprets a deep trend in the configuration of the psyche of modern masculinity. Male narcissism was confronted with the infinite power of capital and emerged from it frustrated, humiliated and depressed. It seems to me that Lenin's depression is a crucial element for understanding the role his thought played in the development of the politics of late modernity.

I have read H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse's biography, *Lenin*. The author is a researcher of Georgian descent, who in the 1980s also published *L'empire en miettes*, where she foresaw the collapse of the Soviet empire as an effect of the insurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. What interests me in Carr ere d'Encausse's biography of Lenin, more than the history of Lenin's political activity, is his personal life, his fragile psyche, and his affectionate and intellectual relationships with the women close to him: his mother, his sister, Krupskaya, comrade and wife, who looked after him at times of acute psychological crises, and, finally, Ines Armand, the perturbing, the *Unheimlich*, the lover whom Lenin decided to neutralize and remove, like music, apparently.

The framework of the psyche described in this biography is depression, and Lenin's most acute crises coincided with important political shifts in the revolutionary movement. As Carr ere d'Encausse writes:

Lenin used to invest everything he did with perseverance, tenaciousness and an exceptional concentration: such consistency, which he thought necessary in each of his efforts, put him in a position

of great superiority over the people around him.

... This feature of his character often had negative effects. Exceedingly intensive efforts would tire him and wear down his already fragile nervous system. The first crisis dates back to 1902.<sup>2</sup>

These were the years of the Bolshevik turn, of *What Is To Be Done?* Krupskaya played a fundamental role in the crisis of her comrade: she intervened to filter his relations with the outside world, paid for his therapy and isolation in clinics in Switzerland and Finland. Lenin emerged from the 1902 crisis by writing *What Is To Be Done?* and engaging in the construction of a 'nucleus of steel', a block of will capable of breaking the weakest link in the imperialist chain. The second crisis arrived in 1914 at the height of the break-up of the Second International and the split of the Communists. The third crisis, as you might guess, occurred in the spring of 1917. Krupskaya found a safe resort in Finland, where Lenin conceived *The April Theses* and the decision to impose will on intelligence: a rupture that disregarded the deep dynamics of class struggle and forced upon them an external design. Intelligence is depressive, therefore will is the only cure to the abyss, to ignore it without removing it. The abyss remains and the following years uncovered it, as the century precipitated into it.

I do not intend to discuss the politics of Lenin's fundamental choices. I am interested in pointing out a relationship between Bolshevik voluntarism and the male inability to accept depression and develop it from within. Here lies the root of the subjectivist voluntarism that produced the setback of social autonomy in the 1900s. The intellectual decisions of Leninism were so powerful because they were capable of interpreting the male obsession with voluntarism as it faced depression.

#### 5. The next wave

By the beginning of the twenty-first century the long history of the artistic avant-garde was over. Beginning with Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and resulting in the Dadaist cry to 'Abolish art, abolish everyday life, abolish the separation between art and everyday life', the history of the avant-garde culminates in the gesture of 9/11. Stockhausen had the courage to say this, whilst many of us were thinking the same: terrorizing suicide is the total work of art of the century with no future. The fusion of art and life (or death – what difference does it make?) is clearly visible in the form of action that we might call 'terrorizing suicide'. Let us take Pekka Auvinen as an example. The Finnish youngster turned up to his class at school with a machine gun,

killing eight people, himself included. Printed on his T-shirt was the sentence 'Humanity is overrated'. Wasn't his gesture pregnant with signs typical of the communicative action of the arts?

Let me explain: I am not inviting the young readers of this article to go to a crowded place with an explosive belt. I am trying to say, pay attention: a gigantic wave of desperation could soon turn into a suicidal epidemic that will turn the first connective generation into a devastating psychic bomb. I do not think that this wave of suicides can be explained in terms of morality, family values and the weak discourse used by conservative thought to account for the ethical drift produced by capitalism. To understand the contemporary form of ethical shipwreck we need to reflect on the transformations of activity and labour, the subsumption of the time of the mind under the competitive realm of productivity; we have to understand the mutation of the cognitive and psycho-social system.

## 6. Conjunction/connection

The context of my understanding of the present historical and cultural dynamics is the transition from a realm of conjunction to one of connection, with a special focus on the emergence of the first connective generation, those who learn more words from a machine than from a mother. In this transition, a mutation of the conscious organism is taking place: to render this organism compatible with a connective environment, our cognitive system needs to be reformatted. This appears to generate a dulling of the faculties of conjunction that had hitherto characterized the human condition. The realm of sensibility is involved in this ongoing process of cognitive reformatting; we see aesthetic thought as being inserted at a juncture. Ethical and political thought is also reshaping its observational standpoint and framework around the passage from a conjunctive to a connective form of human concatenation.

Conjunction is becoming-other. In contrast, in connection each element remains distinct and interacts only functionally. Singularities change when they conjoin; they become something other than they were before their conjunction. Love changes the lover and a combination of a-signifying signs gives rise to the emergence of a meaning that does not exist prior to it. Rather than a fusion of segments, connection entails a simple effect of machinic functionality. In order to connect, segments must be compatible and open to interfacing and inter-operability. Connection requires these segments to be linguistically compat-

ible. In fact the digital web spreads and expands by progressively reducing more and more elements to a format, a standard and a code that make different segments compatible. The segments that enter this rhizome belong to different realms of nature: they are electronic, semiotic, machinic, biological and psychic; optic fibre circuits, mathematical abstractions, electromagnetic waves, human eyes, neurons and synapses. The process whereby they become compatible traverses heterogeneous fields of being and folds them onto a principle of connectivity.

The present mutation occurs in this transition from conjunction to connection, a paradigm of exchange between conscious organisms. Central to this mutation is the insertion of the electronic into the organic, the proliferation of artificial devices in the organic universe, in the body, in communication and in society. Therefore, the relationship between consciousness and sensibility is transformed and the exchange of signs undergoes a process of increasing desensitization. Conjunction is the meeting and fusion of rounded and irregular forms that infuse in a manner that is imprecise, unrepeatable, imperfect and continuous. Connection is the punctual and repeatable interaction of algorithmic functions, straight lines and points that juxtapose perfectly and are inserted and removed in discrete modes of interaction. These discrete modes make different parts compatible to predetermined standards.

The digitization of communication processes leads, on the one hand, to a sort of desensitization, to the curve and to the continuous flows of slow becoming, and, on the other, to a becoming sensitive to the code, to sudden changes of states and to the sequence of discrete signs. Interpretation follows semantic criteria in the realm of conjunction: the meaning of the signs sent by the other as she enters in conjunction with you needs to be understood by tracing the intention, the context, the nuances and the unsaid, if necessary. The interpretative criteria of the realm of connection, on the other hand, are purely syntactic. In connection, the interpreter must recognize a sequence and be able to perform the operation required by general syntax or the operating system; there is no room for margins of ambiguity in the exchange of messages, nor can the intention be shown by means of nuances.

This mutation produces painful effects in the conscious organism and we read them through the categories of psychopathology: dyslexia, anxiety and apathy, panic, depression and a sort of epidemic of suicide are spreading. However, a purely psychopathological account fails to capture the question in its depth,

because we are in fact confronted with the effort of the conscious organism to adapt to a changed environment and a readjustment of the cognitive system to the techno-communicative environment. This generates pathologies of the psychic sphere and in social relations.

Aesthetic perception – here properly conceived as the realm of sensibility and aesthesia – is directly involved in this transformation: in its attempt to interface efficiently with the connective environment, the conscious organism appears increasingly to inhibit what we call sensibility. By sensibility, we mean the faculty that enables human beings to interpret signs that are not verbal nor can be made so, the ability to understand what cannot be expressed in forms that have a finite syntax. This faculty reveals itself to be useless and even damaging in an integrated connective system. Sensibility slows down processes of interpretation and renders them aleatory and ambiguous, thus reducing the competitive efficiency of the semiotic agent.



The ethical realm where voluntary action is possible also plays an essential role in the reformatting of the cognitive system. Religious sociologists and journalists lament a sort of ethical lack of sensitivity and a general indifference in the behaviour of the new generations. In many cases, they lament the decline of ideological values or community links. However, in order to understand the discomfort that invests the ethical and political realms, the emphasis needs to be placed on aesthetics. Ethical paralysis and the inability to ethically govern individual and collective life seem to stem from a discomfort in aesthesia – the perception of the other and of the self.

## 7. Dystopian poetry

The arts of the 1900s favoured the register of utopia in two forms: the radical utopia of Mayakovsky and the functional utopia of the Bauhaus. The dystopian thread remained hidden in the folds of the artistic and literary imagination, in Fritz Lang, expressionism, and a kind of bitter surrealism that underlies the field of vision that connects Salvador Dalí to Philip K. Dick. In the second half of the twentieth century the literary dystopia of Orwell, Burroughs and DeLillo flourished. Only today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, does dystopia take centre stage and conquer the whole field of the artistic imagination, thus drawing the narrative horizon of the century with no future. In the expression of contemporary poetry, in cinema, video art and novels, the marks of an epidemic of psychopathology proliferate.

In her videos, Elja Liisa Athila (*Wind, If 6 was 9, Anne Aki and God*) narrates the psychopathology of relations, the inability to touch and to be touched. In the film *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, Melinda July tells the story of a video artist who falls in love with a young man and of the difficulty of translating emotion into words and words into touch. Language is severed from affectivity. Language and sex diverge in everyday life. Sex is talked about everywhere, but sex never speaks. Pills accelerate erection because the time for caresses is limited.

A film by Jia Zhang-Ke, entitled *Still Life (Sanxia haoren)* and produced in Hong Kong in 2006, shows an unfolding devastation. This film is extraordinarily beautiful and tells a simple story, with the background of a sad, desolate and devastated China, as both the scenery and its soul. The predominant colour is a rotten, greyish, violet green. Huo Sanming returns to his place of birth in the hope of finding his wife and daughter, whom he had left years earlier to go and find work in a distant northern mine. His village, along the riverbank of the Yangtze, no longer exists. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam had erased many villages. Houses, people and streets were covered by water. The building of the dam proceeds, the destruction of villages continues and the water is going to keep rising. Huo Sanming arrives in this scenario of devastation and rising water and is unable to find his wife and daughter; so his search begins. He looks for them as groups of workers armed with their picks take walls down, as explosives demolish buildings in the urban centre.

After long searches he finally finds his wife; she has aged and been sold by her brother to another man. They meet in the rooms of a building as it is being

demolished and talk about their daughter in whispers, with their heads down, against a dark green spaceship background of bricks and iron spattering onto a shit-coloured sky. In the last scene of *Still Life*, a tightrope walker walks on a rope from the roofs of a house towards nothingness, against a background that recalls the dark surrealism of Dalí's bitter canvas. *Still Life* is a lyrical account of Chinese capitalism, acted inside out, from the standpoint of submerged life.

*The Corrections*, a novel by Jonathan Franzen published in 2001, speaks of psychopharmacological adjustments as the corrections used by a humanity devastated by depression and anxiety to adjust to an existence that must pretend to be happy. Corrections are the adjustment to a volatile stock market to avoid losing the money invested in private pension funds that might suddenly disappear. Franzen recounts the old age of a father and mother, a couple of oldies from the Midwest who have gone nuts as a result of decades of hyper-labour and conformism. Corrections are the small and unstoppable slides towards the point of turn-off, the horror of old age in the civilization of competition, the horror of sexuality in the world of puritan efficiency.

Franzen digs deep into the American psyche and describes in minute details the pulpification of the American brain, the depression and dementia resulting from a prolonged exposure to the psychic bombardment of stress from work, the apathy, paranoia, puritan hypocrisy and the pharmaceuticals industry around them, the psychic unmaking of men who are encapsulated in the claustrophobic shell of economic hyper-protection, the infantilism of a people which pretends to believe, or perhaps really believes in the fulsome Christmas fairy tale of compassionately liberalist cruelty. By the end of the long-awaited Christmas dinner, as the psychopathic family happily gathers together, the father tries to commit suicide by shooting himself in the mouth. He is not successful.

*Yakizakana no Uta*, an animated film by Yusuke Sakamoto, starts with a fish in cellophane wrapping on a supermarket shelf. A boy grabs it and takes it to the till; he pays, leaves, puts it in the bicycle basket and cycles home. 'Good morning Mr Student, I'm very happy to be with you. Do not worry, I'm not a fish who complains', the fish says whilst the student briskly pedals home. 'It's nice to make the acquaintance of a human being. You are extraordinary beings; you are almost the masters of the universe. Unfortunately you are not always peaceful; I would like to live in a peaceful world where everyone loves one another and even fish and humans shake hands. Oh it's so nice to

see the sunset, I like it ever so much.' The fish becomes emotional and jumps in the cellophane bag inside the basket. 'I can hear the sound of a stream ... I love the sound of streams, it reminds me something from my childhood.' When they get home the boy unpacks the fish and puts it on a plate, throws a little salt on it. As the fish gets excited and says 'Ah! I like salt very much, it reminds me of something...' the boy puts it on the grill in the oven and turns the knob. The fish keeps chatting: 'Oh Mr Student it's nice here, I can see a light down there ... I feel hot ... hot...' until its voice becomes hesitant. It starts singing a song, more and more feebly and unconnectedly, like Al in *2001: Space Odyssey* as his wires are unplugged.

*Yakizakana no Uta* is perhaps the most harrowing animation I saw in June 2006 at the Caixa Forum of Barcelona, during the *Historias Animadas* festival. Yet I perceived a common tone running through all of the works presented at the festival, one of ironic cynicism, if you will allow me this expression. *Place in Time* by Miguel Soares recounts millions of years from the standpoint of an improbable bug, an organic insect, as the world changes around it. *Animales de compañía* by Ruth Gomes uses ferocious images to tell the story of a generation of well-dressed anthropophagi, young beasts in ties; they run and run to avoid being caught by fellows, colleagues, friends and lovers who wound, kill and eat them as soon as they fall into their grip, with terrorized smiles and dilated eyes.

This art is no denunciation. The terms 'denunciation' and 'engagement' no longer have meaning when you are a fish getting ready to be cooked. The art of the twenty-first century no longer has that kind of energy, even though it keeps using expressions from the 1900s, perhaps out of modesty, perhaps because it is scared of its own truth. Artists no longer search the way to a rupture, and how could they? They seek a path that leads to a state of equilibrium between irony and cynicism that allows them to suspend the execution, at least for a moment.

Is art the postponement of the holocaust?

All energy has moved to the war front.

Artistic sensibility registers this shift and is incapable of opposing it.

Translated by Arianna Bove

## Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p. 12; *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant, Sage, London, 1993.
2. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Lenin*, Fayard, Paris, 1998, p. 78; *Lenin*, trans. George Holloch, Holmes & Meier, Teaneck NJ, 2002.