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Source *NJP Reader #8 Future Museum: Public to Commons*, pp.223-234

Publisher Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin

Art in the Hell

Colophon

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Published on 31 December 2018

Art in the Hell Franco Berardi 'Bifo'

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi is an Italian philosopher who played a central role in the movement of Autonomia in Italy. In 1975, he published *A/traverso*, an avant-grade magazine and also in 1976, established 'Radio Alice', the first free pirate radio station in Italy. He is considered to be a media theorist and activist transcending various media as he created 'Recombinant', a mailing list exploring social activism and new technology in 2000 and constructed 'Orfeo TV' in 2002 by organizing the 'Telestreet' movement against Berlusconi government. Berardi has been presenting critical theory on psychoanalysis, information technology, and capitalism since the 1990s. His books including, *After the Future*, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, *Precarious Rhapsody* and etc. are translated published in Korea.

During the world Summit of Hamburg, in July 2017 a group of young protesters carried a banner with the words: "Welcome 2 Hell".

What hell were they talking about? What is the contemporary hell, in which we dwell? And, finally: what is use of art in the hell?

In order to answer these questions I will go through some metaphors that can help us to outline an imaginary map of the contemporary hell. A map that is needed if one wants to look for a (possible?) line of escape.

Darkness, white noise, breathlessness are three metaphors that I'm using in order to outline this imaginary map. However, I'll also speak of chaotic spasm and of vibrational chaosmose in order to grasp the evolutionary dimension in which (thanks to the activity of artists) we may overcome the present Chaos.

Darkness

In the imagination of Dante Alighieri, the hell is, first and foremost, dark (*selva oscura*). Darkness is the main feature by which we

recognise the hell, when we think of it.

Some books recently released are speaking of the relation between light and darkness.

James Bridley has just published a book titled *The New Dark Age* where he writes: “we find ourselves connected to vast repositories of knowledge, and yes we have not learned to think. In fact the opposite is true: that which was intended to enlighten the world in practice darkens it.” (James Bridley: *The New Dark Age*, Verso 2018, p. 10).

Knowledge, technology, information have long been tools of enlightening the surrounding world, flows of light that were supposed to illuminate our individual path and our social existence. But the expansion and intensification of those enlightening flows have resulted into dazzling stimulation of the mind and finally have provoked an effect of blindness.

In the words of James Bridley the apparent progress of the technical enlightenment of the world has provoked “.. the inability to see clearly what is in front of us, and to act meaningfully, with agency and justice, in the world.” (p.11).

In the book *Black Transparency*, (whose Author is the collective Metahaven) we read the following words:

“We are the opposite of blind. We have absolutely nothing left but our vision.” (Metahaven: *Black Transparency*, Sternberg Press, 2017, p X), then they add:

“For all the advocacy for transparency, the world in general never appeared as opaque as now.”

The irrepressible boundless dissemination of light, the proliferation of images in the uncountable screens that besiege our attention, are provoking an effect of bedazzlement, and the world has grown

incomprehensible.

One more book is devoted to the metaphor of light and darkening dazzlement: *Stand Out of My Light* authored by James Williams, one of founders of the Google corporation. The title of the book is based on an ancient legend: according to legend, Alexander the Great came to visit the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who used to lie in the sun, on a sidewalk. Alexander wanted to fulfil a wish for Diogenes and asked him what he desired, but Diogenes replied “Stand out of my light.”

James Williams is reflecting on the gesture of the philosopher, and rejects the panoply of goods that new technology offers in order to restore the intimate order of the self. Light, the deployment of techno media machine has spread a dazzling light everywhere, but it is blinding us, so that we are entering a sort of new age of darkness. The Williams’ book is about the siege of our attention, the constant stimulation of our nervous system that is provoking the chaos of the mind.

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 The dialectics of light and darkness is the core of the famous book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by Adorno and Horkheimer. In 1942 the German philosophers reflected on the relation between the rationalisation of the world purported by modern science and modern politics, and the coming back of irrationalism and violence in the years of German Nazism and Italian Fascism.

The metaphor of light in the shape of Reason has been crucial in the progressive dimension of the Modern culture. The Enlightenment emphasised rationality as the source of illumination in the field of scientific thought and in the field of politics.

Then the expansion of knowledge resulted into technical acceleration of information, and the XXth Century has been marked by the euphoria of acceleration, expansion, enhancement of the horizon. This acceleration, however led to a paradoxical effect, that in the last

decades of the Century has been described as the disappearing of future.

The modern idea of future was based on the Futurist euphoria of speed, while the late modern acceleration turned future into a nightmare.

In the new Century, thanks to the shift from Internet to the web 2.0, we have been taken in a sort of whirlwind: permanent acceleration of the info-sphere and following intensification of the neuro stimulation.

The permanent acceleration of the info-sphere led to a a collapse of the psychosphere.

White Noise

The political forms of representation that emerged during the modern age are now empty, deprived of effectiveness and of meaning.

Political sovereignty can be described as a condition in which the sound of law is topping the noise that proceeds from the social environment. Nowadays, instead, the construction of power is based on the boundless intensification of noise: social signification is no more exchange and decoding of signifiers, but saturation of listening, neural hyper-stimulation.

The political order used to be based on the voice of power proclaiming law amid the silence of the crowd. The contemporary post-political power, on the contrary, is just a statistical function that emerges from the noise of the crowd.

Referring to the swarm-like behaviour of the networked culture, Byung Chul Han summarises the transformation with the following words:

“..According to Carl Schmitt sovereignty is a matter of deciding when a

state of exception holds. This doctrine may be translated into acoustic terms. Sovereignty means being able to produce absolute quiet, eliminating all noise and making all others fall silent in a single stroke. Schmitt's life did not coincide with the era of digital networks..." (Byung Chul Han: *In the swarm*, MIT Press, 2917)

Actually in our age of digital networked communication, power does no more correspond to sovereignty, and is no more based on silencing the surrounding environment. On the contrary, it compels people to express themselves, it incites people to rise their voices up to the point of white noise.

In the words of Byung-Chul Han shit-storm is the prevailing form of social communication:

"Shitstorms occur for many reasons. They arise in a culture where respect is lacking and indiscretion prevails. The shitstorm represent an authentic phenomenon of digital communication..."

And finally:

"Following the digital revolution, we need to reformulate Schmitt's words on sovereignty yet again: Sovereign is he who commands the shit-storms of the Net."

Starting from the notion of shit-storm, we may explain the ascent of the Emperor of Chaos to the highest place of world power, the presidency of the United States of America.

Modern power was based on the force to impose one's own voice and to silence others:

"Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany," wrote Hitler in 1938 in the Manual of German Radio.

The new Hitlers emerge from the storm of inaudible voices. Power is no more based on eavesdropping and censoring. On the

contrary it acts as proliferation of flows of non-sense, it stimulates expression, and it draws rules of control from the Statistical elaboration of data that emerge from the noise of the world.

The social sound is turned into white noise, and the white noise is the source of social order.

In this whirlwind of info-flow Democracy is losing its meaning, as the human ability of governing reality has been thwarted, as the critical mind has turned unable to process the expanding dimension of the accelerating media-sphere.

In the aftermath of the Donald Trump's triumph, left-wing commentators have repeatedly asserted that the political machine of democracy is rotten because the fake news are invading the public discourse. I think that this judgement is downplaying and misinterpreting the catastrophe that democracy has suffered. The problem, in my opinion, is not fake news. Fake news have always been part of the public discourse. Obviously the volume of fake news has enormously increased in the last decades, but this is only an effect of the enormous enhancement of the volume of information that we receive every day.

The new phenomenon in the domain of social communication is not fake-news, but the information overload that has led to the disablement of critical discernment. The extinction of the critical mind is the problem, and the extinction of critical mind is the effect of a systemic change of the semiotic environment, that results in a new kind of destruction of Reason: a systemic disablement of the critical procedures of rational thinking and of conscious decision.

The inability of the human mind to elaborate (ethically and emotionally) the flow of neuro-stimulation is the source of the present explosion of rationality.

The political machine, that in the age of democracy was based on the

conscious participation to the process of decision, is broken forever. Chaos, and identitarian aggressiveness are the consequence of this disablement of the critical mind.

The question now is: what should be done when Chaos erupts everywhere?

We should never forget that those who wage war against chaos will be defeated, because chaos feeds upon the war.

In their last book titled "*What is philosophy,*" (in the last chapter devoted to chaos and the brain) Deleuze and Guattari write that we should consider chaos as an ally not less than a foe. When chaos breaks out, indeed, we should be able to find in it the conditions of a chaosmotic shift.

Identity

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Everywhere in the world people have grown unable to decide about social life in a democratic way, because their life and their mind are taken in the permanent turmoil of mental chaos.

The financial machine has been the main accelerator of chaos in the social business, and the technomedia system has provoked a pathogenic acceleration of mental time. Micro-trading, financial domination of the economy have replaced political decision and critical reason. As a result, the ability of citizens to decide about their own life, and about the distribution of labor and wealth, has been jeopardised. Consequently people have lost any faith in democracy, and feel impotent and unsafe, as they cannot control the implications and effects of the techno-financial assault.

This is the hell: impotence, precariousness, fear of the future, spreading violence. The only ground for escaping precariousness and

anxiety is to build on identity: belonging to a nation, to a religious community, to an ethnic group becomes the only certainty, intrinsically based on exclusion, and aggressiveness.

This is why Fascism is spreading everywhere: not the old Fascism of the past Century, which was based on the euphoria of young persons looking forward to the bright future of economic growth and national glory. That old kind of Fascism is over, as the futurist spirit of Marinetti and of the Vanguard has been replaced by depressive No Future of the punk sub-cultures.

Contemporary fascism is a desperate attempt to re-enact a no more existing community, and to restore a youngish potency that will never come back. It is the Fascism of young men who live in a condition of precariousness and of loneliness, and it is the Fascism of old people who long for their potency (sexual and political). That potency will never come back.

The only thing that the new form of fascism has in common with the fascism of the past is the racist assertion of identity, the aggressive assertion of what we think we are. As we are frightened by what we are becoming we try to focus on the common origin, ethnic, religious and otherwise.

But the question: who are we? is a fake question. Identity is a fake concept. We are nothing, as human nature is based on becoming.

Vibrational Chaosmose

Reason and critical discernment can only exist in a situation in which time for decision is compatible with the rhythm of the techno-machine.

It's a problem of temporality, of relation between time of the machine and time of the human mind. When the rhythm of the techno-financial

automaton grows too fast for the elaboration time of the human mind to elaborate, chaos prevails.

Chaos is not something that exists in nature. It is not a real thing. Chaos is a relation between the temporality of info-sphere and the temporality of the human mind.

Chaos is painful for the mind, and the kind of pain that we feel in chaotic environments is defined as “spasm” by Felix Guattari.

The concept of Chaosmose may be explained in terms of a continuous interplay between cosmic respiration and refrains (retournelles) of singularity.

In a chaotic environment the conscious and sensitive organism is desperately looking for an order, for a regularity, and this desperate search results into the stiffening of the vibrational oscillation of singularity. Spasm is the effect of this stiffening of the conscious and sensitive organism in the vortex of the chaotic environment.

In medical language spasm means a painful intensification of the rhythm of a muscle, and of the organism as a whole.

We may speak of brain spasm, when we refer to the painful perception of an artificial acceleration of the rhythm of our cognitive activity, of our mental reaction to the accelerating Infosphere.

We live in the age of chaosmic spasm.

But the spasm is chaosmic in as much it is inviting the organism to re-modulate its vibration, and to re-establish an harmonic order by way of re-singularisation.

Music, and poetry are the field of the vibrational search for a possible con-spiration beyond the limits of the dominant order.

Now, in the hellish time that has been prepared by thirty years of Neoliberal competition and unbridled intensification of the rhythm of productivity, the sound of the modern order has collapsed, and in the digital sphere sound has evolved into noise: the public discourse is a tangle of inaudible voices.

Steve Goodman (*Sonic Warfare*, MIT, 2009) speaks of sonic warfare in order to describe the invasion of the acoustic sphere of society by sonic

hyper-machines that besiege the acoustic attention imposing rhythm in which singularity is cancelled.

Sonic warfare is a way to define the contemporary hell.

Darkness and white noise.

And breathlessness.

Breathlessness

Do you remember that man who has been killed in Staten Island some years ago. He was illegally selling cigarettes in the public sidewalk, and the police came to arrest him. Garner was killed on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York City, when a New York City Police Department officer put him in a chokehold for about fifteen to nineteen seconds while arresting him. The words “I can’t breathe”—which Garner panted eight times, less and less audibly, before expiring—have been chanted by thousands of demonstrators all over the country following the death of Garner.

In many ways, these words express the general sentiment of our times: physical and psychological breathlessness everywhere, in the megacities choked by pollution, in the precarious social condition of the majority of exploited workers, in the pervading fear of violence, war, and aggression. Trump is the perfect emperor for this baroque empire of unchained vulgarity, glamorous hypocrisy, and silent, widespread suffering.

Respiration is a useful point of view for discussing contemporary chaos while searching a line of escape.

The metaphor of breathing is useful for a conceptualisation of chaos.

Chaos in fact is provoking an effect of dis-rhythmia, and of panic.

It is all about rhythm: the relation between the body and the surrounding world is disturbed by the acceleration of the surrounding rhythms, and by the confusion provoked by infinite multitasking.

For Henri Bergson, time is defined from the point of view of our

consciousness of duration. Time is the objectivation of a biological organism's act of breathing, which is sensitive, conscious, and singular. Singular respiration is concatenated with the breathing of the others, and this co-respiration we name "society." Society is the dimension in which singular durations are rearranged in a shared time-frame.

Consciousness is located in time, but time is located in consciousness, as it can only be perceived and projected by consciousness. Therefore "time" can be defined as the duration of the stream of consciousness, the projection of that dimension in which consciousness flows.

The stream of consciousness, however, is not homogeneous: on the contrary, it is perceived and projected according to different rhythms and singular refrains, and sometimes it is codified and arranged into a regular, rhythmic repetition.

In the contemporary hell, the stream of consciousness is overwhelmed by the jumble of stimulating flows of noise.

Reactivation

How can we overcome the spasm, how can we survive, and relax, and reactivate the erotic body of the conscious and sensitive organism which is affected by spasm?

It's a political question, as the political mobilisation of social subjectivity is impossible as long as the body is stiffened and separated from the networked brain.

It is also a therapeutic question, as the stiffening and loneliness of the body provokes a suffering that is manifest in the epidemics of depression and panic that looms at the horizon of the XXIth Century.

It is also, and foremost, an aesthetic question. In fact poetry, music, and dance dwell and find their scope in the prospect of reactivation of the erotic body. Artists are the actors of a possible process of reactivation of the erotic body of the cognitive labor.

There is no political way out from the hell that financial capitalism has

imposed over the world. The way out is not political, but aesthetic, in the broadest sense of this word.

The evolution of the neuro-aesthetic dimension of the human organism is the dimension in which a line of escape may be found. But the problem is: can human mind have control on the evolution of the human mind itself? Can we consciously reframe consciousness, can we consciously act on the evolution of the brain?

A french philosopher and psychoanalyst whose name is Katherine Malabou, in a book titled *What should we do with our brains?* elaborates on this subject, building on the concept of “neuroplasticity”. How can we find a new harmony a new sintony between the rhythm of the brain and the rhythm of the infosphere.

This is not a question for political thinkers. This is rather a question for those people who deal with sensibility, I mean artists, and poets. I’m not sure that the word “artist” are adapt define those person who can reshape the vibrational dimension of the neurological evolution. I would prefer to say “psycho-artists”, or may be “neuro-poets”.