

Out of joint. Then what? by Franco "Bifo" Berardi

“Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint—O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let’s go together.”
(*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5)

In the last years of the last decade of the Modern Century, the symptoms of a sort of dissonance and of temporal unbalance have multiplied in the sphere of aesthetic sensibility. Just think of Robert Altman’s movie *Short Cuts* (1993), of P.T. Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999), of Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty* (1999). The rhythm of life is permeated by a sense of acceleration, fragmenting lived experience, and sensory perception itself. “Time is out of joint,” wrote the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, quoting Hamlet, of course. Out of joint – disconnected.

Connectivity is the new environment of the human mind, and the transition to the space of connectivity is provoking a disconnection between the mutated pace of the connected mind and the bodily mind.

If we look at the art-scape of the last decade, we can diagnose a disease that cannot be named, defined, or understood. Precariousness is the name of this unnamable disease. But the naked condition of life is precarious, and the history of civilization has been the construction of shelters, protection against the immediate perception of our relation to Death. Nothing but this deserves to be called Progress, or Civilization: the protection from the vision of truth, from the vision of Death.

Then, at a certain point in the history of late-modernity, the shelter called civilization collapses. We don’t even know exactly when, and the historical account of this collapse may be the object of study for future researchers – supposing that researchers and historians will exist in some future.

What we can say, now, is this: the bare reality of life’s precariousness has returned to the visual field of human beings because of the acceleration of the Infosphere, and because of precarity – the social form of precariousness, the abrupt declaration of truth.

In the first decade of the precarious century, art has been a sort of account of inexhaustible phenomenology and of this return to the truth that civilization has tried so hard to hide: Death.

Only Jean Baudrillard, in a sudden lightning bolt of premonition, said some words about the coming dismantlement of the symbolic castle and the coming nakedness of death in a book published in the year 1976, titled *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

If you want to give a name to this frantic cartography of “panic effect,” the disconnection that the techno-connection has produced in relation to mind and time, soul and body, word and reality, you may think of artworks like Miranda July’s novellas, and Jia Zang-ke’s movie *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video-installations, or Kim Ki-duk’s movie *Time* (2006).

What is the effect of info-acceleration on human emotionality; what is the effect of virtualization and the separation of the symbolic exchange from the continuum of bodily perception; what happens in the field of the unconscious as the exchange between organic sentient beings comes to be more and more mediated by electronic devices?

Human beings are transformed into receivers, terminals of the networked global machine Infosphere. The Universe of receivers, human beings made of frail and sensuous fleshy organs, is not formatted according to the standards of digital transmitters (the Infosphere). The format of the transmitter does not correspond to the format of the receiver. So what happens? The interfacing of the electronic universe of transmission with the organic world of reception produces pathological effects: panic, over-excitement, hyper-mobility, attention deficit disorders, dyslexia, info-overload, and saturation of the neural circuitry.

The universe of transmission has been constantly accelerating, and the universe of receivers has desperately tried to follow, accelerating and standardizing the cognitive response.

The human mind, thus, evolves with a rhythm totally different from the rhythm of the evolution of machines. This is why the expansion of cyberspace

implies an intensification and acceleration of cybertime. And this intensification and acceleration has pathological effects on the living terminal, the human mind, which has physical, emotional, and cultural rhythms of elaboration of the incoming stimuli.

Let's think about multitasking: a new methodology of human behavior spread worldwide as an effect of the technological transformation of capitalist exploitation of work. Multitasking implies the quick shift from one informational frame to another. The human mind seems to be perfectly suited to perform multitasking, but such a practice unavoidably triggers a psychological mutation. This mutation produces new forms of mental suffering like panic, Attention Deficit Disorders, burnout, mental exhaustion, and depression.

According to the author of *Capital and Language*, Christian Marazzi, who emphasizes the implication of the faculty of language in the process of valorization, a true form of dyslexia is spreading among the last generation of cognitive workers: reading a text from beginning to end has become almost impossible for those cognitive workers who are particularly involved in technical and existential multitasking. They ask an assistant to read the text in their stead and summarize what is important. This is the symptom of the growing inability to act accordingly with linear strategies, and also the sign of a change in the cognitive strategies of the new generation, which is less and less able to follow a linear sequence of meaning and is more and more inclined to configurational synthetic forms of learning.

New cognitive and anthropological possibilities are opening up, but these are ensnared in the trap of competition and hyper-exploitation.

Will the plastic brain succeed in finding a way out of the labyrinth to create a new syntone, in German a *Sytonie*, i.e., harmony with the environment?

How so?

People are absorbed by frenzy of forced socialization: "working" implies being connected – hence, being connected means working. As we are perpetually in a state of cellular connection we are forced to continuously take part in the process of production. The economic obsession therefore creates conditions of permanent mobilization of productive energy.

That most rare species known as an "attention span" has turned out to be the scarcest of resources: we have no more time for attention – dealing with infor-

mation and making decisions have become more and more automated. We tend to be governed by decisions in response to short-term interests, corresponding to binary alternatives, rather than in response to long-term rational strategies.

Furthermore, time is short for tenderness, pleasure, compassion, and love. Drugs for erectile problems, like Viagra, have more to do with attention time than with physical impotence. Fast sex, after all, needs pharmaceutical support. Time for caresses and words is no longer available for precarious lovers. Lack of time for sensuousness = sex without attention.

We can describe the present psychopathology in terms of a “chrono-pathology.” Over the last twenty years, more and more children have been diagnosed with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorders), a disease that manifests itself in the form of hyper-motility, and consequential inability to focus attention on a subject for more than a few seconds.

The daily exposure to electronic flows of psycho-stimulation at an early age provoke effects which have implications on affection, emotional language, imagination, and the very perception of lived time.

When working, humans are transformed into connected elaborators of information, with the increase of productivity based on the acceleration of info-flows. This contraction of time with the acceleration of brain activity has an effect on the erotic and emotional perception of the other, making personal experiences more fragile.

Cyberspace, the virtual dimension of info-productive interaction between agents of communication, can be infinitely expanded. On the contrary cybertime, “living” time, and attention *in* time cannot be expanded beyond a certain point, as it is limited by an organic temporality, and by an emotional and cultural temporality which belongs to human consciousness and sensibility. That is, this emotional and cultural elaboration of stimuli happens in time, and the time for psychological and bodily elaboration cannot be shortened beyond a certain point.

The more information demanding our attention grows, the less attention time is available for elaboration. This conflict – or incompatibility – between cyberspace and cybertime is a distinguishing paradox of our society, and in the sphere of capitalist exploitation it produces pathological effects.

I see in this tendency the source of a sort of *desensibilization*. Beyond a limit, the experience of acceleration leads to a reduction of conscious elaboration and to a loss of sensibility – which has ethical implications too. Sensibility is in time, and space has grown to become so dense that the sensible organism – as a conscious singularity – has no time to extract meaning and pleasure from the experience. Ethics and sensibility have much in common. Ethical behavior, in other words, is based on the pleasure of the bodily presence of the other.

As semiocapitalism is based on the constant exploitation of mental energy, and competition is the general form of relation in the sphere of labor precariousness, in the last thirty years – the years of transition – mental suffering has become a social epidemic.

Competition in such connective conditions implies constant attention stress; the reduction of time available for affection results in loneliness, existential misery, and, furthermore, angst, panic, depression. These are the individual symptoms of the epidemic, and the process of social and political solidarity cannot be initiated if we do not understand the fine line between social exploitation and mental suffering.

In the industrial era, capitalism quested after physical energies to extract from the bodies of salaried people. Psychopathology was thus secluded in a marginal space of the city. Nowadays, to the contrary: semiocapitalism needs neural energies for work, for mental work. And psychopathology is exploding at the core of social machinery, and, likewise, the finance economy is influenced by the spreading psychopathology. Ups and downs, panic and depression are not metaphors taken from the lexicon of psychoanalysis. Those words are clues to the growing interdependence between economic behavior and mental pathology. Understanding economic cycles implies the understanding of mental distresses, of the spreading of despair.

Then what?

Think of the wooden and metal body of a loudspeaker, receiving electric stimulations and transforming them into sound. In Warren Neidich's work *The Infinite Replay of One's Own Self-Destruction* (2012)¹ tools lying around his studio – saw, hammer, drill, etc. – usually used to make things have been used as devices of battering and destruction. The speaker is a stand-in for the physical body of a lover or a twin. Stereo speakers come in pairs, as object-beings receiving and transforming electric stimulation into signs, into sound, into words, into meaning between social minds. One such speaker is de-

¹ A counterpoint to Robert Morris's 1961 *Box with a Sound of Its Own Making*.

stroyed and the act is recorded. The cacophony of this loss is then reanimated into the remaining speaker that now replays that moment of ecstatic rupture over and over again, infinitely looping as noise resonating throughout the exhibition space. Reverberating from one wall to the next until it finds human ears which are captured into this *asyntonie*, the syntone having been replaced by the conditions of its lack.

So where is meaning now? The work is a respite from meaning. This seizure is a chance to emancipate the conditions of new meanings lurking in the subterranean spaces of the cultural pluri-potential held down by institutionalized and normalized meaning. And it is this condition of release that creates a caesura of understanding.

But Neidich does not stop here. His work *How do you translate a text that is not a text? How do you perform a score that is not a score?* (made later in that same year) was created to parallel his speaker works; so let's take this discussion one step further by providing a way forward. The noise and cacophony of *The Infinite Replay of One's Own Self-Destruction* created the event of a caesura but suggests no way out. It disrupts but it also constructs. In this later work, graphic scores of nonsensical unframed images and colors are entangled in musical staves. These staves do not allow for the usual communicative relationship between the musician (as a reader) and the score; lacking clefs, containing no fourths, forte, or flats. In other words, nothing suggests how the piece should be performed, how loud or how fast.

The link between the infinity of meaning and the finite translation of meaning into understandable marks is shattered. Dismembered, tortured, broken – the poor body of the loudspeaker is there. Dead.

Think of sheet music, think of signs on sheet music: images, ideograms, unreadable graphics taking the place of musical notations on the musical score. Think of musicians, violinists, and singers who read the score which is paradoxically not a score but who suddenly find a new rhythm, a new syntone with returnelli that float in space. We do not know what is happening next. Politics cannot detect the signs of the present becoming, simply because the language of politics is only able to express what could be expressed by slow rationality, by the faculty of rational critique, within a particular generational context. So we are kind of blinded, dazzled by the excess light, by the infinite proliferation of visual stimuli. Neuroplasticity is the ability of brains to reframe relations between the rhythm of the receiver (the human brain, the musical score) with the

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rhythm of the transmitter: the chaotic universe sending signs which are no more filtered by the grids of civilization, by shelters of semiotic order.

Will we find a way to escape the panic that derives from discovering our nakedness in front of death after 10,000 years of building protection?

Will we find a new dimension of autonomy? Hard to say!

Art is groping its way forward. The human brain is the musical score, and we are trying to find a new rhythm for reading, for playing. The babbling of the nonsensical has been transformed into the sublime. Neidich has told me that these two aforementioned works are a part of the project entitled *The Sound of Cats Meowing*. It relates to the way that the Viennese audience, in December 1808, reacted to Beethoven's first performance of his famed Symphony No. 5: apparently, the impatient audience (required to sit for some four hours in an unheated opera house) experienced the work like the odious sound of cats meowing in heat. But today this once odious meowing is now considered our highest form of music – it has even been called Beautiful. The babbling of the nonsensical has been transformed into the sublime. Could this transformation be seen as a political condition? Is neuroplasticity, as it is matched to our cultural potential, a place for a new form of activism? Assuming, that is, that new forms of resistance could also be the sublime conditions of an ever-present political imagination waiting to be born and to manifest itself. Like the performer confronted by these once indecipherable graphic scores, the activist is likewise confronted by the conditions of the undecipherable political entity with no hope for change. In the end, both must “translate a text that is not a text or perform a score that is not a score” by going inside themselves, to dip into their autonomous well, to find new ways of understanding and – once that has been accomplished – find ways to communicate it to others.