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DIALOGUE

Conversation on Futurability

Geert Lovink and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi

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Interview with Franco Berardi by Geert Lovink.

In September 2018, I travelled to Bologna to discuss a draft of my book *Sad by Design*, which the Italian media theorist and activist Franco Berardi helped to shape. A year earlier I had read his work *Futurability, the Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. That book opens with the weary observation that Berardi is not going to write about the future again – or about any future, for that matter. He has done so exhaustingly, for instance in his 2011 book *After the Future*. Instead, Berardi wants to write now about the process of becoming other: “possibility is content, potency is energy, and power is form.” While being a decade younger, I do have much in common with Berardi. Most of all I relate to his shifts in moods and attentions, from political strategizing to dark thinking and the desire to quit the scene altogether, walk away, remain silent and retreat, in order to create space for something new. In our regressive era that lacks progressive social movements, it is important to state that, in such a *Zeitgeist*, liberation is unlikely. Berardi teaches us that we have to abandon hope. What does it mean when we witness that the “social body is separated from the brain” and becomes “incapable of strategy or empathy”? Are we really incapacitated by our impotency to change? Can we be this honest towards our own defeat and the failures of others around us? Are you ready to discuss the decline of potency? Once you are you can enter the Berardi universe beyond the future.

Geert Lovink: First of all, on September 10, 2018, Paul Virilio passed away. Can you tell us how you relate to the work of this French urbanist and ‘philosopher of speed’? He influenced Jean Baudrillard and vice versa. How did Virilio influence you?

Franco Berardi: In the late 1970s and 1980s, when I read Virilio, I was particularly influenced by his pessimist vision. One can hardly deny that he has been able to see things that we only start seeing today. Being a catholic with a military background turned out to be a formation with a plus for him. Virilio’s *Vitesse et Politique* is a book about military power, about the force of speed. What Baudrillard and Virilio have in common is how they relate technological innovation and media to the realm of anthropology. What they share is a certain tone of human nostalgia. In both you perceive the sound of the ‘no longer’ – something has been; has disappeared. Disappearance is the mark of nostalgia.

GL: Let’s turn to the topic of the disappearance of future. I see the future being erased because of the collapse of time as duration. However, there is a human understanding of time as a sequence in the narrative sense, as something that unfolds. What happens to the hermeneutic element of unfolding when time will implode?

FB: One has to distinguish between time and duration. For example, the Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli argues that, from the perspective of quantum theory, time cannot be defined as a continuum; as a process that goes from before till after, from yesterday to tomorrow. There are only zones of temporality at the level of the universe.

When we talk about time, we generally refer to duration, to our perception of organic entropy. All statements about the end of the future imply that the human elaboration of duration can be read as a natural relation with the slow decomposition of the human body. However, suddenly in our age we are confronted with an intensity of time going beyond the intensity of the body. The current collapse of the future is

connected to the cultural dimension of capital, to expansion and accumulation, all of which are problematic these days. In addition, the psychological perception of time is redefined because of the transformation of intensification, an intensification that still needs to be distinguished from acceleration. The current form of intensification linked with time could be considered the subjective recording of acceleration that happens around us, whereas intensification used to occur internally i.e. inside the brain and the body and its slow decomposition. Virilio started reflecting on the distinction between the external dimension of both time and the political and the subjective effects that such acceleration will provoke.

GL: Virilio talks about the end of acceleration. The speed of light is our absolute border, we cannot go faster than real-time. Many people are exposed to real-time, they have to respond straight away. Real-time is also the regime of social media. What is real-time for you?

FB: All of us have stopped watching TV ten years ago. Today I happen to watch television only in certain places, mostly hotel rooms. However, during 9/11 I was still a TV watcher – I remember I was on the phone with a friend in London that day. Half a minute after we stopped he called me again and cried out: “watch TV, watch TV”! We could say that today there are less significant real-time events. The real-time regime has entered so deeply everyday life and work experiences and it is so persuasive that we no longer notice it. I recently read about burnt-out YouTubers. They are doing what they have been dreaming to do all of their lives. But it is becoming a nightmare because the millennials cannot keep up with the speed of what their audience wants. “When I am going full speed”, they say, “I become aware I cannot continue this kind of acceleration”. They get burnt-out because of their relationship with their so eagerly desired job, and end up in a short-circuit of that desire. “I am so perfectly into the flow I cannot handle it anymore”. Thus, they collapse under the pressure of the constant feedback: it is speed upon speed, a second degree of speed as it were.

GL: You have written about this phenomenon in your book *Futurability*. How would you summarize your position towards the future?

FB: The situation is dark. Yet, alternate possibilities are still feasible since technology could facilitate less work and more prosperity for all. That potentiality is not cancelled. What then is the trick, the switch that can bring that potentiality into play? Alternate possibilities are not defeated by either Donald Trump or the fascists. There is potency.

Potency is an infinite resource. Energy is not, particularly when you speak of the human body. The recognition of impotence is the first step towards a possible therapy. Once people start understanding that we are not infinitely potent one starts relating to the body in a more relaxed way. After that awareness one is ready to use one's political, technological, and sexual energies in a more adapted way. I would say, look friends the situation is going to be bad only because we are ignorant.

The three or four times I met cultural theorist Mark Fisher (1968–2017), my impression of him was paradoxical. Fisher, aka “k-punk”, seemed so militant and socialist; he was in touch with the young generation and himself in fact an adolescent in the good sense of the word. That mix has been detrimental for him. The persistence of an old concept of politics combined with a very up-to-date perception of current sentiments made it impossible to translate one level into the other. The impossibility of translation Fisher encountered made him live in two different time zones. I believe that suicide can never be explained in theoretical terms – it would not touch the problem. Mark once explained to me that for him ‘capitalist realism’ started with ‘social realism’. The intrinsic paradox of capitalist realism means a reduction of reality to the laws of capitalism. Mark was convinced that it wasn't really possible to overcome that. Within capitalist realism reigns an indefinite future: it is like a Moebius strip.

GL: In the 1990s, we may have been caught in a web of capitalist realism but at that time we also believed in a way out into the Temporary Autonomous Zones of Hakim Bey. In those days, we had festivals as autonomous zones. Today we have psychedelic drugs.

FB: In the 1990s, the concept of TAZ expressed the tensions between neo-liberal violence and the resistance of social centres, mailing lists, and raves. The influence of the info zone on the psychological condition cannot be blocked. We are increasingly aware what is going on outside, and that is a good thing. When it comes to drugs it is a problem of the permeability of the mind. When you take psychedelics, it is important to know what happens around you. Nowadays it is impossible to stay alone. This is why the concept of TAZ has been

forgotten; it became obsolete. Currently, there are no longer ways to promote the idea that there is a separate area where bad energies cannot enter. I do not see the possibility of a (digital) detox. There will not be a Brexit type referendum of leaving the Internet (the 'Internexit' as you call it). We cannot quit because that would be a reduction of any communication whatsoever.

GL: In contrast to the strategy of acceleration with the aim to speed up developments, many believe that we have to cultivate 'slow politics' in order to slow down, and break the real-time regime open so that we can reflect again, think again.

FB: I like slow food, sometimes, but it is not a therapy for bad food. Slow politics, from the perspective of desire, is boring. You cannot promote boredom; it is something for losers. The way out can never be to go backwards. You need to go beyond. Maybe I am an accelerationist – some people think so. What we need is a difference between the speed of our brain and the speed of our surrounding environment. The real political question of today is the one posed by Catherine Malabou in her 2004 book *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* How can we change the way the brain elaborates the input? Is a conscious mastering of the brain possible? Is a conscious politics implying a decision concerning the evolution of the brain possible? Up to a certain point, the brain is the subject of consciousness. How can consciousness act on the source itself? This framework of training the brain is new. For instance, yoga and transcendental meditation do not explicitly address the acceleration of the info sphere. A brain gym: wouldn't that be something for the future?

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi is an Italian media theorist and Marxist thinker in the autonomist tradition. He is the author of *Breathing* (2019), *Futurability* (2017), *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (2015), *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012) and *The Soul at Work* (2009).

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and author of *Networks Without a Cause* (2012) and *Social Media Abyss* (2016). He is the director of the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Recent projects deal with digital money, experiments in digital publishing and the future of art criticism.

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