

1968–1977–1999 and Beyond

Bifo's Futural Thought

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The thought of Franco Berardi, or Bifo, seems to defy the conventions of an introduction.¹ It's not that Bifo's career doesn't consist of numerous and impressive highlights but rather that his work, both as a thinker and an activist, has always been in relation to a multiplicity of others and completely opposes the cult of the institutional master intellectual—even that of the 'Cattivo Maestro' or 'Wicked Master' applied to Antonio Negri. So, this introduction will highlight some the singular points of Bifo's political and intellectual trajectory, as a background to his most recent and extremely important book *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero* (The Sage, the Merchant, the Warrior), which, moreover, can be seen as a distillation of his political and intellectual activity up till now.² The trajectory of Bifo's thought and practice contains valuable material not only in relation to cultural studies and contemporary thought but also in relation to political and aesthetic projects seeking alternative futures to those imposed by the contemporary military-economic technosstructure.

—THE 1968 THAT LASTED A DECADE

In a recent interview, Bifo traced his history of political action back to the mid 1960s.³ He identified as a decisive event being thrown out of the Young Italian Communist Federation in 1967 for distributing a pamphlet that concluded with the words 'dare to think, dare to speak,

dare to act, dare to make revolution', a slogan from the Maoist Cultural Revolution.⁴ He then became involved, through the groups Classe Operaio and then Potere Operaio, with a series of autonomous interventions into factories, beginning with the ICO syringe factory, near where he lived in Bologna. Bifo's period of intense involvement with Potere Operaio came to an abrupt end in 1971, after the appearance of his first book *Contro il lavoro*. According to Bifo, he was politely taken aside by Antonio Negri and others for releasing the book without consultation with Potere Operaio, something that had never occurred to him. While this was not a reprimand, it nevertheless indicated a certain organisationalist idea about how a militant should act. This was not, for Bifo, a mere personality disagreement but an immediately political question, in that he did not subscribe to the Leninist organisational model of Potere Operaio, according to which the organisation was meant, in the final analysis, to lead the actions of the movement. Instead, along with many other Potere Operaio militants, he believed in the auto-organisation of the movement itself and that politics is not what takes place at congresses and meetings but more anarchically in all spheres of productive activity and everyday life. These were the beginnings of Bifo's Creative Autonomia.

Bifo's conviction that the role of extra-parliamentary groups should not be that of leading and organising the movement but of informational and cultural circulation led in 1976 and 1977 to the formation of Radio Alice; itself more the child of Mayakovsky than of Lenin. Radio Alice attempted to constitute a zone of linguistic self-organisation for the movement in alliance with other areas of auto-organisation such as the factory or the University and especially with non-institutional zones of experimentation with ways of life. This enabled a joyful militancy, 'more hippy than Bolshevik', in which concrete political struggles were inseparable from the emergence of new behaviours and modes of life.⁵ Bifo summarised the conclusions he drew from this period of political and cultural subversion as follows:

The real problem is a question of creating new cultural, anthropological, everyday, lived, relational, psychic, communicative conditions because a process of auto-organisation of society can free itself from the chains that capitalist command determines.⁶

This problem remains constant throughout Bifo's work.

—AFTER MARX: APRIL 1977

Il cielo e finalmente caduto sulla terra (The Sky has Finally Fallen on the Earth) is one of Bifo's better known texts, in part because of its translation into French.⁷ This text, assembled from a number of pieces written for the revue *A/Traverso*, is a remarkable document of the political events of April 1977 in Bologna and especially of the emergence of Radio Alice. But it is much more than this: it is a text that crosses the fields of radical thought and political action in a unique and exemplary way. From the beginning this text addresses itself to an emergent 'post-political politics', a politics of micro-behaviours that escapes the logic both of capitalist power and of conventional, Partyist forms of resistance.⁸ According to Bifo,

capitalism is always flogging a dead horse: in its attacks on unions, strikes and terrorism it fails to notice the emergence of a new uncapturable figure, outside the domain of conventional politics. This new figure is that of the 'young proletariat', the immediate ancestor of the Cognitariat that would be the subject of Bifo's work twenty-five years later.⁹ This new subject in transformation, composed of the young, workers, women, students and homosexuals, did not conform to old socialist ideas about what constitutes politics and political subjectivities:

Dissolution, unruliness, celebration—that's the terrain on which the behaviour of youth, women, students, workers is situated ... Appropriation and liberation of the body, collective transformation of interpersonal relations: such are the forms under which today a project is elaborated against factory work, against every order predicated on expropriation and exploitation.¹⁰

The problem posed in the book is one of recomposition: not that this emergent subject should be organised by means of a conventional concept of class but rather that the lines of its emergence are already a recomposition effected through processes of transformation: 'Sharing, collective study, practices of awareness, appropriation, collective writing, communication', are the means by which this new class specified itself transversally.¹¹ In this way, recomposition was understood neither as a moral imperative nor as political dogma but as the desire of the movement: the role of writing in relation to these processes is as a comportment-machine: to give body to these already existing tendencies, not in order to represent them but to move with them transversally, 'to incarnate the tendency as desire'.¹²

For Bifo, the new politics that emerged after 1968 were characterised primarily by irregular relations to and the refusal of work as well as the transformation of 'living time': the possibility of benefiting from the world of goods without chaining all of life to work, as expressed by the slogan: 'work for every-one but not very much'.¹³ This emergent subject already incarnated the tension between historically accumulated knowledge and capital that is also central to Bifo's recent work: the struggle becomes whether this knowledge will be subordinated to capitalist domination or will be an instrument of liberation through the diminution of work. Now this redefinition of struggle is by no means presented as a pacifist one and the possibility even of armed struggle is not ruled out. However, for Bifo, this struggle should not be directed at any spectacular seizure of power as in terrorism or even some tendencies of Organisational Autonomia but rather aimed at the creation and maintenance of autonomous zones beyond the reach of capitalist forces, to give an autonomy of movement to these emergent subjectivities. Behind the apparent naivete of such a strategy, there is a radical new conception of struggle which takes further the politics already developed in *Potere Operaio*. If the aim of politics is no longer to attack the state but to create zones of self-organisation, the path is opened for a politics of defection rather than contestation, exit rather than voice: communism as a power of dissociation: 'Absenteeism,

sabotage, collectivisation: so many symptomatic micro-behaviours in the process of emerging. Communism is not the synthesis, the unification of these behaviours, it is their transversal recomposition.'¹⁴

The thrust of the book is the creation of a politics of the movement that would not be reducible to any single line, party, or form of organisation, even an autonomist one, but that would fully embrace the multiple politics of the movement itself while giving it more spaces for development. Inevitably this post-political politics converged on the media and especially on radio as just such a space not for the diffusion of true counter-information but where: 'false information can produce real events', in accordance with the new form of political action known as Maodadaism.¹⁵ The book is a unique document of the struggles of this emergent politics over the course of 1977 and culminates on the following triumphant note which echoes in the present:

Italy is a mid-point in the international organisation of labour but an advanced point in the organisation of struggles: when this fact becomes clear, then the history of communism will begin to be implicated with the exercise of the possible against the given. And the tune that the liberated Italian Proletariat has played only the first notes of during this Spring, will become a deafening concert for every-one: bosses, reformists, police and politicians.¹⁶

With the retrospective knowledge of the subsequent defeats of the movement, it would be easy to dismiss this euphoria as creative but deluded and maintain that these conclusions are simply incorrect: that the effect of Italian Autonomia was nothing but the preparation of the Italian state to assume a new form, that of post-Fordism, in which the radical subjective tendencies of the movement identified by Bifo would become fully incorporated in a new and improved neo-liberalist capitalism. This is, however, only one side of the story that forms the backdrop to Bifo's most recent work, *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero*, which begins with a re-reading of Autonomia and its aftermath before launching into a rigorous analysis of both the political situation of the present and its possibilities for transformation.

—TONIGHT WE'RE GOING TO PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999

In Bifo's latest book we find ourselves in 1999, 31 December to be exact, 'the last night', under the global spell of the now largely forgotten Y2K Millenium Bug.¹⁷ However, for Bifo, this was not at all a non-event but rather a telling sign of the extent to which the economy, the media and human affects and intelligence or to use his terms the infosphere, mediascape and psychosphere have become completely intertwined:

The night of the 31st December, 1999 showed the reliability of the technosphere and the imperturbable functionality of its connective assemblages. But it also showed the fragility of the connections between the infosphere and the psychosphere, between the technosphere and the biosphere. And at the connection point between the bio-social organism and the sphere of the inorganic a fracture was revealed.¹⁸

In fact this phantasmic apocalyptic breakdown in global functioning can now be seen as the effective anticipation of the real breakdown of 'global order' and the end of history that took place on September 11, 2001 and the politics of infinite war that it unleashed. Already, if *Il cielo* was a comportment-machine, *Il sapiente* reveals itself to be a recombinant-machine where apparently distinct fields become creatively recombined in unforeseeable articulations.

After this introduction, Bifo's book is, as he says later on, really two books in the form of one. The first is a genealogy of forms of power and resistance since the 1960s. While this is in fact a rewriting of Bifo's earlier book *La nefasta utopia di Potere Operaio*, the section dealing with the 1980s is particularly strong and doesn't hesitate to make some controversial claims about the retreat of some forms of radical politics into identitarian, paranoiac, semi-fascist formations. However insightful this part of the book is, it is the second half which traces the rise and fall of the virtual class from the 1990s to the present, that is its strongest and most original contribution to radical thought and politics. Here Bifo uses the themes of 'acceleration' and 'schizo-economy' to demonstrate how, during the 1990s, the world was divided into a virtual sphere of hyper-development and a physical sphere of permanent warfare.¹⁹ Bifo characterises this post-Cold War world, after the fall of the 'Evil Empire' of Soviet Russia as the 'Empire of the worst'.²⁰ In this period, particularly in the middle of the decade, there was the emergence of a utopianism not seen since the 1960s associated with the proliferation of electronic technologies and cyber-culture. However, rather than this being the realisation of the autonomist utopia of the reduction of work, instead it was the realisation of a neo-liberalist dream of hyper-work:

The development of digital communication technologies and the self-creation of the global network have produced conditions of generalised functional interdependence ... Interdependence has put in motion a process of growing mobilisation of nervous energies. Infinite multiplication of lines of connection, uninterrupted stimulation of attention, obligatory mobilisation of the psychic energies of society: expansion of labour time ... This unlimited growth has created the conditions of a collapse.²¹

This euphoric bubble, which was particularly evident in the hyperbole of publications such as *Wired* was bound to burst. According to Bifo, the virtual class sensed itself to be physically vulnerable,

that it could be wounded, hurt, killed; that it had a social body that could be impoverished, fired or put in conditions of suffering, marginalisation and misery and an affective, emotional body that could enter into a state of panic and depression.²²

So, the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the implosion of the economy of virtual euphoria is followed by a new economy of fear which is what, for Bifo, principally characterises our current situation.²³

What is striking about Bifo's analysis of this collapse is its insistence on the co-implication of the monetary economy with the global economy of the mind and affects; an analysis already prefigured in his discussion of Y2K as well as in his previous book *Errore di sistema*, (System Errors), which developed this analysis of the interface between the infosphere, mediascape and psychosphere in relation to the media subversions of the Canadian media activists Adbusters.²⁴ What the euphoria expressed so adamantly in *Wired* along with a myriad other celebrations of cyber-culture didn't take into account were the limitations of human beings to adapt to a suddenly changed environment where an infinite acceleration and proliferation of information could only have a catastrophic effect on an affective level. Updating Virilio, Bifo analyses the gap between the infinite speeds of the infosphere and mediascape or cyberspace and the slowness of human beings and their incapacity to respond to this chaotic atmosphere of hyper-stimulation except through a reaction of panic only partially alleviated through a recourse to pharmacology. Nevertheless, while this networked, hyper-capitalism was very far from the utopia it claimed to be, Bifo nevertheless does identify some positive effects of this proliferation: after all the internet isn't merely a money-making machine and has enabled forms of immaterial production, global political action and communication that were previously impossible. However, it is only with the collapse of the dotcom bubble, with its mythology of the benign operations of the free market and its associated temporary alliance between cognitive labour and capital that the full potential of the internet as a co-operative network can begin to be reached: these are the conditions for the emergence of the cognitariat.

Il sapiente comes up with the most original insights, in an analysis which links the economic crises from the end of the 1990s with such phenomena as the flourishing pharmaceutical economy of drugs from cocaine and amphetamines to Prozac, the multiplication of disorders such as depression, attention deficiencies, new forms of dyslexia and the pathogenic effects of overexposure to information and overstimulation:

Depression has taken the place of euphoria, and depression is a self-reinforcing psychic phenomenon. Psychopharmaceutics are no longer a sufficient substitute for a massive investment of desire. The group of American leaders are trying to substitute euphoric drugs with a heavy injection of military amphetamines. The classic expedient of someone who wants to escape the arrival of an inevitable depression is to make use of stimulants. Anyone who knows a little about psychochemistry and has some familiarity with using drugs will tell you that it is absolutely inadvisable to take amphetamines when you are on the edge of a possible depression. You risk entering a dangerous phase of excitation, ever more rabid, before being thrown into an abyss.²⁵

However, equally strong in the book is its analysis of the 'cancellation of democracy' associated with the development of a hyper-complex technostucture.²⁶ In fact, this section contains a devastatingly concise critique of *Empire*.²⁷ Bifo acknowledges the positive role of

Empire in bringing political discussion into a productive relation with globalisation, through a synthesis of compositionist and poststructuralist thought which rejects nostalgia for sovereignty as expressed, for example, in postcolonial valorisations of the local or the celebration of hybridity as a political strategy. However, Bifo identifies an oscillation in the book between an analysis of power in terms of the sovereignty of supernational institutions and a completely incompatible analysis of power in terms of biopolitical production: is empire supposed to be a subject structuring the contemporary world or is it a collection of desubjectifying functions? The idea of a successful overarching global order expressed through transnational institutions is, for Bifo, more a fable of the 1990s new economy euphoria than a contemporary reality and it is belied by almost everything that has taken place since then. In this regard, Bifo points out the failures of every attempt to construct forms of supernational sovereignty, even politico-military ones such as the so-called war on terror. In the light of these failures he questions whether it is possible or useful to identify a centre of emanation for contemporary forms of network power and suggests that it is necessary on the contrary to have a more complex analysis of power that can grasp it in its radical deterritorialisation and multiple conflicts and contradictions: Empire reveals itself in the end to be an empty formula.²⁸

Ultimately for Bifo, despite all the references to Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault, *Empire* falls into the trap of dialectics by imagining the world in terms of a simple duality between Empire and Multitude amenable to a dialectical resolution rather than grasping the contemporary world in its hyper-complexity: how should a phenomenon like Al-Qaeda be understood in this model—as part of the anti-empire multitude? Instead of such a simplifying, unifying account of contemporary power, Bifo proposes an analysis of multiple ‘totalitarian automatisms’, that directly activate and stimulate the human nervous system and produce effects below the level of discursive political choices:

Automatisms have taken the place of political decisions and today govern the technical concatenations on which socialised life, the techno-linguistic, techno-financial, techno-administrative interfaces depend. Power has inoculated models of semiotisation inside social potential ... Potential has grown beyond the possibility of control by power but at the same time has become abstract human power, mere reproduction of non-human automatisms.²⁹

This disturbing and complex analysis of contemporary power in terms of multiple automatisms leads to much more concrete way of thinking forms of resistance in terms of so many methods for subverting the specific technosocial interfaces that express these automatisms, for example, through practices of media activism. Rather than leading to a Messianic fable of the multitude versus empire, it leads instead to multiple recombinant strategies that may have the power to produce zones of greater freedom and autonomy within the horizon of capital. Instead of reviving dreams of the revolution to come after

capital, it instead identifies immanent zones of the creation of other possible futures; ways in which the replication of totalitarian automatisms may be converted into possibilities for 'Rekombination', a strategy that also characterises the *Rekombinant* website co-ordinated by Bifo and Matteo Pasquinelli.³⁰

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—NOTES

- ¹ Bifo is an acronym based the first and last letters of Franco Berardi's name which he adopted from his adolescence.
- ² Franco Berardi (Bifo), *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero: dal rifiuto del lavoro all'emergere del cognitariato*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2004. Unless otherwise indicated, citations from Berardi's work are my own translations from the Italian.
- ³ 'Intervista a Franco "Bifo" Berardi', 19 November 2000, *Futur Anteriore: Dai Quaderni Rossi ai Movimenti Globali*, Rome, 2000.
- ⁴ 'Intervista', p. 1.
- ⁵ 'Intervista', p. 7.
- ⁶ 'Intervista', p. 12.
- ⁷ Franco Berardi, *Le ciel est enfin tombé sur la terre*, trans. Pierre Rival, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1979. The translation into English is my own.
- ⁸ Berardi, *Le ciel*, pp. 11–17.
- ⁹ Berardi, *Le ciel*, pp. 21–53.
- ¹⁰ Berardi, *Le ciel*, p. 22.
- ¹¹ Berardi, *Le ciel*, p. 23.
- ¹² Berardi, *Le ciel*, p. 24.
- ¹³ Berardi, *Le ciel*, p. 176.
- ¹⁴ Berardi, *Le ciel*, p. 53.
- ¹⁵ See Franco Berardi, *La Barca dell'Amore e Spezzata*, SugarCo Edizioni, Milan, 1979, pp. 164–5.
- ¹⁶ Berardi, *Le ciel*, pp. 195–6.
- ¹⁷ Berardi, *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero*, pp. 7–11.
- ¹⁸ Berardi, *Il sapiente*, p. 8.
- ¹⁹ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, pp. 105–117 ('acceleration'); pp. 118–127 ('schizo-economy').
- ²⁰ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, pp. 105–7.
- ²¹ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, pp. 108–9.
- ²² Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, p. 113.
- ²³ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, pp. 139–42.
- ²⁴ Franco Berardi, *Errore di sistema*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2003. This analysis was introduced in Franco Berardi, *La fabbrica dell'infelicità* (The Factory of Unhappiness), DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2001.
- ²⁵ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, pp. 134–5.
- ²⁶ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, pp. 143–5.
- ²⁷ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, p. 151–5; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2000.
- ²⁸ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, p. 153.
- ²⁹ Berardi, *Il Sapiente*, p. 147.
- ³⁰ See *Rekombinant*, <www.rekombinant.org>.