

## Biopolitics and Connective Mutation

Bifo

It is thanks to Michel Foucault that the theme of subjectivity has definitively been freed from its Hegelian and historicist legacy, and thought again in a new context -- that of biopolitical discipline. The subject does not pre-exist history, it does not preexist the social process. Neither does it precede the power formations or the political subjectivation that founds autonomy. There is no subject, but subjectivation, and the history of subjectifying processes is reconstructed through the analysis of epistemic, imaginary, libidinal and social *dispositifs* modeling the primary matter of the lived. Biopolitics is a modeling of the biological body and of the social body by what Foucault defines as disciplinary *dispositifs*. Historically, the disciplinary societies described by Foucault are those that take shape in the Classical age, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such societies reach their climax at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Foucauldian analysis did pose the problem of genealogy in terms which were finally no longer Hegelian, but it was still attached to the mechanical forms of industrial discipline and it did not take into account new technologies of control. The concept of biopolitics, however, implies an evolution that goes beyond the classical form of mechanical discipline of the industrial age. The concept of biopower designates that which brings life and its mechanisms within the realm of calculus, in other words, that which makes knowledge an agent of the technical transformation of human life. Deleuze proposes the concept of 'control society' as a means to fully develop such an idea. Deleuze was a great reader of William Burroughs and Burroughs imaginatively anticipated the passage to the fully biopolitical age, that age whose *dispositifs* no longer present a molar character (such as the school, the prison, the factory, the asylum) but essentially molecular features, which are intrinsic to the very genesis of the conscious organism. We move here from the phase of industrial discipline to that of the mutation of the organism, taking place through the inoculation of mutagenic principles, and the cabling of psychic, cognitive, genetic and relational circuits. We might replace the word 'control' with 'cabling'. Biogenic cabling. Techno-linguistic cabling of the human brain's printed circuit, cabling human brains in connection. By the concept of *dispositif*, Foucault means those machinic concatenations which are able to externally predispose the linguistic, psychic and relational formations of conscious organisms in the modern age. By cabling we mean the insertion of *dispositifs* inside the biologic, genetic, cognitive routes of formation in the age that comes after the end of modernity. The process of mutation that takes place during the formation of the first video-electronic generation can thus be described as the cabling of emerging subjectivities performed by techno-biological and technocognitive automatisms.

This process of cabling is taking place at multiple levels: biotechnology, systematized through the development of the Human Genome Project, works to identify the codes on the basis of which one can model the life of human organisms. It thus works by laying out the technical conditions for a modeling of the organism, starting with coding. However, another operational level by now largely diffused and experimented with is that of a cognitive modeling that takes place on diverse planes: the production of techno-linguistic means of production, psychopharmacology, media production and the production of the imaginary.

The philosophy underlying the Human Genome Project is based on a substantially deterministic hypothesis even as the utopia of linear genetic determination does not take into account the interaction between the info-genetic level and the environmental level, and hence the unpredictability of developments within a specific physical environment. But when we look beyond the limits of biogenetics, and we turn to the analysis of psychic bio-modeling, we realize that this process cannot be deterministic. Processes of mutation are in general highly volatile. During the mutation, the relationship between the organism and its environment is perturbed, redefined as stochastic, fragile, probabilistic. This indeterminacy is particularly visible when we look at the cognitive and psychic level of the biopolitical modeling.

My 'point of observation' is exactly this: the pathologies of the organism in the mutagenic age, the indeterminate and stochastic nature of the morphogenetic process in which the organism is looking for a new balance. In particular, my interest is focused on the processes of cognitive cabling induced by communication technologies and by techno-linguistic and techno-perceptual *dispositifs*. The latter produce a psycho-pathology which presents endemic features. By working on this indeterminacy and on the psychopathologies derived from it and by

following the Guattarian schizoanalytic method, it is possible to rethink radically our notion of politics. Politics should be reconceptualized as the art of interference in the relationship between the techno-mediatic universe (dominated by specific agencies which act on the production of the imaginary and on the production of knowledge and are identifiable in the global capitalist corporations) and the ecology of mind.

## Elephant

1977 is the year of mass youth suicide in Japan: the official figure is 784. What causes the outcry is the fast succession, at the end of the summer holidays of that year, of suicides by children: thirteen, to be exact, all among primary school children. What is disconcerting here is not so much the number as the gratuitousness and the incomprehensibility of the gesture: in all these cases, there are no motivations or reasons for the act. There is a striking lack of words, an incapacity on the part of the adults that lived with the child to predict, understand, or explain what happened.

In 1983, a group of students in a Japanese secondary school murdered a group of old and homeless people in a park in Yokohama. When questioned, the children offered no explanation other than that the homeless people they killed were *obutsu*, dirty and impure things. As in *manga* comics, which achieved mass readership precisely in the second half of the seventies, the enemy is not evil, it is dirty. Cleanliness, ridding the world of the 'waste products' of the indefinite, the confused, the hairy or the dusty, prepares the way for the digital, smoothing surfaces without asperities. Erotic seduction is progressively disconnected from sexual contact until it becomes sheer aesthetic stimulation. It is in Japan that the first symptoms can be spotted. The year is 1977.

In Japan as in Europe and the USA, 1977 is the year of passage beyond modernity. But whereas in Europe, this passage is signaled by the philosophy of authors such as Baudrillard, Virilio, Guattari, Deleuze, and by the political consciousness of mass movements such as the creative Italian *autonomia* or London punk, and whereas in North America it takes the form of a cultural explosion, of a movement of urban transformations which is expressed in the artistic and musical 'no wave', in Japan, the passage already appears without mediation, as an unexplainable monstrosity which quickly becomes daily normality, the prevalent form of collective existence.

Since 1977, the collapse of the Western mind has assumed a sneaking, subterranean, episodic trajectory, but at the threshold of the millennium, it takes on the rhythm of a precipice, of a no longer containable catastrophe. What the consciousness of 1977 had signaled as a danger and a possibility implicit in the acceleration of productive and existential rhythms, becomes daily news. Certain events signaled this passage, becoming viruses, carrying information that reproduces, proliferates, infects the entire social organism. The exceptional event of the Twin Towers crashing in a cloud of dust following the deadly suicide of nineteen young Muslims is certainly the most impressive, the image-event spectacularly inaugurating the new times. But the Columbine school massacre, which took place some years before, might have carried a more uncanny message, because it spoke of daily life, of American normality, of the normality of a humanity that has lost all relation with what used to be human and that stumbles along looking for some impossible reassurance, in search of a substitute for emotions which it no longer knows.

Michael Moore has dedicated a passionate film of social documentation to this event (*Bowling for Columbine*, 2002), where he relates what anybody can see, the sale of firearms and the aggressiveness that feeds fear. But in his film *Elephant* (2003), Gus Van Sant interrogates the same episode from a deeper, more impalpable and hence more uncanny point of view. What has happened and what is happening in the mind of that generation coming of age at the turn of the millennium? What does it mean and where can its psychic fragility take us, endowed as it is with a terrifying technological and destructive power? Technological Hyper Power and psychic fragility are the mix which defines the first videoelectronic generation, especially in its North American variant.

The disciplines of the natural sciences and psychiatry underestimate the effects of the psycho-cognitive mutation that traverses the first video-electronic generation. Politics ignores them or completely removes them, but if we want to understand something about what is happening in the society of the new millennium, we need to move our point of observation in this direction, towards the psychosphere. It is within the psychosphere that the effects of twenty years of info-invasion, nervous overload, mass psychopharmacology, sedatives, stimulants and euphoric substances, of fractalization of working and existential time, of social insecurity which translates in fear, solitude and terror manifest themselves. Time-based psychobombs are exploding in the interconnected global mind. The effect is unpredictable.

In the last decades, the organism has been exposed to an increasing mass of neuro-mobilizing stimuli. The acceleration and intensification of nervous stimulants on the conscious organism seems to have thinned the cognitive film that we might call sensibility. The conscious organism needs to accelerate its cognitive, gestural, kinetic reactivity. The time available for responding to nervous stimuli has been dramatically reduced. This is perhaps why we seem to be seeing a reduction of the capacity for empathy. Symbolic exchange among human beings is elaborated without empathy, because it becomes increasingly difficult to perceive the existence of the body of the other in time. In order to experience the other as a sensorial body, you need time, time to caress and smell. The time for empathy is lacking, because stimulation has become too intense.

How did this happen? What is the cause of these disturbances of empathy whose signals are so evident in daily life, and in the events amplified by the media? Can we hypothesize a direct relationship between the expansion of the Infosphere (acceleration of stimuli and nervous solicitation, of the rhythms of cognitive response) and the crumbling of the sensory film that allows human beings to understand that which cannot be verbalized, that which cannot be reduced to codified signs?

Reducers of complexity such as money, information, stereotypes or digital network interfaces have simplified the relationship with the other, but when the other appears in flesh and blood, we cannot tolerate its presence, because it hurts our (in)sensibility. The video-electronic generation does not tolerate armpit or pubic hair. One needs perfect compatibility in order to interface corporeal surfaces in connection. Smooth generation. Conjunction finds its ways through hairs and the imperfections of exchange. It is capable of analogical reading, and heterogeneous bodies can understand each other even if they do not have an interfacing language.

The destruction of the inter-human sensory film has something to do with the techno-informational universe, but also with the capitalistic disciplining of corporeality. In the final phase of capitalist modernization, the emancipation of woman and her insertion into production has provoked an effect of rarefaction in the corporeal and intellectual contact with the child. The mother has disappeared or has reduced her presence in the experiential sphere of the first video-electronic generation. The combined effect of the so-called emancipation of women (which in reality has been the subjection of women to the circuit of capitalist production), and the diffusion of the televisual socializer has something to do with the contemporary psycho-political catastrophe.

Another upheaval is being prepared in the next generation. In many places, a process is taking place that could have significant consequences in the future. Millions of women in poor countries are forced to abandon their children in order to move to the West to look after the children of other mothers, who cannot look after them because they are too busy with work. What phantasms of frustration and violence will grow in the minds of abandoned children? A people of hyper-armed children has invaded the world scene. It is doomed to get badly hurt, as in Vietnam. But unfortunately it hurts us too. We saw this in the pictures snapped at Abu Ghraib and other prisons of American infamy.

It is with glacial tenderness that Gus Van Sant shows us the neurotic mumbling, the anorexic hystericisms and the relational incompetence of the Columbine generation (I am thinking about the splendidly bestial dialogue between the three girls in the canteen, when they decide to go shopping after having horrifically discussed friendship and its duties and the percentage of time that one should set aside for the dearest friends, in a minute quantification of affectivity). He shows us shining waiting spaces, luminous corridors traversed by psychos. Bodies that have lost contact with their soul and hence no longer know anything about their corporeality. Then everything happens, while the sky rapidly moves by, as always in Gus Van Sant's films. In the suspended light of an ordinary day, here come the suicidal homicides. Everything happens within a few dilated minutes, recorded by closed circuit TV cameras: teenagers hide under tables, trying to avoid the bullets. There is no tragedy, no outcry, the ambulances are not yet there. The huge sky changes colour. Dry, sparse shots. Not the terrifying crowds that we saw around Wall Street while the towers crashed. A quiet, peripheral massacre - reproducible, replicable, contagious

### **Connective mutation**

*Elephant* speaks of a generation that is emotionally disturbed and incapable of connecting thought and action. It speaks of a cognitive mutation that is unfolding in the context of a communicative transformation: the passage from conjunction to connection. The forms of conjunction are infinite, and connection is one of these. But within the concept of connecting there is an implicit specification: *connexio* implies the functionality of the materials

being connected, a functional modeling that predisposes them to interfacing. While conjunction is a becoming other, in connection every element remains distinct, even though functionally interactive.

Conjunction is the encounter and fusion of rounded irregular forms that infiltrate in an imprecise, unrepeatable, imperfect, continuous way. Connection is the punctual and repeatable interaction of algorithmic functions, of straight lines and points that can be perfectly superimposed onto each other, inserting and detaching themselves according to discrete modalities of interaction. Modalities that establish a compatibility between diverse parts according to predetermined standards. The digitalization of communicative processes produces a sort of desensitization to the curve, to continuous processes of slow becoming, and a corresponding sensitization to code, sudden changes of state and the succession of discrete signs.

The first videoelectronic generation is experiencing a mutation, and the social, political and technical future depends on the effects of this mutation. But in the tradition of the cognitive sciences, the notion of mutation is not acceptable, because the epistemological foundations of these sciences remain anchored to a premise of a structuralist nature. In effect, cognitivism considers the human mind as a device that functions according to innate and unchangeable rules. Cognitivism cannot see how the environment acts on the concrete and particular modes of functioning of the mind. For this reason, the notion of a dynamic interaction between mental activity and the environment in which minds enter into communication is inadmissible. For the cognitive sciences, the technical complexity of communication is incapable of modifying the modalities of cognition, even if certain cognitivists depart from this founding principle. In *Cognition and Reality*, for example, Ulric Neisser speaks of a cognitive ecology and recognizes the possibility of a dynamic interaction between the environment in which the mind develops and its modes of functioning (Neisser, 1976).

### **Acceleration language identity**

The acceleration of the circulation of information, the mass of information that we receive, decode, digest, and must respond to in order to maintain the rhythm of economic, affective and existential exchanges, brings with it a crisis of the faculty of verbalization that manifests itself in various forms: autism and the dizzying escalation of dyslexia in the youngest generations, particularly in the social and professional classes most involved in the new technologies of communication.

Digitalization seems to open up a double movement of re-formatting.

Verbal language is being replaced by forms of communication that are more rapid, more synthetic and more agile in carrying out different tasks simultaneously, according to the multitask method. But the acceleration of impulses provokes stress in the physical organism and demands a psychotropic re-formatting of perception and cognitive interaction, through the use of psychopharmacological drugs or the pure and simple deactivation of empathy (which slows down cognitive rhythm) and the attenuation of certain sensory levels such as smell and touching, already reshaped by the acceleration of writing.

In general we can say that the expansion of a specific cognitive function redefines the whole of cognition. The exposure of the conscious organism to videoelectronics amplifies competencies of a configurational type such as the ability to decode complex visual ensembles or to develop multiple processes of interaction simultaneously. But at the same time it reshapes other competencies, such as the ability to react emotionally to stimuli that are drawn out in time or the capacity to perceive temporal depth.

The modalities of memorization depend on the mind's capacity to store information that has left a deep impression, was active over a long period of time or in repetitive fashion. Memorization modifies the conscious organism and shapes its identity, given that identity can be defined as a dynamic accumulation of the memory of places and relations forming the continuity of an experience.

But what happens to memory when the flow of information explodes, expands enormously, besieges perception, occupies the whole of available mental time, accelerates and reduces the mind's time of exposure to the single informational impression? What happens here is that the memory of the past thins out and the mass of present information tends to occupy the whole space of attention. The greater the density of the infosphere, the scarcer is the time available for memorization. The briefer the mind's lapse of exposure to a single piece of information, the more tenuous will be the trace left by this information. In this way, mental activity tends to be compressed into

the present, the depth of memory is reduced and thus the perception of the historical past and even of existential diachrony tends to disappear.

And if it's true that identity is in large part connected to what has dynamically settled in personal memory (places, faces, expectations, illusions), it is possible to hypothesize that we are moving towards a progressive dis-identification, where organisms are increasingly recording a flow that unfolds in the present and leaves no deep imprint because of the rapidity with which it appears to the eye and settles in memory.

The thickening of the infospheric crust and the increase in quantity and intensity of the incoming informational material thus produces the effect of a reduction of the sphere of singular memory. The things that an individual remembers (images, etc.) work towards the construction of an impersonal memory, homogenized, uniformly assimilated and thinly elaborated because the time of exposure is so fast it doesn't allow for a deep personalization.

### **Cybertime, eroticism, desensitization**

It seems to me that the fundamental question of the current mutation -- the mutation that flows through individual organisms, populations and the entire planet - can be found at the intersection of electronic and organic cyber-space. Young people are naturally the most exposed to the effects of this mutation, because the invasive power of cyberspace has impacted on them to the full, and as a consequence their potential to adapt cybertemporally (that is the potential of their cognitive, psychic and psycho-physical apparatus) is subject to an extreme solicitation. The essential problem is that the rhythms of the technological mutation are a lot faster than those of the mental mutation. Hence the expansion of cyberspace is incommensurably faster than the human brain's capacity to expand and adapt (cybertime). We can increase the length of time an organism is exposed to information, but experience can't be intensified beyond a certain limit. Acceleration provokes an impoverishment of experience, given that we are exposed to a growing mass of stimuli that we can't digest in the intensive modes of enjoyment and knowledge. Spheres of relationality and behavior that require an extended period of attention such as those of affectivity, eroticism and deep comprehension, are disturbed, subject to a contraction. In these conditions of acceleration and information overload, automatism tends to become the prevalent form of reaction to stimuli, in the sense that automatic reactions are those that don't demand reflection or a conscious and emotional reaction. They are standard reactions, implicit in the preformatted chain of actions and reactions of the homogenized infosphere.

The digitalization of the communicative environment and even of the perceptive environment acts on the sensibility of human organisms, without a doubt. But how do we address this problematic? What instruments of analysis, what criteria of evaluation allow us to speak of sensibility, of taste, of enjoyment and suffering, eroticism and sensuality? We have no other instrument but ourselves, our antennae, our bodies, our psychic and erotic reactivity. Moreover, the filter of the observer can have a distorting effect. And yet the feeling of rarefaction of contact, coldness and contraction are at the core of our contemporary pathologies, particularly evident in the younger generation. The sphere of eroticism is particularly prone to them.

After the end of the avant-gardes and their infiltration into the circuit of social communication, aesthetic stimulation in the form of advertising, television, design, packaging, web design etc. is increasingly widespread, pervasive, insistent, indissociable from the informational stimulation to which it has become complementary. The conscious-feeling organism is enveloped in a flux of signs that are not simply the bearers of information, but also factors of perceptive stimulation and excitation. In the past, artistic experience was founded on the sensorial centrality of catharsis. The work of art created a wave of involvement and excitement that rushed forward towards a climax, a cathartic state of agitation comparable to orgasmic release. In its classical, as well as romantic and modern conceptions, beauty was identifiable with the moment of completion, an overcoming of the tension implicit in the relationship between the feeling organism and the world: catharsis, harmony, sublime detachment. Reaching harmony is an event that can be compared to orgasmic release following the excitement of contact between bodies. Muscle tension relaxes in the fullness of pleasure. In the happy perception of one's own body and the surrounding environment what is at play is an essential question of rhythm, time and lived temporalities. But if, into the circle of excitement, we introduce an inorganic element such as electronics and impose an acceleration of stimuli and a contraction of psychophysical reaction times, something ends up changing in the organism and its forms of erotic reaction. Orgasm is replaced by a series of excitations without release. Orgasm is no longer the prelude to any accomplishment. Inconclusive excitation takes the place of orgasmic release. This is something like

the feeling that is conveyed to us by digital art, the coldness of video art, the inconclusive cyclical nature of the work of Tinguely or the music of Philip Glass. Not only aesthetics but also eroticism seems to be implicated in this inorganic acceleration of the relationship between bodies. The video installation, *The Wind* (2002), by Eija Liisa Ahtila, consisting of three screens on which scenes of destruction, attempts at contact with the body of the other and devastating crises of solitude unfold, is the most direct inquiry I know of into a form of psychopathology that, at the beginning of the new millennium, is tending to become epidemic.

Traveling the circuits of social communication, the erotic object is multiplied to the point of becoming omnipresent. But excitation is no longer the prelude to any conclusion and multiplies desire to the point of shattering it. The unlimited nature of cyberspace endows experience with a kind of inconclusiveness. Agressiveness and exhaustion follow from this unlimited opening of the circuits of excitation. Isn't this perhaps an explanation of the erotic anxiety that leads to diserotization and that mix of hypersexuality and asexuality that characterizes post-urban life? The city was the place where the human body encountered the human body, the site of the gaze, contact, slow emotion and pleasure. In the posturban dimension of the cyberspatial sprawl, contact seems to become impossible, replaced by precipitous forms of experience that overlap with commercialization and violence. Slow emotion is rare and improbable. And the very slowness of emotion is transformed little by little into a commodity, an artificial condition that can be exchanged for money. Time is scarce, time can be exchanged for money. Time, an indispensable dimension of pleasure, is cut into fragments that can no longer be enjoyed. Excitation without release replaces pleasure.

In the cultural phenomenology of late modernity, the mutation we are speaking of can be connected to the transition period that takes place from the sixties and seventies to the eighties and nineties. The years of hippy culture were centred around a project of eroticization of the social, of universal contact between bodies. In the transition period that coincides with the introduction of electronic communications technologies into the social circuit, the punk phenomenon explodes. Punk cries out desperately against the rarefaction of contact, against the post-urban desert, and reacts with a kind of hysterical self-destructiveness. The transition towards the postmodern and hypertechnological dimension was registered by the New Wave of the early eighties, which in its most extreme form defined itself as No Wave. No Wave doesn't mean immobility or constant flow without undulation; on the contrary, it means infinite fragmentation of the wave, it means nano-wave, infinitesimal agitation of the musculature, subliminal, uncontrollable micro-excitation. Nervous breakdown. Between the seventies and eighties, the irruption of heroine into the existential experience of the post-urban transition was a part of this process of adaptation to a condition of excitation without release. Heroine allows for a switching-off, a disconnection from the circuit of uninterrupted over-excitement, a kind of attenuation of tension. The collective organism of Western society looked for a slowing-down in the massive consumption of heroine, or else, in a complementary fashion, looked to cocaine as a way of keeping up with the pace. What was taking place here was the shift in infospheric speed that made it possible to subjugate human time to the regime of absolute and uninterrupted exploitation of the neurotelematic network -- the flexibilization of work.

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## References

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