

# The Rhetorical Future of the Soul at Work

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Franco Berardi, in many ways, is the most “out there” of the Italian autonomists. Working in radio production (including the infamous Radio Alice pirate station that was brutally shut down by police in 1977), magazine and book publication, hypertext production, as well as authoring the kind of treatises we would more commonly recognize as “theory”, the activist and media theorist who goes by the nickname “Bifo” has had a varied career. He is also, at least in his recent work (the only stuff from him to be translated), the most pessimistic (one might even say depressing) of the Autonomia generation. This depression stems primarily from his being the most orthodox Delezo-Guattarian amongst the figures in this movement, having adopted the methodology of schizanalysis described in D&G’s *Anti-Oedipus* and having closely worked with Guattari during the 1980s (Bifo’s 2008 biography of Guattari draws out some of these connections). These psychological concerns have come to dominate Bifo’s translated work, in which, more than many of the other thinkers in Autonomia, economic fluctuations and the vagaries of markets are explained through a recourse to psychic symptomatology. Given this focus on the psychological violence of capitalism, Bifo’s recent work, post-2008 has been grim. Including *The Soul at Work* (a rousing account of how semicapitalism has come to colonize even the human soul) and *Heroes* (a detailed look at the phenomenon of mass shootings with chapter titles such as “Humanity is Overrated” and “You People Will Never Be Safe”), Bifo has

focused on analyzing depression, suicide, mass murder, and anxiety as symptoms of the precarity of semicapitalism. Gary Genosko has explained this tendency in Bifo through recourse to the “psychic and somatic form of the human” that “cannot take” the new forms of cognitive labor created by cybernated economies and that “as our cognitive, communicative and emotional capacities become subject to cellular fragmentation and recombination” nervous disorders emerge in response (Berardi, *After the Future* 6). Bifo calls this condition “precarity,” connecting the economic precariousness of the “gig economy” of temporary, contracted, gift labor to a sense of psychological instability and panic.

However, in *After the Future*, Bifo hooks this machinery up to what he calls the failure of the myth of the future. In a frankly strange reading of the 20th century, Bifo divides “the century that trusted in the future,” as he calls it, into two tendencies: the *utopian* and the *dystopian*. The utopian period is inaugurated by the 1909 publication of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” by F.T. Marinetti, in which, according to Bifo, Marinetti sutured the capitalist faith in limitless progress to the idea of the machine as a (then) external engine of this progress. This utopian period, of course, peaked in 1968 in the events of the Paris student protests (of course) and transitioned into the dystopian period in 1977 with the Red-Faction-inspired riots in Italy, the birth of “no wave” art in New York, and, most importantly, the rise of the punk cry of “No Future” in London and reached its peak on 9/11. If the utopian period of the century that trusted the future is a rising moment of industrial progress seemingly without end, the dystopian parodies this first part and ultimately undoes these utopian energies. As I’ve said, this is dark stuff. Throwing serious shade at Negri, Bifo writes “I don’t like empty words of self-reassurance, or rhetoric about the multitude. I prefer to tell the truth . . . : there is no way out, social civilization is over, the neoliberal precarization of labor and the media dictatorship have

destroyed the cultural antibodies that, in the past, made resistance possible” (Berardi, *After the Future* 158). The dystopian portion of the century that trusted the future has no end, a boot stamping on a human face, forever.

As Bifo makes clear, this shift from utopia to dystopia (troped by the shift from radio to Internet in the avant-garde imaginary, he argues) the machines celebrated by Marinetti are now inside us. Our machinic being shifts, starting with the rise of privatization and neoliberalism, our economic relationships from the valorized conjunction of labor to the alienated connection of network cyberculture. Mashed together in the space of the factory, physical labor is marked by a “becoming-other” (Berardi, *After the Future* 39). “Singularities change when they conjoin; they become something other than they were before their conjunction” (Berardi, *After the Future* 39). In contrast, in the psychic labor of the precarious, “each element remains distinct and interacts only functionally” (Berardi, *After the Future* 39). The solidarity of laboring bodies is broken up by the network effects that make neoliberal privatization possible. This is why Bifo has argued that, as the title of 2009 article indicates, “Communism is back but we should call it the therapy of singularisation” (Berardi, “Communism Is Back but We Should Call It the Therapy of Singularisation,” n.p.). This conception of conjunction and connection is also, weirdly, connected to a kind of victim blaming in which lazy youngsters, freed from the coercive pressure of physical labor, *chose* to participate in an alienating and singularizing form of labor instead of continuing to work in conjunctive manufacturing jobs that no longer exist in the West.

This victim blaming, “you damn kids get off my lawn” quality is part of why *After the Future* is a bit of a hot mess, but I want to leave this to the side for the moment. Instead, I want to more directly consider that text’s account of the failure of the myth of the future itself. Bifo is convinced that the future is over, but, as he writes “of course, we know that a time after the

present is going to come, but we don't expect that it will fulfill the promises of the present" (Berardi, *After the Future* 25). "We don't believe in the future in the same way" (Berardi, *After the Future* 25). Despite all of the apocalyptic hand-wringing, Bifo is "not referring to the direction of time, ... rather, of the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization" (Berardi, *After the Future* 18). There will still be time after today, but we no longer believe it will be better. For Bifo, the future is a myth of a golden-age-to-come in contrast to the medieval, theocratic vision in which the golden age was always in the past and "historical exigence takes the shape of the Fall, the abandonment and forgetting of perfection and unity" (Berardi, *After the Future* 18). So when he calls it the myth of the future he means it very literally: the future functions for a now over modernity in the same that myth functions for the ancients.

What interests me in all this is Bifo's connection between this myth of the future and rhetoric. He writes that the future "is a modality of projection and imagination, a feature of expectation and attention" (Berardi, *After the Future* 24–5). This idea of attention is important to Bifo in the same way that it is important to Richard Lanham in *The Economics of Attention*: as a scarce resource in demand of constant and careful management by the rhetorically aware subject. However, for Bifo, of course, the current rhetorical ecology of our, as he calls it, "media dictatorship" is one in which "the social brain ... is assaulted by an overwhelming supply of attention-demanding goods. This is why the social factory has become the factory of unhappiness: the assembly line of net-production is directly exploiting the emotional energy of the virtual class" (Berardi, *After the Future* 55). So, on the one hand, as his history of the 20th century draws out, rhetoric failed Western European modernity by making us want the wrong

things *and* the products of this system also cause us to ignore the goal of a rhetorical future that got us into this mess in the first place.

For Bifo, especially in *After the Future*, the only future is the future of post-capitalism and, more importantly, as he makes clear in his pessimistic analysis, it must be a shared rhetorical future that can coordinate class-based solidarity, conjunction, and resistance. In other words, Bifo here bemoans the death of The Future as an organizing myth for working class struggle and solidarity. This is a very strange move to make: one of the founding principles of Autonomia was the removal of apparatuses (parties, ideologies, etc) to allow for the autonomous presentation of a working class culture. On the one hand, Bifo diagnoses the loss of this culture, but, on the other hand, he ignores the fascism of pegging such organization to a singular shared vision. Bruno Latour, in “Socrates’ and Callicles’ Settlement” works over similar territory by highlighting the excluded third term in the debate between Right and Might in Athenian democracy as staged in Plato’s *Gorgias*, namely the agora, “the damned tendency of the mob to discuss and debate,” as Latour ironically states it. Ultimately, unlike the Sophists, Callicles and Socrates are attempting to inject two modes of reason into an inherently unruly mass of desires. Referencing that the Sophists were the last to truly master the “factish” (Latour’s portmanteau of fact and fetish), and understanding that management of desire not reason was what moved the body politic, Latour laments,

The impossible surgery started by Socrates continues on an even bigger scale: more Reason, more artificial blood, but less and less of this very specific form of circulating fluid that is the essence of the Body Politic, and for which the Sophists had so many good terms and us so few. (Latour, “Socrates’ and Callicles’ Settlement - or the Invention of the Impossible Body Politic” 45)

In the footnote on this really exciting sentence, he writes “See again, Cassin, *L’Effect Sophistique*, especially the notion of “plasma“!” (with an exclamation point). This is a reference to Barbara Cassin’s *The Sophistic Effect*, her lengthy commentary connecting detailed accounts

of Sophist thought to postmodernism. Latour develops this idea of *plasma*, from Cassin, in *Reassembling the Social* where it importantly concludes the whole book. He writes of

background plasma, namely that which is not yet formatted, not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified. How big is it? Take a map of London and imagine that the social world visited so far occupies no more room than the subway. The plasma would be the rest of London ... (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 244)

For Latour, background plasma, the fluid uncategorized of reality, explains how objects already inscribed in these relations may suddenly change without warning:

Why is it that quiet citizens turn into revolutionary crowds or that grim mass rallies break down into a joyous crowd of free citizens? Why is it that some dull individual is suddenly moved into action by an obscure piece of news? Why is it that such a stale academic musician is suddenly seized by the most daring rhythms? Generals, editorialists, managers, observers, moralists often say that those sudden changes have a soft impalpable liquid quality about them. (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 245)

So, for Latour following Cassin's analysis of Sophistic rhetoric, *plasma* is the unformed stuff from which the new emerges.

While Cassin's work on *plasma* has not been translated, Philippe-Joseph Salazar's commentary on this reading in *An African Athens* provides some interesting insight into this term that has Latour so excited. Salazar summarizes Cassin by saying that "in rhetorical theory, 'fiction' translates the Latin word *fictio*, itself a translation of the Greek word *plasma*" (Salazar 190). More directly, he clarifies Cassin as arguing "rhetorical theory contrasts *pseudos* (a lie, a deceit; translated here as "pseudo reality") with *plasma* (something that is told as if it is an actual event, but without the intention to deceive the audience) and *historia* (the telling of a true event, of a reality)" (Salazar 190). He considers this further, however, by discussing the "as if" quality this understanding of *plasma* clearly held for the Greeks. Later, Salazar suggests that "*plasma* ... stands somewhere between reality and falsehood. In other words, it is able to present a scenario for reality." For Salazar, *plasma* is the appeal by which Desmond Tutu is able to present a South

Africa for Africans to his listeners as-if it already existed, when it is only a fiction. Alexandre Leupin, also basing his usage of *plasma* on Cassin, offers the following

In this first usage, *plasma*'s meaning is positive: a human world that creates the world as a simulacrum. ... In sophistry's *plasma*, it is man who creates the world, and whether the world is fictional or not is of little importance, so long as it is convincing. (Leupin 43)

In other words, *plasma* is the material from which the human, specifically the rhetorically canny human, invents the world.

In the concept of *plasma*, we have a concept of an imagined futurity at the core of Sophistic rhetoric, an understanding born out by John Poulakos's famous definition of Sophistic rhetoric as "the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible" (Poulakos 36). Explaining *to dynaton* (the possible), he argues that Sophists taught a rhetoric that

moves toward the suggestion of the possible. The starting point for the articulation of the possible is the ontological assumption that the main driving forces in man's life are his desires, especially the desire to be other and to be elsewhere ...

Consideration of the possible affirms in man the desire to be at another place or at another time and takes him away from the world of actuality and transports him in that of potentiality." (Poulakos 42-3)

So, we start to see a version of rhetoric that cuts its power from the raw cloth of *plasma*, the unformed "might be" that exists in front of us. In a weird way, I think it is this version of futurity that Bifo is afraid of when he talks about the end of the future.

In analyzing what he calls "virtual reality technologies," Bifo explicitly confirms his fears of a sophistic, instead of a Marxist, vision of the future. For him, VR is "any technology capable of directly transmitting impulses from one brain to another, in order to stimulate in the receiver brain a synaptic connection corresponding to a certain representation" (Berardi, *After the Future* 31). This new "production of technical tools for simulation" means for Bifo an exit

from “signs conventionally and arbitrarily connected with meanings” and into a real of “poetical and magical symbolism” (Berardi, *After the Future* 31). This magical symbolism is what Bifo calls the dystopia of the Internet; so the author who has written several books on cyberculture and is responsible for first bringing the cyberpunk into Marxist theory is now claiming that the Internet is only dystopia (in contrast to what the utopian radio). As the commentary on *plasma* has already revealed, for the Sophists, this direct transmission of affect and simulacrum that resulted is not a crisis; however, as Anders Cullhed points out in *The Shadow of Creusa*, Plato’s concern about arguments from *plasma* (the might-have or as-if real) is specifically why he “adopted a sceptical attitude toward the lies of the poets” in *The Republic* (Cullhed 26). This Platonic attitude of skepticism toward the uncoded or unquantified stuff that *might be* is precisely the same attitude underscoring Bifo’s apocalyptic rhetoric.

This crisis is a crisis at the core of Marxist methodology. In the face of seeming apocalyptic (or at minimum unpredictable) climate futures, Bifo asks how we can go on: in Marxism, he writes, “the future was imagined as the unfurling of a tendency inscribed in the present” and the method of Marxism was to uncover those tendencies, describe the scientific processes shaping that future, and accelerating those processes toward a post-capitalist utopia that we all agree on in advance. Given that this scientific futurism is no longer possible, because the world is so chaotic, Bifo concludes we are doomed.

What’s interesting about this claim is that while Bifo is willing to excoriate other Marxists for maintaining the myth of the future in the face of its exhaustion, Bifo’s unwillingness to declare anything but apocalypse as following from the death of this myth is similarly a kind of negative faith in the myth of the future itself. Ultimately, I think we can conclude that Bifo’s issue with the future that comes after the future, as it were, is that it is Sophistic and that it admits

the chaos of the agora, a chaos that philosophy since Plato has been trying to barricade, as Latour shows in his discussion of *Gorgias* and *plasma*. Instead, I think the solution to this impasse is, of course being a rhetoric conference, more sophistry. What that might look like in an autonomist or post-autonomist Marxism might look like a recent blog post by McKenzie Wark. Wark writes that the unquestioned axiom of Marxism is that the future will come after capitalism and be glorious. This is why Marxists keep coming up with increasingly absurd words, such as postfordism and neoliberalism, to describe the present. Instead of treating capitalism as an eternal essence whose outward form changes, Wark suggest that the task of the Marxist today is

to think the possibility that capitalism has already been rendered history, but that the period that replaces it is worse. That it could be worse gets us away from the happy narratives in which capitalism gave way to a postindustrial society or some other magic kingdom, free from contradiction and class struggle. Rather, in this thought experiment, I propose to think the present as a new kind of class conflict, including new kinds of class arising out of recent mutations in the forces and relations of production. But putting this pressure on our received ideas and legacy language, perhaps we can begin to see the outlines of the present afresh, estranged from our habits of thought. (Wark, n.p.)

Estranging ourself from our *nomos* to see our present and the available *plasma* is an interesting experiment in Marxism (or post-Marxism?) but this estrangement is also, at least according to the work I've been discussing on *plasma*, the task of sophistic rhetoric. So, with this idea of *plasma* and seeing the outlines of the present afresh, I'll conclude. In Bifo, I think we see some of the limits for autonomia in imagining Utopia as a rhetorical image and also, in this collapse, we can find the space for a possible, potent sophistic Marxism that traces contours of desire in the present to present new futures, futures that are not monolithic but polyglottal. We can refigure the future and this may be the task of a radical rhetoric in the present.

Thanks

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