

Franco Berardi

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Paal Bjelke Andersen



# ART AND DYSTOPIA

a conversation

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In an exquisite sense of contagious connectivity, paranoia is one form that a felt insistence on the social and historical structuring of psychic experience can take. Paranoia “knows well” the resonant evidence suggesting that everything really is connected, the psyche and the power of the social, a small white pill and a wildly historical story.

– Jackie Orr: *Panic Diaries*

Paranoia is a form of knowledge, but it needs to be counterbalanced by irony, as Utopia has been counterbalanced and finally overthrown by dystopia in the course of the past century.

The arts of the 1900s favoured the register of utopia in two forms: the radical utopia of poets like Vladimir Majakovski, André Breton and so on, and the functional utopia of Italian Futurism and the Bauhaus.

The dystopian sensibility remained hidden in the folds of the artistic and literary imagination, in Fritz Lang expressionism, or in the bitter surrealist thread that connects Salvador Dali to Philip Dick. In the second half of the 20th Century the literary dystopia of Orwell, Burroughs,

Ballard and DeLillo flourished, parallel to the philosophy of Baudrillard. Only at the beginning of the 21st century, does dystopia take centre stage and conquers the whole field of the artistic imagination, thus drawing the narrative horizon of the century with no future. In the expression of contemporary poetry, in cinema, video-art and novels, the marks of an epidemic of psychopathology proliferate.

In the ‘80s De Lillo wrote *White Noise*, a novel about nuclear waste and massive mental disease. The epidemic that he is narrating is rooted in the constant flow that is surrounding us:

We’re suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information ... The flow is constant. Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them.<sup>1</sup>

And Jackie Orr, in the book *Panic Diaries*:

In 1980, the U.S. government opens a new National Institute of Mental Health and declares the management of mental disease a public health priority,

1. De Lillo *White Noise*, p. 66

“panic disorder” emerges as a new psychiatric diagnosis. Defined by floating attacks of terror that occur without any apparent cause, panic disorder is estimated to afflict millions of people in the United States. In 1982 a drug called Xanax, manufactured by the Upjohn Company, appears on the market, quickly becoming a bestselling treatment for panic attacks and anxiety. Even when the panicky body is your own, the experience of such a disease never falls entirely outside the histories of power’s play, of power’s insistent production of panic knowledge.

In her videos, Elja Liisa Athila (*Wind, If 6 was 9, Anne Aki and God*) narrates the psychopathology of relations, the inability to touch and to be touched, very much in the same vein that Miranda July in the film *Me and you and everyone we know*.

It is the story of a video-artist who falls in love with a young man and of the difficulty of translating emotions into words and words into touch. Language is severed from affectivity. Language and sex diverge in everyday life. Sex is talked about everywhere, but sex never speaks.

If psychopower wants to control the collective terror in a burning theatre, it also wants to simulate the fire that starts it. If protecting frightened subjects from the face of death is one of the psychopower’s

goals, so is constructing a spectacular death mask to trigger an experimental terror. If calming panic disorders through prescription drugs is one of its aims, so is promoting the panic attacks that extend the market reach of a pharmaceutical cure.<sup>2</sup>

In the novel *Corrections* Jonathan Franzen speaks of the psychopharmacological adjustments used by the precarious humanity anguished by depression and anxiety in order to adapt to a social fiction where everybody is requested to show energy and efficiency, if not happiness. Corrections are the adjustments to a volatile stock market to avoid losing the money invested in private pension funds that might suddenly disappear, but also the adaptations to a form of existence that belies all the expectations promoted by advertising and by the mainstream political discourse.

Franzen recounts the old age of a father and mother, a couple of oldies from the Midwest who have gone nuts as a result of decades of hyper-labour and conformism. Corrections are the small and unstoppable slides towards the point of turn-off, the horror of old age in the civilisation of competition, the horror of sexuality in the world of puritan efficiency.

2. Jackie Orr: *Panic diaries*, p. 14

Published in 2001, *Corrections* is the novel that marks the transition to the post-psychoanalytic understanding of the Unconscious. The traumatized cerebrality, not the linguistic sexuality is the space of this post-Freudian Unconscious.

Franzen digs deep into the folds of the American psyche and describes in minute details the pulpification of the American brain, the depression and dementia resulting from a prolonged exposure to the psychic bombardment of stress from work, the apathy, paranoia, puritan hypocrisy and the pharmaceutical industry. The psychic unmaking of men who are encapsulated in the claustrophobic shell of economic hyper-protection, the infantilism of a people who pretends to believe, or perhaps really believes in the fulsome Christmas fairy tale of compassionately liberalist cruelty. At the end of the novel, as the psychopathic family happily gathers together for the long awaited Christmas dinner, the father tries to commit suicide by shooting himself in the mouth, but he does not succeed. His brain is unable to perform the final act of liberation.

Vulcano

i was preparing my bagages  
 when a lady's voice told me on the mobile:  
 "Mister Berardi you're cancelled  
 today you cannot fly."  
 "Why so?" I asked the lady.  
 She kindly answered: "Because of the vulcano."

Mi lupita me espera en la tarde  
 en mi ciudad lejana  
 para comer together  
 y dormir juntos hasta la mañana.  
 Hace cuatro semanas  
 ci siamo detti arrivererci presto.  
 Quando sono partito  
 come potevo immaginare questo?

Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Because I do not hope  
 Because these wings are no longer wings to fly  
 But merely vans to beat the air  
 The air which is now thoroughly small and dry  
 Smaller and dryer than the will  
 Teach us to care and not to care  
 Teach us to sit still.

No one can see the ashes in the sky  
 nevertheless nobody dares to fly,  
 except may be the white seagulls who cry.  
 Land of iron of stone and of dismay.

Not so funny Ash Thursday  
 crowds of tourists and managers  
 cancelled and cancelled and cancelled  
 and Europe grounded.  
 Eruption of an Innere Ausland,  
 All the corporeality that is forgotten  
 In eurodailyconnect.  
 Such a huge crowd at the check in  
 ch'io non credea  
 che morte tanta ne avesse disfatta

White clouds in the gothic skyline  
 scratched by the skeletal branches of naked trees.  
 Et au de la de la mer le vulcan qui vomit  
 sa poudre grise vers le haut du ciel.  
 Remember that you are powder  
 et in pulverem reverteris.



Perfectly colourless light  
of clouds reflecting in the lake.  
But the economist is never teetering  
never is hesitant or is fettered by thought.  
He is stubborn, inflexible indifferent  
to suffering life and similar details.  
So the well paid columnist persists:  
“cut social spending  
rise productivity  
postpone retirement  
make work more flexible.”

All flights are cancelled,  
may be tomorrow.  
All of a sudden  
I've realized:  
“Ash is not moving away.  
the cloud will stay  
in the Euro atmosphere  
for days and weeks to come.  
Laptops flash out emails from distant places  
and brain is disconnected from the body.  
And now sky is declaring  
that the end of this greedy European Union  
is a matter of days.

Cancelled

I'm cancelled I'm cancelled I'm cancelled.  
All the flights have been cancelled until Saturday.  
All the flights have been cancelled until Sunday.  
All the flights have been cancelled until Monday.  
All the flight have been cancelled until Tuesday.  
All flights have been cancelled until Friday.  
You are cancelled my dear,  
and I'll not come back anymore.

Perch'io non spero di tornar giammai  
Ballatetta in Toscana  
Va tu leggera e piana  
Dritt'a la donna mia.

I come from those southerners lands  
where survival used to be easy  
and daily life was lazy.  
Nobody can answer the question  
That sounds like an obsession:  
How can we get rid eventually  
Of the dull conspiracy?

Pursued by the invisible ashes  
I decided to take the bus.  
I overstepped Northern Europe  
Sitting, sleeping and making no fuss.  
At every station along the journey

Someone approached and asked me:  
When do you think that the tempest  
Will at the end go away?  
I smiled and did not answer.  
I'm not a weatherman and I might  
just tell you that the atmosphere  
Is nevermore  
going to be bright.

*Trondheim, spring 2010*

I perfectly understand the state of mind of the poet the week before the Communards were slaughtered in Paris. This happened 140 years ago, and we go on repeating the same gesture again and again and again. Expectation, deception, escape.

This time should be different, after the global slaughtering that is going on worldwide after the final dissolution, after the dissolution of the Occupy movement of 2011.

A fissure is running in our perception of time, and we are trying to escape it. It is like a tectonic fault in the texture of our expectations, a deep cut in our imagination of the future.

The Modern art of politics, the rational prediction and the voluntary act of government is deprived of potency and effectiveness. For the time coming after the future we have to learn how to ride on the dynamics of an irreversible disaster with impassible soul. The art of politics has now turned into an impossible and useless exercise. We must invent a new art, the ironic art of detachment. A sceptic post-futurist ethics has to replace the modernist ethics of responsibility. Autonomous subjectivation can be only in withdrawal, desertion, abandonment.

In *The Uprising – On Poetry and Finance* Franco Berardi approach the relation between language and economy “from the unusual perspective of poetry and sensibility”. The book will be translated into Norwegian for the Audiatur festival.

Even though *The Uprising* deals with poetry, there is very few poems read and commented in the book. I used this opportunity to send Berardi some poems and works by three of the poets invited to Audiatur and ask him to write three responses. The poems/citations I send him are printed below.

Paal Bjelke Andersen



9th March 1871. a difference of opinion -  
 we were nouns, a black gulf where your speech is rusting politically -  
 an oracular diagram, moronic translations, music roasting -  
 a strange, distant english voice, bricked up inside it -

*Hello, I'm the police. Like, you know, serious  
 like deliver your purse, or I'll / with your  
 red courtesans whirling, & our gross kettle  
 meaningless. We have no further comment*

*Howl, dole-rust, caustic half-dead city  
 scrape jet / surprise attack on human head  
 & its million doors / a gap obliterate  
 or oh I'm sober now. have rat will*

but this is a very crude reading -  
 later we made art, it shattered nothing -  
 our homicidal lives now were a form of understanding -  
 our expressions were lifeless, our hatred made visible -  
 the point is an absolute redistribution of all the senses -

Sean Bonney: From *Happiness – Poems after Rimbaud*, p. 39



## A Conversation Series

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Fredrik Nyberg  
Ängen

Sean Bonney  
You'd Be a Pig Not  
to Answer

Jena Osman  
A Letter from Jena Osman

Chateaux  
Omskriven genom läsning

Lisa Robertson  
The Present Is Unfinished

Jason Dodge  
Side by Side with What  
Already Happens

Cecilia Vicuña  
Where Glaciers Meet  
the Sea

Tomas Espedal  
Jag skriver i dina ord

Uljana Wolf  
Fibel Minds

Jean-Marie Gleize  
Å prøve å være så nøyaktig  
som mulig

Julie-Sten Knudsen  
Blåøjet