

Franco “Bifo” Berardi Game Over

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Children

On March 15, 2019, in many cities around the world, one million children marched under the banner of “Climate Strike.”

Why should we go to school? Why should we prepare for a future that we will not have? We want you to panic. Then what?

This movement is a rebellion against extinction. (Can you rebel against extinction?) Simultaneously, this is the beginning of a culture of transitoriness and of rage against those who have engendered us.

Zain, the protagonist of the movie *Capernaum* (2018), directed by the Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki, is a twelve-year-old Syrian boy who lives with five siblings in a refugee camp in the metropolitan chaos of Beirut. Zain was not marching with Greta Thunberg and other youth activists on March 15, 2019; having been summoned by a judge, he demands that his parents be prosecuted for the crime of giving birth to him.

Zain is the perfect symbol of the children’s crusade that is mounting everywhere: an immense crowd of innocent victims who want to know why they have been compelled to abandon the blank immortality of eternal Nothingness, why they have been summoned, assembled in this awkward city of violence, in the sad murkiness of precarity and anguish. *Why did you force me out of my space of dispassionate nonbeing into the fog and fury of exhaustion?*

It is not the world that is sinking, but the jumble of my synaptic circuits. Entropy is expanding down there, blurring vision, clouding meaning, obstructing any path of escape. We are not dealing with the disintegration of the universe, or with the undoing of the social foundation, but rather with the unstoppable degradation of my nervous cells. But reality at the end of the day is but the dynamic projection of countless experiences of mental decay.¹

Kronos and Cosmos

The relation between Kronos and his son Zeus was troubled, they say. Kronos, the king of the gods in the age of Chaos, swallowed his own sons because he had been told that his destiny was to be overthrown by one of them. The goddess Rhea, however, tricked Kronos by getting him to swallow a rock, and hid Zeus in a cave on the island of Crete. Eventually, Zeus chained up his father Kronos, became the king of the gods and the architect of the Universe, and turned Chaos into Cosmos.

Time, the Great Destroyer, must be chained up in order for an eternal order to be imposed on

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Still from Philippe Parreno's 2017 movie *No More Reality Whereabouts*.

the world.

Order is ceaselessly collapsing into Chaos. Eventually, the mind rebuilds structures and restores mental order, so that Chaos leads to Cosmos. Then Cosmos collapses again. This cycle is well known; this is how our experience unfolds in time.

Time and Structure play their infinite game on two different planes: Time cannot exist in a world ruled by Structure, because Structures are immutable and eternal. But Time is the decomposer of all Structures, and the agent of the extinction of all things.

In the structural universe, temporality does not exist: Kronos is chained.

In the living universe of temporality, Structures are continuously dissolved: Kronos unchained.

The mind is the only place where these two universes coexist: the universe of abstraction and the universe of life.

Digital Mephistopheles

In the realm of matter, and particularly in the realm of biological matter, extinction is the destiny of every entity, both of individual particularities and of collective multiplicities.

However, throughout the course of evolution, the human mind has pursued eternal duration, so as to make immortality possible. The human mind has succeeded in this search for eternity by creating the sphere of abstraction: pure mathematical relation independent from physical matter and therefore preserved from death. The mind, indeed, is the only dimension in which order dwells, and where the immortal can be found: mathematical order.

But we should not forget that the human mind is embodied. This bodily nature implies that the individual mind is subject to the effects of time: decay and extinction. The mind is the source of abstraction (immortality), but also the domain of sensitive duration; organic architecture lives and dies like all perishable material substances.

This is why mathematical reason cannot indefinitely coexist with a sensitive organism. In the long run, the insertion of mathematical entities into the continuum of social life engenders lethal disturbances, nervous breakdowns. Mathematics is the mental dimension in which extension is replaced by relation, the realm of immateriality in which time is irrelevant.

In order to achieve immortality, Faust struck a deal with Mephistopheles. But Faust didn't realize that the best path to immortality is the mathematization of the world.

Since you want to live forever, says the digital Mephistopheles to the transhumanist

Faust, you will be recombined into the immortal abstraction of the automaton.

Look up here, I'm in heaven
I've got scars that can't be seen
I've got drama, can't be stolen
Everybody knows me now

Look up here, man, I'm in danger
I've got nothing left to lose
I'm so high, it makes my brain whirl
Dropped my cell phone down below
Ain't that just like me?

– David Bowie, "Lazarus," from the album *Blackstar* (2016)

Mathematization

The global cognitive automaton is under construction in the sphere of computation. The process of constructing the automaton is asymptotic, ever-expanding, and never finished. Its genealogy is rooted in the history of the modern mathematization of the world.

Galileo was persuaded that

philosophy is written in the great book of the universe, which is continuously open in front of our eyes, but cannot be realized if we don't learn the language in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric forms. If we ignore them, we cannot understand a single word of the universe, and we are doomed to vainly wander in a labyrinth of darkness.²

Mathematization is not only a methodology for the theoretical formalization of natural phenomena. It is also a process of technical determination; the digitalization of linguistic and physical processes, in the late modern age, has proceeded to insert mathematical functions into the living body of language and social exchange.

The establishment of a conventional standard for measuring space and time, and the ensuing reduction of all entities to commensurability, is the core of modern science. It is also the precondition of capitalism, a social system that is based on the conventional equalization of all produced goods, both material and semiotic.

Since the common measure of value is based on socially necessary labor time, time itself has been reduced to computation. The mechanical computabilization of time was at the core of the Industrial Revolution. The

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objectivation of time as a computable extension is the foundation of the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of capitalism.

Thanks to the mathematization of the world and to the computabilization of time, the mental sphere emancipates itself from the dimension of perishability. Abstraction is not subject to the rule of death.

Outside the walls of the Circle all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work.

– David Eggars, *The Circle*

Abstraction Eternity Extinction

Paradoxically, however, the insertion of abstraction into social life and the cycles of the natural environment is leading to the extinction of concreteness, and of life itself.

The damnation (or salvation?) of death is denied in the realm of abstraction; extinction is not a possibility in the sphere of pure mathematical relations. This is why capitalism is eternal, and (unluckily enough) this is why humankind seems to be doomed.

The eternity of capitalism, in fact, is based on the annihilation of life through the process of abstraction: abstract value has taken the upper hand and has subjugated the concreteness of life, of production, consumption, and language.

Thanks to digital networks, financial capitalism has detached the economy from the sphere of perishable things. The concrete activity of producing useful things has been subsumed, recoded, and finally abolished by the mathematic rule of financial capitalism. The unintended consequence of this is the annihilation of life. The eternal survival of capitalism is enabled by the expansion of death, so that in the end, we dwell inside the corpse of abstraction.

Never, not for a single day
do we have pure space before us in which
the flowers
are always unfolding. It's forever world
and never Nowhere-without-Not:
the pure and unwatched-over air we
breathe,
know infinitely and do not want. As when
sometimes
a child gets lost in the silence
and has to be shaken back.

– Rilke, *The Eighth Elegy*

Dark Zeitgeist

The contemporary subconscious is marked by two powerful gravitational pulls: extinction and immortality, which feed into each other.

The insertion of mathematical exactitude into the living continuum of the vibrational organism has led to the ossifying of biodiversification. The insertion of digital connection into the continuum of bodily conjunction has led to the syntactic ossifying of the creative ambiguousness of sensibility.

The allure of extinction and immortality has polarized the social unconscious. A nihilistic drive emerges in aesthetics and politics: decline, and the fear of extinction, is fuelling ethno-nationalist cultures worldwide, and in particular a wave of aggressive white supremacism. This is the reaction of the white male when he perceives that he will soon be replaced.

But the while male, in his historical domination, has produced the conditions for a larger extinction: climate change, global civil war, and psychotic collapse. These might lead to the real extinction of life on the planet (unlike the imagined extinction of the white supremacists).

At the same time, a frozen immortality emerges in the form of the global cognitive automaton. This immortality results from the unravelling of the semicapitalist abstraction, and from the insertion of bio-info-techno devices into language and life.

The insertion of inorganic intelligence into the conjunction between organic bodies acts as an extinguisher of life and of living consciousness. Thus, extinction looms on the horizon as the ultimate destiny of history.

I didn't intend any of this to happen. And it's moving so too fast. The idea of Completion, it's far beyond what I had in mind when I started all this, and it's far beyond what's right. It has to be brought back into some kind of balance ... I was trying to make the web more civil. I was trying to make it more elegant. I got rid of anonymity. I combined a thousand disparate elements into one unified system. But I didn't picture a world where Circle membership was mandatory, where all government and all life was channeled through one network ... There used to be the option of opting out. But now that's over. Completion is the end. We are closing the circle around everyone – it's a totalitarian nightmare.

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Istubalz, *Prospettive Sovrapposte*, 2014.

– Ty Gospodinov in Dave Eggers, *The Circle*

What Extinction Am I Talking About?

The answer to this question is not clear to me.

Does this extinction concern the human race, or the cultural construct that we call “human civilization”?

Social integration is collapsing, but at the same time, the process of civilization has culminated in the self-construction of the automaton, which impassively takes shape in the connective space of digital computation.

Environmental collapse, global civil war, nuclear proliferation, and epidemics of panic and depression are steps towards extinction. But this is not the end of the world, since abstraction has created a world of its own, subsuming social language and prescribing the social forms of interaction.

Twentieth century medicine aimed to heal the sick. Twenty-first century medicine is increasingly aiming to upgrade the healthy ... In the twentieth century, medicine benefited the masses because the twentieth century was the age of the masses. Twentieth century armies needed millions of healthy soldiers, and economies needed millions of healthy workers.

– Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*

Expansion and acceleration have been fostered by the cultural erasure of transitoriness. Investing time in economic value has been a way to simulate eternity: private property, accumulation, and the sacrifice of the present on the altar of the future. This cycle of sacrifice, investment, and expansion has been the strength of capitalism.

Now it's over. The physical resources of the planet and the nervous energies of society are on the path to final exhaustion. The collapse of visions of the future has paved the way for reflecting on a previously forbidden subject: extinction.

Trans-humanist utopians, for their part, indulge in fantasies about imminent promises of high-tech immortality.

Both hypocritical tech-cheerfulness and contemporary nihilism are based on a shared vision of the ineluctable: it's too late to stop devastation and climate change, and it's too late to stop the psychotic collapse of the hyper-connected mind.

This helps to explain the nonsensical increase of inequalities that marks the wealth distribution of our time: the predators think that it is impossible to stop the extinction process. In their calculation, all they can do is protect themselves and their families, and this alone may prove enormously expensive. Panic and cynicism prevail in the terminal psychosphere.

Coda

Is there a way out from this end? Yes, of course: it is you, the unpredictable.

In 1983, after three years of full immersion in the laboratory of future sensibilities, I came back to my country and, together with a group of friends I staged “Game Over,” a video-electronic poem, in an art-space called the Public Secret.

The Gang of Four was on trial in Beijing: Chang Ching, Chang Chung Chao, Yao Wen Yuan, and Wang Hun Weng symbolized the defeat of our generation.

I spent hours in a Naples cafe playing video games. The first generation of video games came in large metal boxes with screens. I fought little green men in a game called *Space Invaders*.

I was impressed by these early electronic devices, especially because at the end of the game, after inevitable defeat, two words appeared on the screen: Game Over.

Nowadays, these two words no longer pop up on the screen, because players of the new generation are aware of the automaton: they have internalized it.

But sooner or later, you will be overthrown.

Together with the poet Enzo Crosio, I wrote a poem. Based on the poem, my brother then wrote music for a concert with four voices. The Gang of Four are playing video games in front of electronic screens, and they chant:

The exponential function of electronic speed knocks down one after the other the functions of biological reactivity. Sooner or later you lose. The machine always wins.

Now the trial begins. The conviction is certain. War is declared and it is going to be a war of extermination.

Then Chang Chung Chao, the dogmatic intellectual from Shanghai, yells: “What is a crime? What is a crime? What is a crime?”

Is crime the inducer of Chaos, or the generator of Order?

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1

Franco "Bifo" Berardi and
Massimiliano Gualleschi, from
the novel *Morte ai Vecchi* (Milan:
Baldini e Castoldi, 2016).
Translated by the author.

2

From *Il Saggiatore* (The Assayer).
Translated by the author.

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