

Franco Berardi Bifo  
**Nightmares and  
Screens: Notes  
on Two Movies**

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### Don't Take Shelter

Curtis's nightmares are frightening. He dreams of a yellow brownish rain and of a tempest destroying everything, especially his family – his wife and daughter, and their house, one of those depressing comfortable houses scattered in the sad, flat landscape of the American Midwest. Is the nightmare to become his life or is his life already a nightmare? His life seems happy. He loves his wife Samantha and he loves his daughter Hannah, who is deaf. Thankfully, the company he works for gives Curtis good insurance that will cover the surgery to fix Hannah's hearing. Samantha is a stay-at-home mom who supplements the family income. Money is tight, but thanks to his job, Curtis manages to pay the mortgage on the house.

But during the night, Curtis's sleep is troubled by premonitions of a catastrophe. He decides to build a storm shelter in his backyard. To build the shelter he needs money. His salary is not enough for the task, so he goes to the bank and asks for a loan. "Beware, my boy," says the good bank director. "These are difficult times, you have a family, running into debt is dangerous." But Curtis insists. He needs money to build a shelter and protect his family from the imaginary tempest.

Significantly, director Jeff Nichols sets his movie at the end of 2008, after the Lehman Brothers breakdown. In the contemporary imagination, finance is more and more linked to catastrophic events.

Samantha is worried. Her husband's behavior is strange. She is alarmed by the loan, and she understands that Curtis has mental problems. She knows that his mother suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.

Then things worsen. In order to dig a hole for the underground shelter, Curtis takes a backhoe from the place where he works. His boss finds out. Curtis is fired. He is now jobless, anguished, on the brink of a nervous breakdown. The shelter is ready, and one night a tornado warning sends him and his family into the shelter. They sleep in the shelter, but the tempest is not the final catastrophe, and the following morning the sky is bright and the neighbors are cleaning up debris.

Samantha persuades Curtis to go see a therapist.

The doctor suggests they take a beach vacation before Curtis begins real therapy. When they get back, he will be more relaxed and ready to start a new life. They go to the beach for a few days.

Curtis is on the beach with his daughter. They are building a sandcastle when the deaf and dumb little girl looks at the horizon and makes the sign of a storm. Curtis turns and looks at the sky: ominous clouds are announcing the

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Boat filtering oil-infested water in the Gulf of Mexico after the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, 2010.

most frightening of storms. Samantha comes out of the house running, and the thick brownish rain of Curtis's nightmares begins to fall. She looks at the ocean, where the tide is pulling back and a tsunami is growing in the distance.

*Take Shelter* recalls Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, not only in the sequences that involve birds attacking humans, but in the inexplicable premonition of an indefinable threat. The premonition gives voice to the present global unconscious, the inner landscape of mankind ravaged by financial predation and coming environmental catastrophe.

Should we take shelter? Should we go to the bank and ask for a loan, and invest in protecting our future? Should we take our premonitions seriously?

Should we accept the idea that paranoia is the proper understanding of a danger we cannot dispel, or should we avoid paranoia?

Nichols answers our questions: investing our energy in building shelter is the way to fall into the trap, to accept the dilemma of depression and catastrophe. When the tempest comes, we won't be home anyway. We'll be too far away from the shelter.

September 11, 2012. Eleven years after the inconceivable explosion of terror, the signs of the tsunami are gathering in Europe. One million people march in Barcelona under the banner of Independent Catalonia, recalling Zagreb in 1992.

No way out, and no shelter in sight. Anti-German hatred is growing in the minds of the population of Southern Europe. The European hope is turning into a nightmare, as Northern Protestants don't want to pay the bill for "lazy" Southern Catholics and Orthodox. Goldman Sachs has sown wind, and now the harvest is ripe for a tempest.

The hope of the Arab Spring is turning into a nightmare, too: Syrian civil war threatens to spread beyond Syrian borders, and Islamists are taking the lead in the anti-Assad insurrection. The Egyptian revolution has been trashed by the democratically elected Islamist government. Israel threatens Iran and Iran threatens Israel, and Hezbollah announces the creation of a special force destined to occupy Northern Israel.

Money is our shelter, the only way to access life. But if you want money you have to simultaneously renounce life. Don't build shelter, it is surely going to be useless. Furthermore, building shelters is the job of those who are preparing the storm.

Stay relaxed. Don't be attached to life, and most of all: don't have hope, that poisonous, addictive drug. Only those who are hopeless know the unspeakable way to happiness.

## Italian Reality, Frontline of Semiocapital

For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is.

– Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Some decades ago, screens started to intrude upon urban space, the house, and daily life. First it was the screen of television, then it was the screen of the computer, then everywhere in the city huge advertising screens filled the space of our visual perception. Then, little by little – or maybe all of a sudden – we entered the screen, and we lost the way back.

The opening shot of *Reality*, a movie by Matteo Garrone, is from the sky. We see Mount Vesuvius, then the city of Naples, then houses and streets, then cars, then a golden coach and coachmen dressed in Baroque style. Then we enter a garden: a wedding party and fancy ball, and people disguised as clowns, everybody taking pictures and filming with video cameras, then Enzo, the hero of the party, who has become famous as a star because he has taken part in the reality show *Il grande Fratello*, the Italian *Big Brother*.

Luciano (Aniello Arena) is a Neapolitan fishmonger who wants to be like Enzo. He wants to be one of the lucky people who enter the House of Big Brother. He approaches Enzo. Later, he goes to Rome for an audition. He starts to believe that he is going to be accepted, that he will enter the screen as a contestant, that he will win and gain fame and fortune for himself and his family.

He does not want to continue his normal life. He sells his fish shop, he gives away the tawdry things of his house, and he squabbles with his wife, who is conscious of the growing madness that is destroying her husband. But time passes, and the TV people don't call. Little by little, Luciano falls into depression. He spends his time watching the lucky winners on TV.

At the end, totally out of his mind, Luciano goes to Rome for a religious ceremony. He finds the Big Brother house and sneaks inside. He peeks at the idiotic activities of the lucky ones who are inside the screen, and he feels that he is happy there, and lies down in a corner of the house.

Then the camera detaches itself, going away, far away, sky high. Luciano is down there, getting smaller and smaller, and at the end he disappears, a small point of light in the darkness

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of the night.

The fascination with the screen captures the mind, and the capture becomes irreversible, since everything happens in the space of the mind. *Reality* is the ultimate movie about contemporary power. When everybody in Italy is persuaded that Berlusconi has lost his power, Garrone tells us the truth. It's a deception. Berlusconi can be politically defeated, and some consultant from Goldman Sachs can take his place only to pursue the same politics as Berlusconi; a center-left coalition can win the next elections, but Italy will never come out from the screen.

The movie is simultaneously very much in the neorealist style and in the surrealist Baroque style, because Baroque is the reality of modern Italian history.

Those who think that Italy is a backward place – the corrupted side of good neoliberal postmodernity (as the Italian Left thinks) – are totally wrong. They do not understand that the reality of semicapital is based on optical illusion and deception, on hypertrophy of the image and the inflationary proliferation of language, on the predatory manipulation of exchange (linguistic exchange and economic exchange, mixed together and confused).

Italian absentmindedness, Italian mafia culture, and Italian political corruption are absolutely not exceptions. They are not marginal or backward aspects of the present becoming of the world. On the contrary, Baroque is the style of semicapitalism, and Italy is the frontline of the world regime of financial dictatorship.

Italy has been the laboratory of power since Benito Mussolini set the Baroque of Italian fascism (the decoration, the show, the simulation) against old Weberian bourgeois capitalism. The old ethically motivated Protestant bourgeoisie, the class that had built industrial modernity, was slowly exiting the scene of power. Italian people, who are deeply fascist because of the cultural and aesthetic history of their country, have not betrayed their mission: they have reclaimed the space of deception, of the phantasmagoria of immaterial semioproduction, whose culmination is financial abstraction.

The anti-fascist resistance was an expression of a small minority of cosmopolitan intellectuals. The '68 decade was totally un-Italian, and the culture of *Autonomia Operaia* has been the only experience that smacks of cosmopolitan culture in a country that has never come out from the fascist screen.

Berlusconi, who represents the economic interests and the culture of the Sicilian-Milanese mafia, is the continuation of the Baroque style of Mussolini, finding in the TV screen its perfect

framework.

In the twentieth century, Italy has been the laboratory of semicapitalism – intimately Baroque, and intimately fascist.

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Franco Berardi aka “Bifo,” founder of the famous “Radio Alice” in Bologna and an important figure of the Italian Autonomia Movement, is a writer, media theorist, and media activist. He currently teaches Social History of the Media at the Accademia di Brera, Milan. His last book titled *After the Future* is published AKpress.

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