"I can't breath" as schizo-analysis: chaosmosis, poetry and cinema

Interview with FRANCO "BIFO" BERARDI by MITRA AZAR

Abstract

This interview done December 31, 2018 approaches the theme of LaDeleuziana starting from the new book Bifo has just published, titled Breathing (Semiotexte, 2019), and proposes to wave the concept of breathing as a new radical political category together with the attempt of understanding it as a possible schizo-clinical tool to elaborate strategies of resistance to the current political crisis. From Eric Garner chocked to death by a police officier while screaming "I can't breath" to the history of social movements from '68 up to the Gilet Jeunes as the attempt of the general intellect to give itself a body - and as a consequence a breath - able to articulate the current necro-political spasm, the interview digs into the extremely original and visionary political theory of one of the most radical Italian philosopher and activist. Taking as an excuse the recent trip in Argentina and Uruguay Bifo has just returned from – where he's also visited the Felix Guattari's center in Montevideo – the interview aims at drawing the constellation that connects Breathing to the chaosmotic thought of the French schizo-analyst, as much as to the role of poetry and cinema in re-articulating the rhythms of a politics to come.

Mitra: Let's start with a straightforward question about your book, *Breathing*, and let's see if from here we can "conspire" together some thoughts. Where did the idea of the book come from?

Bifo: I was in the United States in Autumn 2014, the period of the Ferguson riots. At that time, I happened to receive the link to a video showing Eric Garner, a black person living in Staten Island, New York City, choked to death by a police officer named David Pantaleo – I remember the names of murderers. Eric Garner was choked and pushed to the ground while whispering "I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe". He said these words eight times, and you can hear his voice until the point of dissolution. He died. Many people reacted to his death by marching in the streets of New York and of other cities, shouting "I can't breathe". When I heard these words, I perceived a very rich message. You're not a philosopher if you don't understand the meaning of very simple, basic, almost banal words, when those words are pronounced by one million people. You have to understand the meaning of that. So, when I listened to people shouting "I can't breathe" I realized that

something important was conveyed by those words, that there was a message, and we'd have to interpret those words.

Mitra: You know your book has allowed me to connect a number of phenomena that I've been interested in without being really able to understand that **t**hey were talking about the same thing, which to me is the main original point of your book – the understanding of breathing as a political category. From the choking game – an early-2000 internet phenomenon where teenagers choke each other to the point of fainting while being recorded on camera – to Eric Garner, to the #YouStink movement in Beirut against the waste crisis of 2015/16 and the consequent literal impossibility of breathing properly in the streets of Beirut, the problem seems always to be the transformation of breathing into a political category.

You know I'm also a filmmaker – or as I like better to say, a video-squatter. While reading your book as a filmmaker, I thought about our film project and about the possibility of re-adapting the structure of our movie in relation to the concept of breathing. At the same time, this possibility made me think about another wider possibility, that of framing the idea of cinema itself as a *dispositif* or operational instrument for controlling breath.

Think for a second about horror movies, or thrillers, think about Hitchcock's movies – what do they do? They play with your breath. Maybe all movies do one simple thing, they control the breathing of the audience through different aesthetic, narrative and formal devices.

Now, is it possible to make a movie that makes this function of cinema – cinema as a breathing device – really explicit? Your idea of turning breathing into a political category then becomes for me – and for our movie – the idea of turning cinema into a breathing exercise. And the idea of turning cinema into a breathing exercise means understanding how to turn cinema into a political weapon.

Bifo: Let's start from the beginning. This is a book about poetry, and the metaphor of poetry in my book is the metaphor of chaosmotic enunciation. Poetry is an attempt to find a new syntony with chaos. This is poetry. A new syntony with the firmament, with the incomprehensible complexity of the sky, with the uncountability of stars in the sky. You cannot reduce the complexity of the universe into a concept, a word, a gesture, but you can create *retournelles*, refrains, machines for concatenation. Poetry is a machine for concatenation, the concatenation of chaos – and its transformation. That's why this book is a book about poetry and chaos. Poetry is a transformer of breath, of respiration. Poetry is the manipulation of language, of words, of sounds, of breath, at the end. Poetry receives rhythmic stimulations from the world and translates these rhythmic stimulations into the organism's breathing. You're right, you can think of cinema, of all kinds of arts, as a way

of regulating, modifying, tuning the rhythm of respiration. This is art. The core of this strange activity we call art is a modulation of breathing in view of projecting a world over chaos.

Here comes into play the concept of intentionality, because our cognitive relation to the world is essentially an intentional relation not only in the sense of intention as will, "voluntas", desire, but also in the sense of in-tention as pro-tention: moving towards something, tending towards.

I wrote this book in the years between 2016 and 2018, when our perception of the world has deeply changed, for the worse.

1968 was the perception of a possibility, the possibility of a global respiration of the world in the form of a conscious agreement, in the form of a conscious coordination of the human will intended as a political consciousness able to produce a more human world. 2016, on the contrary, has marked the end of this very possibility, which is the possibility of breathing together, of an harmonizing breath. No more common breathing, individuals and companies and nation-states are competing for resources and power.

Mitra: Another point which I think is worth making in relation to the attempt of thinking breathing as a political category is that of how to make breathing visible, and this question, again, has much to do with cinema. How to make breathing visible in cinema? How to make an image that breathes? Paul Klee said that art is "making visible the invisible". How is it possible to make visible the act of breathing – or that of choking? To me this is an eminently political question: social movements, in fact, are processes where bodies breath together in a collective way.

Bifo: I think that 2018 has been for many reasons the final point in the history of social movements: ex-piration. The experience that has started in the year '68 has been an experience of inspiration and con-spiration. Now we are facing extinction, ex-piration.

Mitra: Is it possible to make a history of social movements from the point of view of breathing?

Bifo: Social movements are an exercise in conspiration, in translating singular breathing into a collective breathing. The movements of the past, particularly '68, have tried to imagine another possible world, another future. Now it's difficult to imagine a future which is not the future of extinction. This is why now it is difficult to create a movement.

Mitra: What is happening now is that the *abstract automaton*, as you call it, regulates and constrains breath, so breathing is not facilitated but rather occluded, locked and channeled by it.

Bifo: In '68 Stanley Kubrick directed *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It is the most far-sighted aesthetic reflection on the meaning of that year, of that movement, and also of what is happening now, I think.

When the astronaut David Bowman, the protagonist of the movie, looks straight into the eye of HAL9000, the computer, the automaton that masterminds the Discovery One starship, we understand that something important is at stake. The automaton we have built for our good, our happiness and our *orientation*, has taken the upper hand, and it is going to disorient us, to take power over us – destroying our starship and our trip. What can we do in such a case? What is the reaction of the astronaut? He destroys, he dismantles HAL. While doing so, HAL starts singing a song. This is 1968 for Stanley Kubrick, the filmmaker who has mapped the 20th century from *Days of Glory* to *Eyes Wide Shut*, recounting with this movie the spiritual journey of the final century of human history.

1968 is the year in which we become aware that the product of our intelligence is going to take hold of our future, and it is going to destroy our future. At that point we realize we have got to dismantle the automaton, we have to start a new process straight from the beginning, we have to unchain our imagination.

Let's try to understand what's happening now. Since the year 2016, since Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump, until 2018, we have witnessed the explosion of *dementia*. The word dementia is to be well understood, the demented organism is not an accident, it is the effect of the separation of the brain from the body. The body – both the individual and the planetary body – is acting in a demented way, and this is happening at a political level, at a social level, at the cultural level, and so on.

Now, the demented body of humanity is feeling the final danger, I call it the final stampede. Are we going towards the final stampede?

In an article titled *Life on a shrinking planet*, the environment researcher Mac Kibben writes that "when I said the world is shrinking this is what I mean: until now human beings have been spreading across the globe but a period of contraction is setting in as we lose parts of the habitable Earth". He says: "the habitable Earth is shrinking, the human population is growing and we don't know exactly how much; demographers say between nine and twelve billion people will be populating Planet Earth in 2050. We will be 10 billion people and the habitable space will be reduced to half". What does that mean for

the collective unconscious of human kind? That means that we have two ways out: one is escape from Planet Earth, the other is the elimination of half of the global population of the Planet. This second option is already theorized in contemporary cyberspace, for example in 4chan.com, where the rising dementia is producing effects of dark imagination. This option is also already enacted in very concrete ways, for example by letting thousands of immigrant bodies die in the Mediterranean. I'm not talking here about the conscious political planning of mass extermination, but of the unconscious preparation for the final stampede, the final extermination. There is also a third way, which is the trans-humanist utopia. HAL900 represents the creation of the cognitive automaton, a simulation of life without breath: the transfer of our memory, of our cognitive activity and orientation into intelligent machines. We are creating a super-organism that is a computing organism, and also a biological organism – the bio-informatic super organism. These are the three non-futures that we can imagine for the coming time: escape from Planet Earth, exterminate half of the human population, create the breathless cognitive automaton.

How can we imagine the ability to breathe in such a situation, metaphorically and literally? Don't forget that breathing becomes physically difficult, as people living in Shanghai or New Delhi know very well, and as you have pointed out with the case of the waste crisis in Beirut.

Mitra: Somebody has measured the effects of co^2 pollution on the functioning of the human brain, proving that it reduces the capability of linking ideas, of generating what Stiegler calls bifurcations. This lack of oxygen in the long-term produces a spasm.

Bifo: In his last book, Guattari speaks of a chaosmic spasm. What is a spasm? A spasm is a condition of hypermobilization of the body, precisely of a muscle, of the lungs, if you want. A respiratory spasm is a condition in which you cannot breathe because your body is too contracted, and this is making breathing impossible. Nevertheless, Guattari says the spasm can become chaosmic, and this happens when the spasm searches for a new syntony, a new attunement with the surrounding universe. The body enters in a phase of spasmic vibrational oscillation up to the point in which this oscillation calms down and enters a phase of syntony, of sympathy, which is the ability to feel for other bodies, to share the same *pathos*. The old idea of revolution can be very well replaced by the idea of the chaosmic spasm. The spasm is the act of violence that you are obliged to enact in order to recompose the harmony of your spasmic body. Chaosmosis is the ability to find a new osmosis, a new equilibrium, a new harmony beyond a condition of spasm.

Mitra: So the spasm itself is a *pharmakon* in the sense of Derrida, it can be a good thing and a bad thing at the same time.

Bifo: It's a poison but it is also the medicine, the antidote.

Mitra: The concept of spasm seems crucial for understanding the current contraction. Movements have been trying to deal with the spasm, and to find a new rhythm. Finding a new rhythm is also about finding a new interval, it is not only the immediate reaction to repression – which is also, and inevitably, spasmic. Finding a new rhythm is also about articulating the moment of pause from the spasmic reaction, the moment in which people build intimacy, eroticism. Many years ago I heard you saying that the moment of revolution is not when you throw stones at the police but when you take care of each other's wounds, when you make love, right after it. These are the moments in which the spasm is re-articulated in a therapeutic way. You know I've been around a number of uprisings and revolutions in the last 10 years, from the Iranian revolution in Tehran to Tahrir square in Cairo to the Syrian uprising to the Umbrella revolution in Hong Kong, to name a few. I want to share with you an experience that to me seems to embody this point. In 2009, in Tehran, after the clashes that followed Ahmadinejad's corrupted re-election, once back home, at night, people were doing one simple thing. This was happening everywhere in the city of Tehran. People were switching off the lights of their apartments – so not to be visible from the outside – and were reaching their balconies and they were singing. You know what they were singing? *Allahu Akbar*, God is great. The interesting thing here is that the singing had nothing to do with the meaning of that expression, it wasn't at all about the content – and I'm sure about that because I was living with Iranian comrades that were singing that – and furthermore the composition of the Green movement was everything but Islamist. After reading your book, I realized that this was an attempt to re-synchronize breath. *Allahu Akbar* became a signifier beyond its meaning, a way to re-articulate breath collectively, to re-invent the interval within the spasm – and by doing so the spasm itself.

Bifo: What you said is really the core point of what we're talking about. The problem was not the content but doing an action that made possible and visible and audible the breathing together, the conspiration – that's the revolution. Revolution is the point in which singularities enter into a condition of common vibration, cosmic vibration without leveling themselves, without losing their singularity.

Mitra: I know you're asthmatic. What happens during the asthmatic spasm?

Bifo: Yes, I suffer from asthma. At a certain point, when I start perceiving the reduction of my respiratory capability, I have to choose: should I stop thinking or should I stop moving? I decide to stop moving and my brain goes on. I lie on the bed and I keep working with my brain. Unfortunately, the majority of humans need to move, they are obliged to

get up at 6 AM in the morning, they're obliged to work with their bodies, they are obliged to do things. As a consequence of their reduced breathing capability, the human brain loses steam as it loses energy. This is one of the causes of the current planetary dementia.

Mitra: In your diary about asthma you shared with me some years ago as material to be included in the movie, I remember your description of one of your first asthma attacks, and your first reaction to it. You tried to breathe stronger and faster, and by doing so you were choking even more. Then your wife's sister approached you and told you: "calm down, calm down, just breathe, breathe normally".

Bifo: When I started feeling the first crisis of asthma I was sort of panicking, and I was trying to get in more air than what my lungs could have received. On the contrary, if my physical movement is reduced to the very minimum, my lungs can receive the minimum amount of air I need to go on, even during an asthma attack – to go on and do the only thing I can do, which is imagining, thinking. Now, let's project this crisis of asthma onto the planetary level.

What is happening? Not all humans have the privilege of lying in bed, and of suspending their bodily activity. As a consequence, the reduction of oxygen is translated into an expansion of dementia: a brain receiving less oxygen is a brain that is less able to elaborate.

Mitra: The story about your first asthma attack and the suggestion of your wife's sister is important because in there I see a hint, an indication of therapy. A therapy which – translated on a planetary level – suggests a way to breathe through the "shit storm", as you've called it somewhere. Instead of gasping and panicking, you say, it is better to calm the fuck down. Screaming doesn't help, because nobody is there to hear, anyway. You remember that short article I sent you a while ago about drowning? That article is terrifying, because it says that drowning doesn't look like drowning. When people drown in the fucking sea they don't move because if they move they lose more oxygen. That's why a person that is drowning doesn't look like a person that is drowning. If we apply the insights of that article to the planetary asthmatic state of human kind seen as a form of drowning, then we might say that each and every one of us is drowning, but we're not able to communicate it, because we don't look like we're drowning. So, even if you know as an individual that you're drowning, your capability of communicating your drowning state is severed. Drowning lacks a community because drowning doesn't look like drowning, because we are not yet capable of articulating breathlessness at a community level. Everybody is drowning alone. If your wife's sister's therapy works at an individual level, then, what kind of therapy do we need at an interpersonal level, to make it clear that we're drowning together?

Bifo: I'll try to answer your question by looking at the structure of my book. *Breathing* is divided into three parts. The first part is inspiration: you are aware of Yoga, so you know what it means the relation between the individual *Atman* and the cosmic *Praná*. Inspiration is the ability to physically and mentally elaborate the environment. In this section I quote the poet Frederick Hölderlin, who has proposed the concept of *Beigisterung*, which means inspiration. This idea of knowledge as inspiration of the world is much more interesting than the Hegelian idea of the conscious and rational domination of the world. We are not dominating the world, we are small organisms pulsating to the rhythm of the cosmos, and our activity is first of all inspiration.

The second part of the book is conspiration, which means breathing together, which means the creation of a shared meaning we refer to as society. In this section, I approach the idea that in contemporary conspiration there is a new rhythm produced by the toxic automation of cognitive capabilities.

The third part of the book is expiration. Expiration is difficult to think because I have not experienced expiration. We have not experienced expiration outside the sphere of possible experience, because expiration is exactly the end of experience – what we commonly call death. So far the point is that we don't know a way to share death – and that is maybe why we are incapable of sharing a collective drowning experience. Sharing death has nothing to do with grief. Nothingness is not an object of experience, we do not experience nothingness. We are conscious of nothingness as something which is beyond experience. Nothingness only exists in consciousness as the shift beyond experience. We know that modern culture has removed death, it has been unable to think death. Modernity is essentially the opposite of death – it is the utopia of immortality. Capitalism is the realization of this utopia – capitalism is immortality in act, effectively. And the immortality of capital is the mortification of life. As capital becomes immortal, a pure abstraction, an automaton, simultaneously the living organism loses breath, losing the concrete experience of life.

In my opinion, David Bowie has been one of the very few poets who has dared to speak about death. David Bowie speaks of the unspeakable: death. In his last work, *Black Star*, Bowie deals ironically with his own extinction. Nobody did that before. Probably Dante Alighieri did something similar when he speaks of his journey into hell, purgatory and heaven. David Bowie does so in a much more dramatic way. He does not visit hell, he is about to go to hell, literally.

Don't forget that during the last mass revolt against global capitalism which happened in Hamburg in July 2017 – people chanted the slogan "Welcome to hell". Meanwhile, thousands of artists marched in the streets of Hamburg dressed as zombies, their faces painted white.

This is the first time that humankind perceives the future as hell. Maybe, the apocalyptic imagination of the Middle Ages imagined something like that, maybe Hieronymus Bosch did it, with the euphoria of Bowie. Nevertheless, now it is not anymore about an apocalyptic imagination, but about a concrete apocalyptic prospect. Extinction is the only realistic prospect of the planet, of the human planet, and this stays in the realm of the unthinkable. I've heard about the movement Extinction Rebellion, about this idea that we must rebel against extinction. I understand the point, of course, but I don't agree. We should not rebel against extinction, we should instead learn to breathe at the rhythm of extinction. How? Don't panic, breathe normally, stop thinking that you need to breathe more, stop thinking that you need to live more, you have been living enough. Take it easy.

Mitra: If we take the point of view of extinction, what does that mean politically, what does that mean at the level of consciousness? What you say implies inevitably that the idea of revolution is also dead, because revolution implies a progressive idea of history, and this is not possible anymore. The great intuition of using breathing as a political category against the progressive becoming-real of Hegel's rationality, is that breathing is cyclical, not progressive. Breathing is not a pick that goes down, breathing is not orgasmic, and in this sense it is potentially anti-capitalist. Nevertheless, if there is no revolution to fight for anymore, if I am drowning and I can't even explain or make other people aware that I am drowning, even though they're drowning with me, what should I do? You say, breathe calmly. If I breathe calmly together with others, then maybe I am going towards a new cycle. How can we articulate a new breathing cycle from the point of view of extinction?

Bifo: Let's recapitulate something. How did we get here? How is it possible that the majority of the world's population, politically speaking, goes back to Hitler? This is the point. I mean, Dutarde, Modi, Erdogan, Salvini, Brexit, Trump, Bolsonaro. The majority of humankind has chosen Hitler. That is the point. We must understand why such a horrible thing has become possible, and my answer is that at a certain point people have felt so humiliated that they have decided to seek revenge at all costs – including self-destruction among the costs.

Summer 2015 is a key moment towards this unconscious decision. The summer of the Greek defeat, of the Greek humiliation. At a certain point, the European mind has realized that the automaton is too advanced, that we have already entered the situation in which the abstraction has taken hold of our lives. The automaton captures our lives, our choices, our future possibilities. Thus, at a certain point, we rebel. But the rebellion against the automaton is the rebellion of a body without a brain, because the brain has been already captured by the automaton. The breathless brain is already captured by the automaton,

and this is why the demented body acts in a fascist way. Fascism is action without a brain, and this is our reality.

The problem here is that the perception of a choking situation, the perception of breathlessness cannot be communicated without communicating panic, and I don't want to communicate panic – that's why I don't want to do any more public talks. I want to elaborate a way of synchronicity, of sympathy, of harmony, with extinction. Can you say that in public? No. It is something that you have to elaborate in a very hidden space. Do I want to teach people that dying is unavoidable? Do I want to say that our civilization is destined to die? Yes, but that's not the point. The point is: how can we learn to share breathing in the perception of breathlessness. How can we share the experience of breathing together when we have announced that the end is coming? How can we learn to come out from the plastic financial automaton, to withdraw from the need to consume? How can we reduce our consumption of air and of things up to the point that it gives us the possibility of starting again? Where is the point of starting again?

Mitra: Maybe what we need to learn is how to build intervals from the automaton, where to learn again how to breathe with others. It is not about political action in a traditional sense, it is not even about clashing with the police or squatting spaces – things that nevertheless are possibly, not to say inevitably, necessary to generate these intervals I'm thinking of, especially in the current political scenario. How to build these intervals, these islands? This is a question of locality, of a form of archipelagic locality which first of all tries to revendicate the notion of locality from its fascist connotation, outside the notion of borders, identity, and language.

Bifo: We live in a physical place, we breathe the air which is around us. The air is not contained by notions of border, identity, language. It is not my homeland, it's the place where I breathe.

Mitra: Let's dig a bit more into the rise of dementia in relation to the current asthmatic state of humankind as a form of disarticulation between the brain and the body. What does fascism mean in terms of breathing, what kind of form of breathing is fascism?

Bifo: Fascism is a mandatory synchronization of automated breathing, it is when you can no more breathe according to your singular rhythm, when you have lost the relation with your singularity and you need to inhale through the respiratory machines – which is the financial machine, which is the plastic machine, which is the salary machine. At a certain point, you understand that if you want to survive you have to accept the dictatorship of the automaton, the automaton is the mandatory leveling of breath. As a singularity I am nothing, I have lost the freedom of defining myself as a singularity, so I

define myself as the white race. This process gives me the possibility of breathing, breathing in an automated way, in a synchronized way. Nevertheless, when you are helped to survive by a machine, by an iron lung, this is not breathing. This is fascism.

Mitra: Breathing as well, like everything else, is displaced from the body into the machine. The cut you talk about between the body and the brain goes even deeper and produces the cut between the body and the breath – breathing is no longer a function of the body but it becomes a function of the machine.

Bifo: At a certain point society, the global society, the global brain realizes that it cannot breathe without the iron lung of financial technology. The Greek people couldn't choose, they couldn't say no to the memorandum, to the European bank system. If you want to breathe you have to breathe at the rhythm of the automaton. What happened since then? The collective brain of humankind decided to take revenge. Revenge is a crucial concept in the current political landscape. The political left thinks that individuals, social groups and society at large deliberate according to rationality, to a rational project, to a rational interest. This has been maybe true in the past, but it is certainly no longer true nowadays. People didn't decide rationally that by voting for Donald Trump their salary would get better. No! The people who voted for Donald Trump knew that Donald Trump is a man of the financial system – the first law passed by Donald Trump has been the fiscal displacement of wealth from workers to financial capitalism. Nevertheless, they voted for him because he was the face, the name of revenge – revenge against Hillary Clinton, revenge against the Democratic Party, revenge against the neoliberal left that has created the automaton, revenge against the automaton. The only way to break the automaton is suicide. Don't forget that suicide is a way out. Suicide is the way out. This is the meaning of what has happened in 2016 and 2018. The human race has decided to commit suicide because this is the only way to take revenge against the abstract automaton.

Nevertheless, I know that the possibility is not cancelled, the possibility being the intellectual energy of a hundred million networked brains, collaborating and con-spiring. The general intellect is the hopeful place, but the general intellect is not breathing now, or it is breathing through an iron lung, in a connective, automatized way. The general intellect has lost its respiratory body at the moment, and it has turned into a collective machine unable to conjoin. You know, the network, the digital network, this is the respiratory machine of the general intellect, and as long as the general intellect will be obliged to breathe in a connective way, this breathing will not be happy, will not be creative, will not be a laboratory, will not be erotic. The liberatory imagination of the future that I can have, sometimes, is based on reactivating the erotic body of the general intellect. Movements have always been the activation of an erotic body enabling the brain to imagine things that did not exist yet. I don't know if in the coming apocalypse, in the

apocalypse now that we are living, this ability will emerge in some way. I don't see how this can happen, and this is why people say I'm a pessimist. Actually, I don't even know what it means the word pessimist or optimist. I know that the possibility is here and we are missing this possibility. This is what I see.