

## I CAN'T BREATHE

I suffer from asthma, so perhaps I was affected by a sense of asthmatic solidarity when I saw the video of Eric Garner's assassination. Garner was killed on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York City, when a New York City Police Department officer put him in a chokehold for about fifteen to nineteen seconds while arresting him. The words "I can't breathe"—which Garner panted eight times, less and less audibly, before expiring—have been chanted by thousands of demonstrators all over the country in the months since.

In many ways, these words express the general sentiment of our times: physical and psychological breathlessness everywhere, in the megacities choked by pollution, in the precarious social condition of the majority of exploited workers, in the pervading fear of violence, war, and aggression. Trump is the perfect emperor for this baroque

empire of unchained vulgarity, glamorous hypocrisy, and silent, widespread suffering.

Respiration is a subject that will help me discuss our contemporary chaos and search for an escape from the corpse of capitalism. I'll start by reading Friedrich Hölderlin.

Hölderlin belongs to the tradition of German Romanticism, but his pathway diverges from idealism because he opposes an ironic interrogation of Reality to the assertive style of Hegelian dialectic rationalism. Hegel chose the path of bigotry, the modern bigotry of History conceived as the becoming real of Truth.

Hölderlin was not such a bigot, and he did not follow this pathway that leads to historical delusion. In "Mnemosyne," he writes, "A sign we are, without interpretation / Without pain we are and have nearly / Lost our language in foreign lands."<sup>1</sup>

Hegel, who was a colleague of Hölderlin's during their college years in Tübingen, finds the unity of man in the concept, and in the historical "becoming true" of the concept. Hölderlin does not fall into the trapdoor of Hegel's *Aufhebung* (sublation). He does not buy idealism's faith in the historical realization of *Geist* (spirit). His ground for understanding reality is not *Geschichte* (History), but *Begeisterung* (inspiration). Hölderlin intuits that the intimate texture of being is breathing: poetical rhythm.

I intend to emphasize here the ontological meaning of “rhythm”: foundationally, “rhythm” refers not only to vocal emissions or to the sound of acoustic matter, but also to the vibration of the world. Rhythm is the inmost vibration of the cosmos. And poetry is an attempt to tune into this cosmic vibration, this temporal vibration that is coming and coming and coming.

Mystical Buddhist philosophy distinguishes between the Indian words *shabda* and *mantra*. *Shabda* is a word for ordinary speech sounds, used to denote objects and concepts in the normal exchange of operational signifieds. A *mantra*, on the other hand, is a vocal sound that triggers the creation of mental images and sensible meanings. While *shabda* acts on the level of the operational chains of functional daily communication, *mantra* acts on the rhythm of the body and its relation with the semio-sphere—which is the source of the human world. *Ātman*, in this philosophy, is the singular breathing of each sensitive and conscious organism; *prana* is the cosmic vibration that we perceive as rhythm.

In “Notes on Antigone,” Hölderlin opposes a poetical logic to the conceptual logic of the then-emerging idealism. Against Hegel’s panlogism, Hölderlin advocates a sort of panpoeticism. We should not dismiss this stance as merely Romantic patheticism, for there is a deep philosophical core to

Hölderlin's suggestion. Hölderlin means that poetry is the semiotic flow that emanates the perceptual and narrative forms that shape the common sphere of experience. Reality, in other words, is the sphere of human interaction and communication secreted by language and refined by poetry. Poetry builds and instills the strata of mythopoiesis: it is the inspiration of the social imagination and of political discourse. In Hölderlin's words, "poets establish what remains."<sup>2</sup> Respiration and semiosis: this is the conceptual couple that I want to consider in order to understand something of our contemporary chaos.

Chaos and rhythm are the main threads of this book, which roams about the apocalypse of our time: in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the mindscape and the social scene are flooded by flows of unhappiness and violence. In his poetry, Hölderlin foresees the forthcoming chaos of modernity and the coming breathlessness. It's a problem of measure, he says. There is no earthly measure, so our sense of measure (rhythm) is only a projection of our breathing: poetry. This is why man lives poetically, although he "deserves" differently. Hölderlin: "May a man look up / From the utter hardship of his life / And say: Let me also be / Like these [gods]? Yes. As long as kindness lasts, / Pure, within his heart, he may gladly measure himself / Against the divine."<sup>3</sup>

## Poetry as Excess

What is poetry? Why do human beings deal poetically with words, sounds, and visual signs? Why do we slip away from the level of conventional semiosis? Why do we loosen signs from their established framework of exchange?

Hölderlin writes, "Full of merit, yet poetically / Man dwells on this earth."<sup>4</sup> The poetical act is here opposed to the "deservingness," or merit, of man. What is merit? I think that merit is the quality of being worthy, of deserving praise or reward, the quality of measuring up to the (conventional) values of individuals in a given social scene.

Social beings are more or less full of merits. They deserve recognition as they exchange words and actions in a worthy way, and they receive mutual understanding as a sort of moral payment, a confirmation of their place in the theater of social exchange. Merits and moral payments and recognition are part of the conventional sphere. When humans exchange words in the social space, they presume that their words have established meanings and produce predictable effects. However, we are also able to utter words that break the established relation between signifier and signified, and open new possibilities of interpretation, new horizons of meaning.

In the last lines of the same poem, Hölderlin writes: "Is there measure on earth? There is /

None.”<sup>5</sup> Measure is only a convention, an inter-subjective agreement which is the condition of merit (social recognizability). Poetry is the excess which breaks the limit and escapes measure. The ambiguousness of poetical words, indeed, may be defined as semantic overinclusiveness. Like the schizo, the poet does not respect the conventional limits of the relation between the signifier and signified, and reveals the infinitude of the process of meaning-making (signification). Exactness and compliance are the conditions of merit and exchange. Excessiveness is the condition of revelation, of emancipation from established meaning and of the disclosure of an unseen horizon of signification: the possible.

What we are accustomed to call “the world” is an effect of a process of semiotic organization of prelinguistic matter. Language organizes time, space, and matter in such a way that they become recognizable to human consciousness. This process of semiotic emanation does not reveal a natural given; rather, it unfolds as a perpetual reshuffling of material contents, a continuous reframing of our environment. Poetry can be defined as the act of experimenting with the world by reshuffling semiotic patterns.

Did I say: poetry can be defined? Well actually the act of definition that I have just performed is arbitrary and illicit, because the question “What is

poetry?” cannot be answered. I cannot say what poetry “is,” because, actually, poetry “is” nothing. I can only try to say what poetry *does*.

The act of composing signs (visual, linguistic, musical, and so on) may disclose a space of meaning that is neither preexistent in nature nor based on a social convention. The poetical act is the emanation of a semiotic flow that sheds a light of nonconventional meaning on the existing world. The poetical act is a semiotic excess hinting beyond the limit of conventional meaning, and simultaneously it is a revelation of a possible sphere of experience not yet experienced (that is to say, the experienceable). It acts on the limit between the conscious and the unconscious in such a way that this limit is displaced and parts of the unconscious landscape—of what Freud called the “inner foreign country”—are illuminated (or distorted) and resignified.<sup>6</sup>

That said, I have so far said nothing, or nearly nothing. Very little. Actually, poetry is *the* act of language that cannot be defined, as “to define” means to limit, and poetry is precisely the excess that goes beyond the limits of language, which is to say beyond the limits of the world itself. Only a phenomenology of poetical events can give us a map of poetical possibilities.

“Is there measure on earth? There is / None,” Hölderlin writes. He continues, “No created world

ever hindered / The course of thunder.”<sup>7</sup> Let’s forget measure, let’s forget technical capability social competence and functional proficiency. These measurable entities have invaded the modern mindscape and accelerated the rhythm of the info-sphere up to the point of the current psychocollapse and techno-fascism. Let’s try to think outside the sphere of measurability and of measure. Let’s find a way to rhythmically evolve with the cosmos. Let’s go out of this century of measure, let’s go out to breathe together.

Félix Guattari speaks of “chaosmosis”: the process of rebalancing the osmosis between the mind and chaos.<sup>8</sup> Hölderlin speaks of poetry as linguistic vibration, oscillation, and quest, of a rhythm tuned to the chaosmotic evolution that simultaneously involves mind and world.



## VOICE SOUND NOISE

**Chaos as Spasm**

*Chaosmosis* is the title of Félix Guattari's final book.<sup>1</sup> The concept of chaosmosis emerged from Guattari's previous work, particularly from his and Gilles Deleuze's concept of the refrain (*ritournelle*). The term "chaosmosis" alludes to the incumbency of chaos, and the prospect of chaos's osmotic evolution itself. The groundwork of chaosmosis is the ceaseless interplay between cosmic respiration and refrains of singularity.

The established order—social, political, economic, and sexual—aims to enforce a concatenation that stiffens and stifles the vibrational oscillation of singularities. This stiffening of vibrant bodies results in what Guattari calls "spasms."<sup>2</sup> Guattari did not have time to further elaborate his concept of the chaotic spasm, as he died a few months

after the publication of *Chaosmosis*, but I think that this concept is crucial for an understanding of subjectivity under today's conditions of info-neural acceleration.

The spasm provokes suffering and breathlessness in the nervous system and the consciousness of the social organism. But the spasm is "chaosmic," in Guattari's terms, inasmuch as it invites the organism to remodulate its vibration and to create, *ex nihilo*, a harmonic order by way of resingularization. Music is the vibrational search for a possible conspiracy beyond the limits of the noise of the environment, and the recomposition of fragments of noise in a sound that embodies a conscious vibrational intention. In the spasm sound collapses into noise, a tangle of inaudible voices.

Thinking with Guattari's chaosmosis, we may reframe the concepts of history and of historical time. When we speak of "history," when we view events from a historical perspective, we are imposing a certain modulation of our perception and projection of time. Historical perception is the effect of a mental organization of time within a teleological frame. Historical perception shapes time into an all-encompassing dimension that forces individuals and groups to share their temporalities according to a uniform meter and a teleological (or economic) frame. People enter the historical domain when they all hear more or less

the same music in their ears. Time is captured by a certain rhythmic refrain, so people march at the same pace. This shared pace of time's temporality, perception, and projection is called "history." Only thanks to the harmonization of different temporalities can history frame time's myriad events within a common projectual narrative structure.

### Time and Spasm

For Henri Bergson, time is defined from the point of view of our consciousness of duration. Time is the objectivation of a biological organism's act of breathing, which is sensitive and conscious. Singular respiration is concatenated with others' breathing, and this corespiration we name "society." Society is the dimension in which singular durations are rearranged in a shared time-frame.

Consciousness is located in time, but time is located in consciousness, as it can only be perceived and projected by consciousness. "Time" means the duration of the stream of consciousness, the projection of that dimension in which consciousness flows. The stream of consciousness, however, is not homogeneous: on the contrary, it is perceived and projected according to different rhythms and singular refrains, and sometimes it is codified and arranged into a regular, rhythmic repetition.

In the industrial age, when a dominant rhythm was imposed over the spontaneous rhythms of social subjects, power could be described as a code aligning different temporalities, an all-encompassing rhythm framing and entangling the singularity of individuals' refrains. We could speak of Political sovereignty when the sound of law was silencing the noise emitted from the social environment. In our contemporary connective postindustrial society, the opposite is true: power is no longer constructed by silencing the crowd (for example, through censorship, broadcast media, or the solemnity of political discourse), but is based on the boundless intensification of noise. Today, social signification is no longer a system of the exchange and decoding of signifiers, but a saturation of the listening mind—a neural hyperstimulation. While political order used to be effected by a voice proclaiming law amid the silence of the crowd, contemporary postpolitical power is a statistical function that emerges from the noise of the crowd.

Referring to the swarm-like behavior of networked culture, Byung-Chul Han summarizes the transformation that has occurred in the relation between power and information: "Shitstorms occur for many reasons. They arise in a culture where respect is lacking and indiscretion prevails. The shitstorm represents an authentic phenomenon of digital communication . . . *Sovereign is he who*

*commands the shitstorms of the Net.*”<sup>3</sup> This is a good way to explain the ascent of the Emperor of Chaos to the highest political office in the world, the presidency of the United States of America. Modern power was based on the ability to forcibly impose one’s own voice and to silence others: “Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany,” Hitler wrote in 1938 in the *Manual of German Radio*.<sup>4</sup> Now, power emerges from the storm of inaudible voices. Power no longer consists in eavesdropping and censoring. On the contrary, it stimulates expression and draws rules of control from the statistical elaboration of data emerging from the noise of the world. Social sound is turned into white noise and white noise becomes social order.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s parlance, the “refrain” is a concatenation of signs, particularly phonetic sounds and phonetic vibrations; the refrain is a semiotic concatenation (*agencément sémiotique*) that enables the organism to enter its singular cosmos into a wider concatenation. Time is the projection of a singularity (*durée*, in Bergson) and is simultaneously the frame of interindividual conjunction, the grid where uncountable refrains interweave.

Music is a peculiar mode of chaomosis: the osmotic process of transforming chaos into harmony. Music’s process of signification is based on directly shaping the listener’s body-mind: music is psychedelic (meaning, etymologically, “mind-manifesting”).

Music deploys in time, yet the reverse is also true: making music is the act of projecting time, of interknitting perceptions in time. Rhythm is the mental elaboration of time, the common code that links time perception and time projection. The emanation of sound is part of the overall creation of a social cosmos: Steve Goodman speaks of “sonic warfare” in order to describe the invasion of society’s acoustic sphere by sonic hypermachines that besiege acoustic attention, imposing a rhythm in which singularity is cancelled.<sup>5</sup>

### Code, Debt, and the Future

Code is “speaking” us. Code is a tool for the submission of the future to language, enabled by the inscription of algorithms into the flux of language. The future is now being written by the algorithmic chain inscribed in techno-linguistic automatisms.

Prescriptions, prophecies, and injunctions are ways of inscribing the future in language, and, more pointedly, of actually producing the future by means of language. Like prescriptions, prophecies, and injunctions, code has the power to prescribe the future, by formatting linguistic relations and the pragmatic development of algorithmic signs. Financial code, for instance, triggers a series of linguistic automatisms which perform social activity, consumption patterns, and lifestyles.

“Money makes things happen. It is the source of action in the world and perhaps the only power we invest in,” writes Robert J. Sordello in *Money and the Soul of the World*.<sup>6</sup> Money and language have something in common: they are nothing and yet affect everything. They are nothing but symbols, conventions, *flatus vocis*, yet they have the power to persuade human beings to act, to work, and to transform physical things. Language, like money, is nothing. Yet like money, language can do anything. Language and money are shaping our future in many ways. They are prophetic.

Prophecy is a form of prediction that acts on the development of the future by way of persuasion and emotion. Thanks to the social effects of psychological reactions to language, prophecy can be self-fulfilling. The financial economy, for instance, is marked by self-fulfilling prophecies. When ratings agencies downgrade the value of an enterprise or the value of a nation’s economy, they make a prediction about the future performance of that enterprise or economy. But this prediction so heavily influences actors in the economic game that the downgrading results in an actual loss of reliability and an actual loss of economic value—thus fulfilling the prophecy. How can we escape the effects of prophecy? How can we escape the effects of code? These are two different problems, of course, but they share something in common.

## Poetry as Semiotic Insolvency

In his preface to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein writes, “in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).”<sup>7</sup> Later, he posits:

*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world.

Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.

So we cannot say in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that.’

[ . . . ]

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either.

[ . . . ]

The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.<sup>8</sup>

The potency and extension of language depend on the consistency of the subject: on its vision, on its situation. And the extension of my world depends on the potency of my language. The process of going beyond the limits of the world is what Guattari calls “chaosmosis.” He speaks of chaosmosis “rekindling processes of semiotisation”: i.e., redefining the semiotic grid.<sup>9</sup> The semiotic grid is



a tangle that limits the possibilities of experience, and therefore limits the experienceable world itself.

“Chaosmosis” means breathing with chaos—“osmosis” implies breathing together—but in this osmosis with chaos a new harmony emerges, a new sympathy, a new syntony. This “emergence” is an effect of autopoietic morphogenesis: a new form emerges and takes shape when logical-linguistic conditions make it possible to see it and to name it. Only an act of language escaping the technical automatisms of financial capitalism will enable the emergence of a new life form. Only the reactivation of the body of the general intellect—the organic, existential, historical finitude that harbors the potency of the general intellect—will enable the imagination of new infinities.

Language has infinite potency, but the exercise of language happens in finite conditions of history and existence. Thanks to the establishment of a limit, the world comes to exist as a world of language. Grammar, logic, and ethics are all based on the imposition of a limit. Code is a limited exercise of language and, simultaneously, it is the imposition of a performing and productive limit. Limits can be productive, but outside of the space of limitation, infinite possibilities of language persist immeasurably.

Code implies syntactic exactness of linguistic signs: connection. Compatibility and consistency

and syntactic exactness are the conditions of code's operational functionality. Code is language in debt. Only by exacting the necessary syntactic consistency can language perform its connective purpose. The leftover excess is the *remise en question* of language's infinity, the breakdown of consistency, the reopening of the horizon of possibility. Excess plays the game of conjunction (the game of bodies looking to make meaning out of *any* syntax), not the preformatted game of connection.

Poetry reopens the indefinite, through the ironic act of exceeding the established meaning of words. In every sphere of human activity, grammar establishes limits in order to define a space of communication. In the age of capitalism, the economy has taken the place of the universal grammar traversing the different levels of human activity: language, too, is defined and limited by its economic exchangeability. However, while social communication is a limited process, language is boundless: its potentiality is not limited by the limits of the signified. Poetry is the excess of language, the signifier disentangled from the limits of the signified. Irony, the ethical form of the excessive power of language, is the infinite game that words play to create and to skip and to shuffle meanings. Poetry and irony are tools for semiotic insolvency, for the disentanglement of language from the limits of symbolic debt.

## CHAOS AND THE BAROQUE

The modern age blossomed with a breathtaking expansion of the sphere of experience: the discovery of the new world and the diffusion of printed texts paved the way for the expansion of experience and the enrichment of the imagination. This, in turn, led to the bewildering phantasmagoria called “the baroque.” The humanist Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had been founded on an assertion of the centrality of the human viewpoint in the vision of the landscape, in the projection of space, and in the construction of the world. The explosive Age of Discovery that followed multiplied prospective viewpoints.

In the sixteenth century, Spanish culture was the theater of a sort of vertiginous proliferation of viewpoints that José Antonio Maravall has called “baroque cosmovision.”<sup>1</sup> Crowds of people coming from the countryside took hold of urban spaces,

and the ensuing whirlwind of urban experience provoked an inflation of meaning and a sort of explosion of identity. In the same year that Columbus disembarked onto American soil, Spanish rulers ordered the expulsion of infidels. The country was just emerging from three centuries of religious war: religious identity, ethnic identity, and social identity now entered into the turmoil of modernity. The basic interrogation had to do with religious faith and ethnic belonging: in a word, with identity, a nonsense concept and a psychological trap. In the Spanish situation of the late fifteenth century, "Who are you?" was a twofold question. It meant, what is your origin? Are you a pure Christian or have your ancestors mingled with the infidels? Simultaneously it meant, what social place do you have?

The problematics and the adventures of the picaresque novel (that literary genre that was emerging from the urban condition and from the conflict between the bourgeoisie and urban proletarians) are grounded here. A *picaro* is someone who has nothing: no property, no job, not even the certainty of his origin. Therefore, the *picaro* is someone who is searching. The *picaro*, in fact, is a *buscón*, a searcher. What is the *picaro* searching for? He is searching for everything, and first of all for himself—for his origin, his identity. The bewilderment that Góngora calls "madness" (*locura*) and

Quevedo perceives as “disillusion” (*desengano*) was an effect of this deterritorialization of viewpoints and proliferation of stimuli. The baroque is a transition, according to Deleuze. A transition from what to what? A gigantic fluctuation happened in the European semio-sphere when, thanks to the technology of print, written text spread among a large urban population, while geographic explorations enormously expanded the limits of the known world. This fluctuation led the collective mind to peer beyond the borders of the anthropocentric order asserted by Renaissance culture. That order was scrambled by the man-made disorder of baroque modernity: artifice replaced nature, *locura* replaced reason, and appearance replaced being. Lost in the urban labyrinth, in the unremitting battle for survival and accumulation, reason turned into shrewdness and measure was replaced by force. The *buscòn*—the searcher—became the symbol of the new condition.

The fold, the fractal: these are the figures of the baroque imagination. The baroque originated from a vertiginous fractalization of the humanist order. For the first time, inflation appeared as an economic and a semiotic phenomenon. Catapulted to a planetary dimension, the Spanish economy was shaken by social turmoil and by inflation, while the Spanish psycho-sphere was frenzied with a proliferation of signs: inflation of meaning,

*locura*. Economic inflation happens when more and more money is needed to buy fewer and fewer goods, and semiotic inflation happens when more and more signs buy less and less meaning. Chaos loomed in the frantic acceleration of the info-sphere during the Spanish Golden Age, and it is in this conjuncture that the baroque imagination is rooted.

Then, in the age of scientific revolution, of industrialization and of nation-states, bourgeois rationalism prevailed, and the baroque sensibility retreated to linger around the margins of modern art and philosophy. But at the end of modernity rationalism faded, and in the twilight of humanism that we are living through today, a new gigantic fluctuation is perceptible. Reason has been submitted to financial rule, such that the culture of belonging has replaced universal reason and identitarian resentment has replaced social solidarity. The legacies of humanism and the Enlightenment are nullified along with the legacy of socialism. Socialism, however, has returned under the shape of national socialism: the discourse and the political agenda of Trump, Putin, Salvini, Erdogan, and Modi. The promise of recovering the economic security destroyed by neoliberal globalism is tied to the promise of empowering the nation (the identitarian particularity) against those who do not belong.

In the folds of the contractual sensibility that results from the digital kingdom of abstraction and from the aggressive return of identity, we are baroquely searching for a new rhythm.

### **Indeterminacy and Chaos**

In the wake of Newton and Galileo, modern mechanistic physics was based on the idea of a unifying language—the language of mathematics—which was supposed to be apt to semiotize the whole of creation. Later on, the development of biology and biogenetics thrived on the assumption of a deterministic code that ruled the organism's development. In the 1950s, a fusion of physics and biology led to the discovery of DNA. The body was then viewed as a deployment and actualization of code, of an implied order which accounted for the unfolding of life. This mechanical vision of nature coincided with an economic practice based on the measurability of all things: labor time as the source of economic value, and value measured as a product of working time. In industrial society, the determinability of economic value was based on the fact that labor time was definable as an average term. One could determine the economic value of an object by calculating the time which was socially necessary in order to produce it.

But at the end of modern industrialism, the deterministic relationship between labor, time, and value is now dissolving in the chaotic dimension of semio-capitalism. When the measurability of value dissolves, when time becomes aleatory and singular, the very idea of determination starts to fade. This affects the realm of the natural sciences too, where the discourse of determinism is abandoned and replaced by the principle of indeterminacy.

In the nineteenth century, Pierre-Simon de Laplace envisioned a universal intelligence able to know every state and every possible evolution of beings:

An intelligence that, at a given instant, could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings that make it up, if moreover it were vast enough to submit these data to analysis, would encompass in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atoms. For such an intelligence nothing would be uncertain, and the future, like the past, would be open to its eyes. The human mind affords, in the perfection that it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble likeness of this intelligence.<sup>2</sup>



This universal intelligence would be able to encompass with a single formula the movements of the largest bodies and the movements of the slightest atoms, and therefore, as a consequence of ruling out any uncertainty, it would be able to foretell the future. This intelligence would be determinist in a double sense: it would be the cause of the inmost determination and simultaneously it would be the consciousness presiding over any deterministic relationship occurring in nature.

But Laplace's deterministic rationalism did not survive the unfolding of a new epistemology: the concept of chaos entered into the scientific realm when the progressive order of modernity started to crumble and when the destabilizing force of the financial market started to jeopardize the economic order of industrialism. The concept of indeterminacy obliged to rethink the relation between the mind and world in terms of undecidability, and at this point chaos entered the fray.

In science, just as in life, sometimes a sequence of events may reach such a level of complexity that a small perturbation will have huge, unpredictable effects. We speak of "chaos" when such indeterminacy becomes widespread. "Chaos" stands for an environment that is too complex to be decoded by our available explanatory frames, an environment in which fluxes circulate too quickly for our minds to elaborate. The notion of chaos denotes a

complexity which is too dense and too fast for our brains to decipher. Chaos takes a special place today in the sphere of the social sciences, as the order of modern civilization is falling apart.

Modern civilization may be described as a process of the colonization of reality by the force of the law, in a double sense. Scientific law wanted to reduce the becoming of physical matter to the repetition of a model, while political law was a linguistic act that asserted a conventional norm and then aimed to oblige social activity to conform to it. The subjugation of natural chaos by the humanistic order of measurement (recall that "ratio," in Latin, means measure) was the crucial feature of the cultural colonization of the world by the Europeans. Civilization was—or better, was conceived as—the transformation of Chaos into Order. That transformation implied an act of mathematizing the world that enabled a commensurabilization (a proportioning and submittal to measurement). Scientific knowledge implies a limitation of the space of what is relevant, an excision of the irrelevant. Similarly, the political mind cannot be decisive without delimiting the space of what is socially relevant. Only what is relevant from the viewpoints of knowledge and government is actually elaborated by the modern mind. Forget the irrational, forget mythology, forget craziness and delirium. Those multiple facets will

be segregated in the madhouse that psychiatry is building in order to protect the Enlightenment from the darkness.

Machiavelli distinguished the sphere of Fortune (*fortuna*) from the sphere of Will (*volere*). The prince is the (male) person who subdues Fortune (chance, which is feminine) to the masculine will—to measure, to order and predictability. Fortune is the chaos that is always hiding in the folds of the human mind, and if the Prince wants to govern, he has to preemptively carve a narrow chain of events from the infinite territory of Fortune. The dark infinity of unreducible chaos lies at the border of the established order. Rhythm is the key that enables the synchronization between Fortune and Will, between reality and reason. But only a tiny part of the sphere of reality can be synchronized with reason, and only a tiny part of Fortune can be synchronized with political will. This tiny part is what is called “relevant” by the ruling intellect of Order. Government is always an illusion, as political consciousness carves out a tiny chain of relevant social events and tries to protect this space—the space of civilization—from the surrounding ocean of ungovernable matter.

The digital intensification of the semiotic flow has broken the rhythm that we have inherited from the modern age. When the refrain of rationalism and political reason grows unable to process and govern

the flows of information proliferating in the networked info-sphere, the protective fence of relevancy breaks down, and we can no longer distinguish what is relevant from what is not. If cyberspace is the virtual intersection of infinite mental stimuli, and cybertime is the mental rhythm of processing these stimuli, how can cybertime be upgraded to the point of processing today's digital cyberspace? As far as I know, we cannot speed up our mental rhythm beyond a certain limit that is physical, emotional, and cultural.

When the acceleration of cyberspace breaks the rhythm of mental time, and we no longer know what is relevant and what is irrelevant in our surrounding environment, this is what we call "chaos": the inability to attribute meaning to the flow, the breakdown of our framework of relevance. A special vibration of the soul spreads out at this point, which we call "panic": the subjective recording of chaos.

## CHAOS AND THE BRAIN

Here all is distance;  
there it was breath.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Eighth Elegy”

### **The Apocalyptic Unconscious**

Social psychomancy is not a science, it's just a game that I play from time to time in order to survey the ongoing history of humankind from the viewpoint of the social unconscious. So do not take me too seriously. Social psychomancy is a random methodology for the interpretation of a random sphere of events: mental events evoked by the flows of imagination that roam the social psychosphere and are organized by forces of attraction and repulsion. Fears, expectations, desires, and resentments dwell in the psychomantic sphere of

imagination, so I think of psychomancy as the art of mapping the collective mind. The history of the world cannot be fully grasped if we do not understand what happens in the social psycho-sphere: shared meaning, rational goals, and conscious motivations are continuously disrupted and reshaped by the immaterial substances that social psychomancy tries to survey.

The present may be considered the Age of the Dark Enlightenment: the age of the rejection of modernity's rationalistic Enlightenment by those who have been led to submit reason and life to the ferocity of financial mathematics. Rational categories have lost their grasp on our social becoming, and we need a different approach in order to apprehend our contemporary postrational condition. Our time is traversed by an apocalyptic sentiment of a sort. The institution most credited for interpreting the famous text ascribed to John of Patmos—the Catholic Church, whose expertise is long established—has lately been shaken by astounding, unheard-of events.

In 2005 Karol Wojtyła, the pope who triumphed in the long fight against the Soviet Union's Empire of Evil, performed a worldwide broadcasted spectacle of extreme physical suffering and fortitude. After his death, a new pope, of German origin, came to Rome proclaiming the unquestionable uniqueness of Truth and condemning

relativism. Then, on a dark night in February 2013, while the black sky of Rome was ripped by lightning, Pope Benedict bent his head and acknowledged his own fragility and the fragility of the human mind. Chaos was spreading around the world, and the word of Truth was imperceptible amidst the fury and fog of the uncountable wars that were destroying the lives of people all over the planet.

At that point, the Holy Spirit chose a new pope, an Argentinean who introduced himself to a crowd of the faithful with the words “Good evening, I am a man who comes from the end of the world.” What he meant was “I come from a country where people like me have experienced the apocalypse provoked by financial capitalism.” He was the first pope in church history to name himself Francis: a defiant declaration of affinity with the poor, with the exploited, with those who have been oppressed by the economic powers of the world. This defiance was not unconnected to a daring rethinking of theological grounding. In the first interview that Pope Francis released, to Monsignor Santoro for the magazine *Civiltà Cattolica* in October 2013, he spoke of theological virtues, inviting Christians to emphasize charity rather than faith and hope. The church, he said, is like a military hospital in wartime: our mission is not to judge nor convert, but to heal the wounds of human persons regardless

of their religious faith, ethnic origin, or nationality.<sup>1</sup> A glimpse of internationalism shone in his words, and in subsequent years Francis has emerged as the main actor of human resistance and dignity in an age of spreading barbarity.

Beyond the political meaning of his actions, I think that Francis is speaking to the apocalyptic unconscious of our time, while trying to translate this into an ethical soteriology, or soteriological ethics. Only in the embrace of the other, only in social solidarity, can we find any shelter. God's silence resounds in the background, and in different ways the contemporary artistic sensibility is speaking the same language. Nanni Moretti (in *Habemus Papam*), Martin Scorsese (in the not so convincing *Silence*), and Paolo Sorrentino (in the enigmatic *The Young Pope*) in different ways elaborate on the same subject. The silence of God resounds as chaos, as we have grown unable to breathe at the rhythm of our own respiration, which has been captured by the apocalyptic force of the algorithm of financial capitalism.

### Chaos and Concepts

In the last chapter of *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari reflect on aging. They refer to senescence in terms of the relation between order and chaos:



We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master. These are infinite *variabilities*, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought. This is the instant of which we do not know whether it is too long or too short for time. We receive sudden jolts that beat like arteries. We constantly lose our ideas. That is why we want to hang on to fixed opinions so much. We ask only that our ideas are linked together according to a minimum of constant rules.<sup>2</sup>

“Chaos” is defined here in terms of speed, of acceleration of the info-sphere relative to the slow rhythms of reason and of the emotional mind. When things start to flow so fast that the human brain grows unable to elaborate the meaning of information, we enter into the condition of chaos.

What has to be done in such a situation? My suggestion is that you should not focus on the flow, but on your breath. Don't follow the external rhythm, but breathe normally. Deleuze and

Guattari: “the *struggle against chaos* does not take place without an affinity with the enemy, because another struggle develops and takes on more importance—the struggle *against opinion*, which claims to protect us from chaos itself.”<sup>3</sup> Those who wage war against chaos will be defeated, as chaos feeds on war. When chaos is swallowing the mind (including the social mind), we should not be afraid of it, we should not strive to subjugate chaos to order. That will not work, because chaos is stronger than order. So, we should make friends with chaos, and in the whirlwind we should look for the superior order that chaos brings in itself.

In the same place, Deleuze and Guattari describe the relation of poetry to such chaos: “In a violently poetic text, Lawrence describes what produces poetry: people are constantly putting up an umbrella that shelters them and on the underside of which they draw a firmament and write their conventions and opinions. But poets, artists, make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision.”<sup>4</sup> Reading these lines, I cannot help but recall Wittgenstein’s famous sentence in the *Tractatus*: “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*”<sup>5</sup> People are constantly sheltering themselves under the umbrellas of their limited languages, and their worlds are written on the undersides of these

umbrellas. Poets cut the fabric of the umbrella and their incision discloses the unbearable vision of the true firmament. The poet's action is literally apocalyptic, and it begins the unchaining (or disentanglement) of the hidden possibilities lying there since the beginning, since the cosmic primeval origins of human history.

Poetry opens multiple ambiguous pathways to meaning, and concepts act in a similar way. Concepts are created to frame our cognition: a concept, etymologically speaking, is a captor of different entities, material and purely intellectual ("concept" comes from the Latin *concupere*, which literally means "taking together"). As Deleuze and Guattari write, "A concept is therefore a chaoid state par excellence; it refers back to a chaos rendered consistent, become Thought, mental chaosmos. And what would *thinking* be if it did not constantly confront chaos? Reason shows us its true face only when it 'thunders in its crater.'"<sup>6</sup>

The cosmos is the background of the process of recomposition that happens at the existential and at the historical level. "Cosmos," in fact, means order and simultaneously the all-encompassing dimension that exceeds human history and individual existence. Chaosmosis is the opening of the ordered system to chaotic flows and the osmotic vibration of the organism that looks for a rhythm tuned to the cosmos. I consider *Chaosmosis* and *What Is*

*Philosophy?* to be the books that philosophically predict the new millennium: philosophy now has to posit itself on the threshold of chaos without fearing the swirl, and without worshipping its vertigo and surrendering to its fascination.

In *What Is Philosophy?*, the two old boys speak of a struggle against chaos, but they also suggest that chaos may be a friend, a new condition of thought. The modern order wanted to protect us against chaos. We have accepted that deal, and we have implicitly accepted an order based on exploitation and misery. In order to avoid being killed by hunger or by barbarians, we have accepted the salaried labor and the daily war of competition. But now that the order based on salaried labor order is crumbling and the universal framework of modern rationality is dissolving, the protectors are turning into predators. So order turns into chaos, but in the chaos we should detect the outlines of an implicit new harmony for the challenge we now face is this: we must make visible an order where now we see only incomprehensible darkness. The word "order," actually, is misleading: we are not speaking of order, we are in fact speaking of rhythm. A new rhythm is what humankind needs.

Chaos has the potency to make creation possible. Can the collective brain consciously master and attune to the evolution of the collective brain itself?

## Chaos and Aging

“We require just a little order to protect us from chaos,” Deleuze and Guattari write.<sup>7</sup> The aging philosophers wanted to be protected. Protected from what? From the chaotic features of the world? I don’t think so. They didn’t want protection from the chaotic world, but from the brain’s chaos.

The aging brain is an agent of chaos, because the brain grows slower and less precise. Neuronal geometry loses its definition and projects this loss of definition onto the surrounding world. In the senescent decay of the psycho-sphere we can find an explanation of the current explosion of chaos. The average age of the human brain is growing older, while the amount of nervous info-stimuli is exploding. In past centuries, senility was such a rare experience that the old person was automatically considered a wise man (or an idiot). But now the pyramid of age is almost squared, and old people are so common that it’s getting more and more difficult to care for them, and to tend to the expanding sphere of dementia, memory loss, Alzheimer disease, and . . . chaos. Aging is a distinctive mark of the postmodern era: loss of energy, loss of speed, mental confusion.

Chaos is essentially a problem of tempo. When we call it “chaos,” we mean that our surrounding environment (particularly the information that

invades our attention sphere) is too fast to decipher, too fast for us to possibly decode and remember. History can no longer be understood in terms of a narrative, and instead takes the shape of a semiotic hurricane, an unchaining of uninterpretable flows of neurostimuli. No one has better expressed the sentiment of being overwhelmed by chaos than Shakespeare:

Out, out, brief candle,  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Chaos implies sound and fury, but it also implies a special relation with signification.

While globalization has linked the daily lives and activities of all people living on the planet, the imagination of the planet's masses is less and less retraceable to a common frame of historical narration. In a paradoxical reversal, economic globalization has broken the universality of reason and the political sentiment of internationalism: nationalism, racism, and religious fundamentalism are the cultural identity markers claimed by the globalized masses of the world. So history turns into idiocy, a tale told by an idiot.

But we should see the other side of this idiotization of history: Might this idiot be trying to speak of something that is untranslatable into our known language? Might the idiot be saying something that exceeds our understanding, because his noise and his fury require a different system of interpretation, a different language, a different rhythm? Certainly now, in the second decade of the first century of the third millennium, the human brain as a whole and all the individual brains of humans seem to be overwhelmed by the accelerating pace of the surrounding universe: the human brain has become outpaced by the rhythm of its surrounding environment. When we say "chaos," then, we mean two different, complementary movements. We refer to the swirling of our surrounding semiotic flows, which we receive as if they were "sound and fury." But we also refer to attempts to reconcile this encompassing environmental rhythm with our own intimate, internal rhythm of interpretation.