

## Reading Berardi on Exhaustion, thinking about Extinction

We sing of the rebellious cognitariat who are in touch with their bodies ...  
(Berardi 2011, *Manifesto of Post-Futurism*).

Franco Berardi, Italian thinker, writer, media activator and educator, is still known for his creative role in the free radio station Radio Alice in Bologna in the late 1970s. He is also a Guattarian he writes of himself, alluding to his intellectual associate and close friend Félix Guattari, well known for his thinking-writing collaborations with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Guattari's early studies in pharmacy and philosophy met there and in his experimental approaches to psychotherapy at the French psychiatric clinic La Borde. But interlaced with all, was his articulation of an ecosophy of interconnected ecologies – the 'three ecologies' of the social, the mental, and the environmental - and a call for a paradigm of ethico-aesthetics in the humanities; to this end, schizoanalysis, a theory-metamodel for proliferating subjectivity at the heart of this thinking was developed before his death in 1992. The seventies was a watershed decade, Berardi recognized, the beginning of wider attunement to the accelerating alienation of socio-economic systems of production and profit driven by a mantra of limitless economic growth. Radio Alice was a powerful flash of resistance amidst this realization, becoming a hub of social energy and intellectual creativity in Bologna before being shut down, finally, by force, and its core of innovators and network dispersed. Berardi was one who fled to Paris where he met again and began to work with Guattari.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began, as Berardi eloquently lays out in his 2011 book 'After the Future', with the 1909 manifesto of Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti: an explosive valorization of speed, acceleration and the becoming-machine of 'mankind'. In the latter quarter of the unfolding twentieth century, Guattari had tuned into the multifaceted nature of that very cultural trajectory dreamed of, called up, and being manifested. Berardi writes that Guattari's ecosophy and ethico-aesthetic paradigm were provocative 'gifts' 25 years ago, yet are as relevant as ever in the 'mists and miasmas' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the end of the zero zero decade, the first of this third millennium, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's continuing efflorescence of thought and writing offers a new theme of this, his post-futurist, century. Not the manifesto of speed and acceleration and machine and endless growth now mainlined into neo-liberal western economy-cultures, not the evanescent utopian promise of 1990s' cyberculture, but a re-attunement, cognitariat-first, to bodies, sensibilities, the

present, and the slowing, slowed down, slow. Berardi offers us the necessity to think about and embrace *Exhaustion*.

The Club of Rome's 1972 clear-eyed visionary premonitions and predictions delivered in the unlikely environmental bestseller 'The Limits to Growth' have not stopped chiming, and now the great acceleration has come to name a new planetary end-of-Holocene epoch as the Anthropocene. It is an attribution, if still geologically contested, equally as narcissistic as anything *Homo sapiens* has created, but it is also a salient reminder to pause and return to ground level. Really? This is what we have come to manifest? What we have laid on the shimmering blue chamber planet? It is cause to draw deep breath, to exhale long and listen at the window to fellow species – our 'earth others' as philosopher [Val Plumwood \(1993\)](#) suggested – unabashedly making melodies in the shared space of an everywhere atmosphere and a dying star's warmth and light.

*Exhaustion* defies the myth-mantra of endless, limitless growth on a finite living planet. The G20, Group of Twenty Leaders' Summit, in Brisbane this week talks of global growth. Economic growth divorced from its planetary capsule: two percent growth in global GDP as a minimum target from the business-as-usual or 'standard run' scenario in the lexicon of the Club of Rome's research and prognosis. For Australia, the great quarryer economy culture of the past half-century, this means ramping up new coal seam gas extraction fields in Queensland's south, and up to nine possible new mega coal mines in the central Queensland Galilee Basin. The Galilee Basin is a Permian epoch geological formation from the time of the supercontinent Pangaea. Around 250 million years ago, the Permian-Triassic extinction event resulted in the extinction of 95% of life on the planet: the biological death cascade that laid down the ancient life beds to become the coal and methane gas emplacements now the targeted black gold of this century's Galilee and Bowen Basin fossil fuel fields. This also means a highway of supersized ships tracking in and out across the vast underwater coral cities on the continental shelf of eastern Australia. It means the unchecked acceleration of oceanic temperatures and the dissolution of atmospheric carbon dioxide released from the combustion of this ancient dead life into the 71% of the planet covered by oceans and their ecosystems. As made explicit in the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC AR5), corals and the cryosphere are at most risk in this heating, acidifying soup scenario, one of the unvoiced, hidden connectors to the ramping business-as-usual scenario. The science is in, the library vast and growing, and particularities and local anomalies are being documented, mapped and understood beyond politically expedient generalising speak.

Still, many of the wise, intelligent, tool-making ape *Homo sapiens*, erstwhile *Homo faber*, seem collectively reluctant to grasp with an opposable thumb mind the inter-connectedness of breathing bodies, of closed chamber cycles of carbon, oxygen, water, of planetary scale climate systems and local extremes of weather. Denies, as a fundament, an irrevocable corporeal dependency on synergies of vital systems and species for daily nutrition, respiration, hydration, shelter and safety. The great century of acceleration, speed and becoming-machine, the great acceleration of global temperature rise marked by climate scientists from the 1950s, has mushroomed a new darkness. *Exhaustion*, Berardi composes, is here, and is at the same time, a potential route of escape.

‘What can a body do?’ Gilles Deleuze asked, interpreting the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. For Guattari, a lifelong Spinozan, this had added resonance and import because he lived with and productively theorised from the insights of the diminishment of bodily vitality by depression. Berardi reveals this in ‘The Soul at Work’ (2009), and revisits this unspoken truth in ‘After the Future’ (2011). He picks up on this ineffability, the indirect enunciation of his friend Félix, and brilliantly links depression and exhaustion at the level of the individual body, the social body, and ecologies – of atmosphere, psychosphere, infosphere – into a new oeuvre of flighted thought.

Whilst Berardi creatively explores exhaustion as lived reality and existential and ecological metaphor, there is, in the context of the contemporary age, an expanding focus on other-than-human species extinction, on multispecies extinction, on waves of extinction, and crises of extinction across the life sciences and the emergent expanding field of the environmental humanities. The latter is opening up spaces for cross-conversation where well faceted academic disciplinary boundaries cut and polished over the preceding two centuries are meeting again, and meeting anew. Extinction is a word derived from extinguishment – of a light or fire. So the extinction of another earth species, a whole ‘type’ of an evolved life form, *all* of its planetary populations, extinguishes a metaphorical light, a lit carbon-based fire. Extinction is the extinguishment of a biological light, a life fire. But, what happens if instead of extinction, or alongside extinction, we begin to use the word exhaustion? By focussing only on extinction, by forging academic careers as scholarly or artistic witnesses of extinction in the humanities and the arts, are we not at risk of being no more than ambulance-chasers, grave diggers for forecast deaths, funeral goers, and obituary writers? Grief, its personal and scholarly articulation and attendings-to as lived, living loss, is not only unavoidable but can be a potent activator for rethinking extinction as a shared, deeply affective experience and what this, in turn, might catalyse and inform anew

(Boscacci 2014). Yet, without emplaced action alongside the words, conferences, publication lists; without openness to experimentalism that might challenge one's certainties; without a financial investment from the benefit of a career of academic research into the potential of alternatives or projects towards solutions outside one's ambit of knowledge, are we not in danger of becoming extinction mercenaries? However much we articulate a lexicon of nonhuman, non-human, other-than-human, more-than-human, post-human, it is a still human-centred vocabulary; still the narcissistic hominid with an intellectual selfie stick. A despairing one, a shouting-at-each-new-provocation-one, yet ever a bystander watching and assiduously documenting another extinguishment episode. Extinction cannot be the makings of a scholarly career, surely. Extinction is an ethical injunction requiring attending-to in multiple, invested, creative and practical ways. This is the clarion echo of the second decade of the 2010's for *Homo*, the wise ape *sapiens*, the creative maker ape *faber*, and the playful ape *ludens*. And the increasingly exhausted ape, exhausting an iron-rich, watered, oxygenated, blue chamber planet. What might a lexical and attended-to call of *exhaustion* become?

Berardi's thesis of exhaustion ultimately is a creative one. A century on, he composes a reply and refusal of Marinetti's 1909 Futurist construction in a new manifesto: a *Manifesto of Post-Futurism*. It begins with: "We sing of the danger of love, the daily creation of a sweet energy that is never dispersed". And continues: "We exalt tenderness, sleep, and ecstasy, the frugality of needs and the pleasure of the senses" ... "Speed has slowed down. Cars are as immobile as stupid lumbering tortoises in the city traffic. Only slowness is fast". And on to his final of the eleven declarations, he composes: "We sing of the rebellious cognitariat who are in touch with their bodies. We sing to the infinity of the present and abandon the illusion of a future". Berardi's is a manifesto of return to bodies, to activated and agentic bodies, of individuals, of the social body - the communal and societal. It is to the energies of love, to poetry reclaimed, the slow, the re-attunement of sensibilities to the local, the present, to the rich sensate life. It is to irony, tenderness and rebellion. To women and men, not 'mankind'. It is to art as force, and the return of mass media to poets and sages from the merchants. "We sing of the rebellious cognitariat who are in touch with their bodies. We sing to the infinity of the present and abandon the illusion of a future". It is to intellect re-directed and singularities of knowledges expanded, bodied. It is to a refocus on the present moment, the infinities of potential, the sagacities of the finite, not an illusionary unchanged projection of material economic growth without limit and with no cost to the living planet and its generosity of species of which *Homo* is just *one*.

## Readings

Berardi, Franco 2009, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles.

Berardi, Franco 2011, *After the Future*, (eds) Genosko, Gary & Nicholas Thoburn, AK Press, Oakland & Edinburgh.

*with:*

Berardi, Franco 2012 'Emancipation of the Sign: Poetry and Finance During the Twentieth Century', *e-flux*, no. 37, 11/2012; <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/emancipation-of-the-sign-poetry-and-finance-during-the-twentieth-century/>