

SENSIBILITY

CHAPTER 1

SENSITIVE INFO-SPHERE

La peau humaine des choses la dermo de la réalité

—Antonin Artaud

The sensible organism

What do we mean by sensibility? In his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze writes that “Sensibility is a vibration. As we know, the egg represents a stage of the body before organic representation—axes and vectors, gradients, zones, cinematic movements and dynamic tendencies—in relation to which forms are contingent and accessory.” (Deleuze 1995, 103)

Sensation is the opening to the world that enables the tantric egg of the body without organs, to vibrate.

“A Body without organs is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate. Still, the Body without organs is not a scene, a place, or even a support upon which something comes to pass. It has nothing to do with phantasy, there is nothing to interpret. The BwO causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a spatium that is itself intensive, lacking extension. It is not space, nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree—to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. It is non-stratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0; but there is nothing negative about that zero, there are no negative or opposite intensities. Matter equals energy. Production of the real as an intensive magnitude starting at zero. That is why we treat the BwO as the full egg before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs, before the formation of the strata; as the intense egg defined by axes and vectors, gradients and thresholds, by dynamic tendencies involving energy transformation and kinematic movements involving group displacement, by migrations: all independent of accessory forms because the organs appear and function here

only as pure intensities. The organ changes when it crosses a threshold, when it changes gradient. “No organ is constant as regards either function or position... sex organs sprout anywhere... rectums open, defecate and close... the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments. Tantric egg.” (Deleuze Guattari 1987, 153)

The organism is the specific sedimentation of the vibrations through which the potentiality of the egg is actualized, and it naturally retains the ability to return to the state of a body without organs whenever it finds the potential to change again. When an organism stiffens its refrains, its obsessions and its codes of interpretation, it is doomed to lose sensibility and to lose its ability to vibrate.

Sensibility can be defined as the faculty which enables the organism to process signs and semiotic stimulations that cannot be verbalized or verbally coded. Someone who is unable to comprehend moods, emotions, allusions and the non-said—a large part of what constitutes communication and daily affective and social life—is commonly defined as insensitive.

Like a thin film recording and deciphering non verbal impressions, sensibility makes possible for human beings to conjoin and enter empathic relations, or in other words, to ‘regress’ to a non-specified and non-codified state of a body without organs that pulsate in unison. Empathic relations enable the comprehension of signs that are irreducible to information and yet constitute the foundation of inter-human understanding. Sensibility is the faculty of decoding intensity, which is by definition escaping the extensive dimension of verbal language.

Therefore sensibility is the ability of understanding the unspeakable.

Beauty

According to Paul Klee, the task of creative activity is not to reproduce the visible, but to make visible. Sensibility is the faculty of making visible a configuration of the world.

The function of creative activity such as poetry, music, painting, cinema, literature, is not to represent existing reality, but to make the world sensibly perceivable, to translate world into sensitive configurations. Although art and sensibility are not limited to the realm of beauty, we name beauty the

emergence of forms in the realm of sensibility. Beauty can be found in symmetry or in a harmony intrinsic to an object, but a violation of the symmetric order can cause no less aesthetic pleasure.

In beauty, we find a regression to a state of a body without organs, where it is possible to create new constellations of meaning and new functionalities for the objects we experience.

Victor Sklovski defines poetry as the restitution of *pathos* to words which have been overly used and consumed: he calls *ostranenie*, (estrangement) the procedure that gives back meaning and energy to this kind of signs. We do not need to look at symmetry and a-symmetry for an explanation of aesthetic emotion and the pleasure of forms, we should rather look at estrangement, an unpredicted deviation in the relationship between sign and meaning.

This is the point: the derailing of the customary predictable relation between sign and meaning and the discovery of unforeseen and multiple perspectives is the condition of beauty. Beauty has to do with surprise. Symmetry and dissymmetry are modalities of the configurations of signs and their aesthetic value is dependent on improbability, unpredictability and strangeness: a distance from the predictable order.

Perhaps beauty is the ironic tolerance of the real life's imperfection, allowing for a relaxation of the tension between an organism and its environment, mind and body, existence and being for death. And it may also be something entirely different, like the cruelty of the inexhaustible.

Life continuously produces bodies that we cannot enjoy; they imperturbably pass us by, indifferently brushing against our gaze. Beauty is the cruelty of this infinite excess of nature, the sudden awareness of the fragility of our conscious organism, the intuition of the impossible infinity of experience.

Art, aesthetic creation and the gesture of suspension are playing with the tolerant irony of beauty. But there is a beauty that the language of eroticism de-reasons about, that gushes out of the blind and merciless game of nature, the tenderness of sensual energy and decomposition.

The Western philosophical tradition has conceived of aesthetics as a theory of beauty. But this conception has revealed rather inconclusive. Therefore I think that it should be better to conceive of aesthetics as the science of semiotic emanation in its interaction with sensibility. Aesthetics should return to its etymon and should refer to sensibility as experience of the object, rather than to beauty (a quality of the object in itself).

Democritus conceived of sensation as the chemical integration of sensuous and environmental matter. Sensibility can be seen as a modulation of this *syntonia* (tuning). Sensibility is the certainty of judgement, the singular certainty of good and evil. According to Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska,

“Sensibility is not simply the faculty of the beautiful and artistic beauty does not constitute a separate realm. [...] Sensibility belongs to a sphere of certainty that no objective knowledge can lay claim to, because the real source of human knowledge is not the intellect, but sensibility. [...] In its radical subjectivity, sensibility is the faculty of the real.” (G. Dufour-Kowalska 1996, 11-12)

What makes possible the harmonious or disharmonious vibration between singularity and cosmos? What is the similarity, what is the difference between aesthetic and erotic pleasure? Should we think that in the human mind there is a neuro-physiological predisposition, an innate program of sensuous reception of the world, a bio-grammar of aesthesia and eroticism? Or should we think that the conditions of harmony are exclusively cultural?

Harmony and disharmony are not intrinsic to the cosmos. They are modalities of a relationship between the singular receptive psyche and cosmic becoming; here lies the secret of pleasure and beauty.

Genealogy of the skin

Techno-semiotic emanation and sensibility are the two poles between which the scene is set: the cultural, historical and social becoming of the planet can be viewed in the perspective of the techno-semiotic and cultural modulation of human sensibility.

Accelerated by the power of technologies, the environment exceeds human measure. Human reason is exhausted. The observer is overwhelmed by the infinite complexity of phenomena. Thrust beyond the realm of the properly human, sensibility involves the inorganic.

Sensibility can be regarded as a particular realm of what Foucault defines as episteme (Foucault 1966): the shaping of social perception that makes possible a common projection of the world, and therefore social discipline. It is now necessary to outline a phenomenology of the mutation of sensibility.

Semiocapitalism penetrates deeply into the neural circuits of social culture thanks to the permeation of sensibility.

Let us distinguish the sensory from the sensuous level. Sensory is the perceiving faculty of the organism, while sensuous is the organism in so far as it selectively projects. Sensibility is the singular faculty that allows for a projection of the real. It is therefore morphogenetic and continuous in its creation of forms. Sensibility is certainty of judgment in this respect, because aesthetic judgment does not apply to something separate from pleasure and pain, and thus entails the singular certainty of good and evil.

The idealist vision here is turned upside down: whilst for Hegel art (the activity of morphogenetic creation) is a moment of the process towards knowledge, we would say on the contrary that thought is a moment of sensibility: the tuning of *atman* and *prana* (singular breath/cosmic rhythm).

Thought tends towards the conceptual capture of the world, while sensibility is caressing and shaping the world without interrupting its becoming, without pretending the establishment of any absolute truth.

Epidermis is the point of contact, the sensitive interface between the conscious self and the infinite emission of signs. In the night sky, desire is the order of constellations. The epidermis is the stratum where order is opened and created on the coordinates of pleasure and pain. Among the infinite signs coming from the cosmos and from the artificial info-sphere, constellations emerge, ruled and designed by epidermal intuition and desire which create, compose, choose, hide and make world. But the epidermis is not a biological or natural stratum. The skin is shaped by touch, caresses, suffering and scars. The info-sphere shapes the sensors that create world constellations in the info-sphere. The epidermis is a memory of caresses. It is the interface of the social, and its sensibility is the place of the utmost intensity of mutation.

I'm questioning here the common assumption that sensibility is passive and purely receptive, whilst imagination is creation, falsification and simulation.

I view sensibility as an action on the environment and as emanation as well as reception and perception.

Info-sphere and sensibility

The info-sphere is the sphere of intentional signs that surround the sensible organism.

Perception and the technological architecture surrounding the perceptive organism are intertwined. The theoretical innovation of Marshall McLuhan consists essentially of this breakthrough: the technical structure of semiosis (the emission format of semiotic flows) shapes perception and imagination.

In the Renaissance, man's perception of the space of everyday life changes because of the innovation in the representational technique (perspective).

Prior to modernity, a regime of slow transmission characterized the info-sphere and this slowness was shaping lived time and cultural expectations. Throughout the history of civilisation, perception has been moulded by artificial regimes of images and techniques of the circulation and production of representations of the world. The modern acceleration of the transmission of signs and the proliferation of sources of information has transformed the perception of time. The info-sphere became more rapid and dense, and the proliferation of info-stimuli subjected sensibility to a mutagenous stress. Due to an intensification of electronic signals, the info-sphere acceleration drags sensibility into a vertigo of simulated stimulation. The perception of the other and its body is reshaped too. Pressure, acceleration and automation are affecting gestuality, postural dispositions and the whole of social proxemics.

The images proliferate and our faculty of imagination undergoes a vertiginous acceleration. The image is not the brute perception of empirical data brought to our attention by matter, but the imaginal elaboration of visual matter by our mind, and the technical mode in which we receive and elaborate images acts upon the formation of our imagination.

Techno-media adjustments and psycho-cognitive mutations are as interdependent as the organism and its ecosystem. The conscious organism is a sensuous organism as well: it is a bundle of sensitive receptors. The connective techno-sphere we inhabit today resembles the outcome of a projective zapping where we combine sequences coming from different sources. The social unconscious is reacting to this continuous deterritorialisation in various ways: adaptation, disconnection, pathology.

Suddenly awoken by the eruption of semiotic proliferation and deprived of the filters inscribed in the critical and disciplinary mindset of modernity the nucleus of identity is fleeing and dissolving in all directions.

Emotion in cybertime

Let's call "Info-sphere" the Universe of transmitters and "social brain" the Universe of receivers. The Universe of receivers, who are human beings made of flesh, frail and sensuous organs, is not formatted according to the standards of digital transmitters. The neural system however is highly plastic and can mutate according to the Info-sphere's rhythm. But the format itself of the transmitter is not corresponding to the format of the receiver. So what happens? The interfacing of the electronic universe of transmission with the organic world of reception is producing pathological effects: panic, over-excitement, hyper-motility, attention deficit disorders, dyslexia, info-overload and saturation of the neural circuitry.

In the late modern times, during the transition from the alphabetical to the electronic regime of communication, the universe of transmission has been constantly accelerating, and the universe of receivers has desperately tried to follow the rhythm, accelerating and standardizing the cognitive response.

The neuro-system is plastic, nevertheless human mind is evolving with a rhythm which is totally different from the rhythm of evolution of machines. This is why the expansion of cyberspace implies an acceleration of cybertime that has pathological effects on the living terminal, the human mind which has physical, emotional and cultural limits.

Multitasking implies the quick shift from an informational frame to another. Human mind seems to be perfectly suited to perform multitasking, but this kind of practices are triggering a psychological mutation, and this mutation is producing new forms of mental suffering like panic, attention deficit disorders, burnout, mental exhaustion, depression.

We are taken in a frenzy of forced socialization: producing and working imply being connected—so connection means working. The economic

1 Interesting by this point of view the Dave Eggers novel titled *The Circle*, published in 2013.

obsession brings about a sort of permanent mobilization of productive energy. According to Jonathan Crary “the relentless capture and control of time and experience are the form of contemporary progress.” (Crary 2013)

This is the main focus of the semio-corporation whose mission is the flexibilization and dynamization of the relation between the Net and the netter, between the machine and the cognitive worker: Google.²

The overproduction that was leading to cyclical crises in the age of industrial capitalism according to Karl Marx becomes permanent in the sphere of semiocapitalism, as the proliferation of sources of nervous stimulation implies infinite overload of the attention market. According to Crary the expansion of the attention time leads to the permanent siege and relentless expansion of alert time. Attention has turned to be the scarcest of resources: we no more have time for conscious attention, so our dealing with information and taking decision needs to be more and more automated. We tend to be governed by decisions that are not responding to a long term rational strategy, but only to binary alternatives...

The psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski, author of *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*, published in 1933, has stressed the link between mental suffering and the perception of time: the way we perceive our flowing through time, the lazy or frantic mood of experiencing life.

Clearly influenced by the thought of Henry Bergson, who thinks of time as duration, or projection of the existential *vecu*, Minkowski does not speak of “time”, but of “lived time”. Following Minkowski’s suggestions we may label as cronopathology the prevailing forms of psychopathology.

In the American schools the diagnosis of ADD (Attention deficit disorders) is more and more common. This disease is manifesting itself in form of hyper-motility, and consequential inability to focus attention on a subject for more than a few seconds. The daily exposure to electronic flows of psycho-stimulation since early age is provoking effects which imply affection, emotionality language, imagination, and the very perception of lived time.

2 “In the late 1990s, when Google was barely a one-year-old privately-held company, its future CEO was already articulating the context in which such a venture would flourish. Dr. Eric Schmidt declared that the twenty-first century would be synonymous with what he called the attention economy and that the dominant global corporations would be those that succeed in maximizing the number of eyeballs they could consistently engage and control. The intensity of the competition for access to or control of an individual’s waking hours each day is a result of the vast disproportion between those human temporal limits, and the quasi infinite amount of content being marketed.” (Crary 2013, 75)

In the work process humans are transformed into connected elaborators of information, and the increase of productivity is based on the acceleration of the info-flows. The contraction in time and the acceleration of the brain activation has an effect of fragilization of personal experience.

While cyberspace can be infinitely expanded, as it is the virtual dimension of info-productive interaction between agents of communication, cybertime, the duration of perception cannot be expanded beyond certain limits, as it is limited by emotional and cultural temporality, and by organic restrictions. Emotional and cultural elaboration of stimuli happens in time, and time for psychological and bodily elaboration cannot be shortened beyond a certain point.

The more the amount of information demanding our attention expands, the less attention time for elaboration is available. The technical composition of the world has changed, but the modalities of cognitive appropriation and elaboration cannot adapt in a linear way. Technical environment is changing much faster than culture, and especially cognitive behaviour.

We can increase the time of exposure, we can increase our efficiency taking drugs, but experience cannot be intensified beyond a limit. Therefore acceleration is provoking an impoverishment of the experience, as the intensive modalities of pleasure and knowledge are stressed up to the point of exhaustion.

This conflict—or incompatibility—between cyberspace and cybertime is a marking paradox of our society, and because of capitalist exploitation it is producing pathological effects.

This gap is the source of a sort of desensibilization. Beyond a limit, the experience acceleration leads to a contraction of conscious elaboration time and to a loss of sensibility—which has also ethical consequences. Sensibility is in time, and cyber-space has grown so thick that the sensible organism—as conscious singularity—has no time for extracting meaning and pleasure from the experience.

The drugs for erectile problems, like Viagra and similar products have more to do with attention time than with physical impotence. As time for caresses and words is no more available for precarious lovers, fast sex needs pharmaceutical support: sex without attention, as attention needs time.

Prozac-crash

The universe of transmitters (cyberspace) can no more be translated by the universe of receivers (cybertime). Here lies a pathogenic gap: the flourishing industry of psychopharmacology is selling more pills every year, because drugs are the only way to manage mental suffering, anxiety, sadness.

At the end of the '70s, when an acceleration of productivity was forced on workers, a huge epidemic of drug addiction swept the late-industrial metropolitan areas. Capitalism was entering in the age of neo-human acceleration, and cocaine, a substance which accelerates mental and bodily rhythm, became very fashionable. In the same period, however, many people started injecting heroin, a substance that allows a deactivation of the link between individual perception and surrounding rhythm. In the years of passage from the '70s to the '80s the white powders epidemic triggered existential and cultural devastation whose traces can be found in music, literature, and visual arts of the American no-wave and of the British punk culture. Then the psychopharmacological products spread, and we entered the age of antidepressants and mood enhancers: Prozac, Xanax, Zoloft and so on.

As semiocapitalism is based on the constant exploitation of mental energy, and competition is the general form of relation in the precarious labour market, mental suffering has become a social epidemic. The main source of pathology is competition in connective conditions: constant attention stress, reduction of time available for affection, loneliness, existential misery, then angst, panic, depression: these are the individual symptoms of this epidemic. Psychopathology and economics become more and more interlinked. In the transition to Semiocapitalism mental suffering is no more the problem of a small minority of weird people, but tends to become the normalcy of a system which is based on the exploitation of precarious cognitive work.

As long as capitalism was looking for physical energies to extract from the bodies of salaried people, psychopathology could be secluded in a marginal space of the city. Who cares about your suffering, as long as you are just screwing, hammering, working on a lathe, and assembling pieces of a machine? You can feel alone as a fly in the bottle, but your productivity is not hindered by your loneliness and pain, as your muscles can work. Nowadays, on the contrary, semiocapitalism needs essentially neural energies for mental

work, and alienation is exploding at the core of social machinery. Ups and downs, panic and depression are words that the economic parlance shares with psychopathology: these words have not metaphorical meaning, they are clues of the growing interdependence between economic behaviour and mental pathology.

Desensibilization

After the end of the Avant-garde, after the infiltration of art in the territory of social communication, aesthetic stimulation invasively spread in every space of the mediascape: advertising, television, design, web design. The conscious and sensible organism is enveloped by a semiotic flux which is not only an information carrier, but a factor of perceptual stimulation and psychological excitement. Widespread aesthetization absorbs erotic energy, and diverts it from the body towards the signs.

The classical aesthetic philosophy was based on the conceptual and sensible centrality of the catharsis. In the Aristotelian vision art work was conceived as the trigger of a captivating wave, exciting and leading to a climax, a cathartic emotion. In the Classic, Romantic and also in the Modern conception, beauty was identified with the moment of culmination relaxing the tension implied in the relation between sensitive body and the world: catharsis, harmony, sublime detachment. Reaching the cathartic climax of the aesthetic emotion is an event that can be assimilated to the orgasmic discharge that ensues from the exciting contact between sexual bodies, when muscular tension falls down in relaxation and pleasure.

If we introduce an inorganic item in the circle of excitement-pleasure, if we introduce for instance electronic stimulation, if we accelerate the intensity and frequency of the stimuli, the result will be a contraction of the psychophysical time of reaction, and a spasm of unconcluded excitement will replace the orgasmic discharge.

In late-modern art, the idea that catharsis is the aim of art is fading, giving way to a more cold cerebral conception of the relation with art: beauty splits from pleasure, and tends to resemble a conceptual game, the space of unresolved tensions. Late modern art often looks like a frozen gesture of desensibilization.

Rather than the cathartic excitement of the Modern tradition these artists prefer the conceptual recombinant montage. A sort of an-emotional trend marks the art-scape of the late modern age, anticipating the emergence of an-affective forms of life.³

Aphasia seems to prevail in the social behaviour of the connective precarious generation, while verbal elaboration is compressed and accelerated up to the point of provoking emotional disease.

Also dyslexia can be read as a symptom of this acceleration.

The emotional elaboration of meaning is deranged by intensified stimulation. Affection and sexuality are wavering between loneliness and wild predatory aggressiveness: rituals of emotional detachment, virtualization, pornography, sexual anorexia.

Sensitivity enters into a process of re-formatting: in order to be compatible with the digital machine, language is to become smooth exchange of information. Sexual imagination is invested in the hairless surfaces of the digital image. The first digital generation shows symptoms of emotional atrophy: impressive disconnection of language and sex. In the media, advertising, television, everywhere there is talk about sex. But sex is no more talking, as it is disconnected from language.

Sex is babbling, stuttering, mumbling, or screaming in desultory way. Words are drying out.⁴

Electronic media act as an accelerator of info-stimulation and simultaneously as a desensibilizer of the collective psyche and the collective skin.

3 In the works of artists like Philip Glass, Jean Tinguely, Nanni Balestrini, the artistic intention seems to be hinting at the conceptual algorithm, the graphic-viral replication, the an-emotional unconcluded cycle.

4 "Japan's under-40s won't go forth and multiply out of duty, as postwar generations did. The country is undergoing major social transition after 20 years of economic stagnation. It is also battling against the effects on its already nuclear-destruction-scarred psyche of 2011's earthquake, tsunami and radioactive meltdown. There is no going back. 'Both men and women say to me they don't see the point of love. They don't believe it can lead anywhere,' says Aoyama, a Tokyo based psychologist and counselor. 'Relationships have become too hard.' Marriage has become a minefield of unattractive choices. Japanese men have become less career-driven, and less solvent, as lifetime job security has waned. Japanese women have become more independent and ambitious. Aoyama says the sexes, especially in Japan's giant cities, are 'spiraling away from each other'. Lacking long-term shared goals, many are turning to what she terms 'Pot Noodle love'—easy or instant gratification, in the form of casual sex, short-term trysts and the usual technological suspects: online porn, virtual-reality 'girlfriends', anime cartoons. Or else they're opting out altogether and replacing love and sex with other urban pastimes." (Haworth, A. 2013. "Why have young people in Japan stopped having sex", *The Observer*, October 20 edition).

Emotion: trace and body

What is emotion? Max Pagès tries to overcome the separation between the Freud's conception of emotion as a sign and Reich's conception of emotion as a bodily instinctual reaction.

According to Pagès, emotion is the trace of psychological and physiological events, linked by not gratuitous connections as the expressions of joy, anger, and fear. (Pagès 1986, 109).

Corporeity and culture together contribute emotional value to objects, signs, acts. The modes of sensuous and sensitive reaction of a body are linked to a cultural context. According to Pagès we can speak of a sensible memory, a bodily recording of the history of contacts, of tenderness and violence: bodily traces of psychic events, particularly at the level of emotional inhibition and of psychosomatic troubles. (Ibid., 118).

The skin, which is covering our body and sheltering it from the external world, is also the most ancient and sensible of our sensory organs, our first tool for communication. Although covering and closing, skin is also opening the body to the world, as it is bringing messages from the surrounding environment towards mind. In the sensory system's evolution, the sense of touch, whose organ is the skin, comes first and has fundamental importance, introducing our organism to the sensuous knowledge of the world. The world becomes part of our experience only when the other's body (human or not human) enters in contact with our skin, and warmth can flow from an organism to the other.

Society is first of all the space where we encounter other bodies to touch, smell and see, however it is also the space where touching is submitted to rules. Culture implies a regulation of touching and of proxemics—the way bodies locate and position each in relation to the other. There are cultures in which touching—starting from the relation between mother and child—is considered part of daily life, and societies in which touching is strongly ritualized, and is considered as something embarrassing, something that we should deal with only secretly in a closed space of the house, something we should reduce to a minimum when in public spaces.

“*Noli me tangere*” (do not dare touching me) seems to be the rule of behaviour of modern society, where the hygienic obsession is joining and reinforcing the religious obsession. Monotheistic religions tend to identify

contact and guilt, and submit touching to rigid symbolic regulations. But in the hygienic modern times, medical more than religious dissuasion is detaining people from touching and seeking pleasure. Michel Foucault has described medicalization as a process which marks social spaces and functions, disciplining bodies and submitting them to the order of economic production.

As long as touching the body was a danger for the religious soul, human beings defied the sense of guilt, but when the body of the other is felt as the carrier of epidemic disease, then desire itself is repressed and reshaped, not only its expression. When desire becomes a danger for the body, then fear threatens desire from inside, and desire is assimilated with disease. Eroticism takes then a morbid turn, and starts being aestheticized and transferred in the realm of social taboos and individual transgressions.

Epidemics proceeding from touching have marked the cultural history of human kind, particularly in modern urban, crowded, promiscuous times: think of the place of syphilis in nineteenth century's cultural scape.

On the threshold of post-modernity epidemics have been amplified by the mediascape, and have gone psycho-viral, transferring their dangers in the semiotic space, then shifting from the semio-sphere to the space of emotions, then back to the Mediascape, in a sort of Larsen effect of the psycho-sphere.

AIDS, the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is the perfect metaphor of this anthropological shift: more than ever this disease has produced its effects on the sphere of communication. In the last decades of the past century AIDS has acted as a media epidemics and simultaneously it has frozen and sanitized the act of touching, transferring erotic energy in the media space of pornography and in the always postponed excitement of the social network rituals of courting. The cultural virus has so deeply permeated the collective psyche that we are unable to ponder the effects it has produced in the quality of experience and in daily life. Even if the actual fear of the acquired syndrome is mitigated by the medical science, its cultural and psychological effect is here to stay, transformed into ritual, fashion, life-style.

Frail Psychosphere

The arts of the 1900s favoured the register of utopia in two forms: the radical utopia of Futurism and Surrealism, and the functional utopia of Bauhaus.

The dystopian thread was hidden in the folds of the artistic and literary imagination, in Fritz Lang's expressionism, and in a sort of bitter surrealism that resurfaces in the novels of Philip Dick.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the literary dystopia of Orwell, Burroughs and De Lillo flourished. In the years of transition from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century dystopia takes centre stage and conquers the whole field of the artistic imagination. In the expressions of poetry, cinema, visual art and novel, the marks of an epidemic of mental suffering proliferate.

All along the late modern age artists have been the harbingers of precariousness, internalized in an aesthetic of uncertainty, randomness, and excess. But in the first decade of the new century precariousness has turned into a social condition, pervading the labour market and the very self-perception of the workers.

Precarious art is an attempt to mitigate social pain and political impotence with a sort of dystopian irony.

At the Exhibition of Visual Art of Limerick 2012 I saw *The Trainee*, a distressing work by the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala. *The Trainee* has been produced in collaboration with Deloitte and Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art. In order to realize the project, the artist has been working for a month as a trainee in the marketing department of Deloitte where only few people knew the true nature of the project. She is initially a normal-seeming marketing trainee, then she starts to apply peculiar working methods. We see the trainee sitting at her workstation in the consultants' open plan office space or in the tax department library all day doing nothing. One of the videos shows her spending an entire day in an elevator. These acts or rather the absence of visible action slowly make the atmosphere around the trainee unbearable and force the colleagues to search for solutions and come up with explanations for the situation. Gradually she becomes an object of avoidance and speculation. Her colleagues start asking her embarrassing questions, between sincere interest and bewildered amusement. Demands are directed at the superior regarding the strangely behaving worker. Masking laziness in

apparent activity and browsing Facebook during working hours belong to the acceptable behavioural patterns of a work community. However, sitting silent and still in front of an empty desk, thinking, smiling and gazing at the wall threatens the peace of the community and breaks the colleagues' concentration. The non-doing person isn't committed to any activity, so she has the potential for anything. It is non-doing that lacks a place in the general order of things, and thus it is a threat to order. The degrading religion of labour is exposed here together with uselessness of contemporary work.

In her videos, Eija-Liisa Ahtila (*Wind, If 6 was 9, Anne Aki and God*) narrates the psychopathology of relations, the inability to touch and to be touched.

In the film *Me and you and everyone we know*, Miranda July tells the story of a video-artist who falls in love with a young man and the difficulty of translating emotion into words, and words into touch. Language is severed from affectivity. Language and sex diverge in everyday life. Sex is talked about everywhere, but sex never speaks.

A film by Jia Zhangke, entitled *Still life (Sanxia haoren)* and produced in Hong Kong in 2006, shows an unfolding devastation of contemporary China. The predominant colour is a rotten, greyish, violet green.

The story is simple, but cruel: Huo Sanming returns to his place of birth in the hope of finding his wife and daughter, whom he had left years earlier to go and find work in a distant northern mine. His village, along the riverbank of the Yangtze no longer exists. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam had erased many villages. Houses, people and streets have been covered by water. The building of the dam proceeds, the destruction of villages continues and the water keeps rising. Huo Sanming arrives in this scenario of devastation and rising water and he does not find his wife and daughter; so his search begins. He looks for them while groups of workers armed with their picks take walls down, explosives demolish buildings and landscape is transformed into a huge sprawl of garbage.

After long searches he finally finds his wife; she has aged and been sold by her brother to another man. They meet in the rooms of a building as it is being demolished and, in whispers, they talk about their daughter, their heads down. A dark green spaceship is flying in the background of bricks and iron spattering onto a shit-coloured sky. In the last scene of *Still life* a tight-rope walker walks on a rope from the roofs of a house towards nothingness, against a background that recalls the dark surrealism of Dali's bitter canvas.

Still life is a lyrical account of Chinese capitalism acted inside out, from the standpoint of submerged life.

The Corrections, a novel by Jonathan Franzen, speaks of the psychopathological micro-shifts and of the psychopharmacological micro-adaptations of the humanity increasingly devastated by depression and anxiety: the attempts to adjust to an existence that must be normal and pretends to be normal while the brain is unable to deal with the surrounding chaos and the intimate chaos as well. Corrections are the adjustments needed in a volatile stock market in order to avoid losing the money invested in private pension funds that might suddenly disappear.

Franzen recounts a couple of aging person in the Midwest: they have gone nuts as a result of decades of hyper-labour and conformism. Corrections are the small and unstoppable slides towards the point of turn-off, the horror of old age in the civilization of competition, the horror of sexuality in the world of puritan efficiency.

In the novel, published in 2001, Franzen digs deep into the folds of the American psyche and describes in minute details the pulpification of the American brain, the depression and dementia resulting from a prolonged exposure to the psychic bombardment of stress from work, apathy, paranoia, puritan hypocrisy and the pharmaceutical industry around them, the psychic unmaking of men who are encapsulated in the claustrophobic and illusory shell of economic hyper-protection, the infantilism of people who pretend to believe, or perhaps really believe in the fulsome Christmas fairy tale of compassionately liberalist cruelty. By the end of the long awaited Christmas dinner, as the psychopathic family happily gathers together, the father tries to commit suicide by shooting himself in the mouth. He does not succeed.

Yakizakana no Uta starts with a fish in cellophane wrapping on a supermarket shelf. A boy grabs it and takes it to the till; he pays, leaves, puts it in the bicycle basket and cycles home.

“Good morning Mr. Student, I’m very happy to be with you. Do not worry, I’m not a fish who complains,” the fish says whilst the student briskly pedals home. It’s nice to make the acquaintance of a human being. You are extraordinary beings; you are almost the masters of the universe. Unfortunately you are not always peaceful, I would like to live in a peaceful world where everyone loves one another and even fish and humans shake hands. Oh it’s so nice to see the sunset, I like it ever

so much,' the fish becomes emotional and jumps in the cellophane bag inside the basket. I can hear the sound of a stream... I love the sound of streams, it reminds me something from my childhood."

When they get home the boy unpacks the fish and puts it on a plate, throws a little salt on it, as the fish gets excited and says "Ah! I like salt very much, it reminds me of something..." the boy puts it on the grill in the oven and turns the knob.

The fish keeps chatting: "Oh Mr. Student it's nice here, I can see a light down there... I feel hot... hot..." until its voice becomes hesitant.

It starts singing a song, more and more feebly and unconnectedly, like the Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey* as his wires are unplugged.

Yakizakana no Uta, by Yusuke Sakamoto, is perhaps the most harrowing animation film I saw in June 2006 at the Caixa Forum of Barcelona, during the *Historias animadas* festival. Yet I perceived a common tone running through all of the works presented at the festival, one of ironic cynicism, of ironic despair.

Animales de compania by Ruth Gómez uses ferocious images to tell the story of a generation of well dressed anthropophagi, young beasts in ties; they run and run to avoid being caught by fellows, colleagues, friends, and lovers who wound, kill and eat them as soon as they fall into their grip, with terrorized smiles and dilated eyes.

This art is no denunciation. The terms "denunciation" and "engagement" no longer have meaning when you are a fish getting ready to be cooked.

Artists of the twenty-first century no longer show that kind of energy, even though they keep using expressions taken from the lexicon of the past century, perhaps because they are scared by their own truth. Artists no longer search the way to a rupture? They seek a path that may lead to a state of equilibrium between irony and cynicism, they seek a way to suspend the execution, at least for a moment.

Geo-cultures: skin and imagination

In my research I retrace the mutation that techno-media globalization has produced in the living body of cultures, and I'm trying to describe

the anthropological mutation that follows the wide diffusion of electronic technology and digitalization of social communication by the point of view of the different cultures and their internal conflicts.

Contrary to the presupposition of the clash of civilization theory, I think that identities do not exist as such: they are fragile and changing constructions, based on the social history of human groups, and on the changing effects of flows of techno-psycho stimulation.

Civilizations are not homogeneous blocks of consistent identity, rather the space of continuous negotiation between differences.

If we look at the geopolitical and geocultural map of the world, we see that most of the current conflicts nowadays are happening inside the space of a so called civilization. In his book *Clash of civilizations* (1996) Huntington writes that the Christian West is destined to clash with Islam—but the experience of the last ten years has shown that the main source of war is the opposition of Sunni and Shia Islam.

Far from being the natural evolution of a long dated legacy, identities are shifting, fragmented, continuously reshaped by the media flows that cross them.

Strictly speaking civilizations do not exist, and the transversal factors of mutation (technology, the Net, financial collapse) are permeating the different cultural landscapes with similar colours.

The word “civilization” is not defining some sort of political homogeneity, and the transition is not opposing races or religions, but technologies and economic lifestyles in a common framework marked by exploitation, social misery and mental suffering.

My research is intended to retrace the molecular evolution of geo-cultures, focusing on identities only as temporary constructions.

In order to draw a map of this mutation I will follow two different pathways:

I'll start tracing a sort of phenomenology of the skin, then a genealogy of the global imagination.

The phenomenology of the skin draws a map of the multifarious approaches to the perception of the body of the other, so “culture” is reframed as the sphere of social imagination: perception and projection of the environment.

Sensibility and social imagination in the Modern age will be subjects of the next chapters of this text.