

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

# Reflections on Semiocapitalism and the Maternal from a Daughter's Point of View

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The article is a reflection on semiocapitalism and the maternal inspired by Franco "Bifo" Berardi's book "Precarious Rhapsodies" \*(2009). For Bifo, current times of what he named splitterkapitalism can only be understood by thinking together capitalism and media. The current pathologic relation between cybertime and cyberspace that characterises our time, as described by Bifo, can be considered responsible for the common difficulty, in communities and individual spaces, in expressing authenticity, reciprocity and working on the alterity of the other. How can the maternal be connected with these issues? Can, for example, the reflection on one's own personal maternal legacy, of a maternal subject both involved in building the child's alterity and in positioning herself as a mother in the contextual social order, be generative in choosing how to manage our boundaries, our relation between cybertime and cyberspace, and the related consequences in affective, bodily and community life?

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I still remember one morning, at the beginning of the 1990s. My mother was taking my brother and myself to school and it was raining heavily. The rain was so strong a deep puddle had formed under a small bridge. The cars were queuing in front of it; everyone was careful when passing through due to the risk that their car would stop. Every car seemed to be doing fine, despite the worry you could sense from each driver. When it was our turn to drive through, however, the car got stuck. Ours was the oldest car in the queue.

I remember my mother getting out of the car to try and move it. Even though the water was up to her knees, no one helped. She asked the man who was driving the car behind us if he knew where a mechanic was. His voice sounded embarrassed as if he was struggling to speak to her. My mother lifted my brother and me up into her arms, one at a time, and she carried us so that we would not have to walk through the water. We went to look for a car repair shop, that luckily was nearby. My mother and the mechanic pushed the small car out of the water, and he got it running until it reached the repair shop. Despite the mechanic helping us out, for me, he was not the hero; my mother was. The mechanic was the person who helped, but it was my mother who took us into her arms, who looked for a mechanic and made a deal with him, and who found another way for us to get to school. Maybe my perspective already contained a neoliberal maternal image, but I could not have known.

When I reflect on the day when our car got stuck in the water, I often wonder why no one came to my mother's assistance. Whenever I have found myself in similar situations subsequently in Italy, I have always received some kind of help. For instance, last Christmas, my car (also carrying my father and brother) got caught in a difficult situation. This time, however, four young men stopped to help us out. Such a response re-emphasised to me how my mother was left to deal with things on her own. I am still staggered by the lack of help we received that day.

I recently thought about the incident again while reading Franco "Bifo" Berardi's book *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009). Bifo participated in Radio Alice, a pirate radio station that aired in Bologna between 1975 and 1977, before it was closed by the police. Radio Alice was established and organised by people who belonged, independently and critically, to the left, but who were also trying to move beyond the language and

the community participation promoted by left-wing parties. These people aimed at using a radical form of discourse that could somehow attack, or at least dismantle and confuse, conventional language, which they considered inextricably linked with various forms of power and inequality. The participants in Radio Alice were connected with the political autonomist movement and inspired by artistic movements such as Dadaism. The station did not have an organised schedule and it did not operate as a conventional radio station. Radio Alice provided a space for people to speak freely. For instance, people who would call into the station on the phone were immediately put "on air" without any kind of filter.

In the book, Bifo articulates his thinking about semiocapitalism, the system whereby capitalism<sup>1</sup> and the media are connected, arguing that today it is not possible to reflect on one without linking it to the other. His main argument is that today we are living through individual and community pathologies caused by semiocapitalism, and in particular by the specific relation between cyberspace and cybertime. Cyberspace is the totality of the information and stimuli that circulate via media systems. Cybertime is the organic bodily capacity to deal with and elaborate information, which therefore has bodily a limit. The dramatic relation between the two, what he calls "splitterkapitalism", creates clashes that bring about a multitude of problems for people in spheres such as labour, mental health, sexuality and affective life. Bifo observes that the current semiocapitalist order started to take this direction in Western societies in 1977, when hope and ideas of changing the economic, social and political organisation of society which had characterised many of the political movements in the previous decades, started to fail.

Bifo considers the 1990s to be a period of total identification, within the general *Zeitgeist*, with capital. Because of this identification, all technological changes were seen as forms of liberation and as creations of new spaces of freedom. The following decade, the 2000s, has for Bifo been characterised by a form of cultural depression resulting from the realisation that the mania of the '90s could not last. Monopolies

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<sup>1</sup> When thinking about capitalism is important to mention the different and interrelated forms of oppression that characterises it. The analysis of colonial and capitalist patriarchy articulated by Silvia Federici (2004) can be one of the many that can help in describing complex processes of power.

emerged violently from the new world created by the internet and digital technologies. The potential for the internet and new digital technologies to allow people to live well, work less and have more time for affective and intellectual life were not realised. Indeed, the opposite occurred. The sphere of labour encroached on all aspects of individual and social life, and daily life became submerged under a continuous flux of information. Bifo discusses the end of previous social class divisions, and speaks about the “cognitariat”, the international group of workers involved in cognitive and emotional labour. He does not see any way for this form of spittlerkapitalism to end, but he proposes the creation of autonomous spaces in people's lives as an antidote to some of the problems created by this wider context.

Going back to that morning, I think that nobody helping my mother can be read as an instance in which semiocapitalism dictates that, simply put, appearance is more important than helping someone in need. Although it may be problematic to render an ethical and political question from this small event, what I want to stress is the framework through which I am making this claim. I am less interested here in discussing the subject of appearance versus the question of help, but more in showing how a single micro act can reflect a wider organization of relations that has to do with economic production, and the related symbolic sphere. I also want to open up a potential reflection on the maternal and semiocapitalism.

There may be many ways in which this reflection can unfold. One of them concerns the child's introjection of the maternal subject position within a social context, and the consequent taking in of neoliberal or semiocapitalist models that shape a subject's position. However, I want to put forward some rough, rather unformed ideas, focusing more on how the relation with the mother, from the daughter's or son's point of view, can be a space in which to learn something about the difficulties that the mother is going through, preserving the ability to maintain, somehow, a potentially unfettered area of psychic and social experience and a healthy organisation of personal boundaries. I am interested in connecting this with the question of boundaries between cybertime and cyberspace. Following Bifo, this question concerns the relation between labour and the affective life of a community; how we may continue to exercise a mode of independent thinking within

contexts of labour; the many questions of exploitation and exhaustion of worker's resources; the impossibility for particularly young workers to have autonomy over real spaces where their bodies and souls can rest, which in part requires access to housing and other material resources. All these problems are interconnected in the current organisation of Western societies and can lead some communities to indiscriminately wish to project the need for boundaries between groups in various and problematic ways.<sup>2</sup>

I want to go back to my mother, my brother, and me in the car.<sup>3</sup> When I was a teenager, I spent an important amount of time with my mother travelling by car around Rome. During these encounters, I remember I decided one day I wanted to create the possibility of a deeper conversation with my mother about things I was thinking and feeling. I think she was not expecting this from my side; we started to get along very well when discussing subjects such as relations with friends, family, and social and cultural issues. During these conversations, I was not listening to music, or watching television. I was trying to elaborate a way of thinking about what I wanted and didn't want, liked and didn't like, what was going fine and what was not. I was trying to look with her for explanations, but also for spaces where I could say: "well, what I authentically feel and think is different from what the majority of people feel and think, and sometimes also from you, and I need to find ways to adapt, but also to continue to give credit to my feelings in a way that works".

It is not my intention to say that the relationship I had with my mother should be a model for anyone else. I think that we all might need to work on our own experiences and stories, in their particularity. However, I want to pose this question: what if, in learning from our relation with our mothers as maternal subjects with

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<sup>2</sup> Narendra Keval's (2016) analysis of racism as the wish to destroy the desire that the other has is interesting in this regard and relates to Bifo's comments on the creation of psychotic and psychopathic community relations.

<sup>3</sup> Modes of transport put us in the middle of a controversial production system that we cannot control. Bifo gives space to the artistic movement of Futurism, and its developments in Italy and in Russia. In the first place it ended up by serving the interests of advertising, and in the second of Bolshevik terror. Both movements had at their basis a joyfulness and vitality that was then lost. The author is interested in how utopian imaginaries can be hijacked. I hope it is clear that it is not my intention to praise systems related to the production of cars.

'mercurial mental and emotional currents' (Baraitser, 2009, p. 2) caused by the often uncomfortable and destabilising experience of being in relation to a child whose enigma and alterity needs constant work, whose ambivalence needs to be constantly tolerated, it is possible to trace a legacy that can be used in the work of creating meaningful boundaries between cyberspace and cybertime, for ourselves? Can this legacy, and even more, its re-elaboration, help us in framing and re-framing our positions in the social context, and consider the authenticity of our wishes, spaces and limits, in a world where they tend to be often overridden, and where the preciousness and richness of this work on alterity can be denied?

The last ten years, the global economic crisis, austerity measures, and the rising surge of racist and populist movements could be seen as the effect of an era that for Bifo is not based on consent, but on terror. This has certainly pushed communities into losing certain transitional elements (Winnicott, 1971) that have been in place for a long time. Many people are confronted with a world that looks very different from the one when their parents were young, but also from the one when they were, themselves, younger or children. Today, these mothers and children have gone through complex changes within their specific situations, often without the opportunity of having support in transitioning to deal with the new and upgraded versions of semiocapitalism's products.

This raises certain questions. Can the ability to reflect on and use the legacy of the relation with one's own mother, entangled in her difficulties concerning the work on the child's alterity and her positioning in her social context, be generative for the discovery and rediscovery of how systemic pressures are failing our own need for autonomous spaces? Can the legacy of such a complex intimate relation be used to think through paths of growth, the risk of stasis, and the search for authenticity within a context of splitterkapitalism? Of course, material, practical and structural constraints are not something that can be washed away. However, my question is whether such thinking can help in navigating a reality that tends to obliterate intimate parts of the self. Also, can some of the countless and unthinkable complexities that maternal subjects face today have to do with some of the losses that communities went through in the last decades?

A final question: can we take inspiration from the difficult work of mothers to find tools and strategies to give birth and care for ourselves in these current times?

### Editor's Note

This contribution to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Studies in the Maternal* were invited by the editorial team. As such they were internally reviewed by the journal's editorial team.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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