

The Denial of Reality, Managing the Catastrophe and Technicity

An Interview with Annie Le Brun¹

Antoine Mercier: I propose that we begin by exploring the symptoms of the crisis by starting with a domain to which you, as a writer and poet, are particularly sensitive: that of language, of its development. A language that, according to you, is developing in a continual “denial of reality.” Can we look at a couple of examples of this?

Annie Le Brun: In fact, this goes back to a phenomenon that began in the 1960s but that, since then, has taken on exorbitant proportions. The extraordinary thing is that no one seems to have realized it.² Because it has involved the gradual implementation of a technical language whose apparent objectivity has been imposed in almost every domain. And so we have come to speak of “smart bombs,” “surgical strikes,” and “undocumented workers,” and today it is “zero growth.” This crisis has even led us to speak of “negative growth,” which is an expression that doesn’t shock anyone. The function of this language seems to be to prohibit contradictions, through the use of such formulae, which are sufficiently chilled to be taken up by everyone and, as a result, have become so ritualized that they appear uncontestable.

Q: Why? Because they simultaneously contain something and its opposite?

A: Not only do these phrases contain something and its opposite, but they also sanction confusion, by provoking a kind of shock [*sidération*]. With an anesthetizing effect that allows people to swallow anything. It is remarkable that the crisis has spread this kind of discourse to the point that it has developed those elements’ contradiction into a conspicuously hypnotizing consent.

¹ “*Annie Lebrun : des maux pour dire la crise*,” an excerpt from Antoine Mercier, *Regards sur la crise* (Editions Hermann, 2009), published 6 February 2010, by Marianne2/France Culture; no longer available online. Translated by NOT BORED! 19 January 2019. All footnotes and the title are by the translator.

² Maybe in France, but not in America, the birthplace of smart bombs and surgical strikes. See George Carlin, “Soft Language,” *Doin’ It Again* (1990): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o25I2fzFGoY>.

Q: This is a symptom of what?

A: Of the fact that we are less and less involved with what actually exists. Not only because the means of talking about it are increasingly lacking – language being both the reflection and the instrument of this widespread hypnotism. But also because, by the same token, language forms a screen to prevent us from seeing what’s essential, namely, that everything is connected. For example, that the financial crisis is the equivalent of “mad cow disease” in the agricultural domain, of contaminated blood in health domain. . . .

Q: That is to say?

A: That is to say, we find ourselves facing systems that are beginning to function autonomously, that only refer to themselves.³ To the point that all control and supervision are impossible because of our inabilities to describe what is happening or to foresee any of the consequences; we completely lose sight of what has been set in motion.

Q: The conditions for the possibility of thinking, including thinking about the crisis, are thus damaged.

A: Yes. Furthermore, there are very few people, even among intellectuals, who seem to be aware of this situation, despite the proliferation of critical discourses. Because, in the majority of cases, these are specialized critiques, which only concern a single aspect of the situation, while – as I’ve already said – everything is connected. And it is precisely this fact that people don’t want to see, the coherence of the thoughtlessness [*inconséquence*].

Q: Everything is connected – what does that mean exactly? What do you include in this “everything”?

A: Well, there is a kind of equivalence in the disaster. *Bodybuilding*⁴ and cosmetic surgery correspond to the renovation of cities into sprawling shopping centers. The poor-quality intellectual and artistic nourishment that so many cultural institutions try to make us swallow corresponds to reconstituted crabmeat, to all the doctored

³ Cf. Guy Debord, Thesis 16, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967): “The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them. It is no more than the economy developing for itself.”

⁴ English in original.

foodstuffs that the agricultural industry tries to force-feed us. All this in such a way that the conditions are in place for us to swallow bad food as well as the most deficient thinking, both with the same absence of discernment.⁵ Obviously the question that arises is, is someone directing this operation? But it would be too easy to think that someone is pulling the strings of a conspiracy of such an extent. But what can give us this impression are the facts that there seem to be fewer and fewer individuals who are opposed to the turn things have taken and that everything seems constructed to make us think that such opposition is in fact impossible.

Q: Can you tell us what levers could be pulled to start a reaction [*quels leviers agir pour réagir*]?

A: The misfortune here is that people seem increasingly deprived of responses to what happens to them, precisely because of the invasion of technical language, which goes as far as their inner lives. And how couldn't they feel lost, when they find themselves increasingly dispossessed of language that could account for their singularity as well as for their affectivity? This is, no doubt, what leads them to accept all the ersatz forms of communication – starting with what the Internet gives us under the form of the clickable link, which is becoming the norm for relationships. Everything happens as if this world has found its reason for existing in the profuse production of things that fill up the absence – that is to say, the ceaseless prompting of communication. In this sense, the merit of the Internet is that it advantageously⁶ replaces all [direct] contact with what amounts to an alienating proximity. With the effacement of the body that this replacement presupposes and the collapse of sensibility that follows it. Nevertheless, during the protests that have broken out since the beginning of the crisis, some hardly noticed the fact that many people wore a kind of butterfly on which “General dream”⁷ was written, along with the signature “Utopians stand up.”⁸ This might only be a small detail but it seems extremely important to me, because something at variance with the majority of the demands was being enunciated. Though the demonstrators had all the reasons in the world to be primarily preoccupied with the threats posed by the economic system, this “General dream” opened up another perspective, another space, from which one might have some distance. As if the possibility of another place began to be perceptible, a place from which another kind of critique of this

⁵ Cf. Guy Debord, “Hunger Abatement,” *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, #5, November 1985: <http://www.notbored.org/abat-faim.html>.

⁶ The French word used here, *avantageusement*, can also mean “smugly.”

⁷ A play on the phrase “General strike.”

⁸ During protests against the *contrat première embauche* (CPE) in 2006.

life could develop. I saw in that slogan much more than a play on words; I saw a kind of breach that was far from negligible, one that perhaps opened upon something that was not easy to formulate exactly. Even though the system didn't hesitate to manage the catastrophe and even made innovations in the way that it enslaves people. The gravity of the situation became a pretext to incite an even greater submission.

Q: You say: “the system manages the catastrophe.” The system is what exactly?

A: It is the commodification of all the forms of life, and its principle aim is infinite development. In this regard, the crisis that appears and is lived as a permanent state of exception⁹ constitutes a great opportunity to not open new markets and thus impose new forms of servitude. Where this is concerned, I refer to Riesel and Semprun's book *Catastrophism*,¹⁰ whose subtitle – “administration of the disaster and sustainable submission” – shows how the notion of catastrophe is now used to prolong and worsen the on-going process of voluntary servitude.

Q: When do you think this process of voluntary servitude started? Is it the fate of all powers or is it something particular that was put into place at the moment that the liberal system was inaugurated?¹¹

A: No, I wouldn't go that far back into history. Nevertheless, it seems that the ascendancy of technology has had a considerable role in this affair, which is something that the theorists of the Frankfurt School noted in the 1960s. And Marcuse was the first to see how language constituted the privileged instrument of the technological order in the imposition of its hegemony.¹² The consequence of this development was the remodeling¹³ of our ways of thinking. And so one could see, over the course of the 1960s, the speed with which the human sciences (properly speaking) at first and then literary criticism were contaminated, at a time when the entirety of human life was in the process of becoming the hostage of a pseudo-technicity [*pseudo-technicité*] without which nothing these days can be

⁹ Apparently an allusion to Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione (Homo sacer, II, 1)* (2003); translated into French in 2003 and English in 2005.

¹⁰ Written by René Riesel and Jaime Semprun and published by Encyclopédie des Nuisances in 2008.

¹¹ The phrase “voluntary servitude” appears to have been coined by Étienne de la Boétie, the author of *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, published in 1576.

¹² See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, published in English in 1964, in German in 1967 and in French in 1968.

¹³ The French word used here, *remodelage*, can also mean “modernization.”

taken “seriously.” So much so that feelings and sentiments – unable to be expressed in these terms – have lost, not only their acuity and subtlety, but also their powers of discernment, not to mention their critical sense, which could have countered the advance of this technicity. Both intellectuals and artists are in part responsible for this situation.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: First of all, because – from structuralism to deconstructionism, from the New Novel to autobiographical fiction – there is the same allegiance to technicity, which is inseparable from the same refusal of the perceptible world, whether it privileges structure, function or even the notion of flux, which have dominated all the genres and all the modes of expression for more than twenty years. It is as if everything that is part of the perceptible world must be liquidated theoretically or symbolically. You can also see this in the increasing collusion between cultural power and political power, which is reinforced by the system of subsidies, prizes and honors, which has certainly contributed to the collapse of critique.

Q: Whereas culture used to have precisely the function of maintaining what is sensibly alive [*le sensible vivant*] in society?

A: No doubt more so in the past than today, when there isn’t any cultural politics properly speaking and when only their sensibilities have led a number of artists to be spontaneously opposed to the course of things. Conversely, those who say “no,” simply “no,” to what is going on are increasingly rare these days. The majority accepts everything: the academies, the prizes, the easy jobs. . . . And so we reach the mummery of today’s subsidized subversion!

Q: Let’s return to the disappearance of the fundamental processes of thinking, starting with the connection between cause and effect.

A: That’s what characterizes technological ascendancy – the impossibility of seeing beyond [*se projeter*] what one is doing in the present. As if pressing a button comes with no responsibility. One of the first to be alarmed was Günther Anders,¹⁴ writing about the atomic bomb. Observing that “we are smaller than

¹⁴ Cf. *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Band I: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (C. H. Beck: München 1956). Note well that none of Anders’ books have been translated into English.

what we do,”¹⁵ to the point of not being able to see or foresee, he tied this blindness to a lack of imagination. Such a complete failure [*une panne sensible*] that it entails the impossibility of representing to ourselves what we are in the process of doing.

Q: Does this mean that we must get out of or somehow reject the world of technology?

A: As it exists today? Definitely. And, in this respect, the most worrisome thing appears to me to be the seizing of the perceptible domain that is taking place through the different forms of cultural politics and the innumerable processes of cultural commodification. Both of them essentially serve to neutralize all forms of negation so as to install a reign of widespread insignificance¹⁶ whose only goal is continual renewal.

Q: Do the phenomena that you describe constitute an anthropological attack?

A: Yes, we can see it clearly when we read, not only the *management*¹⁷ manuals, but also any magazine for women or men. We can see in them the new image of the individual who, at bottom, is no longer an individual, but a connected being, someone who is more valuable if he or she is ill suited for any real attachment and, on the contrary, is able to become attached to people who are as interchangeable as he or she is. The ability to pass from one to the other would be his or her primary quality – always online, always plugged in. Never have individuals been so easy to manipulate, because they lack any passionate anchorage.

Q: Human resources at last. . . .

A: That’s the principle of human resources in both entertainment and work. Hence the importance of the cultural politics that allow the fashioning and formatting of human beings to go even further. This is so true that enterprises¹⁸ increasingly seek to abolish the boundary between public and private, causing a diffuse eroticism, so that profitability increases. And this goes for society as a whole. The abolition of the secret, the effacement of intimacy, to the profit of a calculated exhibitionism

¹⁵ Other sources quote Anders as saying “human beings are smaller than themselves” or “we are smaller than ourselves.”

¹⁶ Cf. Cornelius Castoriadis, *La Montee de l'insignifiance* (1996), translated as *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy* (2003): <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.html>.

¹⁷ English in original.

¹⁸ A word that can mean either “the companies” or “the initiatives.”

that is based upon model celebrities – this reveals the programmed poverty¹⁹ of a sexuality in which the interchangeability of human beings is imposed as a new mode of the management of human resources.

Q: How do we get out of this? For example, what are you doing about it?

A: I have neither any advice nor any recipes to give, but I think that it is time to say “No.” Anyone can do it, even if it is only by distancing oneself from all this – a little bit of the distance that, by itself, allows some discernment, by regaining the time to dream and think.

Q: Does the current political era – the era of Sarkozy²⁰ – appear to you as particularly revealing where this is concerned?

A: Yes, quite precisely so. It is the perfect illustration of everything we have been talking about and, in particular, the collapse of language. When you listen to Sarkozy speak, it’s obvious. But his way of speaking isn’t exaggerated, as we might believe too easily. On the contrary, it crystallizes all the troubles that afflict language these days, with its looseness [*approximation*] ceaselessly feeding a cultural kitsch in which everything is mixed together, in which the most varied quotations hide the crudeness of his way of thinking. We can also see in the way he talks the way that language can deny what exists and name what is missing. And this is also very serious because, for a long time, people have believed that you can set speech against the image. In reality, everything happens as if you can impose a protected designation²¹ that is intended to authenticate the things that don’t exist. We might wonder what use are the armies of linguists that we currently have. Perhaps it is time to analyze the unprecedented catastrophe that is being propagated through language.

Q: When it comes to the manipulation of language and words, is there an analogy to be made between the Communist regime, for example, and the current regime in capitalist countries such as France?

A: Yes, there is an analogy. We can find certain aspects of what George Orwell evoked so masterfully in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, especially “doublethink” and

¹⁹ The French word used here, *misère*, can also mean “misery.”

²⁰ Nicholas Sarkozy (born 1955), President of the French Republic from 2007 to 2012.

²¹ *une appellation contrôlée*, which echoes the French *appellation d'origine contrôlée*, which is a protected designation of origin, used to authenticate the place that something (a wine, for example) has been produced.

“doublespeak,” which precisely serve to designate the opposite of what things really are. Nevertheless, I have the impression that, these days, something even more insidious is at work: a false objectivity whose authenticity appears to be guaranteed by the systematic recourse to a technical vocabulary. Almost everybody goes along with it, as if nothing can exist without being passed through a pseudo-scientific filter. The result is a gradual massacre of inner life, to the extent that this life is increasingly manipulated by completely unsuitable terms, by disproportionate measuring instruments whose crudeness cannot account for the complexity or even the fragility of sensations and feelings.

Q: Logically, there must be dissidents, such as. . . .

A: Yes, especially since dissidence is, perhaps, not so difficult to engage in. Even though suspicions about sensitive life [*le vie sensible*] aren't the prerogative of our world alone. Unfortunately, this form of life has been and remains suspicious to too much revolutionary thinking, which has actively participated in the disarmament of the inner self. To my eyes, this fact is a novelty, and it constitutes one of the most worrisome aspects of the situation.

Q: Are we living through the end of an historical period?

A: Perhaps, in the sense that the extent of the crisis and its domino effects, its chain reactions, have had the merit of arousing an unprecedented and widespread suspicion about this world. Thanks to ecological catastrophes, increasing numbers of people seem to be taking a step back and starting to doubt the values and ideas that commodification appears to have successfully imposed. This provides a bit of hope and, at the very least, can prevent us from feeling completely desperate.

Q: There has been a call to unite all the protest movements together. Do you believe that a crystallization of the opposition could resist the system?

A: Why not? Nevertheless, I have a great distrust of organizations and believe much more in individual desertions, in inner desertions. Especially since freedom is much more contagious than servitude.