

Material™

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Image Comics



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hello
muller

**This is Ales, the writer.
Each month, after each chapter:
an essay by a writer I respect.**

Franco “Bifo” Berardi is an Italian Marxist theorist who bears more than a passing resemblance to Material’s opening man — the professor, Julius Shore. Shore’s got Bifo’s round black-rim glasses, his cloud of white hair, and his shady academic non-style. He’s got his gab too, this theoretical preach: this is how it is. Bifo, I love.

He’s like an intellectual muppet.

His long slice of a mouth flops on his choicest word — more! more! more! — eyes bugging under spectacles. He denounces spectacle while embodying it; what a comic.

I first fell for Bifo for his more. In his book *After the Future* (AK Press 2011), Bifo calls for more: poetry, time, pleasure, life. This is his treatment to the ails of accelerated “late hyper-capitalism,”

which, as Julius Shore explains, has created a kind of dictatorship of time and growth; it wants more material, more profit, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, forever and on, for its own and owner’s sake, careless of the masses or Mother Earth.

You know the Miley Cyrus song “We Can’t Stop”? It’s like that. Addicting, arrogant, corporate, white. “We Can’t Stop” was my song the summer I read *After the Future*.

Heat of 2013, I was revving up to burn out from working too much. I knew it was coming but (I thought) I couldn’t stop. Bifo spoke to me like a perennially-unemployed radically-politicked childless uncle might: insisting my exhaustion wasn’t my fault, nor my editors’ — the system was compelling us to give all of us to the corporations we worked for.

“More life! Less work!” He wrote about the psychopathologies of the “cognitariat,” thinking laborers, like myself, a freelance

writer — about how American-brand “cognitive capitalism” sought to suck all my mental and psychic energy, all of my time

(so that’s why I’m depressed and anxious!) (that’s why all the vampire movies!). Bifo’s good on this: on making you feel not crazy for being mad about the status quo.

What Bifo isn’t good on is the good of technology, media, and spectacle. He wanes

old man nostalgic. He

writes: “The mutation that has infested the post-alphabetical generation, that is, the first generation to learn more words from the machine than from the mother — has deeply eroded the ability to solidarize.” He talks about my demographic (I don’t buy the word “generation,” so market-co-opted) not recognizing that we may be listening. From Bifo, I

feel told what’s up, somewhat rightly (he’s one of few contemporaries writing on subjectivity and capital, the internal affects/effects of technology, media, labor), but then he Others. Man objectifies youth like he does our tools, dismissing both in Ivory Tower prose. Archetypally academic, Bifo talks down.

In Kot’s comic, Shore talks up.

He stands at the base of an amphitheatre lecturing to hundreds of students.

The set-up is like most set-ups of power — somehow one body, through institutional arrangement, is imagined more important than a multitude of others. Julius Shore is detailed down to his pant creases.

The students, save for the one who walk outs, are a sketchy mass. This is the scene from Shore’s perspective, he’s centered. But within the illegible mass of students, you know (flip p.o.v.): there are hundreds of subjectivities.



Maybe their heads are mostly in screens (my experience of lecture halls).

Maybe this looks like “doing nothing” to Shore (my experience of some older people’s experience of youth with screens). From all I’ve read of Bifo, he’d have it so. He presents contemporary screen culture as atomizing and automating. Atomizing: individuals being made lonely for being individuals; that is, defined in opposition to others, bubbled in personalized feeds. Automating: people being programmed by social and technological codes, like (my example) email etiquette, the expectation of a rapid response, which assumes we should always be online, always at work; we turn robotic. Bifo would rather like us to autonomize: to cultivate free thinking and doing. In a 2013 interview, he said that he’d started to believe that, “this precarious generation is unable to start a process of autonomization.” This precarious generation being like the “post-alphabetical,” we youth who’re suffering from, “a sort of psychic frailty

and connection. In all, the body is present, on as the tech. My “coming of age” (a forever process I believe but here I’ll talk young adulthood) twisted on tech. I learned to come on a vibrator I ordered online after reading recommendations by Betty Dodson, again online. I learned to write in/for publics online — gained a confidence of voice on, which translated off, where I was before mousy shy. I’ve met mentors, best friends, and lovers (including the prodigious Ales Kot) online. My text life has improved my sex life. Poetry, Bifo’s favorite — I never “got,” until I played in exchanging words via screens; how communication is elusive! I’ll pause, but there is more — more! more! more... I have Bifo’s email. After I read *After the Future*, I asked around for it. I fantasied cajoling him into a speaking tour. We’d hit the American colleges first, then Canada, the UK, Europe, Asia... Bifo would do his podium preach. He’d speak on how, “the dictatorship of the

Fiona Duncan exists to be followed @ffidunks on more than one social media platform.

produced by precariousness, competition and loneliness.” We, according to Bifo, lack autonomy and solidarity and the capacity to get there. So I go — not just! Like the student who interrupts Professor Shore, I wanna speak with Bifo — to tell him what else might be up.

Some highs of a precarious youth: Born in 1987 in Canada to white middle class parents, I am a prototypical Millennial or Gen Y’er or Gen I’er or Gen Me’er or “post-alphabetical” or “precarious” — whatever you want to call me. My name is Fiona. Often, this arrangement of letters — F-I-O-N-A — looks foreign to me, as do my face and body. Because I don’t feel like Fiona Duncan, not just. My name is a label meant to make me legible to others, like generational labels aim to. I know, I am more. One more: I feel fluid with screens. Some of my most solid childhood memories are from screens: watching *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and 90210 on a 13-inch CRT TV at 6; catching snippets of Cronenberg’s *Crash* at 10, describing it to a crowd at recess the next day; taking undressed selfies with a desktop digital camera at 12, sharing them on ICQ. These memories feel warm, they glow. They’re moments of comfort, exploration,

financial economy... is destroying intelligence, public schools, creativity, the environment, water! Everything has to be sacrificed to an abstract growth of money, of value, of nothing. This is a madness.” And on how, “this philosophy of the deregulated economy where everybody is demanded to give ceaselessly in order to survive,” is infecting to kill us. He’d go, “STOP WORKING NOW. START LIVING PLEASE.” And then there’d be questions, and that’s when things would get interesting; he’d be challenged, dialogue would create new meaning, clash and solidarity, perhaps a couple plans to save the world... This plan — evidently — hasn’t been enacted. Rather than work to make this happen, I’ve worked on paying my rent and utilities, on feeding and clothing myself, buying yoga, travel, and weed, the extras that keep me bright. The speaking tour I still stream in my mind’s eye, when stress hits. Maybe I’ll do it, maybe. I’ll find the time, in the future, or after I accept the end of it? For now, at least: I’ll mail Bifo this comic.

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