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Anticipationism (General Theory of Distraction)

Leonardo Caffo

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Within what looks very much like a tragedy, fragments of a comedy we call everyday life keep slipping through. Now approaching forty, I wander through the cities I'm forced to frequent, and the people around me have taken on the role of extras. Viral videos, songs of the moment, repeating memes. Meanwhile the world is collapsing under various names: Iran, Ukraine, Venezuela, Palestine.

My generation believed, for a while, that we could live beyond History. We were bored. We said: the big things are over. And so we produced radical, media-driven thoughts, almost always completely disconnected from reality.

We lived forms that our parents barely knew: suspended between an analog world that still held up and a digital one already devouring us. We spent hours in libraries, yet were already curious about the first Facebooks. Perhaps, all things considered, we brushed against something close to happiness: creative jobs (we managed some of them), low-cost flights to go anywhere, the feeling of being smarter and more mature

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than the others while we smoked in the cloisters of the now half-abandoned humanities departments.

Law, healthcare, wars, biopolitics brushed against us without ever really touching us. Until Covid we lived as though everything were lit by the glow of a personal novel in which each of us was the undisputed protagonist.

The real, Lacan said, arrives suddenly. It can take the form of a cop's baton at a checkpoint. For me it was something like that. For other friends who are no longer here it was cancer. For others still, grief. And for many now, it has become this total narcosis we're immersed in: the first true general destruction of the lives we inhabit.

Today no one seems to really understand what's happening. After years in which philosophy and sociology offered us grand narratives—communism, postmodernity, infosphere, speculative realism, marine creatures and asterisks to zero out pronouns—we find ourselves in widespread confusion. A return of the most reactionary right wings, the end of the revolutionary and hyper-moralist thoughts we had invested so much in.

We are the most successful (and most fucked) product of this generation: too emancipated for the old models, too frustrated for the new ones, too precarious for stability, too stable for the promised global dynamism.

The categories that nourished us—aesthetic ones disguised as moral—have finally caged us. Hordes of no-longer-kids with MoMA canvas bags found themselves facing structural precarity, rejected parenthood, psych meds started too early, cocaine flooding the bathrooms of our nightclubs, baseless lawsuits, a left that killed itself.

Parents dying at a distance, while dozens of glossy books explain speculative ecology or global feminism. Meanwhile the President of the United States is a predator running for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Again: immense confusion. It used to be fashionable to be queer; now it seems fashionable to rediscover the Celtic cross. In between, dazed, my peers swing between the vegetarianism they once imposed on themselves and the desire to just be rotten, but alive.

Someone told me, while I was trying to explain these things, that this is "Nietzsche's revenge and therefore human nature's." But to be children of the superman, attention would be required. Here instead I see only a general theory of distraction.

This imposed distraction serves to keep afloat a capitalism that no longer holds up, and to hide from us that concrete alternatives exist: old, unchanging ways of life we're not considering, preferring instead the final stupor of endless scrolling.

Mediterranean models, perhaps. Antarctic at times. Non-industrial, if possible. Models in which good and evil no longer face off as they taught us in our philosophy departments. Attentive models. Disconnected ones.

Lives in which we no longer have to "feel alive," but simply be alive. To live already as though the collapse has happened: turn off notifications, plant something in the little garden behind the house, talk to the neighbors instead of tweeting, keep a light on for whoever comes home late and doesn't know where to go.

Perhaps this is the next narrative we will witness: the sober anticipation of catastrophe, no longer shared with anyone, but built, brick by brick, in silence.