

very first attempt to expose the accident to come demonstrates the urgent need of establishing, in the twenty-first century, along the lines of the famous 'cabinets de curiosités' of the Renaissance,⁶ a MUSEUM OF THE ACCIDENT OF THE FUTURE.

5 The Future of the Accident

The world of the future will be an ever more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence.

Norbert Wiener

Nothing lost, nothing gained. If inventing the substance means indirectly inventing the accident, the more powerful and high-performance the invention, the more dramatic the accident.

And so the awful day comes when Progress in knowledge becomes unbearable, not only due to the various forms of pollution it creates, but due to its feats, the very power of its negativity.

This was confirmed for us throughout the twentieth century, with the race for nuclear and thermonuclear weapons that are ultimately unusable and of great concern to the protagonists of deterrence, *all-out* deterrence.

The very power of atomic weaponry in fact also flags the ultimate limitation of a power that suddenly morphs into powerlessness. In this instance, the accident is the panicking uselessness of this type of weaponry.

Rather than actually fighting, military commanders then engage in the imaginary of a 'wargame' that doesn't add up, where virtuality is merely the mark of the political inconsequence of nations, since the consequences no longer really matter. For they are at once too enormous to be seriously taken in and too appalling to be viably put to the test . . .

except by some lunatic, advocating the suicide attack against humanity.

On that score, let's hear what Friedrich Nietzsche had to say in his book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, written just after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870: 'A culture built on science must necessarily perish when it starts to become illogical, that is, to recoil before its [own] consequences. Our Art reflects this general crisis.'¹

In fact, if 'in tragedy the state of civilization is suspended,² the whole panoply of beneficial knowledge finds itself wiped out with it. In total war, the sudden militarization of science necessary to the presumed victory of the adversaries turns all logic and all political wisdom on its head, to the point where age-old *philo-sophy* is shunted aside by the absurdity of a *philo-folly* capable of destroying the knowledge accumulated over the course of centuries. 'Inordinately enhanced, human power then transforms itself into a cause of ruin,³ toppling the whole of the culture of nations into the vacuousness of causes that are lost, irremediably lost, in victory as in defeat, since we will not be able to disinvent a terrorist and sacrilegious knowledge produced by scientific intelligence.

And so, just as there are stormy patches in nature, there are stormy patches in culture and we would need a veritable 'meteorology' of invention to avert the storms of the artifice of Progress in knowledge, that genie that stokes the escalating extremism of the power of our tools and our substances and, with them, industrial and post-industrial accidents. We can't help but think here primarily of genetics and computer science, after the fallout from atomic progress, of which Chernobyl, in the wake of Hiroshima, has revealed to us the atrocious truth.

'It's amazing what those that can do anything can't do,' declared Madame Swetchine sometime in the nineteenth century.⁴ This aphorism sums up perfectly the paradox of the

twentieth century and its repeat revolutions, that were like so many weapons turned on the intelligibility of the world.

Today, at the very dawn of the twenty-first century, when much-vaunted globalization is nothing if not the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge – in other words, of the so-called 'information revolution' – the exterminator takes over from the predator, just as terrorism takes over from the original capitalism.

Since extermination is the illogical outcome of accumulation, the suicidal state is no longer exclusively psychological, associated with the mentality of a few disturbed individuals, but sociological and political. This has reached the point where the widespread accident, announced by Nietzsche, now incorporates this dimension of panic, whereby the philosophy of the Enlightenment bows down before the philosophy of magnitude. This is, in fact, the accident in *knowledge* that now rounds off the accident in *substances* deriving from technoscientific research.

In fact, if matter has three dimensions, mass, energy and information, then, after the long series of accidents in materials and energy over the past century, the time of the logical – and even biological – accident is upon us, with the teratological research of genetic engineering.

'The machine has declared war on God,' wrote Karl Kraus,⁵ you might remember, as the butchery of the First World War began. But what's the state of play today, with this globalization touted by the promoters of Progress?

A fruit of the telecommunications revolution, the globalization of knowledge has not only reduced the field of human activity to nothing thanks to the synchronization of interactivity. It also triggers a historic mutation in the very notion of accident.

The local accident, precisely located here or there, has been abruptly replaced by the possibility of a global accident that will involve not only 'substances' – the substance of the world

in the age of the real time of exchanges – but also the knowledge we have of reality, that vision of the world that our various branches of knowledge were, once, founded on.

And so, after the accident in substance, we are ushering in with the coming century an accident without parallel, an accident in the real, in space, in time as in substantial matter, which the cynics had no idea about but which the physicists of relativity introduced bit by bit, in the course of total war.

'Time is just an illusion,' declared Albert Einstein, during the period that divided the First World War from the Second. An accident in historical knowledge, in other words, in the perception of things, a veritable loss of the sense of reality – the fruit of a reality now spiralling off in accelerated flight, just like the galaxies in the expanding universe. Werner Heisenberg already foresaw the devastation such a loss would cause, fifty years ago, when he wrote: 'No one knows what will be real for people at the end of the wars now beginning.'⁶

In the end, after the implosion of the Cold War between East and West, globalization is above all a sort of 'voyage to the centre of the Earth' in the gloomy obscurity of a temporal compression that definitively locks down the habitat of the human race. Certain utopians were already calling this the sixth continent, though all it is is the hypercentre of our environment.

This hypercentre is at once origin and end of a world now foreclosed, where each and every one of us is endlessly pulled towards this central region, without expanse and without temporal extensor. And yet it is merely the outcome, the terminal, of this acceleration of reality that crushes everyone together, all five continents and all seven seas, and especially, the nations and peoples of the planet in its entirety.

Here we have a telluric compression of the history of humanity that, despite the ecologists, no seismograph is registering the magnitude of this cataclysm wherein everything is

telescoped, rammed into everything else at every instant, where all distances are reduced to nothing, obliterated by the accident of the real time of interactivity. And this earthquake affects the whole Earth, with events now nothing more than untimely and simultaneous accidents, at the surface of a celestial object crazily compressed where gravity and atmospheric pressure are further reinforced by the instantaneous synchronization of exchanges.

At this level of anxiety, ecology is less bound up with nature than with culture and the ethological catastrophes culture has in the works. In effect, with the *mise en abyme* of time ratios, lags and scales, the instantaneous elimination of any interval in the promotion of immediacy, this pollution of the distances of the life-size scale of the globe teaches us infinitely more than the pollution of the substances of nature about the calamity, the tragedy of future branches of knowledge. In the frightening compression of the far-flung extremities of a once-gigantic world towards the centre, the hypercentre of the only habitable planet in the solar system, 'Nature can have confidence in Progress; Progress will know how to avenge the affronts it has made it suffer.'⁷

By way of conclusion, let's ask ourselves three questions: Should science reassure? Should science, on the contrary, frighten? And, lastly, is science inhuman?⁸

So many inquiries that largely throw light on the famous 'crisis in Progress'; and also, every bit as much, on the crisis, in no way subsidiary, created by the recent mediatization of discoveries, this 'scientific expressionism' certain mad scientists have been frantically peddling. One such is the Italian gynaecologist, Severino Antinori, the 'Doctor Strangelove' of assisted procreation; another is university professor and cancer specialist, Friedhelm Hermann, accused, in the autumn of 1999, by a German commission tasked with tracking down laboratory fraud, of having doctored his team's results, thereby

triggering a veritable 'Chernobyl of science', according to the specialist press!⁹

We might recall, at this juncture, that the freedom of expression touted by the sensationalist press can never be the same as that of scientific research without sooner or later leading to the 'philofolly' of a science not only deprived of a conscience but deprived of meaning.

Atomic bomb yesterday, information bomb today and, tomorrow, genetic bomb?

In August 2001, before the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, Professor Antinori presented his project of bringing about the birth of some two hundred babies through reproductive cloning, promising the infertile 'parents' perfect children, even if it meant discarding the imperfect. What is at work here if not some kind of demiurgic insanity? Proof, if proof were needed, that when it comes to scientific issues, as elsewhere, the worst case scenario is sometimes a pretty safe bet.¹⁰

Radioactive fallout from Chernobyl, genetically modified organisms, reproductive human cloning following on from animal cloning – the list goes on. Scientific experts now find themselves smack-bang in the middle of controversies that are shaking up the dawning third millennium. This is behind the recent creation of agencies specializing in risk management in a bid to try and forecast the improbable or unthinkable in scientific and technical knowledge. For it is true that for some decades now, we have been confronted defencelessly by major risks that affect the biological and social balance of humanity.¹¹

Looked at from this particular angle, the 'accident in knowledge' is impressive not so much in terms of the number of victims but in the very nature of the risk run.

Unlike road, rail or air accidents, that risk is no longer quantifiable and statistically predictable; it has become unquantifiable and fundamentally unpredictable. This has reached the point of entailing the emergence of an unparalleled risk,

whose scope is no longer exclusively ecological, connected to the conditions of the surrounding human habitat, but eschatological, since what it attacks is the mind's ability to anticipate; in other words, it attacks rationality itself.¹²

'Ruin of the soul', wrote Rabelais about a science without a conscience. . . . And that is another way, now, of approaching the problems of the end of life at a time when the euthanasia of humanity is at issue as a fatal consequence of a shutdown, the *weight of place* which no one is turning a hair at.