

« **Multitude : Luigi Vitali in conversation with Yves Citton** »,  
*DUST Magazine*, Berlin, Seeds Project, 2014, p. 38-43.

## Yves Citton

### We need multitudes of mediartivists

Dust – *The term “multitude”, often used in the discussion and analysis of today’s societies, can give a good idea of who are we today: a plurality of interconnected individuals who, in order to cohabit in the same space, don’t really need to identify with shared limits, mutual will or beliefs, but rather with the ability to exchange goods among each other. In your opinion, what does the concept of multitude reveal about ourselves and the way we live?*

Yves Citton – The first thing I’d like to stress about the concept of “multitude” is that no-one can define it and appropriate it. So it is not up to me, nor anyone else, to say what the multitude is or isn’t. I use this word to refer to *a complex process of composition of forces among singular human beings who work in common*. You are right to stress that, contrary to the traditional use of “the people”, it does not imply that these human beings necessarily conform to a homogenizing model, which was traditionally provided within the frame of the Nation-State (*the American people, le peuple français, das deutsche Volk*). However, I believe there can be no “work in common” without sharing certain beliefs and mutual will, and the multitude sure goes beyond “the ability to exchange goods”: what is constantly exchanged, or rather “communicated” (put in common), are no so much goods as skills, knowledge, ideas, affects, hopes, fears, desires, interpretations, energies and, yes, mutual will and beliefs. The point is that all this emanates from the horizontal collaborations – the working-together, feeling-together, thinking-together – of singularities which can only develop their individuation through their work in common.

But again, the position of defining (from above) “what the multitude is” seems very problematic to me: we cannot “*com-prehend*” (which, etymologically, means “seizing together”, “containing within the scope of our two arms”) what the multitude is. As a process of composition of forces, it always *exceeds* what we can say and “comprehend” in it. Politics of and for the multitudes are *politics of exceedence*: they account for the fact that our working in common exceeds the financial accounting into which capitalism and orthodox economics translate (and mutilate) it. More to the point: no-one can explain *from above* this complex composition of forces. Antonio Negri constructed the notion of “multitude” from his reading of Spinoza’s *multitudinis potential* (the agency of the multitude), which was designed to refer to a *power from below*. Defining the multitude from an intellectual position of superiority is a contradiction in terms. Far from being able to define it, I can only observe, and be surprised by, what the multitude can do, which always exceeds what we think it can do. At best, I can try and “*under-stand*” it: “standing” within it, as a part of it, always surprised by its forces, and trying to make sense of its dynamics “from under”, from within its ranks (which are not “ranks”, but coagulations, conglomerations and networks).

Dust – *If we consider the various and distant manifestations which started around the world in the last few years, like the Arab spring, the episodes in Europe, the protests of the occupy movement or the ones in south America, we can see how their common feature was the participation of a varied multitude who didn’t really identify with political parties or ideology, but who expressed their discontent and who fought the current state of things. How would you describe the relationship between revolt and multitude? Do you see some new narratives emerging from those events?*

YC – My understanding of the multitude is that we cannot conceive of it as “an agent”. It is a process of composition of forces which develops constantly new forms of agency, due to changes in the technology, in knowledge, in social organization, in ecological circumstances, etc. – so I find it hard to think of it as an agent. Organized forms of agency need to be constructed within the multitude in order to impact socio-political developments with an intentional direction. And this is what we call “uprisings” (*soulèvements, sollevazione*). At certain historical junctures, large segments of the multitude “understand” each other and themselves in such a fashion that allows them to align their forces in order to push for a certain political agenda. The temporality of such alignments is multifarious – and this is why our journal is called *Multitudes* in the plural rather than in the singular. I don’t believe in “the multitude” in the singular, as an agent, because the process of composition of forces among human beings (and their institutions and organizations) is just too complex to be anything more than an abstraction. On the other hand, uprisings demonstrate the possibility for large segments of the multitudes to gather forces at punctual historical junctures; and some political organizations demonstrate the possibility to pursue this capacity to push historical change within a broader timeframe. It seems more useful to me to locate historical agents at the level of this multiplicity of (looser or tighter) organizations within the multitudes, rather than in “the multitude” itself.

This raises the truly important questions, that of the temporality, which I see as our main current political problem. As important, necessary, encouraging and inspiring as uprisings can be, they need to be both prepared and relayed by more stable forms of organization. In certain circles, the reference to “the multitude” has provided an easy but unrealistic cop-out of the necessity to think in terms of “organization”. But I think we can no longer afford this. Uprisings have their ground prepared by the slower and deeper work of institutions and organizations: in the case of the Tunisian Arab spring, this was done by the long resistance of the judicial sector and of trade unions. Uprisings are better positioned to generate lasting social change when they are supported by fairly stable forms of organization, which have prepared the ground for such changes in the minds of the multitudes. There are at least three temporalities to take into account here: *the instantaneity of the “event”*, very hard to predict and to control, which governs the brief moment of the uprising itself, a matter of hours and days; *the organizational time*, which counts in months and years, necessary to construct networks, build solidarities, trust, chains of prepared and coordinated reactions; and finally, *the long term of attitudes and habits*, which counts in decades, and slowly permeates people’s minds through the patient work of artists, teachers, thinkers, but which is the real goal of any revolution and progressive agenda. What we want is not just to occupy a square, nor even to bring our friend to the presidential palace, but to affect the way people perceive certain things and behave in their daily life. The fact that, over the past decades, in Western countries, gay and lesbian relationships have gone from a source of legal discrimination and social stigma to an overall tolerance, or the fact that women rights have gained so much ground over the past fifty years (although not enough, yet, of course) are major reasons for hope. They show that what really counts is not so much “the revolution” on public squares as the revolutions in people’s minds – although they often go hand in hand, but not always.

Our current challenge is not only to under-stand the multitudes in their present composition of forces and in their actual work in common, but also to help build more lasting organizations. This is the temporality in which progressive politics have been failing over the past decades. I feel very much in tune with *The Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, written last year by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, when they say that local uprisings will not suffice to put us in a position to face the challenges and to avoid the looming catastrophes of climate change. We also need to develop broader forms of organizations. Far from being incompatible, momentary (radical) uprisings and long-lasting (moderate) organizations are *complementary*, and equally necessary – allowing us to work in different modes of politics, each according to his or her singular complexion. Some people need “action”, they feel better when they can scream and shout in the street; others, like myself, are

pretty much afraid of violence, and prefer working in more conciliatory ways. But both are essential, at different moments or together, and need to be articulated, rather than opposed. Our main enemy is to be located in the belief that you have to choose between being a “radical” or a “reformist”: there is no reform without radical uprisings, but there are no lasting radical social change without a more moderate implementation of reforms. This is the new narrative I’d like to see emerge from the year ahead – and it needs to emerge pretty fast, because time is in very short supply in face of climate change and of the other socio-ecological damages we are causing to ourselves.

Dust – *From the 1950s on, the culture of the left, through Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno etc. was supporting the idea that Art provided the masses, in contemporary society, with a privileged access to genuine experience, to truly enjoy life and contemplate its meanings. Today, a few generations later, with the increasing extension of market dynamics in every form of communication, art included, how do you see the relationship between art and the multitude? Do you see different ways for the multitude to access to a so-called “genuine experience”?*

YC – Modernist art has focused a lot of its energy on “revolt”: the point was to challenge pre-existing norms, to provide and trigger an uprising for the intelligence and for the senses. But you are right to stress the fact that, in its highest accomplishments, it also provided an experience of genuine integration within a community of affects and sensations – in a rather paradoxical “consensus of dissent”, if you will. This is indeed very important. Whether it reaches “the masses” or not is more a matter of time, once again, than of strategy. Busloads of tourists now go to museums and enjoy works of modern art which were perceived as thoroughly elitist when they first appeared. In a parallel fashion to what I was referring to earlier, an art that was once generated as a form of violent uprising has contributed to a reform of our sensory expectations, and can be now perceived as soothing. I find it encouraging, rather than as a form of betrayal or trivialization. It was French philosopher Denis Diderot who wrote that “the multitudes are always right, in the long run”. Busloads of tourists enjoying the Impressionists, or Kandinsky, or Dubuffet, or Bill Viola, are something to rejoice about, not to look down to.

I would locate the relationship between art and the multitudes on two different, but again complementary, levels – but in both cases I would stress an essential link between art and media. If you agree to understand the multitudes as complex processes of composition of forces among singular human beings who work in common, then you cannot fail to see that what we call “media”, in the broadest sense, plays a crucial role in the “composition of forces” and in the ways through which we “work in common”. Whether I can skype with someone on the other side of the world, whether I watch Mexican telenovelas every day, whether I can see Chinese videos, hear African music, learn about revolts in Chiapas, blog about an Occupy movement – all of these uses of various media play a central role in the composition of forces among us, as well as in the very constitution of each of our singularities. It has probably always been the case, but it is certainly more true today than ever: art emanates from a reflexive attention devoted to the media as media. Then, if media are at the crux of our composition of forces, so are artistic practices.

In the modernist “revolt-oriented” vein, art can attempt to disrupt the dominant flows of information, images, sounds, ideas, discourses, affects, through mainstream media. This is the figure of *the artist as mediactivist* – and I would say it is our main hope for social change. We are currently going full speed ahead into a social and environmental catastrophe because of the way in which information, desires, fears are conveyed through a mediasphere that is almost totally controlled by the logics of capitalist profit. Even if the Internet allowed for countless wonderful alternative initiatives to emerge and become quite significant, the mass media are more than ever *the* main political battleground which needs to be targeted and radically transformed. This is a huge and dazzling task, and I for one have *no clue* how to do it.

In France, there is still a pretty strong tradition of street demonstrations, which is a great thing. When people are dissatisfied with a governmental policy, they gather and walk in Paris between Place de la République and Place de la Bastille, which of course is strongly rooted in a long revolutionary tradition. As joyful and pleasant as it may be, I see it as symptomatic that *none* of these demonstrations *ever* address the issue of media power. We need to demonstrate in the streets, of course, but rather than going from République to Bastille, we need to gather around the buildings of TF1 (the main French private TV channel) or France 2 (the main public channel), and peacefully block access to these massive factories of servitude. I am afraid the repression from political and economic powers would be much more violent and brutal – you can bet that even peaceful actions would right away be treated as “terrorism”: all the laws are already well in place for this – but that alone would show that we have struck a nerve. But blocking access to the buildings of mainstream media is only a most primitive and insufficient first step – for people like myself who have no clue how to do mediactivism in a more inventive and constructive fashion.

That’s precisely why we need artists, myriads of artists, to come up with ideas, tricks, concepts, experiments, that would infiltrate viral operations within the circulation of mainstream media. I would call them “*mediartists*”, in order to express the intimate complementarity between mediactivism and artistic invention. There are so many amazing forms of creations, displacements, bricolages, conceptualizations performed in art schools, in galleries, in museum exhibitions, in concerts, etc., there are so many amazing people spending so much time posting amazing things on the web, why couldn’t we focus these efforts on the task of penetrating, invading, disrupting, and re-appropriating mainstream media? There is a great tradition of hoaxes performed by people like the Yes Men or Luther Blisset, for instance, which needs to be developed and intensified. What if *How virally to infiltrate the mass media?* was the main requirement for *all* graduation projects in *all* art schools? Wouldn’t that be likely to produce multitudes of great ideas and plans for action? What we need most urgently today are multitudes of mediartists, conceiving myriads of ways to reconnect the multitudes with themselves through artistic interventions on the mass media.

Dust – *In your book, L’avenir des humanités, reflecting about humanist studies, you focus on the power of interpretation as a fundamental tool to question and reformulate our present and the conception we have of it. Can we see interpretation as the healing process of a generation who wants to reformulate its relationship with the world? In order to avoid misleading interpretations and revisionisms, do you see humanist studies as the only guarantors of this process?*

YC – I see the Humanities as the equivalent of the “reformist” side of political change I mentioned earlier. We need revolted and revolting artists to upset our modes of perceiving, thinking, speaking, and we need the Humanities to help translate their momentary and eventful disruptions into more stable new ways of perceiving, thinking and speaking. In order to explain what I mean, I believe it is helpful, although a very rough simplification, to contrast “reading” and “interpreting”, even if only as polarities within a continuum. In a very limited sense, *reading* can be conceived as a form of decoding: you have the code, you receive the message, you decipher the message, you get what the message was meant to communicate, and you move on. This is what we do most of the time with pictures and written texts, when we read emails, street signs, newspapers, etc. The ideal form of reading is provided by bar-codes: all the information fits in a tiny space, and it can be identified free of error in a fraction of a second. If we could read the newspaper in the same fashion, and absorb all the information it contains in a second, it would be very handy. But, of course, it is impossible. There is no “pure reading”, in this narrow sense, among humans. For better or for worse, we always have to interpret what we read.

*Interpreting* an image, a sound, a text, consists in having to perform a certain work of adaptation (framing, contextualization, comparison, recategorization) in order to extract meaning from a sign. We are led to interpret something when we fail to read it: our pre-existing codes do not work properly in order to make sense of what we perceive. Since the world is complex and

constantly changing, we need to interpret very often (but not all the time). I define the Humanities as *reflexive practices of interpretation*. When we study philosophy, or literature, or history of art, or sociology, or anthropology, we have to reflect upon ways of interpreting fragments of reality, human works and behaviors. More precisely, we have to interpret the ways in which other humans read and interpret their reality.

So, to go back to our earlier points, mediartists are needed to make “unreadable” the more or less poisonous stuff that flows through mass media within the currently dominant modes of circulations and codes of reading. They have to produce messages, images, sounds, discourses, ideas, which communicate something (an affect, a surprise, an intuition, an idea) helping readers to become interpreters. This can be done through disruption, but not necessarily. I have the greatest admiration for people like the Wachowski brother and sister, or for a band like Radiohead, who manage to infiltrate into the mainstream movies and songs which do make us better interpreters – by making us see mainstream media as a matrix, or by making us feel the unsustainable nature of our relation with our environment and with each other. Can you be “revolutionary” while making movies for Hollywood or while being on top of the charts? This is a misleading question. You certainly are a more efficient mediartist if you manage to produce a meaningful interpretive experience enjoyed by ten million people than by a happy few of half a dozen in an art gallery – even if, once again, my problem is not with those who perform in intimate circles (which can sometimes have the strongest impact with time), but with those who would force us to choose between “real” revolutionary art and mass media bastardization.

The Humanities are there to accompany the work of mediartists, past and present. Violent disruptions need to be translated into their more subtle implications and more lasting consequences. New experiences need to be prepared by broadening people’s expectations, by strengthening their tolerance for temporary frustration. In my view, the point is not, however, “to avoid misleading interpretations and revisionisms”, nor to establish “the humanist studies as the only guarantors” of proper interpretations, as you suggest in your question. Interpretations are always conflictual, because they always emanate from different social positions: no two single persons can see the world from the exact same position. So interpretations are endlessly animated by conflicts of interpretations, through endless displacements, which together carry very broad, even if imperceptible, evolutions. An interpretation stands when it is accepted, and only because it is accepted, i.e., because it manages to translate pre-existing signs into a message that appears to be helpful. Now of course, there may be bad interpretations: a lot of people, a few centuries ago, interpreted diseases and religious texts as proving that witches were causing illnesses and social evils, and they drew (or accepted) the conclusion that burning women would help to solve these illnesses and social evils. They were wrong, it was a terrible interpretation, and it needed to be denounced and fought against. However, interpretations had to be attacked with other interpretations – never with “the truth”. Scientists, like mediartists, are merely interpreters, and translators – not the voice of a superior God of Truth.

Dust – *Since you talk about translation, how do you see the relationship between the evolution of the language and the role of the individual in the society? How is this evolution affecting our ability to understand, emancipate ourselves and establish relations? Can we say that our language tends to evolve in a direction that serves more the goods and their exchange, rather than the people and their needs? Isn’t it the main risk the new generation should be aware of?*

YC – The so-called “natural” languages (English, French, Bengali) are our oldest, and probably still today our most decisive, media, so they are likely to be at the core of most mediartists’ work and thinking, although choreography, images or music can obviously do entirely without words. Our common language both reflects and informs the multiples ways in which we “work in common”. Since it was progressively carved and shaped by the way in which we must collaborate with each other, our language knows much, much more than any one of us ever

will. One of the main tasks of education, from primary school to the PhD, is precisely to become more intimately and more finely acquainted with the wealth of meanings and nuances accumulated in our language over the years and centuries. So if our language evolves towards a certain commercialization, it means that there is a certain necessity for it, which we have to understand, even if we may want to fight against it – like people fought against demonology, which led women to be burnt at the stake under the accusation of witchcraft. The main danger behind this trend of the commercialization of language is inherent in the movement of a certain modernity: the movement towards an ever deeper individualization of our behavior. We enjoy this individualization when it means that we don't have to ask our parents, our priests, our village chiefs, for the right to live in couple with this or that person (including same-sex partners). And we should certainly defend these forms of emancipation and freedom. Yet, individualization also pushes us to believe that we are “free” of further duty when we pay the amount of money written on the price tag of the goods and service we buy – and this is a terrible illusion. A lot of our “work in common” is not rewarded in the individualized price tag we pay as individual consumers.

We need both scientists and mediartists to reform our worldviews, our perceptions, our accounting systems, our vocabulary, in order to account for the productivity of the commons (social and natural), and for what is due to it. My hope is that the new generations are becoming more aware of it, and are currently developing new perceptions and new vocabularies accordingly. In this domain, I see the main common task of the Arts and of the Humanities as providing *an education of attention*. Before we can name anything, we need to notice its presence. In French, the word *attention* refers both to a capacity to *notice* something (*être attentif*) and to a capacity to *care* for it (*être attentionné*).

Dust – *There is a lot of talk and focus on attention nowadays, as we are encouraged to process more and more information, but our capacity for concentration is less and less engaged. How do you perceive the enlarging gap between attention and concentration, in relation with the control exerted by power over the multitude?*

YC – In my new book, entitled (in French) *Attention Ecology*, I try to show why we need to evolve from an “attention economy” towards an “attention ecology”. People have been talking a lot about attention economy since 1996. The idea is interesting and basically true: as more and more cultural goods (music, videos, films, articles, books, TV programs, etc.) become available for a very low cost (if not for free) on the Internet, the main form of scarcity we encounter is no longer located on the side of production, which is where economics has always located it, but on the side of reception. We can produce many cultural goods in superabundance, but we can't find the time to consume them. Living in what Herbert Simon called “information-rich societies” should change everything in our economic models, but we have so far failed to draw conclusions from this massive upheaval.

For instance, a professor of (orthodox) economics in Zurich, Josef Falkinger, shows that, since we live in an information-rich economy, where much more information is provided than our capacity for attention can manage, all of our pricing system is biased. Mainstream economics assumes that the consumers benefit from the available information to make the best possible choice; if attention, rather than information, is the real scarcity, then the information may be there, but we cannot benefit from it. More importantly, what reaches our attention is not relevant information, but commercial ads. Falkinger shows very convincingly that taking the attention economy into account upsets all the models currently used by mainstream economics. Advertisement appears as a distortion of competition: when the EU forces France or Italy or Greece to dismantle their State agencies in the name of “free and undistorted competition”, it should instead ban commercial advertisement altogether – which would be a great progress indeed! – or at least tax it quite heavily, as Falkinger suggests.

My point, however, is that attention is not merely an economic problem, but rests at the very core of our environmental challenges. For at least two reasons. First, we are currently failing to address issues like climate change, or soil depletion, or biodiversity, or nuclear contamination, because our mediatic systems fail to direct our attention towards what really matters to us collectively (and trans-generationally). So it is due to a failure of our collective attention if we mess up our planet for generations and generations to come. Second, these mediatic systems themselves should be conceived in terms of a common environment, rather than in terms of a communication network: they do not simply provide information through selected channels; we are immersed in their affective and aesthetic meshwork, like we are immersed in our lifeworld. We must learn to take care of them like we are (much too slowly) learning to take care of our bio-physical environment. We must be (better) attentive to our mediatic environment in order to be able to become more attentive to our bio-physical environment. These are the two parallel goals of an attention ecology.

And of course, mediartists and practitioners of the Humanities have a central role to play in this process. An attention ecology needs to be articulated on at least three levels. At the first level, that of *collective attention*, we need to intervene forcefully and/or virally in the media systems that condition our attention, and this is what I referred to earlier in terms of mediartivism per se. The second level, of *joint attention*, is defined by the co-presence of human beings whose attentions directly influence each other. If you suddenly look intensely behind me, I will instinctively turn my head around to see if something important or threatening is not happening behind my back. Joint attention plays a crucial role in conversations, in classrooms, in performance art: our experience is crucially shaped by what (and how) the others who surround us pay attention to. We learn to become intelligent and social human beings by tuning our attention in and out of other people's attention, whether at the level of collective or of joint attention. As anthropologist Tim Ingold has eloquently demonstrated, the most important things we learn are skills (rather than knowledge or information), and skills are learned (usually in physical presence) through an education of attention.

At the third level, that of *individual* (or rather *individuating*) *attention*, I as a subject face an object of attention (a flower, a journal, a screen). This is what the neurosciences study, often neglecting how much of our individual attention is conditioned by collective and joint attention. Interpretive skills are fueled by a certain quality of attention, made of a very complex mix of concentration and distraction (as in the case of the "floating attention" developed by psychoanalysts). Many aesthetic experiences require that type of interpretive attention, which is far from innate – it needs to be cultivated, and once again, this is mostly what we need the Humanities for: to become more finely skilled in enjoying aesthetic experiences, in order to become more intelligently skilled in interpreting our interactions with the natural and social world.

Your question was about concentration, distraction, our chronic state of information overload and the power exerted over our attention. An attention ecology needs to stress two assertions, which seem contradictory, but which we must defend in parallel. First, we must acknowledge the fact that our individual attention is almost totally conditioned by the social and technical mediatic systems which govern our collective attention, as well as by the affective pressures which structure our joint attention. This is necessary in order to break away from the individualistic methodology of many social sciences (like economics), and from the individualistic ideology at large, which claims that each individual is "free to choose" (to repeat Milton Friedman's book title). This (generally implicit) statement of abstract freedom legitimizes the domination of the market over other forms of interactions, as well as the pseudo-democratic political systems in which we live – whereas in fact these systems deserve to be called *mediarchies*, the domination (*archè*) of the media, more accurately than "democracies", the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*).

If I go back to your question, "power" is exerted over the multitude by having it believe it freely and individually chooses what it pays attention to – which is an illusion since we collectively and individually pay attention to what our environment conduces us to pay attention to. But I don't really subscribe to this use of "power" in this case, as if "power" was transcendently separated

from “us”, the multitudes. “Power”, here, is nothing other than the structure of circulation of information, images, sounds, discourses, affects, values, money, attention – i.e., the mediasphere itself. Of course, some people profit from a particular structure of circulation much more than others, and you may want to identify them as “(the) power(s) that be”. And it may be useful to denounce them (even if “they” may include, sometimes, some of “us”!) as class enemies, or as exploiters, or as obstacles to necessary transformations. But I’d rather say, for my part, that the enemy is to be located in *the dynamics of the system*, rather than in its operators.

In order not to be trapped in a fatalistic acceptance of the current system, however, we also need to make an apparently contradictory assertion: *Yes I can change the mediasphere through the agency of my individual attention!* I can turn off my cell phone when I go to a lecture, a movie or a show. I can turn it off a whole day, I order not be distracted. This is up to me! Here you should object: Is it really up to me? Of course things are not that simple. I, Yves Citton, can turn off my phone a whole day, or a whole week, if I want. But that’s because I am lucky enough to have a stable job as a professor: the people I tend to communicate with can usually wait a few days for my answers without much damage. If I was looking for a job, and waiting for potential employers to call me, I could *not* turn off my phone so easily...

So obviously we are not equal in the attention ecology, as it currently works. Nevertheless, each of us always has some margin of agency, if not on what she does or doesn’t pay attention to at each moment, at least on how s/he organizes his/her attentional environment for the future. My freedom is never to be located in my actual reaction to a stimulus, but in the way in which I try to affect my environment in order control its future stimuli and their impact on me. We must speak about “attention ecology” precisely because our (attentional) freedom is to be located in our current capacity to modify our future environment. So we need multitudes of mediartists and practitioners of the Humanities to help us reflect upon our attentional environments, in order to alter and improve them.

Dust – *Let’s talk about myths. You talk about a current “mythocracy”, in which myths, with their ability to evoke emotions and with their simple storytelling, are tools in the hands of power, used to program people’s opinions and to domesticate their reactions. For our part, we don’t think modern myths conveyed by the media are traps elaborated from a conspiracy. We believe they originate from ourselves, they are vivid and clear representations of the basic values on which our individual reality is based. More than a form of control imposed from above, they are rather honest (and sad) manifestations of what we are and of what matters to us, they are stories in which people like to identify because they manage to express our perceptions of the world and of our place in it. What is your conception of the risks of modern myths? How are they related with power and with us? Can there be “strong myths”, able to give us the tool to understand ourselves better, not as modern consumers, but as human beings?*

YC – I couldn’t agree more. Actually I wrote my book *Mythocratie* precisely to make the point you just expressed very well. My book was a response to another book published a couple years earlier, entitled *Storytelling. The Machine Which Fabricates Tales and Formats Minds*, by Christian Salmon. What you are criticizing here is Salmon’s argument, which equates storytelling with manipulation, and presents it exclusively as a tool in the hands of the dominant power. While I acknowledged that narratives can be used for any forms of purpose, including terrible ones, my main point was that the power to tell stories is as essential to emancipatory politics as it is to social control. This will not surprise many people in the English-speaking world, since many books, like Francesca Polletta’s *It Was Like A Fever*, have well illustrated and demonstrated how storytelling is used by unionists or by grassroots activists to mobilize energy for political organizations and for uprisings. So when I write about a mytho-crazy, I want to stress the power (the Spinozist *potentia*) inherent in myths.

Now, I use the word “myth” with a very large meaning: I go back to the Greek *mythos*, which can mean a simple word, as well as a plain story, or what we now call a (foundational) myth. To me, for example, the word “crisis” – even if it is only one word and not a story, nor even a sentence – is a myth, a poisonous one in this case. When you say that we are in a “crisis”, you implicitly tell a story, a plot, which unfolds in at least three acts: 1° things used to go well; 2° something happened and we now are in trouble; 3° if we manage to pull ourselves together, we’ll go back how things were and should be. I was born in the 1960s and since I pay attention to the news, since the 1970s, I hear everybody say we are in a “crisis” (energy crisis, unemployment crisis, financial crisis, dot.com crisis, bank crisis, debt crisis, etc.). This is a myth that keeps us down. It makes us believe a number of deceptive things: 1° that it used to go well (which, if you dig a little under a very selective memory, is very doubtful); 2° that we should do our best to return to that long lost Golden Age; 3° that the current state of things is only temporary; and 4° that if we patiently wait, things will improve again. We have to uproot this myth, by refusing to use this word and by denouncing those who do. If a crisis has been permanent for 40 years, it is no longer a crisis, it is a permanent state. Neoliberal capitalism as such is a permanent state of crisis: it needs us to believe that the crisis, that it is in itself, is only temporary, and it uses the word-story-myth of “crisis” to keep us in this daydream.

But the Arab Spring, or the Occupy movements are also built on myths, which they spread and perpetuate – for the better in this case. A poor street vendor, if he is drawn to the brink by poverty, oppression and humiliation, can trigger a revolution by setting himself on fire; young folks can mobilize almost instantly through our new digital media and social networks; the masses can join them in the streets; and tyrants can be kicked away! This is a great story, an extremely “strong myth”, as you say. It helps us understand ourselves, not as consumers, but as human beings and as political agents. It radiated to Egypt, Libya, Syria, etc. My point with these two examples, “crisis” and “the Arab Spring”, is that the power of the myth (*mytho-crazy*) is not good or bad in itself. It can be mobilized for the best and the worst causes.

*Dust – Don’t you think that the new generation should be more bold and fight to engage a deep reconsideration of the role of the self within society, and of the role of mankind in the world. Shouldn’t we mobilize new, sharp, profound myths, and passionate skills of storytelling, in order to generate a meaningful and inspiring relationship between the objects, facts, people, places, and especially between the self and the “whole”? This could draw on scientific and physical knowledge, but also on spiritual intuitions and on emotions, in order to reinvent a new conception of what is true, of what is good for us, of new limits and of new values. We need myths to define our time and our consciousness. What’s the hope for the new generation to elaborate a basic structure and narration in which the plural multitude can find its own tools, can find guidance, can find a true self?*

YC – Here again, I fully agree with your position. I would describe myths (stories, narratives) as condensers of attention. Our world is almost infinitely complex; so many big and small things can affect our fate, individually and collectively, that it is daunting and practically impossible to get a grip on all these things. A story is a “small scale model” (*un modèle réduit*) of some part of reality and history, which we can vicariously explore from the inside (through the attention and emotions of a character or narrator). It helps us figure out, in simplified sketches, forms of causality which are much too complex and mind-boggling to be understood at the 1:1 scale. So, yes, it is the very definition and function of a narrative to help us figure out relationships between objects, facts, peoples, causes and effects, parts and the whole, the self and the world. The reduction in complexity can be very brutal (as in the case of a simple word like “crisis”) or the narrative itself can become as complex and mind-boggling as life itself (as in Proust’s *La Recherche du temps perdu* or in a TV series like *The Wire*).

Your question raises an important point however: can we (you, me, you and I together) “reinvent a new conception of what is true and good”? Can we generate myths, purely out of our imagination? I am a little skeptical about such wishful hopes and claims. I believe powerful myths *come to us*, as much as we produce them. I don’t think Mohamed Bouazizi decided to create or to become a myth. It came to him, certainly with a lot of pain and suffering, and eventually death. Powerful myths are always “transindividualistic”: they belong in the relationality which generates our social life, and some of us are sensitive enough, intelligent enough, daring enough, fortunate or unfortunate enough to act upon them. This can go as far as setting oneself on fire. More commonly, it means trying to make sense of some part of reality by attempting to tell it to someone, to express what it means, to describe how it came about. This narrative drive obviously plays a crucial role, but it only elaborates on a bit of reality, on an intuition, on a feeling, on an image that was already there. So mediartists can collaborate to producing myths at all levels of their work: taking a picture can be a crucial moment of this elaboration of a bit of reality into a powerful myth; sending that picture, or that bit of video footage, through a certain network of friends can be another decisive moment; seeing this footage and finding words to express the feelings it triggers in us can be a turning point; imagining a story seems to be the true moment of storytelling, but it is only one moment within a very long collective chain of elaboration. And the mythmakers are to be seen in the photographer, as well as in the broadcaster, no less than in the storyteller.

My point is that strong myths are better generated by attentive observation of reality than by the creative spontaneity of the imagination. The more it goes, the more I feel how unimaginative our human imagination tends to be. When new things are “invented”, they tend to be “discovered” by careful observation of bits of concrete reality, rather than dreamt up by people who closed their eyes and let their fancy fly freely. The highest challenge of emancipatory narratives, in my view, is for them to stick as closely as possible to the model of the documentary in cinema: just make yourself sensitive to what is right under our eyes but that we fail to see; don’t accept the easy solutions provided by your imagination; mobilize the supra-human sensitivity developed by the technical apparatuses at your disposal (cameras, microphones, recording machines, algorithms); observe more attentively the minute details of reality in order to find the answers to your question; sensory data will always be more rich, more inspiring, more true, more effective than the concept or fancy what your poor imagination can come up with.

This attention can be turned toward the outside world, but also to your inner feelings. At each stage of the chain of elaboration I mentioned earlier, people react on the base of what they feel, “on their spiritual intuitions and on their emotions”, on their “conception of what is true, of what is good for them, of new limits and of new values” which are emerging through their collective production of new myths. And, to go back to a point I made earlier on, it is mostly through myths (fictions, narrations, biographies, films, fairy tales, short stories, anecdotes) that human beings construct their perceptual habits and norms: this is the stable ground which, in the long run, conditions people to feel that something is acceptable or not (same-sex marriage), heroic or despicable (freedom fighting/terrorism), good or bad (eating animals), just or unjust (not repaying your debt).

*Dust – The coming generation needs to reformulate a connection of the individual with him- or herself, and a wider idea of the whole, not just based on mathematic scientific notions but on narratives that can shed light on the meaning of our lives and of living together. We need myths in order to put ourselves in a network of meaningful connections, to avoid the tendencies of ego, its narrow interests, to formulate a new and strong sense of direction, a new orientation, based on inner need, truer self, compassion and sharing. No movement, states or parties can define who we are. To change things, we don't need anything else but to change ourselves. If the enemy of the multitude is an abstract form of power that does not have a physical entity and physical location, then that power is inscribed within us, and that's where we have to dismantle it. We see myth, in this case, as the language able to inweave a new meaningful reality and subvert the logic of power.*

*A narration able to give us a more truthful and more inspiring orientation, and make us more aware of ourselves, and of our place in the world.*

YC – I too believe that narratives are the most efficient instrument to shape our sense of orientation. I often describe narratives as a “value reprocessing plant”. When you see the first image of a movie or a TV series, when you open a novel, when you hear the first words of a tale, you enter into the story with your pre-existing values. You believe this is good, just, heroic, and that is bad, unfair, cowardly. As you are immersed in the plot, you import these values in the situation in which the protagonists and/or the narrator find themselves caught in. As the plot unfolds, your values are being put to the test. Will what you originally thought to be good prove useful and efficient, as you hope, or not? Will what you thought of as “moral” prove to have immoral consequences? Just like polluted water goes through a reprocessing plant to be retreated, your values are reprocessed by the unfolding of the narrative. In most cases, when you see a Hollywood movie, good guys do good things and end up rewarded for it with a happy ending. But things are never that simple. Most mainstream fictions tend to strengthen dominant values on the whole, but they may shatter them punctually, in one scene or another. It is through such infinitesimal readjustments that a population shapes its collective values – and storytellers, mythmakers, artists play the most crucial role in this process, as important as judges, priests, economists and lawmakers.

You say that we need new myths “to avoid the tendencies of the ego”, and to give more power to compassion. I agree, but I would say that any story plays on the tendencies of the ego and on its sense of compassion. We pay attention to stories because our ego is built upon and nourished by constant exchanges between our attention to ourselves and our attention to the attention of others. Our awareness, our conscience, our mind are nothing else but the subjective expressions of the attentive relations we maintain with others. So, like you, I see the main task of emancipatory myths, in today’s world, as that of attacking and corroding the individualizing myths which make us believe, and up to a certain point feel, that we are isolated individuals. This “abstract form of power that is inscribed within us”, I see it very much as individualism itself. Now, it is very difficult to “dismantle it”, and maybe especially for artists, because we are so used to think of agency in terms in individual action or creation. And obviously, we cannot “go back” to the age of epic narrations, when whole nations were portrayed as agents of history (the Greeks in the *Iliad*, the Romans in the *Aeneid*). We have to invent post-ethnic, post-national, post-ideological and post-individualistic agencies... With so many “post-”, it is a huge challenge!

As you point very clearly in your question, it is a matter “orientation”, and of “making ourselves more aware of ourselves, and of our place in the world”. I would stress three important aspects of your formulation. You expressed this in the first person of the plural, which is crucial: we have to narrate stories where, even if “I” am alone in my head as a reader, as a spectator, or as a player of video game, I am led to feel that “we” are the real agents inside of or behind or under anything “I” do. Second, you make it a problem of “orientation”, and that’s exactly what I have been trying to describe in several books. My generation is completely disoriented, but we pretend not to notice, so we continue to pontificate and to distribute blames and condemnations as if we had any credibility left. Although everything was in place since the 1970s for us see the ecological mess piling up and threatening to self-destroy, we have not been able to reorient our social developments to prevent that self-destruction. On the whole, we let a pseudo-science (mainstream economics) provide orientation from above with totally abstract and unrealistic maps (whose magnetic North was given by the highly defective calculation of GDP growth), and we closed our eyes and shut our attention to all the warning signals that were flashing from within our daily life experience.

So nothing disgusts me more than fifty- or sixty-year olds pontificating, and arrogantly describing the youth as being distracted, superficial, narcissistic, apolitical, illiterate, and so on – which one hears all the time, in France at least. Who are we to blame younger generations? What have we done, except let a most predictable and totally irresponsible socio-ecological mess accumulate to the point of threatening the living conditions of countless generations to come? A new

sense of orientation has to be built, urgently, *both* from below, from our immediate surroundings, here and now, *and* within a necessary global perspective, because we cannot prevent major destruction without collaborating at the planetary scale.

The third aspect of what you said that I want to point concerns the expression “our place in the world”, where every word is problematic, and has to be reconstructed... Not “my” place, but “our” place. But who are “we”? And what exactly is a “place”? Is a Facebook page “a place”? Why not? Do I have only one “place” in the world, when people chat with me, read my posts and send me pictures from another continent? And what do we mean by “the world”? Can there be only one world, when each of us has so many types of places and modes of location? Can we pretend there are several worlds, when the coal burnt in Germany or in China affects temperature in Africa, and when hamburgers eaten in London destroy forests in Brazil? I follow anthropologist Tim Ingold when he describes storytelling as a way to inhabit our world by an activity of wayfaring: we dwell in a place, we inhabit it by the paths we trace in it, which are like lines, and it is the weaving of these lines which give meaning to our life. Living and storytelling are both forms of wayfaring which construct society by weaving our path with and around other paths. It may be very helpful, at certain junctures, to have a map – a view from above, a theory, a philosophy – in order to better understand where we are and where we could be heading. But orientation is a process, a constant adjustment to our surroundings and to our fellow agents: it is more a matter of attention and care than a matter of calculation and method. And somehow I feel – or at least I want to believe – that younger generations are much more skilled at this process of orientation than my generation was. So, if you want to be kind and if you think it may be useful, listen to us because, in spite of our deep disorientation, some of us may have accumulated some experience and knowledge that can serve you punctually. But you know better than trusting what we may say.