

The New Politics of New Media

Technology is at the core of our relation to the world. This claim tends to be overlooked today, even though it has taken a major part in numerous aspects of modern life. In the West, the question of the essence of technology was first sorted by Greek philosophy, leaving it almost untouched until Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology* which led to a profusion of works on the topic ever since. Technology can be said to have an impact on essential domains of human life: from politics and culture to aesthetics and philosophy. Yuk Hui follows Stiegler by stating that "technology is the first philosophy". He adds: "Philosophy has been always conditioned and called forward by technological conditions of its epoch" (Lovink & Hui, 2019). We will come back to this point later. The point that I would like to stress here is the apparent centrality of technology in humanity's relation to the world.

In this essay, I am going to attempt providing key elements that will help us understand the extent of this centrality. Throughout this paper, I will engage in a systematic explanation, comparison, and critical analysis of concepts in order to develop my assessment.

First, I am going to attempt characterizing the couple formed by humans and technology, notably through the concept of memory. Secondly, I will reflect on technology in relation to time and capitalism. Third, I am going to detour through Simondon's theory of individuation and propose an understanding of technology through this lens. Then, I will make an account of the relation between technics and culture, with a reflection on aesthetics. Finally, I will shortly reflect on the implications of the previous in relation to power in 21st century Media.

The coupling of Humans and Technology

Greek mythology depicts technology as a gift granted to humanity following a mistake, the "fault" of Epimetheus as Stiegler puts it, that both grants our species a crucial advantage in the animal kingdom and leads to our demise. The fire of Gods, *tekhnê*, or the personified spirit of art, craft and technical skill, can be perceived as the "mainspring of hominization, its condition and its fate" (Stiegler and Ross, 2018, 37). Indeed, a study published in 2003 suggests that the mastery of fire, a technical skill that has been passed on through generations, has played a major role in the development of the human brain through an induced change in nutrition (Milton, 2003). Therefore, through this lens, technology is not only our offspring, our creation to play the game of life, that is, survival, but also our condition as complex organic beings.

In around 300 years since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom, technology has made a giant leap forward in its development. This rapid change helps us characterize with more clarity the effect of technology on the environment. Nature taken as a "standing-reserve" changes completely humans' relation to their world. The machine of technological 'progress' that started running with the triumph of reason during the Enlightenment, and that has fuelled technological development until today seems to lead us to the demise of our species. Macron's famous "Make our Planet Great Again" speech in 2017 is not without irony, since it clearly expresses the symbolic merging of our species with the physical and chemical environment we live in. According to this narrative, our planet and our species are one. Moreover, it is not humanity and its current mode of existence that should be preserved, but "the planet". Humanity as "master and owner of nature", following Descartes' formulation, has finally realised itself (Descartes, 2017, 24). We live in a "new world" that humanity has created. And this new world seems to be auto destructive.

This assessment may result in a technophobic/technophilic conceptualisation of technology. This conception induces to take sides, for or against technology, stressing its blessings or burdens more according to subjective interests. In a chapter titled *The Judgment of Thamus*, Postman draws upon the story of the God Theuth presenting to king Thamus the art of writing to reflect on a technological society. Theuth saw in writing an improvement of wisdom and memory for the people of Egypt, contrary to the king, who pointed out the inability of the creator to properly judge "the good or harm which will accrue to those who practice it"

(Postman, 1993, 4). The king makes a distinction between recollection and memory. According to him, relying on this new technique would instead render the people forgetful because they would cease to exercise their memory. Here, we can point out a difference in the conception of memory that Plato developed, and which Stiegler will use later on to define his conception of technology. This difference is the one between hypomnesis - the technical exteriorization of memory - and anamnesis - the embodied act of remembering (Stiegler, 2010, 64).

The technical exteriorization of memory allows to historicize it in different "epochs of grammatization". This term, coming from Derrida, corresponds to "the exteriorization of memory in the form of discrete marks, traces, or *grammé* that forms the hypomnesic milieu for anamnesis" (Stiegler, 2010, 66). In other words, memory is exteriorized in the form of *grammé* that in turn acts as a prosthesis against humans' retentional finitude. Moreover, these externalized traces come to constitute the milieu in which further anamnesis will take place. There is therefore a continuity in history, where the past serves the present and future. Stiegler identifies various epochs from the stone tool to digitization and the Internet. This conceptualization of technics and technologies as the result of a historical process through the exteriorization of memory hints at the close relationship between technics and time.

For Stiegler, a technique is fundamentally an "objectivation", that is, a spatialisation of meaning. Writing is taken as an example of this objectivation in the form of inscriptions. Because they are decipherable by a group of people, they create a community of "users-producers" who share the same mode of making-sense and opens a "public space of meaning" (Lyotard, 2018 53-54). Also, writing using letters of the alphabet, pictograms and even emojis must appear in space in order to make sense to the human mind. As a result, inscriptions are filled with meaning and, due to their lasting nature, "retain the sign of the past event, or rather produces it as available memory, as presentable, as updatable" (Lyotard, 2018, 54). Technics can therefore be understood as a trace of memory as recollection, an hypomnemata, that has an influence on future anamnesis.

Technology, Time, and Capitalism

Lyotard builds up on Stiegler's work and distinguishes three aspects of this *effet-mémoire* of the technological inscription and associates them to corresponding syntheses of time. In this sense, he links *frayage* (a term borrowed to psychology corresponding to the facilitation of a process due to its iteration), *balayage* and *passage* respectively with habit, recollection, and anamnesis (Lyotard, 2018, 54). A habit, according to the author, is an energetically stable apparatus that structures a type of behaviour in a given situation. The stability of this apparatus results in a saving of energy when the behaviour is repeated. The author notes that former cultures held a number of habits, of facilitation or *frayage* that included geographical and chronological elements. However, digital technologies have disrupted them. The quasi-instantaneity of transmission of data together with their independence from the location and moment of their occurrence makes them *telegraphiable*. This aspect leads to a phenomenon of de-temporalisation and delocalisation of *frayages*, which asks the question of a hegemonic teleculture. The inscription mode of this teleculture produces a type of memorisation that is detached from previous conditions of time and space.

Telegraphy considerably facilitates the development of what Adorno and Horkheimer coined as the Culture Industry. Culture, according to them, has become the object of industrial activity whose sole aim is to generate profit. Industrial culture is based on the standardized and reproducible nature of its objects, and therefore "sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). The "logic of work" that the authors refer to here can be understood as the logic of efficiency, of organisation, of calculability, that have been in practice in industries since the elaboration of the principles of scientific management by Taylor. They distinguish this logic from the one of "society", that, we may assume, was different at the time they wrote their work. An important amount of literature has flourished since, showing that this logic that once pertained to the world of work now has spread to the most intimate spheres of human life. Foucault's description of the disciplinary society illustrates well this phenomenon. In a nutshell, Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* shows how the disciplinary subject is produced by institutionalised mechanisms of power relations (Foucault, 2015). Power *apparatuses* act on the subjectivity of individuals, which ultimately influences their behaviour. These mechanisms of power tend to change subjects into *entrepreneurs of the self* who ultimately act as capitalist organizations in search for investment, utility, and profit. Byong-Chul also describes this shift of exploitation exerted

by capitalism from a top-down logic to an auto-exploiting logic, that he associates with the development of neoliberalism. In his words, "today, everyone is an auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise" (Byong-Chul, 2017, 5).

As a result, it seems possible to identify a sort of causal relationship between the "logic of work" or in other words, the logic of capitalism and the potentialities offered by current technologies. Indeed, we have seen - through the lens of the culture industry - that the latest development of technologies seems to favour the capitalist system due to its shrinking of the effect of time and space, rendering easier the standardization, the production, and the consumption of valuable goods.

Regarding the invasion of the "logic of work" to the cultural sphere of society, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that "these adverse effects, however, should not be attributed to the internal laws of technology itself but to its function within the economy today" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, 95). In this sense, it is implied that technology within a capitalist system serves capitalist interests. More than that, it also mediates its effects as for them: "technical rationality today is the rationality of domination" (95). These points echo with Postman's idea that "embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing instead of another [...]," (Postman, 1993, 13) and that "surrounding every technology are institutions whose organization - not to mention their reason for being - reflects the world view promoted by the technology" (Postman, 1993, 18). Following these authors, the capitalist system seems to have shaped its own technologies in order to serve its principles. It is therefore implied that technology may take various forms, according to the type of socio-economic system that creates it. They seem to attribute agency to technology, that itself is an intermediary with the larger socio-economic system that surrounds it.

Technology through the work of Gilbert Simondon

I will now confront this idea with Simondon's theory of evolution of technical objects and his reflection on the relationship between culture and technics.

In *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de formes et d'information*, Simondon first developed a theory of individuation that distinguishes from Aristotle's based on the hylomorphic schema. Hylomorphism approaches the reality of the individual as composed of a

form and a matter, as the example of the moulding of a brick illustrates. It explains the individuation of the brick through the coupling of clay (matter) with a mould (form). Simondon refutes this explanation that he finds incomplete. Indeed, this example implies an originary materialisation of the mould and preparation of the clay by the artisan. The potential energy contained in matter, or its energetic condition of metastability, finds a predetermined limit in the form it encounters. In other words, "the principle of individuation is the unique manner in which the internal resonance of *this* matter is established in the process of *this* form-taking" (Simondon, 2017, 48). Simondon suggests understanding the production of a brick as the result of a modulation of information according to a certain material and energetic condition. As a result, Simondon identifies three essential conditions for individuation namely energy, matter, and information. Various domains are subject to individuation: physical, biological, psychosocial, or trans-individual and technical. It is important to note that according to his theory, individuals are constantly individuating that is, resolving tensions. Additionally, the individual must be understood in relation to his associated milieu. Simondon states: "The individual cannot account for itself on the basis of itself, because it is not the being's whole to the extent that it is the expression of a resolution. It is simply the complementary symbol of another real, i.e. the associated milieu" (Simondon, 2018, 63-64). The individuating being must therefore be understood in terms of potentialities and in relation to its milieu.

In his second dissertation titled *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Simondon applies his theory of individuation to technical objects. He sees technical structures as following an evolution from an abstract mode to a concrete mode. A concrete technical being is a system that is "entirely coherent with itself, entirely unified" (Simondon, 2012, 27). Concreteness, Simondon argues, requires standardisation. In this way, crafts correspond to the abstract mode of production when only the industry can produce concrete technical beings. When an object reaches its concrete mode it is the only perfect type of its kind. In other words, technical reality follows its own path of perfection, independent from the will of its designer. Simondon distinguishes different stages of the evolution of technical objects from the technical element to the technical individual, to technical ensembles (Simondon, 2012, 61).

It is possible to amend this evolution with a later stage: the one of technical system drawing from Jacques Ellul's *Le Système Technicien* (Ellul, 2012). Ellul understands technology as both an environment and a system that is constantly evolving. This evolution is driven by technology's own vital force that constitute their progress from one stage to another. As

Lievrouw (2014, 27) points out, Ellul sustains a deterministic view on technology. In his view, the focal of analysis should be focused on the technological system as a totality as it is interdependent instead of focusing on a single technology. Ellul's view comes to challenge Adorno and Horkheimer's previous idea that the industrialisation of culture does not stem from the essence technology itself. Finally, Ellul concludes that one of the major consequences of this elaboration of a technical system is human's consequential loss in the faculty of symbolizing. Indeed, he says that this faculty can only function in relation to the natural environment. He continues: "Symbolization, which helped man to survive in a hostile world, has become inadequate for the technological environment in which it has no use" (Ellul, 2012, 40). Yuk Hui builds upon this effect of desymbolisation and distinguishes three of its aspects in the contemporary technological system. First, he notes a process of deritualisation. Second, the materialisation of relations; and third, "the creation of circuits within the retentional system that is also part of the technological system" (Hui, 2013, 81). For Hui, this latter aspect does not come with a loss of meaning. But these meanings can be altered through the latest form of tertiary retention, that is, digital objects and data, to serve the controlling function of the technological system.

Technics, Culture and Aesthetics

In a work dedicated to culture and technics, Simondon offers a clear definition of both notions in relation to each other. For him, culture and technics are both techniques of human manipulation. Their main difference lies in the way they act on humans. Culture acts directly on them. It is "the raising of man by man", when technical activities ultimately act on humans through the intermediary of the environment (Simondon, 1965, 18). This one is modified by humans through technical activities, which in turn acts on them via a feedback action. Simondon continues by responding to the widespread idea that culture and technics might oppose themselves and conflict. The opposition of the "logic of work" and the "logic of society" made by Adorno and Horkheimer stated previously seems to constitute one example. Simondon seems to capture this idea by stating: "when the word culture is used today [...], a disjunction, maybe even an opposition is set up between the values of culture and the schemas of technicity" (Simondon, 1965, 18). But for him, this apparent conflict mainly ensues from a question of scale. The order of magnitude taken by technics, that is, the modification of the environment, has radically changed during the industrial revolution. In a pre-industrial world, techniques remain intra-groupal and thus intra-cultural. They are then considered as mere means towards

ends defined by culture. They are considered for their utility. In an industrial world though, techniques become "major" or "pure" and have the power to outstrip the here and now as they act on the environment. They are no longer limited to mere utility, and necessarily overcome politically drawn borders. Industrial techniques seek "intrinsic perfection, the technical virtue of the constructed object" (Simondon, 1965, 20). The Roman, the Russian or the Chinese abacus cannot compete with today's computing devices. Efficiency in calculation is not only a matter of capitalism. And calculation is best performed in a world whose foundation is formal and logic, that is, enabled by computing and digital technologies. This broadening of scale enabled by industrial technologies changes humans' perceptual grid and new schemas of intelligibility are developed. Humans gradually free themselves from pre-industrial limitations that mainly relate to time and space. In this view, telegraphic technology necessarily appears in the continuity of technological evolution. And the hegemonic teleculture that results from it seems inevitable.

In light of the above assessment, culture can be said to be subject to the influence of the technological modification of the environment. Cultures tend to standardise, leading to a synchronisation of temporal flux of consciousness by way of the development of a capitalist technological system (Stiegler, 2018, 595). Moreover, the inherent characteristics of modern technologies can be said to impact people's aesthetic reality. In his chapter titled Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable, Lyotard focuses his attention on photography as an example of the development of industrial techno-science. He explains that photography has considerably modified our aesthetic relation to the world, and he extends this assessment to all the aesthetic objects of the techno-scientific capitalist world. He draws upon Kant who shows that the founding principles of the aesthetics of beauty must be based on an agreement around the free harmony between a sensibility to form and colours, and the faculty of rational organisation. Yet, photography and other aesthetic objects of our type come to negate this free harmony. Indeed, the objects they produce are inherently subject to calculation and programming. As Lyotard explains: "The indeterminate, because it cannot be forecast, has to be, if not eliminated, at least limited to the capacities of the apparatus, and with it sentiment too." (Lyotard, 2018, 119-120). Lyotard also questions the very possibility of an aesthetic sentiment that ensues from a calculated re-presentation. For him, following Kant, the aesthetic sentiment must proceed from a *presentation* that must be *here now*. Modern aesthetic objects require the determination of forms by concepts, which is, according to him, contradictory to the "free reflexive judgement that constitutes aesthetic pleasure" (Lyotard, 2018, 110). Debord also argues that what was once

direct experience is now relegated to mere representation (Debord, 1995). For him, the current social relationship between people that is mediated by images that he calls the *spectacle* is the result of "autonomous movement of the non-living", which echoes with the *vital force* that Ellul described in his characterisation of the technological system.

As a result, it can be said that contemporary aesthetic objects, in addition to presaging a major aesthetic crisis, tend to limit our relationship to the world to the inherent determination inherent of objects pertaining to our time.

Painting, contrary to photography, carries a possibility of modulation. According to Deleuze, painting is the act of modulating colours and light (Deleuze, 1981). This modulation of the sensible is not bound to a mere re-presentation and, according to what has been exposed above, can offer a true aesthetic experience. Modulation seems to be central to the aesthetic experience, that is why Lyotard identifies an end of experience and an end of subjective infinity (Lyotard, 2018, 121). The modulation of information, or the modulation of the sensible, produces meaning to its recipient through the creation of what Deleuze calls a "signal space". It is a delimited space of signification that echoes Rancière's concept of *partage du sensible* (Rancière, 2000). The term *partage* must be understood in its French sense that is, as both a *partitioning* and a *sharing* of an aesthetic modulation. It is therefore inherently political because it simultaneously joins and separates recipient subjects. Hui suggests understanding the medium as the intermediary between humans and their milieu, through which humans act on their milieu and vice versa. Therefore, the human milieu cannot be limited to a physical interpretation. It must include the semiotic sphere that pertains to human life (Hui and Mey, 2017, 4). As a result, one must take into account the political power mediated through aesthetic modulation and that act on human consciousness.

Technology and Power in 21st century Media

In the *Mode of existence of technical objects*, Simondon explains that "a true mediation between technique and power [...] can only be realised through the intermediary of culture. Because something exists that enables man to govern: the culture that was passed on to him; it is this culture that provides him with significations and values [...]" (Simondon, 2012, 207). In light of what has previously been stated, it appears that the significations and values passed through culture that enables humans to govern may be influenced by the determination proper to modern technologies.

Additionally, contemporary technologies that enable the recording, storing, and analysis of data seem to take this action on human consciousness to another level. Hansen argues that the perceptual consciousness that was previously at play with the technical objects we focused on previously is no longer the only medium that impacts human experience. For him, digital technologies impact human experience indirectly.

He states:

"In the wake of computational technologies that distribute sensibility beyond consciousness, the correlation between human-implicating individuation and technics has moved beyond what we might think of as its objective stage [...], and has entered a properly processual stage in which technics directly intensifies sub-perceptual dimensions of human experience and thus comes to mediate forms of transindividuation which, by maximizing the potential of the pre-individual, transform the very being of the human" (Hansen, 2012, 51).

Therefore, the influence of the technological system on the individual seems to have taken a new turn with 21st century media, going even beyond the conscious aesthetic relationship that humans share with the world. Microsensibility seems to be the new theatre of power and politics in the digital world.

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