

REVIEW ARTICLE

Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*
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Bernard Stiegler's writing can be situated within a well-established tradition of philosophical works that question the ever-increasing role of technology in the world. Insofar as technology has not only become entangled with, but also become profoundly transformative of a vast number of human activities, including perception itself, there are a host of questions that arise today, perhaps with greater persistence than ever: what is the relationship between the animate and the inanimate? Are human beings in control of their technological creations, or is it the other way around and does technology have a claim on their experience that is perhaps more powerful than they imagine? In the final analysis, such questions have to do with an evaluation of the technologically induced changes that humanity is witnessing--in other words: with an evaluation of the possibilities that technology has both created and foreclosed.

Stiegler's multi-volume work *Technics and Time* can be summed up in the following way: technics and humanity, the artificial and the human, are inseparable and fundamentally co-dependent. This seemingly harmless claim in fact problematizes the entire Western philosophical tradition, which asserts the unambiguous priority of humanity over its inventions. In other words, Stiegler's claim forces into crisis the traditional, hierarchical structures of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism that subordinate the inorganic to the organic. Such a claim participates in a dialogue with prominent philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida (who was Stiegler's teacher); it also creatively engages with Gilbert Simondon and André Leroi-Gourhan's work on the technical and the human.

The stakes of such a project are multiple. They have to do, on the one hand, with disrupting various illusions and theoretical phantasms, such as the illusion of the sovereign self, of the subject's seeming control over that which it creates, as well as philosophies of vitalism. On the other hand, Stiegler aims to uncover the unthought within thought and thus to pave the way for the new possibilities of human existence. This double gesture of disrupting and unveiling possibilities is accomplished by Stiegler's uncovering of the fundamental co-dependency of the human and the non-human (more specifically, the inorganic) or--to put it in slightly more

technical terms--with the way in which “techno-genesis structurally precedes socio-genesis” (2). Stiegler initially follows Heidegger here in that he sees time as the definitive and theoretically eloquent feature of human life. In this context, he can be said to focus on the aspects of what Heidegger calls originary time (the purely human, finite time) in order to show that originary time is always already infected with and sustained by *artificial time*. In this sense, although Stiegler might follow Heidegger initially, his work also clearly goes beyond Heidegger in that it insists on the infection of the originary by the artificial.

While the first volume of *Technics and Time* offered a nuanced account of the human being’s unique relationship with the tradition that he or she inhabits, more specifically: of the ways in which the human being lives in the world through the *technical* acts of memory--a memory that is spilled over and sustained by the organized, inorganic matter--the second volume describes not the *why*, but the *how* of this process of a living that is enabled by technics (cf. 1). The task of the first volume was thus to demonstrate the ontological insufficiency of the human being, an insufficiency that he or she perpetually tries to compensate for by technical know-how. It was to demonstrate how mortal time is necessarily also the artificial one. The present volume, in its turn, enumerates and interrogates the instances of the conflict between the originary and artificial time--the conflict that ultimately becomes the occlusion of the former by the latter--throughout modern history. It is this conflict that is termed *disorientation*.

However, *Technics and Time 2* goes beyond a merely descriptive account by alerting the reader to the dangers inherent in what could be called the colonization of human time by the technically created or industrial one. To understand these dangers, one needs to go back to Stiegler’s crucial thesis that human beings inhabit the world by externalized memory, by the memory converted into matter. Since the modern age is first of all characterized by the acceleration of matter or, more precisely, by a technical splintering of the world into an infinity of tiny events, the properly political question becomes, “What *don’t* we remember?” The dangers stemming from the age of speed are that one’s memories are open to pre-selection and pre-judgment, which is to say that the time of memory is being radically altered. The question, “What *don’t* we remember?” translates into, “What is *left out* from our memory?” Indeed, “today more than ever the political question is memory” (9).

Stiegler begins his discussion of the externalization of time, memory, or historical continuity by explaining how orthographic writing constitutes collective beliefs and how it is indeed a crucial aspect of “collective individuation” as such. If one were to ask, “What does the orthographic *do*?”, the answer would be that it enables one’s certainty about the past, which means that it secures one’s connection to that very past. When one reads a philosophical text from the philosophical tradition, one does not slip into the paralyzing uncertainty about the accuracy of the words that one is reading. One does not doubt that it is Plato’s thoughts represented on the page and not someone else’s.² Furthermore, rationality and monotheism, nourished by the religions of the Book, have for a long time been the ground of belief and of societies in general (cf. 8). In short, societies have been sustained by the know-how of writing, i.e., by certain ways of retaining and recording events. But why is this the case? The answer is that collective memory is first of all marked by *retentional finitude*--which is to say, by the fundamental inability of memory to contain itself. All memory needs supplements; without these supplements, it would topple over into oblivion. In Stiegler’s language, the *who* is thus radically finite, or more precisely: forgetful, and it is for this reason that it requires the *what*. Because it extends into the future, orthographic writing decontextualizes human beings: it *disorients* them by undermining the singularity of their here and now while simultaneously endowing them with a different kind of existence. As paradoxical as it may seem, disorientation thus lands human beings in a new place. It spatializes them in accordance with disorientation’s own coordinates.

Stiegler proceeds to analyze this process of spatialization or giving place by looking at the ways in which the programming--which is to say, the management or conquest--of rhythms, memories, styles, and idiomatic differentiations occurs. The question here is thus ultimately about the technically orchestrated territorialization of the pulsation of human life itself. Even more importantly, it is about showing that all territorialization is always already conditioned by *deterritorialization*. Stiegler’s aim is to demonstrate that technical control,

technical means of containment and regulation, are necessarily preceded by a technical rupture--the rupture that is also known as innovation or the emergence of the new.

At this point in the argument, Stiegler furthers the discussion by focusing on what he calls the “industrial synthesis of retentive finitude” (97). This is where the political dimension of memory comes to the fore. Analogic, numeric, and biologic technologies industrialize memory not in ways that allows it to retain the real, in other words: to distinguish the fact from the memory of the fact, but rather in such a way that its object is created, performed, and multiplied. The more advanced the technology, the more spectacularly and successfully the memory’s object is engineered. The final claim here is that the cognitive sciences themselves have both forgotten the finitude that lies at the root of memory and misinterpreted the Husserlian intentionality that they imply.³ This intentionality presents itself only in the examination of the temporal object--of a dynamic object such as a melody that is itself technologically recorded and echoed. This is why Stiegler concludes his book by discussing the link between technical or tertiary memory and temporalization. In this case also, there is no “pure” temporal event. Instead, the event is always already artificially retained.

The final chapter of *Technics and Time 2* is animated by two interrelated arguments. Stiegler begins by reiterating the claim (well familiar to the readers of the first volume of *Technics and Time*) that even though Heidegger departed from the Husserlian privileging of the living present, he was unable to adequately conceptualize the nature of technics. Simply put, Heidegger was wrong to place the human being on the side of finitude, and technics on the side of ill-fated infinity. In this view, the human tends towards the technical in order to forget its finitude, and this drive towards forgetting is dangerous precisely because technics is structurally unlimited and thus infinite. For Stiegler, however, the human being can never escape his or her mortality through technics, for finitude itself appears when the *who* and the *what* ontologically intersect. Given this co-dependence, the technical, just like the human, is stricken with discontinuity.

This then leads to Stiegler’s second claim: thought or the Husserlian transcendental consciousness itself is enabled by technological memory. This means that thought, insofar as it is reflexive or able to return to itself, is grounded in the worldly materiality around it, in the sense that it recoils from something other than itself, and it is in this recoil that it is constituted as what it is. Stiegler can thus be said to uncover here the technological foundation of thought, which is also the impossibility of any kind of purely human time.

When consciousness and technics become too intertwined, there is too much artificial time, an excess that manifests itself as “eventization” (100). This artificial time cascades and singles out, a process that results in an endless and ultimately meaningless chain of events. The late twentieth and twenty-first century are the age of an artificial time whose absolutely unique temporal objects, i.e., technologically created events, have become identical with the flux of consciousness they produce. This, thorough temporalization of consciousness, leads, as Stiegler writes, to the occultation of *différance*, the suppression of the here and now--which is to say, to the in-*différance* of a non-place. Indeed, “no future” does not mean “nothing *happens* anymore” (241). The problem is, rather, that the proliferation of events is anonymous, de-singularized, performatively de-rooted from any spatial specificity. Time belongs to no one and is nowhere in particular. It is unable to capture the fact that consciousness and temporal objects are always “awhirl” (243)--the fact that there is an irreducibly spatial dynamism at work here.

There are, of course, various problems associated with Stiegler’s theoretical binding of the technical and the human. One way to reference them is to ask: in affirming the co-dependence of the organic and the inorganic, has Stiegler not re-embraced the framework of intelligibility that he set up to destabilize? In other words, has he not done a disservice to the very materiality of technics--its very difference from thought--by placing it in the necessary conjunction with the human? While Stiegler maintains that “technics thinks” (32), one wonders whether the very irreducibility of matter to thought has not been theoretically muted. Another question that comes to mind has to do with the possible identity of suppression or occultation and erasure of temporal *différance*. If the time of *différance*, as Stiegler says, has been occluded, does this mean that it can still re-appear?

What is meant by this question is the possibility or impossibility of re-joining time and space in new ways, i.e., a kind of hope for the unexpected that stems from the idea that the possibility of such a re-joining has not been radically erased. Rather, what has been invalidated are the old, familiar ways of spatio-temporal confluence. But what warrants Stiegler to think this way? How does one go beyond the potentially unproductive gesture of pointing to the unexpected and the unthinkable? Perhaps what the contemporary world calls for is that the conceptual vocabularies of space and time be replaced with a more direct inquiry into history and materiality. Finally, Stiegler's alignment of critical thought with the specifically Western technical development merits additional questioning. Is it possible to sustain such an alignment without taking into account non-Western formative forces, i.e., the interplay of the Western and the non-Western, the coexistence of the orthographic and the pictorial in a language?⁴ Furthermore, does the conflation of thought and the development of Western technics not foreclose any dialogue with non-Western thinking? ■

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NOTES

1. This is the term that Gilbert Simondon uses to designate individuating processes productive of groups larger than the single individual. In the case of collective individuation, the individual subject, psychic unit, or organism are seen as an effect of a greater interplay of historical, social, and technical tendencies rather than their origin.
2. It is interesting that Stiegler does not problematize the status of Plato's writings in this context. Plato is a key example of someone who always speaks through someone else, of someone whose voice reaches the reader indirectly, through a practice of "imitation" that his own work in fact condemns. In speaking through Socrates, Plato seems to undermine performatively the very exactitude that Stiegler sees as definitional of linear and phonologic writing.
3. Thus, according to Stiegler, the emergent logics of consciousness and cognition do not see time as an issue, let alone as something foundational. They treat it, rather, as one element among others (cf. 97-8).
4. See, for instance, on page 59 where Stiegler unequivocally equates critical thought with memory inaugurated by linear writing.