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On Digital *Hypomnemata*

Agustín BERTI

- 1 B. Stiegler. *Para una nueva crítica de la economía política: Sobre la miseria simbólica y el complejo económico-político del consumo*. (Buenos Aires, Capital intelectual, 2016). Or, B. Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. D. Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
- 2 B. Stiegler, 'La prueba de la impotencia: nanomutaciones, *hypomnemata*, grammatización' en Rodríguez P. et al., *Amar a las máquinas. Cultura y técnica en Gilbert Simondon*, [Loving machines. Culture and Technology in Gilbert Simondon], (Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2015), pp. 141–172. (141).

The persistence of Bernard Stiegler's work, so prolific in essays, books, films, interviews, and online videos, confirms the relevance of his philosophical account of exteriorization as a key issue for any form of thinking. The first volume of *Technics and Time* makes a very underestimated claim: 'inorganic organized matter' is the continuation of life by means other than life. Beginning with that assertion, Stiegler has looked back across different approaches to technology that allowed him to build a theory of *hypomnemata*. This theory allowed him to go beyond the limits of the retentional model of perception proposed by Husserl, and in doing so, helped him propose an articulation of the two main Simondonian theses on 'becoming': concretization and individuation (which Simondon explicates respectively in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* [On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects] and *L'individuation psychique et collective : à la lumière des notions de forme, information, potentiel et métastabilité* [Psychic and Collective Individuation: In the Light of the Notions of Form, Information, Potential and Metastability]). That project laid the foundations for Stiegler to develop a new political philosophy in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* that incorporated the concepts of Derridean 'grammatization' and Deleuzian 'modulation', and helped him understand the 'unseen relations between *technics*, *science* and *desire*' that characterize the age of algorithmic governmentality.¹

Algorithmic governmentality rests upon a specific form of exteriorization, which Stiegler discussed in his long essay 'La prueba de la impotencia: nanomutaciones, *hypomnemata*, grammatización' ['The Trial of Impotence: Nanomutations, *Hypomnemata*, Grammatization']. Summarizing very briefly the complex argument of this piece, which draws from concepts developed over at least thirty years, Stiegler points out the urgent need to question new retentional forms (both digital and genetic) since they are the condition of possibility of politics. Especially, because they grammatize '*power*, *desire* and *knowledge*',² producing an impotence of rationality that leads to uncontrollable societies where individuation processes are short-circuited by personalization. This poses the urgent question of digital *hypomnemata*, and how they impact on the algorithmic governmentality that characterizes contemporary societies.

During the twentieth century, memory of the past was radically different from that of human culture of previous times. Since the end of the nineteenth century, an increasingly shared social memory grew to a scale unprecedented in history; this is intimately linked to the urban, industrial and communicational life that came to characterize Western societies. Within this novel scenario, Stiegler identified the paramount relevance of 'technical devices of exteriorization' and the role they play in the ways in which we remember, not just as individuals but also as communities. Such entanglement, that is, the necessary relation between aesthetics and technics in the constitution of the psyche, is also the constituent relation of politics.

Stiegler's extension of Husserl's phenomenology can be briefly presented as such: The perception of a first stimuli constitutes a 'primary retention' and, in turn, the remembrance of that perception is a 'psychic secondary retention', which, in turn, enables 'protentions', that is, horizons of expectations. But there are also 'collective secondary retentions' made up of the accumulation of all retentions shared by individuals in a community, which are themselves only possible with the aid of 'tertiary retentions', or forms of memory that are external to the body: cave paintings, tablets of the law, censuses, journals, vinyl records, films, etc. (the list may include all the products of human culture). However, the novelty of analog retentions – that is, photography, phonography and cinematography – resides in their reach and persistence in time. To understand the societal change introduced by these retentional modes we must retrieve one of the most powerful ideas of *Technics and Time*: that there is nothing more specifically human than technics, because exteriorizations are what allow the evolution of an inside. Interior and exterior are thus co-constitutive aspects of the experience of humanity, which is only possible if technics allows culture to transcend the cycle of individual lives, in the form of an epiphylogenesis that goes beyond both the innate genetic memory of the species and the experiential, epigenetic memory gained by individuals in the course of their lives.³

For Stiegler, language and *ouillage* (that is, the elementary grammar of use implied by gestures and tools) are the two modes in which such a common trans-individual memory begins to evolve. Memory is organized through and across a prosthetic structure exterior to the body. This results in a form of memory that survives through different gestures and knowledge retention devices, which are actual, physical (but also conceptual) tertiary retentions. These retentions are the *hypomnemata*: depositaries of memories *before us* (outside our minds), since they preserve the past in their material form. Consequently, they condition new secondary retentions, as well as primary retentions, since the dynamics of perception are bound to previously informed previsions (or protentions), that make us anticipate differently because of the access to stimuli preserved outside of the body, in the objects.

Tertiary retention is, then, the form of external memory that lays the foundations of common culture by allowing the emergence of collective secondary retentions, which are then exteriorized in tertiary retentions. This claim explains the causalities of the evolution and growing complexity of both objects and cultural forms, as well as the evolution and growing complexity of humanity. Furthermore, Stiegler's thesis implies that in pre-industrial societies the rhythm of memory was dictated by the rhythm of the tools, engines, mills, and factories that helped traditional societies secure their livelihood. Each community organized its shared memory for and with the devices upon which memory itself was materially settling, and also through preservation in rituals, books or other types of technology such as agricultural cycles.⁴

3 Cf. B. Stiegler, *La técnica y el tiempo. El pecado de Epimeteo*, trad. Morales Bastos, B. (Hondarríbia: Hiru Argitaletxea, 2002), especially, pp. 203–268. B. Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. R. Beardsworth and G. Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 134–179.

4 Cf. B. Stiegler, 'Ars e invenciones organológicas en las sociedades de hipercontrol' in *Nombres*, n. 28, 2014, pp. 147–163. Or, B. Stiegler, 'Ars and Organological Inventions in Societies of Hyper-Control' trans. D. Ross. *Leonardo* Vol. 49 No. 5 (2016), pp. 480–484. And, B. Stiegler, 'La prueba de la impotencia: nanomutaciones, *hypomnemata*, gramatización' en Rodríguez P. et al., *Amar a las máquinas. Cultura y técnica en Gilbert Simondon* [Loving machines. Culture and Technology in Gilbert Simondon], (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2015), pp. 141–172. On the necessary technical dimension of the commons, the latter essay points out that: 'Collective secondary retentions are *transindividuated* psychic secondary retentions. And that means that *technè* is at the core of individuation in its more primary and original moments, since the stabilization of collective secondary retentions is what implies tertiary retentions, which are constitutively prosthetic, and that are collective at that price: as *stabilities* – they are the *organized inorganic matter* by means of which occurs the stabilization of the medium, a medium in which psychic and social individuals swim and in which they are only metastable.' p. 155. Italics in original.

5 B. Stiegler, *La técnica y el tiempo 3. El tiempo del cine y la cuestión del malestar*. trad. B Morales Bastos (Hondarríbia: Hiru Argitaletxea, 2004), p. 48. Or, B. Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3: Cinematic time and the question of malaise*, trans. S. Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 34.

6 For a discussion on the dual and individuation from a Simondonian perspective, see Fernanda Bruno & Pablo Manolo Rodríguez. 'The Dual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies', *Theory, Culture & Society*. September 2021. doi:10.1177/02632764211029356

7 Matteo Pasquinelli, 'The Spike: On the Growth and Form of Pattern Police', in, Stephanie Hankey, Marek Tuszynski and Anselm Franke (eds) *Nervous Systems*. (Berlin: HKW/ Spector books, 2016).

What then are *hypomnemata*? Memories external to the body, that make up the epiphylogenetic background upon which psychic and social individuations occur, and that are in turn the base of psychic and collective secondary retentions. Each technology produces different *hypomnemata*: rituals and sacred architecture, writing and the printing press, industrial machines and cultural industries; which imply relatively meta-stable periods in which these 'memories outside the body' favor differentiated individuation processes. In the periodization presented by Stiegler in 'Ars and Organological Inventions in Societies of Hyper-Control', the emergence of modern industry implies a technical leap of scale in which humans lose centrality, and a process of gradual proletarianization begins: First, in the nineteenth century, as there is a loss of *knowing how to do*, as memories of gestures and skills are transformed and transferred into machines. Then, in the twentieth century, as there is a loss of *knowing how to live*, which occurs with the enhanced synchronization bought about by mass media and the decay of geographically bound cultures and knowledges that the culture industry displaces in the age of analog tertiary retentions. Or put differently, the storage of cultural memory in films and records (but also in print, cooking recipes, consumer products, and TV and radio shows) produces a globalized collective secondary retention that is shared much more than before (and is, therefore, much less diverse). Stiegler identifies some successive milestones in this gradual but ever accelerating process: industrial machines, cinema and mass media, and digital technologies. In the third volume of *Technics and Time*, Stiegler identifies the 1998 World Cup Final in France and its worldwide broadcast as an exemplary case of synchronization.⁵

However, the swift replacement of analog tertiary retentions by digital tertiary retentions that has characterized the twenty-first century drives grammatization beyond synchronization. Google, the paradigm algorithmic tertiary retention, was founded in 1997. What is the specificity of the form of *hyponmesis* that digital technicity favors? What changes when exteriorizations begin to take place in the abstract and seemingly immaterial dimension of binary codification? There are several aspects worth discussing, but, in terms of grammatization, the determining one is the predictive bias that operates over the dividual rather than over individual entities. That is, the discretization of the sub- and supra-human materialized in databases and patterns by means of brute correlation of data.⁶ This implies the passage from an individuation process linked to the synchronization of analog tertiary retention, to an unprecedented state of constant nanomutations that prevents (or, rather, short-circuits) processes of individuation. Even in its industrial age, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and no matter how standardized, collective secondary retention was shared on a common pre-individual background. Today, *hypomnemata*

have undergone an ontological change through the constant datification of movements and taste enabled by the expansion of networks to the bottom of our pockets (both literally and metaphorically). By means of extremely effective data capture equipment configured by the articulation of portable smart devices and internet-based platforms, *hypomnemata* have abandoned previous forms of meta-stability (such as the ones provided by cinematic and photographic genres, or car models, etc.) to embrace a permanent algorithmic modulation based on constant adjustment and upgrading, and fed by endless data input. This change introduces us into a new set of retentional dynamics that Stiegler characterized as one of 'nanomutations'.

Meta-stability, which allowed humanity to somewhat keep pace with technological innovation, now yields to light-speed mathematical abstraction as an unparalleled grammatization of the world. And with this, we move from a disciplinary society focused on the control of bodies and individual subjects, to a form of algorithmic governmentality centered on the modulation of the dividual and its circumstantial profiles that may or may not be linked to a body. In this stage of proletarianization, Stiegler sees the loss of theoretical knowledge, that is, the exteriorization of *knowing how to think*, as the last stage of the proletarianization process started by the industrial revolution.

In the new dynamics of digital retentions, machinic perception becomes central, i.e., what machines can sense as input and what they can make of it. It is, however, a logical sequence: any unforeseen variable cannot be 'sensed' by the machine. What becomes sensible for machinic perception is that which exists as a processable input, as usable data for a program. Hence, certain oppositions that flourished in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are deceitful, since they actually are equivalents in the new, networked existence introduced by digital *hypomnemata*.

A frequent case is the confusion between virtual and remote, for instance in the case of the so called 'virtual lessons' in platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom or FaceTime, which are just remote lessons using videoconference software. But the self-image of a webcam and of an avatar are not opposites, they complement each other in maintaining the interconnection that articulates and organizes digital subjectivities, no matter how they manifest on the web. Three types of digital images, that is, three different forms of digital tertiary retention, summarize the zeitgeist of 2020: 1) the grid-image that evenly distributes faces, initials or profile pictures in any videoconferencing platform; 2) the proliferation of avatars; and, 3) the profiles built out of database correlation by what Pasquinelli has called the 'pattern police'.⁷ Of course, all of these forms are linked to one or several users or accounts.

In the origins of the internet, part of the charm was being able to be someone else. Now IP address tracking and profiling limit such freedom; the extended perception is that there is a displacement from our bodies and our digital persona is but a naïve illusion. This is particularly evident in the virulence and unhinged bigotry of online social-media exchanges or multiplayer game platforms (and is intimately related to specifically digital phenomena such as trolling and cyber bullying). My intuition is that the avatar (and the profile image) play a key role in the age of nanomutations, efficiently integrating to the ever-changing interfaces that mediate the relations between computational devices such as smart phones and computers, but also between other networked sensors such as surveillance cameras, postnet card debits, or face, eye, and fingerprint readers, and platforms from Netflix and Facebook to home-banking or Zoom. The avatar is a form of *hypomnemata* that operationalizes the social field, aestheticizing it in order to suppress essential differences. Or, to put in other terms, avatars, as profiles and user accounts, grammatize networked subjectivities. Thus, the laborious transitions between the private and the public, between *otium* and *negotium*, are lubricated. The enhanced proletarianization that defines labor relationships in the *home-offices* scattered around the globe, against the background of the dividual and the traceable and predictable trajectories that intertwine secondary and tertiary retentions that modulate us in the twenty-first century, aims at the suppression of the unavoidable problems of physical presence. Physical presence demands social manners and costly arrangements, which makes us negotiate with more nuances and subtleties. In that sense, one of the risks of digital networked existence is the dichotomization of social relations due to its inherent tendency to operational schematization.

To conclude we must pose again the question: What distinguishes digital *hypomnemata* from analog ones? Profile schematization based on the grammatization of the dividual short-circuits individuation. This means it translates human nanomutations into operational code, almost as soon as they occur, preventing them from achieving a lasting metastability. This new phase of proletarianization deterritorializes individuals into profiles, grammatizing different aspects of the individuation, while avatars and other forms of digital representation translate or reterritorialize back into what is humanly perceptible, but now grounded in (or aligned with) the standards of platform capitalism. Digital *hypomnemata* in the context of platform capitalism smoothens not only the glitches and errors of the analog/digital/analog transductions implied in any digital communication, but also the harshness of social inequality. In the context of corporate-controlled, consumerism-oriented platforms, digital *hypomnemata* have become toxic, the constant tracking of subjects (under the form of enhanced identification technologies) has created a permanent state of nanomutation that threatens to prevent individuation by the proletarianization of practical knowledge, desire, and theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, given the current agency of anticipation technologies, such as the predictive language functions in any digital device, digital *hypomnemata* have also become a powerful form of exteriorized protention.

Of course, digital technologies, do not necessarily have to be a vector of nanomutation. As Simondon has taught us, technics is not deterministic, inasmuch as it evolves with us. Instead, we need to develop an adequate therapeutic for hyperconnected, deterritorialized society. And, as Stiegler presented clearly in *Para una nueva crítica de la economía política* [For a New Critique of Political Economy] such a challenge demands taking back the *systems of credit*, as a general organization of protention, from financial capitalism. Disputing the private ownership of databases, striving for open Artificial Intelligence, and dismantling micro-jobs and platform-based gig-economies seems a very good place to start. Or, put in other words, redistributing digital *hypomnesis*. #

References

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