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'…In the Secret of one's Life': Bernard Stiegler and Philosophy in the Intimacy of his Prison Cell

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Abstract: *In his book, Acting Out, philosopher Bernard Stiegler confesses that the question once posed to him by Marianne Alphant − namely, 'How does one become a philosopher in the intimacy and secret of one's life?' threw him 'into an embarrassing position', mainly because Stiegler became a philosopher in the intimacy of his prison cell. There is no question that from Socrates to Antonio Gramsci, there have been philosophers who have suffered shorter or longer periods of imprisonment, but this was mainly because of their philosophy – their individuated way of being and thinking. In Bernard Stiegler's case, it appears that the terms are reversed – in other words, the philosopher emerges as the philosopher he is because of and through imprisonment. This reversal is taken provisionally here, since this paper problematises the very notions of philosophical writing, philosophical acting, and origin, repositioning thus the question of writing, authorship, technology and individuation – namely, the central notions of Bernard Stiegler's philosophy.*

Keywords: *Bernard Stiegler, prison, exteriorisation, technology, anamnesis, hypomnesis*

Introduction

In the short essay, *How I Became a Philosopher*, found in his book, *Acting Out*, philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2009) reminisces over the five years he lived incarcerated in a French prison. The narration is deeply personal and quite touching. However, what makes this text quite interesting is not simply Stiegler's biographical references, but the act of philosophising unfolding through biographical writing – that is, through a certain act of reminiscence that makes Stiegler's philosophy, life, and exteriorised memory accessible to the reader. This process of exteriorisation is itself at the heart of Stieglerian philosophy. Exterioriorisation does not suggest the existence of a prior intact interior memory that emerges and finds expression through writing, but rather that the interior itself first becomes possible with this exteriorisation (Kouppanou, 2018). In other words, one cannot help but wonder: Does the narrator of this essay refer back to the convict who begins 'empirically and savagely' (Stiegler, 2009, p. 22) to philosophise or does the narrative function belong to the mature philosopher who reiterates a convict's process of becoming a philosopher after the fact? The matters of identity, writing, origin, time and memory are pertinent to such questions and to Stiegler's philosophy in general. In this framework, we could also wonder about the nature of this particular text – that is, if the text itself narrates the origin of its author – indeed, of this particular philosophical author that emerges through imprisonment − or if the text is itself an archive of exteriorised memory, offering a movement of differentiated multiple selves or even constituting a being without a self at all.

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As indicated in the previous paragraph, my own transaction with Stiegler's text often takes a deconstructive turn: Stiegler's particular piece of writing can be received as his individuated negotiation with Derridean differance, turning thus the essay itself into a processual object, unfolding as the very condition allowing its writer to differentiate themselves and become the writer of such text. My reading, however, can also maintain a Heideggerian phenomenological-hermeneutical lens. It allows the reception of the text as the process during which the narrator is hermeneutically constituted as a *being-in-the-world* – in fact, through the very interpretation the writer puts forth of himself and of this world. In this way, the text constitutes the author's documentation of his personal individuation process through his discovery of a phenomenological praxis.

These two types of reading coincide with Stiegler's process of becoming a philosopher and with his own individuation (his becoming a certain philosophical being with particular characteristics). This double reading also resonates with Stiegler's process of reading himself as a philosopher who goes through a process of emergence. To be more specific, Stiegler's imprisonment becomes a route leading to phenomenology and to phenomenology's essential attitude of suspending the world and the taken for granted beliefs that come along with it. To unpack this a little, we need to remember that Edmund Husserl (see Stiegler, 1998) considered the phenomenological *epokhe* as the attitude creating distance between the philosopher and the world, allowing them to see things as for the first time – indeed, to see things in themselves. In Stiegler's case, *epokhe* becomes the condition imposed on him by the world, which is no longer available to him – in any case, not in the form he was used to. Stiegler's (2009) discovery of phenomenology is presented below. As the philosopher explains:

> I thus discovered what one calls in philosophy the phenomenological *Epokhe* – the suspension of the world, of the thesis of the world, that is, of the spontaneous belief in the existence of the world, which constitutes in Husserl's language the natural attitude – what I previously called ordinary life. I discovered this philosophical theory and practice by chance and by accident, long before studying it in the works of Husserl: I deduced it from the situation, I practiced it, in a way, empirically and savagely. When I discovered it formulated and theorized by phenomenology, I found myself in a state of unimaginable excitement. (p. 22)

For Stiegler, the experience of disconnection from the world and the suspension of the natural attitude, which allows the habitual perception of the world, came all to naturally to him – albeit forcefully, because of prison. To experience this space of reflective dissonance – the state of the world's breaking down, is to allow for that nexus that makes up the world, the nodes and the connecting lines, to come to the fore in a different light. Such a way of seeing things is desirable and yet trying, since that which is closest to us, and thus a condition of our way of being, is often not visible at all. Stiegler, relying on Aristotle, comments on the process:

> [T]his milieu, because it is that which is most close, is that which is structurally forgotten, just as water is for a fish. The milieu is forgotten, because it effaces itself before that to which it gives place. There is always already a milieu, but this fact escapes us in the same way that "aquatic animals," as Aristotle says, "do not notice that one wet body touches another wet body" (423ab): water is what the fish always sees; it is what it never sees. (p. 14)

The phenomenological echoes are strong here – coming from Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student, this time. For Heidegger (2008), the human being is defined by its tendency to nearness: we exist by drawing the world near and through this nearness. Heidegger's own existential hermeneutics consists in the acknowledgment that we are always already thrown into this world. In other words, we are not interior immaterial selves attempting to connect with a hypothetical Cartesian material outside. We are, rather, beings always already in the world –

existing in relations of interconnection to this world and through our always already situated understandings of this world. It is for this reason, that the Husserlian phenomenological suspension of the world is a peculiar kind of dwelling, from which Heidegger moves away. Heidegger, instead, fully embraces the inseparability of human being and the world, turning this inescapable hermeneutical cycle into an ontological one: We can never be without a world: We exist in this world through our understanding of ourselves, the world, beings and *Being* (namely that which allows the emergence of beings) – in a constant negotiation of farness and nearness, mediated through language and technology. Stiegler, can be said, found himself in this process of negotiating the far and the close, that is, indeed in the Heideggerian hermeneutical cycle. In the non-world of prison, which was still a world and part of this world, Stiegler (2009) was able to think about the 'milieu while being able to extract (him) self from it, in the same way as a flying fish can leave the water: intermittently' (p. 14). In other words, Stiegler was able to think about that which allows the emergence of *Being/beings*. This rare positionality allows him to realise that his main means of connecting to the world unfold through recollection – in fact, through his access to the exteriorised memories found in the prison library. This recapitulates, for him, the phenomenological turn to things, which, in turn, leads Stiegler to poststructurally focus on the material supplemental nature of memory and on the technological mediation of the world.

Anamnesis and Hypomnesis

The text, *How I Became a Philosopher*, is quite personal in tone, autobiographical, confessional even, and as such a process of mystery – raising the question concerning the origin of the author (see Foucault, 1979; Derrida, 1997): Indeed, is the author the signifier produced by the writing process or does the author constitute the signified, which is attached to the author's historical presence? The essay repositions this particular poststructuralist concern – raising this time the question of the philosopher – that is, the philosopher as a particular type of writer – and philosophising, as a particular kind of writing, asking: Does the essay constitute a confessional account of someone who once was in the process of becoming a philosopher or does the text belong to a philosopher who has always already emerged as a particular kind of philosopher – reitering himself through this particular philosophical concern? In other words, and this is what Bernard Stiegler (1998) asserts, this is a text of a philosopher reading himself as a philosopher 'après-coup', that is, after the fact. The possibility of experiencing something after the fact is quite an important notion in Stiegler, suggesting the cycle of exteriorisation, during which the inside and the outside blur into a synergistical process of mutual emergence. In this respect, Stiegler's philosophical writing is itself a process of exteriorisation returning to reconfigure the interior and suggesting that there is no absolute origin – no authorial interior, no beginning, no moment of origin in time.

Time is Stiegler's question. For the philosopher, there is no moment that is autonomous and auto-affective. The present is rather a constant synthesis of presences and absences coming from the past and the future. In Stiegler's case, the absence of the world comes with imprisonment. Because of the felt scarcity of things, Stiegler experiences the need and thus attempts to go back to the things themselves. The 'natural attitude' is naturally suspended. Phenomenology becomes both a necessity and a discovery. Very soon, Stiegler comes to discover that there is no going back to the thing – indeed, there is no *thing-in-itself*, only a thing which refers to another thing and to another. In this way, things function as suspensions of other things – even of themselves – and thus act as traces. Realising this withdrawal, Stiegler (2009) gets the 'chance to consider this world as does a fish flying, above its element – an elementary milieu totally constituted by supplements, where the element, in other words, is always lacking' (pp. 14-15). Presence – as origin, spoken word or interior thought – is lacking because the origin is always constituted by presences and absences, supplemented externally, materially, and accidentally. In this respect, Stiegler (2009) moves towards post-structuralism, explaining that he 'no longer lived in the world, but rather in the absence of a world, which presented itself […] not only as a default, but as that which is always in default, and as a necessary default [un defaut qu'il

faut] − rather than as a lack [manque]' (p. 17).

There is no thing as the thing in itself; there is no origin, but an original lack of origin that is constantly compensated for, sustained and re-inscribed through the supplement, which is secondary and indispensable. Stiegler's (1998) phenomenological look is thus turned into a deconstructive one, concentrated on the supplement that sustains the world. Supplements, which are technological, linguistic, or both, contain 'tertiary retentions' or 'hypomnesic traces' – that is, traces which are not contained in the mind, but rather outside of it. These traces participate in perception, since we can access them repeatedly and differentially; they are memory externalised in space. A book is such a repository of tertiary memories. The book gives access to memory, which is not mine – yet inherited by me, and thus participates in the process of my self-differentiation, but also in its own process of individuation through my reconstitution of it. This paper is such a 'mnemotechnic' device – a technology (*techne*) (see Stiegler, 1998) made of memories (*mneme[s]*) that belong to me and Stiegler, Heidegger, Husserl, Derrida and to so many other thinkers. In other words, this paper is a testament to the process of individuation of writers, of readers, and of readers becoming writers because of the technology of books. No second reading can produce the same interpretation. The book is not identical to itself as the reader is not identical to themselves with each and every reading. The temporal object which can be accessed repeatedly underlines thus the default of origin and the supplementarity of language and technology (Stiegler, 1998, p. 18). Most of all, it underlines the role of *hypomnesis* in the unfolding of perception.

Traditionally, western philosophy has prioritized *anamnesis* over *hypomnesis*. Both words contain the Greek etymon for memory – namely, *mneme*. Anamnesis, however, refers to an immediate remembering, an authentic temporality, which is accessed without the mediation of technology and thus resembles *aletheia*, that is, truth as the bringing out of forgetfulness (Derrida, 1981). The understanding of truth as remembering is founded by Greek philosophy (see Heidegger, 1999). Stiegler (2009) comments, for example, that in the Platonic dialogue, *Meno*, Socrates argues that what he is attempting to define, namely, virtue, and ultimately the truth about its nature, is a knowledge that our souls used to possess but now have lost. Stiegler, adds: 'From then on, cognition is recognition, a remembering – an anamnesis' (p. 15). Hypomnesis, conversely, is downgraded. It refers to a secondary type of remembering; it is memory found externally, located in the technological supplement. In *Phaedrus*, we witness another example of this dichotomy solidifying western thought, since Plato opposes anamnesis to hypomnesis (the writing of books), understanding it as a technics that supplements the purported defective body, by replacing true memory with artificial memory. This supplementation process is considered to be eventually weakening memory, leading the human being to a radical forgetfulness. Hypomnesis is therefore presented as the figure of technics par excellence or as the dead simulacrum that replaces life itself (p. 15).

Hypomnesis will be revisited obsessively by Stiegler. His reading of Plato's *Protagoras* and more specifically his interpretation of the myth of Prometheus allows him to illuminate the 'origin of technics' as the 'origin of mortality' (Stiegler, 1998, p. 16). According to the myth, the twin titans Prometheus and Epimetheus are charged with the task of handing over powers to the beasts by way of compensating for their weaknesses. Epimetheus proceeds with this task, forgetting the human being and thus leaving it *a-logo* (without reason). Prometheus, while attempting to atone for his brother's forgetfulness, steals the arts and the fire from Athena and Hephaestus. In this way, Stiegler (1998) comments, the human being comes into being out of a double fault; the accidental forgetting of Epimetheus and Prometheus' theft. This fault, he repeats, 'is nothing but the de-fault of origin or the origin as de-fault' (p. 188). Stiegler's theory is thus built on these pillars − namely, on the accidental nature of the human being, the indispensability of technics for humanisation, and the constitution of time as reproduction because of this original de-fault. In this respect, Stiegler's goal is to solidify the role of the technical realm for the giveness of time, thinking, imagination, and individuation and to emphasise the

political significance of this event. In the short section bellow, this is discussed.

Conclusion: A Few Words on Stiegler's Many Political Thoughts

Reading Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida through a deconstructive lens – posthumanist even, Stiegler detects the contributing role of representation for perception and of the technological artifact for the constitution of human nature, which at any time can be considered not to be human at all. Memory allows the reception of the present moment and the formation of imagination and thus the human being's projection into the future. In Husserl, there is an emphasis on the way that the time that has elapsed is retained in order for the present moment to have meaning and for anticipation to be formed. For Stiegler (1998), this association takes place through imagination that retains and associates the past with the present. The fact, however, that the past is accessed technologically points to imagination's dependence on the technological realm and on exteriorised memory. This goes against both Heidegger and Kant. In Stiegler, technics offers access to memory, which is not one's own but inherited by them. Technological structures form our milieu, our *already-there*, and this is how our anticipation is formed. It is also in this manner that technology becomes the limit of our thought; our 'retentional finitude' (p. 17).

When, however, technics, through its potentiality to retain past memories, enters processes that are supposedly auto-affective, namely imagination, perception, and time, then the question of the type of retentions that are to form thinking becomes political. Technics, has the nature of 'pros-thesis', which means that technology is 'placed before us [la technique est ce qui nous est pro-posé] (in an originary knowledge, a mathésis that "pro-poses" us things)' (Stiegler, 1998, p. 235). In other words, technology is a form of learning (*mathesis*) that happens in us without us. Technology is passive learning: We are formed as thinking beings according to the technological structure of our world. In a way we are learnt by machines, instead of us learning about them and through them. In order for this to become clear, we can bring to mind how search engines function, having always already proposed the criteria for the selection of the knowledge that comes near to us (Kouppanou, 2018). These algorithmic criteria are not chosen by me; I am not even aware of them. Still, these are the criteria defining what is possible for me to know, forming the limits of my knowledge and of my world. In this respect, the one who controls our retentions controls our minds. In our current context, it is the digital media and culture industries that control what is to be retained or not, organising therefore our imagination and setting the conditions for individuation – that is, the way individuals become beings with specific characteristics.

With a series of articles and books, such as *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2010a) and others (2010b, 2011), Stiegler discusses the political aspects of technics. This discussion, he argues, ultimately needs to become a question about the *polis* (the City as the arena of democracy) and education. He thus detects a new responsibility of caring that should be of concern of the state, the educational systems and society in general. This is a responsibility about the formation of attention, the individuation of citizens, and the choice of the factors that ultimately form and affect individuation. Stiegler (2010) says

> And this is not simply a question of the education system. It also concerns the *political milieu* constituted by *the state of minds* that are themselves nothing other than diversely structured attentional flux, more or less attentive and thoughtful, composing this milieu either as critical, rational consciousness (maturity) or as an agglomeration of gregarious behaviors and the immature brains of minors, artificial crowds whose consciousness has been enucleated by a regressive process of identification. This means that the matter of the ecology of mind is also that of the ecology of the political milieu, and the transformations in the political elements − in the sense that water is the fish's element, just as the political element is integrally organological: there is no

"natural element" of the political − "natural law" is a fiction.

The human mind is exteriorised – it is an organ outside of the human body or extended beyond the flesh – feeding it with memories, forming the potential of that which can be and can be imagined in general. This is the arena of learning and of political thinking and acting: it is the water of the human fish. It is everywhere and nowhere to be seen. Returning to the same Aristotelian metaphor: technology is our water. It is what we inhabit but never really see. It is our elemental milieu, which is always already there and always already lacking, in the sense that it can be reconfigured, restricted and reimagined. In its twofold nature, our technological ecology is also pharmacological – on the one hand, it can poison the mind, and on the other, it can cure it by forming it otherwise. In its indeterminateness and accidentality, our milieu remains open for discussion and for transformation. Stiegler's (2009) own experience of imprisonment proves that our processes of individuation are always already processes of transindividuation, that is, of becoming with others and in a specific somewhere. Stiegler, himself, comments about the origin of his philosophical reasoning: 'I was able to enter philosophy properly speaking by accident, therefore, but also thanks to the laws of the City: the spirit of the laws of the French Republic meant that there was a library in this old prison' (p. 22). This is how, technology, learning, and the political meet each other.

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