Heidegger, Stiegler, and the Question of a Musical Technics

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According to Bernard Stiegler, there has been no real philosophy of technology (or what he calls technics)—that the subject of technics has been repressed by the philosophical tradition. But why? In a recent interview with Peter Hallward, Stiegler explains that the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides had inaugurated the spirit of philosophy by orienting it towards the question of being—the being of being—that is, towards the immutable, transcendental truths outside of mortality and contingency. Plato, for his part, pursued this same question of being *as metaphysics or philosophy proper*, and in the process, denounced poets and sophists as mere liars, as skillful technicians, who in their blind repetition of pre-written speeches were abusing the truth-telling power of the *logos*, misusing it in rhetorical flourishes, forgetting the true power of language, and distorting the world with *mere* technique. Technics, always subject to change and practical use, was thus cast aside by philosophy. In the words of Hallward, philosophy, instead was led down the "path of the eternal, of that which neither changes nor evolves."[1]

This repression of a philosophy of technics lasted for some time. At least until the unsettling rise of industrial systems in the later part of the 19th century when Marx began

[1] Peter Hallward and Bernard Stiegler, "Technics of Decision: An Interview" p. 154

to think society from the viewpoint of the system of production, critiquing the elaborate way in which social relations were structured by capital. And since then, the question of technics has become urgent—what was once considered a mere means to a end now seems to present existential questions for the destiny of humanity. Technological determinism, technological autonomy, dystopian narratives, fear and alienation over the linking of the technical, industrial, military, and scientific systems; the emergence of research and development as a corporatized paradigm for invention, science fiction, journalism on technology, and recently, the rapid advancement of information and communication technology. Bernard Stiegler's writing brings the question of technics back to philosophy, synthesizing and critiquing the work of Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Husserl, and Rousseau, among many others.

1. Stiegler's Technics

Life is the condition of technics. What is life? From its earliest origins, life is negentropic: it fights the disorder around it. Within the boundary of the organism exists a system that must "deal with" the necessarily greater complexity of its environment. Here Stiegler draws on Jacques Derrida's work in *Of Grammatology* (1974) to explain life as, essentially *différance*—(which, for Derrida, is always a simultaneous deferral *of* something and a *differing from* something). Life *defers in time* and *differentiates itself spatially* from the entropy around it with the beginning of genetic memory—the first form of writing. Amidst the disorder of the universe, genes are the first thing that remains, that stays fixed for some time. Derrida calls this the first form of writing, the beginning of the *gramme*, constituting a coup of the universe's own temporality by

holding genetic code, or the first information, constant through time. Life, which is usually considered to be absolute dynamism, is in fact, the beginning of writing, of permanence. Only from this permanent genetic ground, will the unique temporality of each individual organism begin.

This is the background for Stiegler's philosophy of technics. Once life has begun, and actual life forms begin to evolve, pursuing "advancement" and developing neurological and functional complexity, a second form of writing, or memory emerges—somatic memory—memory contained in the nervous system. Somatic memory, like genetic memory before it, constitutes the basis for the most primitive consciousness. It is a temporal entity operating continuously for a lifetime, "reading" the "phenomenal" spaces in its environment which inscribe memorable traces on the nervous system. Insofar as these somatic traces remain for an appreciable length of time—in other words, as long-term memory, the creature may be said to begin to "anticipate" things in the world. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida claims this is the moment when the *"gramme* appears *as such.*"[2] The appearance of the world to any living creature as containing traces of things past, as carrying significance, as *having been written on* **before** *by something*, marks the emergence of technics, the emergence of consciousness that anticipates the future. When a consciousness is capable of anticipating something in its environment, the creature may begin to instrumentalize its environment for anticipated ends, equipping itself with prosthetic technical devices. The cognitive "anticipation" that enables this evolution needs only sufficiently long-term somatic memory from a creature, whereby entire technical systems and language systems become possible as self-

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak. (Hopkins, 1974).

perpetuating, evolving social and ethnic systems of living in unique technical worlds.

The technical device itself, a product of a cognitive technical anticipation, is now also an artifact of repetition. Why build a shovel? Only when we have a concept and a memory for what it means to dig holes over and over again, remembering how hard it is to do with our hands, do we decide to build a shovel. The shovel, the artifact, the technical object, becomes an embodied repetition of digging holes. It is an instrument and an artifact of repeated hole-digging. This is what Stiegler calls technical memory. It is the memory externalized outside the creature, or written in inorganic matter to fit the anticipated end. In short, life is pursued "by means other than life."[3]

For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, this technization of the creature through externalized memory is what distinguishes man from animal, and what makes the human being-in-the-world, what Heidegger will call *Dasein*.[4] Heidegger considers that the human being *is*, that *Dasein is* insofar as it *uses* things, through which, by a horizion of reference, or by a setting up of a world, it exists, as *Dasein* being-in-the-world. These things in its world, as useful objects (or equipment) that present themselves to *Dasein,* are what he calls *ready-to-hand*, and most importantly, they are *already there*. *Dasein* inherits already existing technical and referential systems—that is, technical memory remembers outside of human beings' finite somatic memory and gives humans the inheritance of not merely an environment, but a meaningful world, potentially infinite in storage capacity. This inheritance of externalized memory violates Darwinian laws of natural selection because the techniques of survival <u>are prescisely *techniques*</u> now—transmitted outside of purely genetic transmission.

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[3] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*
[4] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, especially sections 15-18.

Stiegler's unique synthesis of Heidegger and Derrida present numerous complications for an understanding of consciousness. For example, in Derrida's treatment of Husserl in *An Introduction to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry"* (1962), Derrida demonstrates that Husserl, in his 1905 lectures *On The Phenomenology of the Inner Consciousness of Time*[5] attempted to describe the conscious perception of melody by distinguishing 1) primary retention (the immediate memory of something happening that fades like a comet's tail behind the continuual presence of experience) from 2) secondary retention (the imaginary recollection, or the reproduction of the past, or the memory of the complete melody), the "total memory" of the melody being a continuity between primary and secondary retention.[6] Husserl's distinction between primary and secondary memory can be reduced to one between presence and non-presence. That, essentially, primary retention is present (attached to a continuous perceptual "now" as the absolute origin of all memory), and the imaginary character of secondary retention is non-present (a mere storage for possible recollection that can re-play the perceptual "now"). Derrida argued instead that Husserl is making an unnecessary distinction between two kinds of non-presence. For sense input is nothing without a prior retention, it is nothing without a cognitive program or an interpretive mechanism allowing consciousness to "see" the outside world. These mechanisms, for Stiegler (who agrees), are always technical mechanisms. Anticipation, as the condition for technical exteriorization, is also the origin of repetition. Sense input is nothing without the inherited traditions of repeatable, technical knowledge. This absence at the heart of sense

[5] Edmund Husserl, *On The Phenomenology of The Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917) especially sections 13-17.
[6] Argument cited in Bernard Stiegler, "Fidelity at the Limits of Deconstruction" pp. 242-245.

perception, at the heart of the "Living Present" is not an abyss or an emptiness, it is a plentitude of technical understandings, of anticipations, of imaginations that constitute the "ever renewed upsurge and virginity" we fallaciously call "presence." Consciousness's very experience of time is constituted by the way technics, our anticipations of whatever is to come, programs temporality. The meaning of Heidegger's "being-in-the-world" (as expressed in *Being and Time*) is nothing more than the human "thrown" into the temporal organizations of a technical environment.[7] Any retention or memory we have is constituted by the "already-there" of technics, by the world's traditions we inherit, but it is never present to itself in a perpetually unfolding now or presence—consciousness is a lacing together of inherited technical anticipations, programs, or repetitions. But, critically, for Derrida and Stiegler, consciousness it is never simply perceiving the world as a continuous "now" as it is always enmeshed in an improvisatory, but always necessary inheritance of technical programs, or anticipations that allow the world to appear as anything. There is no pure sensory data.

It is precisely because of this absence, this non-perception, this technical programming at the heart of sense, that makes *faith, belief,* and *trust* possible. Every technical device must be *trusted* to be *used*, to be, in Heidegger's terms, *ready-to-hand*. This trust is the fundamentally human gesture of faith or belief, the source of morality and ethics, and is just as constitutive of humanity as technics. The faith is such that we pragmatically accept, trust, use something whose history we *did not live*, only because it is left for us, it is our technical inheritance. Derrida calls this *trust* the mark of an *absolute past*, or *God*. The unknowable past of a technical object. The freedom to

[7] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, especially section 38.

believe in it, to use it, leaves open a space of life outside programmability, opening the future or that which is to come as an absolute future, but always through technics, through the program. "Empiricity 'invested with spirit.'"[8] It is this duality of a technical constitution and a necessary trust or faith in the unknowable past that determines consciousness as extended outside itself, where memory is deposited in techincal objects, where consciousness is outside itself, and determined by the historical epoch of its technical environment.

2. Notes On the Phonograph

For technics, music is merely technical sound, a sonic exteriorization of creatures. It emerges when sound is anticipated and repeated, and in turn when instruments concretize this anticipation, and future generations inherit the instrument and technique as a tradition.

What interests me in musical technics is the possibility of explaining the ways in which the evolving technical format of music conditions its relationship to social use, aesthetic construction, religion, ideology, political struggle, and labor while bracketing the responsibility to consider music as fundamentally either 1) a work of art or 2) integral to a social process. Perhaps music and consciousness are subject to continual revision and evolution, in the way technology is seen to be continuously evolving. In a crude sense, one could speak of several key ruptures, when technical innovation reconfigured social and artistic formations: beginning with the sonorous voice, the first musical instruments, musical notation, mechanical instruments, sound recording, electronic

[8] Bernard Stiegler, "Fidelity at the Limits of Deconstruction" p. 260 (quoting Derrida)

synthesis, and editing.

The emergence of sound recordings after 1900 and the rapid expansion of mass-market LP production after the 1950s—basically, the diffusion of sound recordings—arguably constitute the significant rupture in modern musical technics. If musical instruments allowed for the systematic repetition/anticipation (i.e., *technization*) of non-vocal sounds, if notation allowed that systematic repetition to be played, "interpreted," in a different context from its creator, expanding music's possible formal complexity and allowing the possibility of a work-concept, then sound recording is what repeated music in another context *absolutely*—more perfect than any "technical skill" or "culture"—it wrote time itself.[9] So, I want to end with the question, how might sound recording affect performance?

Although there are certainly many ways to ask this question, Stiegler's technics allows us to consider musical technics as inherited anticipations, as programs, or given formal systems. Unlike musical instruments, which enable merely *generic* repetitions of sound, and notation which enables the systematic repetition and combination of *discrete* generic sounds, records are — (degradation of the medium aside) — *absolute and continuous* repetitions of sound. They exist without a real origin (it is improbable to know exactly how the album was recorded, edited, produced, or what musical or cultural influences and ideologies contributed to the recorded musicians, it is anoriginal—at best, intertextual) it exists without death, available for nearly infinite playback (especially in digital mode) and it is always there, ready for use, for playback, it has no human needs,

[9] For an excellent historical account and theoretical summary of the gramophone/phonograph, see Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, 1998)

no living temporality. It's no surprise that phonographs were first made to preserve the voice of the dead; a record is like a spirit, in Jean-Luc Nancy's words: "immortal, unengendered, insomniac... imperturbably adult and awake."[10] As a prosthesis of the human, sound recording commits a double-violence to "live performance" by 1) replacing its labor in the economy with mechanical reproduction (that needs no food or sleep) and 2) haunting the few remaining performers with its ability to *have been human* and still play sounds perfectly.

Recorded music is an incontrovertible ideal, or it marks the emergence of pure musical ideality as such: not because of *what is recorded* but by simple virtue of its *perfectly continuous repetition*, *itself* deaf to all contingencies of playback. It holds itself together perfectly in absolute sonic form, making musical notation look crude in comparison. And we begin to anticipate this continuous, absolute, almost geometrical organization of time as a new musical ontology, a new technical prosthesis or cognitive "program" that induces a powerful dialectic whereby the ideal (properly edited and recorded) sound stands in for what, we might in the 19th century have called the musical work. Not only can we can anticipate, technically, for the first time, a perfect repetition of sound, but the technical identity of perfect repetition, or absolute sonic form, becomes the normative musical-cognitive program—it passes through and haunts all particular, imperfect, human, performances. Performance suddenly appears nostalgic, more real, vulnerable, expressive, "ephemeral" or "drastic" (as in the recent writing of Carolyn Abbate). Modern musical performance, whether on the classical stage performing a composed work, touring an album, or reproducing a traditional style, it must be *anxiously*

[10] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 12 trans. Brian Holmes

marked live, authentic, organic, real as if to preserve the difference of humanity against the constant haunting of immortal, insomniac recordings that seem to proliferate in ever-increasing numbers, seeming to come out of nowhere. Performance, of course, continues, haunted by recording—the limit to a technical realization is a sonic ideal written by the phonograph, ideals which were unimaginable, un-anticipatable before 1900.

For me, the most powerful insight Derrida and Stiegler offer is the necessity of trusting or believing in a technical prosthesis—that sound recording, despite its total impossibility of being reproduced live, despite its ability to transcend the human, must be believed *as* human extension, as a prosthesis. Listening to recorded music does not involve understanding the complete origin of every specific edit, in other words, finding the traces of real performance behind the technical recording. It, conversely, involves merely hearing the end product as human, extending the definition of human music out through the prosthesis of recording, extending the definition of *the music itself*. It is precisely because of this necessary belief in recording that music's ontology can be re-formed as the pure ideality of any sound, that in turn live performance can appear mediatized[11], and that our musical performances are ceaselessly haunted as less than ideal, as less than repetition. We recoil at the thought, tremble, and plead yet again: "the real."

[11] See Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (1999) for a performance studies outlook on the problem.

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