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Algorithmic and Machinic An-Aestheticism: Mediation between defunctionalisation and enhancement

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Industry has deprived the individual of his function. The primary service that industry brings to the client is to schematize everything for him. According to Kant, a secret mechanism is at work in the mind, already equipped with immediate data that are adapted to the system of Pure Reason. Today, this secret has been deciphered.

—Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

There is a continuous spectrum that connects aesthetics to technics.

—Simondon, *On Techno-aesthetics*

1.

To understand the epistemic changes fostered by the society of ubiquitous computing and the data economy we must take into account one of the most powerful media transformations to have occurred in the 21st century thus far. Today individuals find themselves merged into highly connected environments, linking not only people, but also objects, media and, of course, data: this, coupled with the seemingly infinite availability and possibility of correlating digital information, has contributed to the creation of a new ‘image of thought’ (noology), one that often seems can be elaborated even without the intervention and interpretation of any human actor. Like an ideology of ‘immediate truth’, it seems to respond to the widespread demand for an absolute objectivity that machines alone can provide, bypassing empirical experiments and giving the

impression that the uncertainty of subjective perception has been neutralised in advance.¹ Data think by themselves: they come directly from the world without requiring any mediation, and are automatically meaningful. And so, thanks to algorithmic operations that render their correlations visible and immediately available, knowledge is served and man finally relieved of the difficult tasks of interpreting and evaluating facts.

Still, there is another side of this ‘image’, which concerns the unexplored heuristic possibilities that data-representation, automatised computation and worldwide connection, involving technical operations to which humans lack any direct access in their daily experience, seem to inaugurate, enlarging the range of human sensibility even outside the mode of awareness.² The speed of data and of algorithmic correlation, along with the increasing tendency towards the technological substitution of human faculties, together feed the reliance on the promise of freeing brain-time via the automation of the phases of knowledge, becoming a sort of obsession for entrepreneurs, scientists and governments, so that, as Jonathan Crary states, “billions of dollars are spent every year researching how to reduce decision-making time, how to eliminate the useless time of reflection and contemplation. This is the form of contemporary progress—the relentless capture and control of time and experience”.³

These visions, trapped in the eternal shifting between the absence and the increase of mediation that characterise the ideological ‘rationalisation’ and ‘machinisation’ of human subjectivity, force us reconsider an ‘old’ issue: the way in which the conditions of possibility of our knowledge are linked to perception and thus to sensibility, and with this, what (technical) mediation actually means. Data and computation are, indeed, today affecting (through in particular the organisation of data of sensibility) the realm of the senses, and so moulding individual and collective human experience, which is the centre of knowledge processes. But from this it does not follow that

¹ Antoinette Rouvroy, “The end(s) of critique: data-behaviourism vs. due-process”, in *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn. Philosophers of Law Meet Philosophers of Technology*, eds. Mireille Hildebrandt & Ekatarina De Vries (London: Routledge, 2012).

² See Mark B.N. Hansen, *Feed Forward. On the future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³ Jonathan Crary, *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 54.

we can simply replace direct experience with measurable information as a way of increasing knowledge. Conversely, what needs investigation is ‘the thinkable’ itself, an exploration of the relation of forces involved in it – this is the spirit of noology, which we need to embrace so as not to find ourselves caught up in an ideology founded on claims of exactitude. This is our intention in the following, taking aesthetic thought and practice into account in order to think them in relation to technicity.

2.

Starting with Kant, the discourse on aesthetics⁴ has always tried to connect outside and inside through the mediation of sensibility.⁵ Kant's conception of imagination as the faculty capable of making coherence out of the multiplicity of sensuous intuitions, with its power to organise images into what he terms “schemata” (which can then be subsumed under categories and concepts), is well known and has long been debated. It is precisely in this light that several thinkers have wondered if schemata might in fact be arrived at by a different course, by means of an externalisation, or if it is possible via exteriorised objects to control the subject from the outside – that is, specifically, via technological objects. Bernard Stiegler made an important point in this respect, in the third volume of *Technics and Time*,⁶ when he reopened the question of *synthesis* (which creates identity from difference, that is, for him, the unity of consciousness itself) and of the schematism in the age of ‘industrialised memory’. Stiegler elaborates a

⁴ We use here the expanded notion of *aesthesis*, to denote, from Kant, aesthetics in its etymological sense (‘sensibility’). Defined as the first condition of our openness to the world, its set of qualities and performances appear as foundational in human experience and knowledge.

⁵ It would be interesting to confront the importance of Kant to Deleuze's definition of ‘noology’ with the way in which Kant developed his discourse just to find a way between pure empiricism and what in his times was precisely called ‘noology’: that is, the metaphysical theory of the cognitive functions of understanding. In particular, Kant used to call ‘noologists’ those who were presenting the notions of understanding as not applicable to empiric contents, but as able to offer the knowledge of things as such – indeed, for him the first noologist was Plato. See Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Wiley: Blackwell, 1995), 171.

⁶ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3. Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)

strong critique of the analysis proposed in 1947 by Adorno and Horkheimer. Their characterisation of the ‘culture industries’ as short-circuiting the imagination, radically alienating and de-subjectivating what should be the freely reasoning subject, is, for Stiegler, “obviously at once lucid (if not prophetic) and erroneous (if not reactionary)”, and this precisely because it stems from “a dis-oriented reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that is both non-problematic and a-critical”.⁷ Certainly, their vision of Hollywood cinema, and in general of the temporal objects produced by the cultural industries,⁸ as provoking a ‘spiritual catastrophe’ is in a general way valid, and can in fact be extended to today’s exploitation of the ‘economy of perception’. For Adorno and Horkheimer, all this is organised with the sole aim of controlling the senses of everyone throughout their lifetimes and modulating them according to the interests of industrial development, so that the cultural industries would then act in order to paralyse the imagination of spectators to the point that they would no longer be able to distinguish between perception and imagination, reality and fiction. For Stiegler, however, the origin of this possibility lies not in a ‘monstrous’ mechanism of external schematisation introduced by cinema, but precisely in the structure of consciousness itself, inasmuch as it is thoroughly cinematographic.⁹ In short: the act of recollection itself passes through the imagination, constituting a montage of memories in such a way that we can describe the imagination as the ‘post-production center’, produced according to the dictates of the unconscious, which would hence be the ‘producer’. This activity of consciousness corresponds to its formation, which is possible only by

⁷ To retrace the sense of this statement, it’s worth remembering that Kant composed two slightly different versions of the *CPR*, where the role of imagination in schematization changes: first, in 1781, “the imagination seems both productive and receptive, which already suggests an ambiguity concerning the fundamental distinction between intuitions and concepts”. Second, in 1787, “Kant changes the role of the imagination, in order to sustain the boundary between what we contribute to the world’s intelligibility and what the world contributes, by subordinating the reproductive imagination to the functioning of the categories of the understanding”. See Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, second edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 20. For Stiegler, a main misunderstanding of Kant made by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not having pointed out this difference, and the reason why it is introduced. See Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3*, 37ff.

⁸ For Stiegler, an object is ‘temporal’ when its flow coincides with the stream of consciousness of which it is the object.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

passing through mnemotechnical systems: what is produced are temporal, diachronic (i.e. singular, different) streams, always in need of being synchronised (i.e. shared, combined), and where this synchronisation is only ever provisional. As they are produced, these streams are externalised and can be rendered reproducible via what Stiegler calls ‘tertiary retention’ (i.e. a support for the prosthetic exteriorisation of memory, that is, the spatialised form of a temporal object).

When the production of temporal objects becomes industrialised, the production and differentiation of diachrony is increasingly replaced by a synchronisation that is already prepared and supported by the convergence of different media products: this consists in an annihilation of the singularity of the individual, and becomes an obstacle to the very process of individuation that constitutes consciousness. The cause of this change is not an externalisation that would somehow pervert what was initially a free and unmediated consciousness, as Adorno and Horkheimer claim. On the contrary, “if there *is* an ‘industrial schematism’, it is because the schematics are originally, in their very structure, industrialisable: they are functions of tertiary retention; that is, of technics, technology, and today, industry”.¹⁰ In other words, what consciousness produces is for Stiegler always already re-producible: within the structure of thought, image (reproducible tertiary retention) and schema are the two faces of the same reality. The ability of the ‘programming’ and ‘culture’ industries to “schematize everything for their clients” is possible, then, only because the ‘I’ is already projected in external schemata through images that it assembles and selects, and to which it can and must delegate selection – something that has in fact always occurred through the authority of images of the ancestors of this ‘I’, allowing it to adopt these ancestral experiences, which it has not itself lived, as *its own* past.

The fault of Adorno and Horkheimer, according to Stiegler, is ultimately to consider the problem as lying in technology, hence externalisation, whereas, as he points out, the imagination is an already highly technical projection, and where it is clear that “consciousness has never been self-consciousness *other than in being projected outside*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

itself".¹¹ If the role of technics and technology in our development is not taken into account, it becomes impossible to see that "the very possibility of 'culture', and thus of 'spirit', relies on technics".¹² Hence technics cannot be considered as only a poisoning element: it is *pharmacological* – at the same time poison and remedy. For Stiegler, then, what takes place with the advent of the hyper-industrialisation of analogue, and especially digital, technologies? As mentioned, it is precisely because the time of consciousness is already externalised and materialised (spatialised), and so manipulable, storable, exchangeable, and thus saleable, that it becomes *marketable*. If the cultural industries try to operate on the time of consciousness, and to propose and substitute its own spatialisations, this provides the market with a way to exercise control over the process of projection that the individual builds through his memories. If by selecting retentions the individual produces protentions (i.e. desires for the future), then through the industrialisation of image-production the market can incite industrialised aspirations. This results in what Stiegler calls the 'proletarianisation of desire',¹³ where, through the systematic exploitation of the drives of individuals, they lose their attachment to things and are expropriated from their own power to decide. Now, even if this is the result of synchronisation, which in this sense forms an obstacle to the very possibility of thinking, nevertheless it is only *within* synchronisation that the unity of a social body and its desire for a future is possible. In other words, the problem arises only when synchronisation becomes the sole tendency, rather than composed with diachronic tendencies. The same can be said for technical delegation, that is, with the tendency to prosthetisation, which is a natural component of sensibility¹⁴ and hence not in itself problematic - even if the *quantity* and *speed* of prostheticisation certainly is problematic. Such tendencies reveal how the conditions of possibility of sensibility are not immutable but in constant co-evolution with transformations of thinking, agency and experience within surroundings that are always technological.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ See Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery 2: The Katastrophē of the Sensible*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

¹⁴ See also Pietro Montani, *Tecnologie della sensibilità. Estetica e immaginazione interattiva* (Milano: Cortina, 2014), 35.

3.

Currently, the need for a reconceptualisation of the relation between human being and technology within the industrial process is fundamentally involved with a multitude of new and fashionable functionalities made possible by digital and automatic society. As foreshadowed above, the massive disposability of digital data to be exploited, and the explosive growth of connection, make possible the illusion of a better quality of life, no doubt involving the ‘enhancement’ of personal everyday life performances, but also of the relationships with the environment and its objects. This was always the primordial promise of automatisisation: to free brain and life time, thanks to a technological augmentation of human productivity and to the design of ‘smart environments’ capable of optimising any of the functions of living, working and sensing.

One pioneer of research on technological optimisation and ‘smartification’ was clearly Le Corbusier, with his functionalist concept of the ‘house as a machine for living’: a project simultaneously pursued and criticised by his contemporaries, for instance by Asger Jorn, who claimed that to conceive optimisation in this way is to impose a definitive idea of living-well against the “paradoxical complexity” of reality, where “truth is a complementary system of mutually contradictory truths”.¹⁵ Another of his objections concerned the ‘anti-aesthetic standardisation’ of this pre-ideologised world, with its rationalised, stabilised and rather tedious order. For Jorn, such structures lack any direct communication or effect on the human senses, even though it may be harmonic, functional and useful – which for a technical object are as such aesthetic qualities, as Simondon argued some years later.¹⁶

However, with the recent advent of informational and physical environments capable of sensing and adjusting to our feelings and

¹⁵ See Asger Jorn, “Contre le Fonctionalisme” (Paris: 1957, reprinted by Éditions Allia, 2001 [http://bopsecrets.org/SI/asger-jorn/functionalm.htm](http://bopsecrets.org/SI/asger-jorn/functionalism.htm)).

¹⁶ For Simondon, a techno-aesthetic work is perfectly functional, successful and beautiful as such: “it is technical and aesthetic at the same time: aesthetic because it’s technical, and technical because it’s aesthetic”. Gilbert Simondon, “On techno-aesthetics”, trans. Arne De Boever, *Parrhesia* 14 (2012), 1-8.

needs, or of reconfiguring them according to computational patterns that they own, these objections may seem outdated. Today, such environments are fully equipped with different possibilities: they seem to ‘take care’ of our lives, and to affect our ability to sense and think in a direct way.

This is possible thanks to the digitisation of any and all information about the physical world, human beings and their choices, and their transcription into automatically ‘correlatable’ data. With such algorithmic detection and classification of behaviour, it is now possible to fill virtually any intelligent technological object with an indefinite range of programmed options – which can in its turn be connected to a multiplicity of other objects, generating an even larger amount of ‘different possible truths’. These options are becoming increasingly anticipative: the objects know the choices of a single subject so well that sometimes the choice seems to precede the subject's decision, so to speak, generating a feeling of care-fulness.

But, following the previous analysis, it is important not to forget that what is ‘spatialisable’ (or ‘grammatisable’, as Stiegler would say), even in the micro-space of digital data, consists in the form of a trace, which can be reproduced and industrialised as such, and thus commercialised or, more precisely, *controlled*. Indeed, the target of the multiplicity of devices that detect human behaviors is not the expression, nor the best performed execution, of individual intentions, but precisely what comes before, and often in a preconscious stage. With Antoinette Rouvroy, we can call this a ‘performative anticipation of intentions’,¹⁷ which means that the probability of a behaviour, or of a choice, can be not only almost exactly calculated through the very precise statistical modelling of quantified data pertaining to the previous (past) behaviours/choices, but also silently *addressed* precisely through continuous anticipation. Then, the power of what constitutes an almost already perfect system of prediction is also perpetually and automatically implemented by the confluence of billions of new data, whose significance is augmented by the correlation with data of

¹⁷ Antoinette Rouvroy and Jean-Noël Colin, “Des données et des hommes. Droits et libertés fondamentaux dans un monde de données massives” (draft), *Rapport pour la Convention 108 du Conseil d'Europe* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015), [https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/dataprotection/TPD_documents/T-PD-BUR\(2015\)09_Big%20Data_17092015_DRAFT_fr%20\(3%2012%202015\).pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/dataprotection/TPD_documents/T-PD-BUR(2015)09_Big%20Data_17092015_DRAFT_fr%20(3%2012%202015).pdf).

‘similar’ producers - a correlation from which other data are produced, and so on. Even if this is claimed to be a system to reinforce security (the precise cataloguing of any possibility being the only way to exclude the unpredictable contingency of human behaviour), or as an amplifier of subjectivities, the anticipation of intentions seems more linked to a surgical control and formatting - via marketing strategies - of every dimension of life, generating, as Rouvroy and Berns call it, a situation of *algorithmic governmentality*.¹⁸

Concerning the realm of sensibility, this point is further developed by the Italian philosopher Pietro Montani in a way that conforms with the analysis proposed by Stiegler in *Technics and Time* and *Symbolic Misery*. In one of his last books, he argues that the accordance of human performance to the rules of software involves a precise economic and political strategy that he defines as “bioaesthetic”.¹⁹ For Montani, the collection, classification and exploitation of data related to sensibility not only serves the user-profiling strategy of intensive marketing, but also builds new classes of objects that can function as ‘agents of standardisation’, that is, that ‘level’ and ‘anaesthetise’ sensibility. These objects (or environments) are designed to contain all the items that usually stimulate a simple sensible reaction, of the kind that requires no further elaboration or interpretation and that is easily agreeable and shareable, items so hyper-aestheticised that they can be perceived by anyone with little or no effort. It is precisely the fact that such objects are built on the basis of some basic, common and automatically preferred sensibility that allows them to function as conveyers of ‘desires’, decisions and behaviours, all of the most elementary kind. This eliminates the possibility of giving meaning to anything other than what is already inscribed in (and prescribed by) the design of such objects.

Under the mask of a new care for the richness of human sensibility and aesthetic faculties, under the promise of augmenting the power and potentiality of human being, once again we find a tendency towards the shutdown of any subjective individuation, to the ‘an-

18 Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, “Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d’émancipation : le disparate comme condition d’individuation par la relation?”, *Réseaux* 177 (2013/1), 163-196.

19 Pietro Montani, *Bioestetica. Senso comune, tecnica e arte nell’età della globalizzazione*, (Rome: Carocci, 2007).

aesthetic standardisation’ of products, behaviours, and lives. This leads to what Stiegler calls ‘the proletarianisation of sensibility’,²⁰ a reduction of possibilities for thinking and a general emptiness of the sense of aesthetic experience, perverted into pure sensationalism or unelaborated sensation, ultimately ending in the obliteration of any possible new symbolic production engendered by the encounter with contingency, from which the ‘consumer’ is thereby ‘protected’.

4.

Recently, and in particular within the field of media studies, sensibility and thought have begun to be investigated as part of a ‘general ecology’,²¹ that is, a distributed technical process, rather than in an ‘anthropocentric’ way. In short, this has renewed the discourse on mediation, now based on the redescription of agency and collectivity in the light of a radical technical supremacy: Mark Hansen, for instance, refers to ‘environmental agency’,²² claiming that “we must renounce the position of mastery we have long accorded ourselves and instead take our place within the larger environmental networks of sensibility that generate experience”.²³

Hansen’s analysis aims to demonstrate how what he calls ‘twenty-first century media’ have a specific technicity that makes them go beyond their common prosthetic function: being able to operate within the microtemporal and subperceptual dimension of sensory experience, which is outside the scope of human modes of awareness (consciousness, attention, sense perception, etc.), they can process, work and edit the very sensible continuum in which experience occurs, applying to sensibility a sort of ‘mediatechnological engineering’. “Put bluntly, today’s media no longer target human subjectivity as such (perceptual consciousness)”, he states, “but rather aim directly to

²⁰ Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique I. L’avenir du travail* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 43.

²¹ This is for instance the point of view of Erich Hörl. See “A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cyberneticization and General Ecology”, trans. James Burton, Jeffrey Kirkwood, and Maria Vlotides, in *The Whole Earth. California and the Disappearance of the Outside*, eds. Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 121–130.

²² Mark B.N. Hansen, “Engineering Preindividual Potentiality: Technics, Transindividuation, and 21st Century Media”, *SubStance* 129, Vol. 41, No. 3 (November 2012), 32–59.

²³ Hansen, *Feed Forward*, 64–65.

target the nonsubjective subjectivity at issue in worldly micro sensibility”.²⁴ For Hansen, however, the information gathered by 21st-century media are able to expand experience precisely because this information does not require the mediation and ‘approval’ of consciousness. The technical sensors now ubiquitous in our lived environments are able to “feed-forward” data into consciousness, and with a shorter delay than the resolution time required for it to arise through “organic” channels, influencing and expanding the possibilities of our future agency in the world. All this comes at the price of an initial loss of individual conscious sensibility (perception), which is then replaced with a “worldly sensibility” – which in turn can “provide access to an unknown world”.

In contrast to the ideological refrain of a new immediacy into which ubiquitous media and intelligent environments are bringing us, here we are dealing with an absolute technological mediation thrusting us headlong towards a primacy of technical over human faculties. Nevertheless, there is nothing new in the fact that not only perception but also sensibility is technologically mediated: taking the Simondonian formula, we could say that every aesthetic experience is always already ‘techno-aesthetic’.

Rather, the issue is the tendency towards a complete automatisms of sensibility, which can cause the regression of the noetic soul to the purely reactive stage of sensitivity,²⁵ and so, to what Stiegler already prefigured as the ‘aesthetic barbarity’ made possible by the proletarianisation of sensibility. This is so because, again quoting Simondon, “the *aesthèsis*, the fundamental perceptive intuition, is part of a culture. It acts like a pre-selector, separating the acceptable from the unacceptable, and determining whether one will accept or refuse”.²⁶ Without the *aesthesis*, symbolisation is no longer possible, and without symbolisation, there can be no thought.

This kind of danger was already sensed in the 1950s, when Asger Jorn recognised the following as the basic question for today: “how can we avoid a total automatism, a transformation of our intelligence into an instinctive and standardised reflex? [...] Can we

²⁴ Hansen, “Engineering Preindividual Potentiality”, 57.

²⁵ See Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery* 2, 78.

²⁶ Simondon, “On techno-aesthetics”, 4.

retain freedom and experimental desire under the new historical conditions?”²⁷

This quote is clearly in line with the most recent book of Stiegler,²⁸ where he claims that automatisisation is not the problem as such, but only inasmuch as this automatisisation no longer opens up new possibilities for disautomatisation and autonomy: the time we save thanks to automatisisation must be reinvested in finding new capacities of disautomatisation. Again, the question lies along the dimensions of speed and time: further reflection on these dimensions, capable of putting aside any simpleminded techno-enthusiasm, is surely necessary today, if we hope to recover the possibility of actively making our way through a world in which unexplored heuristic possibilities remain to be thought.

²⁷ Jorn, “Contre le fonctionnalisme”.

²⁸ Stiegler, *La société automatique I*.