

Taking Care with Bernard Stiegler, reviewed by Richard Iveson, continued...

### TV is poisoning our minds

Psychotechnological systems, argues Stiegler, are the key technologies of hyperindustrial societies of control. Hence, whereas for Stiegler the key question centres upon education leading to maturity, the 'media world' by contrast is fixated upon gaining control of youth's psychic and social apparatuses from the youngest age (p.132). Such systems of control serve only to short-circuit the psychic system, however, resulting in the explosion of attention-deficit disorder, infant hyperactivity, and cognitive-overflow-syndrome we see today. Ultimately, maintains Stiegler, desire itself collapses (p.42).

In this way, *attention* is reduced to *retention*, a regression of intelligence for which the programming industries and mass media are to blame. Television in particular, writes Stiegler, has 'irresistibly' ruined the public education systems instituted in the 1880s along *Aufklärung* ideals, to the extent that democracy in the West has now been subsumed by a *telecracy*, which, with the programming industries as its 'armed wing', seeks only to control social behaviour by adapting it to immediate market needs (p.58). Moreover, this process has been accelerated by the emergence of new media, leading to the 'hypersolicitation of attention' (p.94). This control process serves to remove individuals from participation in the *critical* process of collective intelligence, a removal characteristic of what Stiegler, after Marx, terms 'proletarianization'.

Psychotechnologies, in other words, eliminate the very thing that defines the human, that of critical consciousness. As a result, the 'new' short-term state of 'attention without consciousness' they inaugurate necessarily constitutes an entirely different form of being. Stiegler refers to this as a state of 'vigilance', a form of being characteristic of wild animals (p.78). The programming industries, in short, rewire the human, purging it of its exceptional 'cerebral plasticity' so as to produce instead an animalistic nervous system 'forever enclosed within strict neurological limits' (pp.96-8). The post-human, therefore, is a (psycho)technologically produced animal, subject only to the short-term satisfaction of drives without desire. This, suggests Stiegler, is the future, and that future is (almost) now, consciousness having being reduced to a 'grammatized stream' by the 'transformation of formalized machinic processes, as well as by devices recording and manipulating the information stream' (p.147).

This 'rewiring', moreover, is no simple metaphor. Television and new media, Stiegler insists, irrevocably restructure the synaptogenetic circuits of children subjected to them at an early age. The evidence invoked to back up this claim is, however, very thin. Nevertheless, Stiegler takes it as proven that such rewiring inevitably results in an irreversible inability to attain maturity at the neurological level (pp.74-7). The 'herd' that is the next generation, in short, will thus be *physiologically* unable to heed Stiegler's warning and to take responsibility. Rather, by the time today's children grow up, it will already be too late.

For Stiegler, signs of this process are everywhere. In place of the social formation of intelligence, we find only 'the most minimal human "subject"', which increasingly 'delegates its attention to automata that then become its captors, meters, gauges, warning signals, alarms, and so on' (pp.100-1). While, on the one hand, we can no longer recall our own telephone numbers or how to do simple arithmetic, on the other we transfer control of all our financial, military and medical decisions to various software applications. As a result, there can be no singular internalization of the collective and social memories of humanity, and thus

no possibility of creating new long circuits of transindividuation. Instead, machines calculate us: 'attention engines' take the place of attention itself, and thus substitute *for* the subject (p.100).

There is, however, something of a hysterical edge to Stiegler's stricture regarding the toxicity of television and new media, which recalls similar apocalyptic warnings that have accompanied the emergence of every new media form, not excluding the printed book. It is an attack moreover, as John Hutnyk points out in a recent article 'Proletarianization or Cretinization', which depends upon a largely undifferentiated concept of the 'long-circuit', which takes no account of the specificities of place. Moreover, Stiegler appears not to consider the possibility that, what for him is only ever a delinquency of youth in need of correction, might instead constitute a basis for resistance and struggle against market controls. Thus, writes Hutnyk, whereas Stiegler's diagnosis tends all too readily to render the masses a passive object of capture, perhaps instead 'we need more delinquents, civil unrest, a revolutionary call to attention' in the constitution of a dialectic in which the distraction of attention may actually be a refined and critical inattention'.<sup>2</sup> Stupidity too, insists Hutnyk, can be pharmacological.

At the same time, in order to justify his distinction between the (good) psychotechnics which constitute humanity, and the (bad) psychotechnologies which reduce it to 'mere' animal vigilance, Stiegler's position ultimately depends upon an extremely problematic human-animal dichotomy, one which conflates 'the human' with consciousness and 'the animal' with blind instinctual drives. As detailed in the first volume of *Technics and Time*, Stiegler insists upon the absolute exceptionalism of the human by virtue of a co-constitutive technicity (meaning that, according to Stiegler's thesis, any nonhuman animal who manipulates a tool must therefore be a human). In *Taking Care*, however, Stiegler seems to suggest that a human can be somehow reduced to, or even returned to, an animal way of being. The question then, is how can grammatization – the putatively defining property of the human – effect what for Stiegler is an ontologically impossible reduction of the human to the animal?

It is in order to circumvent this question that Stiegler attempts to separate human vigilance from its animal counterpart by claiming they constitute two different 'aspects'. Such a separation, however, cannot be maintained. Psychotechnologies, he suggests, *eliminate* human attention, whereas animal attention is always already *captured* (p.102). In other words, the human, defined futurally, must have attention and thus anticipation eliminated in order to then *become* a captured animal. The difference then, concerns only the *process*, rather than the resulting form of being, by which 'the human' becomes what 'the animal' always already is. Stiegler's vigilant posthuman, in other words, is the regression of the (ontologically distinct) human to an animal he or she never was. Perhaps then, in this dystopian future controlled by autonomous psychotechnological forces, it will be Senegalese chimpanzees who, with their favourite tools for extracting termites and their carefully fashioned spears for hunting lemurs, will find themselves marked out as the 'proper' humans amongst all us (other) animals.

### **Re-schooling Foucault**

Returning to Stiegler's argument, the 'great question' of our times necessarily consists in finding a way to abandon the inhuman abandonment of the subject to machines, and to invent instead 'new modalities of non-inhuman existence [...] modalities that are less toxic, more useful to a non-inhumanity' (p.183). This, in short, is *our* particular battle for intelligence: how do we reconfigure the current psychotechnologies so as to invent a new way of life, one

that takes care ‘by inventing techniques, technologies, and social structures of attention formation corresponding to the organological specificities of our times’ (p.48). This will not come about by chance however. Rather, says Stiegler, humanity must be *taught* to cultivate care and attention by way of a reinvention of education that utilizes an industrial organization.

Here we reach the core of Stiegler’s text, which can be summarized as a series of interlinked prescriptions. First, the entire education community must be made aware of its hypomnesic basis within tertiary retentions through genealogical analyses of the grammatization process. In this way, teachers and students alike will thereafter understand the need to return to the ‘older’ form of attention construction as the formation of disciplinary transindividuation circuits. This then in turn requires the teaching of *strategies* for paying attention to psychotechniques of attention formation (p.70). Stiegler calls this an ‘organological rethinking of the education system’ (p.83) in which every retentional device is to be systematically analyzed for both its potentially curative and potentially poisonous effects. In this way, the various forms of attention brought about by both psychotechniques and psychotechnologies can be identified and the correct ones selected in the formation of a regime of *care*.

Arguing that the school, therefore, constitutes the primary pharmacological site of this battle for intelligence, Stiegler is thus compelled to engage with Foucault’s influential reading of the school as simply a prison of enforced discipline. This he does by suggesting Foucault in fact ‘misses’ the pharmacological aspect of tertiary retentions by virtue of a ‘skewed’ reading resulting from the historical contingency that Stiegler terms ‘post-1968 disappointment’. Similarly, writes Stiegler, insofar as Foucault roots his analyses within the nation-states of a long-gone Europe, his notion of biopower cannot account for our age of deterritorialized economic forces and their programming industries which inevitably construct entirely new apparatuses.

It is rather the case, Stiegler argues, that the school, *in addition to* being a Foucauldian apparatus of surveillance and control, is *also* an institutional mechanism through which knowledge is to be acquired, both through the ‘construction of a system of care regulating the connections of the individual to self and others, intergenerationally’, and by the ‘transindividuation of a transmissible knowledge to “ordinary scholars”, citizens with rights (Kant’s and Corderet’s subjects) who attain such knowledge in the form of a discipline formalizing consciousnesses, and that can be taught as such’ (p.146).

For this, Stiegler says, we must return to Kant’s ‘republic of letters’ as formulated in ‘What is Enlightenment?’ from 1784. Here, we discover that the corporeal discipline of the school is in fact a *condition* of a mature self-discipline and of the discipline of self (p.118). Foucault overlooks this fact, claims Stiegler, because he focuses on only one pole of the school’s inherent pharmacology, that of the disciplinary field of subjection, and completely ignores ‘the field of disciplines structuring knowledge – and as discursive relations based on techniques of the self’ (p.121).

Let us not be too hard on Foucault, however, insofar as he too was inevitably trapped within his own historically specific ‘regime of truth’ and thus condemned, as we all are, to operate within its diagrammatic statements. This limit, Stiegler suggests, was constructed in and by the ‘era of 1968’, during which *all* power was considered as synonymous with the repressive State apparatus. As a result, education in general, and the school in particular, necessarily came to be considered as part of the disciplinary control apparatus. However, subsequent to what Stiegler calls the ‘historicopolitical abortion called “1968”’ (p.119), the huge disappointment that followed – disappointment described by Stiegler as the mindset of ‘*only*’, in the sense of ‘school will have *only* been a disciplinary tool’ (p.120) – thereafter comes to define the thought of an entire generation of thinkers.

While admittedly fertile, insists Stiegler, this mindset of ‘only’ is nonetheless *only* fruitful ‘on condition of its being critiqued – and the time of that critique has come’ (p.121).

Through just this critique, Stiegler thus attempts to move at once beyond the limits of the ‘1968-mindset’ in general, and the Foucauldian imbrication of power-knowledge in particular. By way of a *genealogical* understanding of the pharmacological nature of schooling, Stiegler claims in conclusion that it becomes possible to reinstitute ‘the school’ as an organization for the teaching of literacy as a formulator of rational, intergenerational relations and thus as a system of *care* on a ‘completely different plane from the biopolitics emerging as the administration of what Foucault describes as biopower’ (p.179). Insofar as it pays attention to its hypomnesic basis in conjunction with the employment of the ‘correct’ strategies of psychotechnics, the school is thus the key site in the reconfiguration of our current state of carelessness. We, writes Stiegler, the last generation of mature adults, must erect a politics of ‘care-through-instruction’, which is in practice a ‘*metacare* that, as it were, *shapes* care in modern society in the strongest sense – as the taking of noetic action that is *politically and economically organized*’ (p.179). Only in this way, he argues, might the youth of today still understand us tomorrow, only in this way might humanity have a future. Nevertheless, it is a tomorrow whose cure threatens much that might turn out to be more poisonous than the toxicity it promises to combat.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On technology, see, for example, the five volumes of *Technics and Time* (1996–); on political economy, see *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (2009); on art, see *Mystagogies: De l’art contemporain* (forthcoming); on television, see *Echographies of Television* with Jacques Derrida (1997) and *La Télécratie contra la démocratie* (2006); on democracy, see *De la démocratie participative* (2007), and on industrial and hyperindustrial societies, see the first volumes of *Mécreance et discrédit* (2004) and *De la misère symbolique* (2006) respectively.

<sup>2</sup> John Hutnyk, ‘Proletarianization or Cretinization’, forthcoming in *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*.

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