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'Like a flying fish': Bernard Stiegler and Philosophy in the Intimacy of the Prison Cell

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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 he became a philosopher in the intimacy of his prison cell.¹ Of course, there is no question that from Socrates to Antonio Gramsci philosophers have enjoyed an intimate relationship with prison but this was mainly because of their philosophy. In Bernard Stiegler's case, however, the script is a little different since the making of the philosopher takes place in and because of prison. But this is of course a very provisional and simplistic explanation of the origin of a philosopher who makes it his mission to think on the provisionality of origin.

In the short essay *How I Became a Philosopher* found in *Acting Out* Stiegler discusses his five years of incarceration. The narration is deeply personal and at times moving but the uncertainty concerning the identity of the narrator constitutes performatively the very argument of the essay. One cannot help to wonder; is the narrator the convict who begins slowly and awkwardly to think philosophically or is he the philosopher who reiterates philosophically the convict's process of becoming a philosopher? Does the text coincide with the author? Is the text a reiteration of this self's differential process? The reading of this essay can be deconstructive, Stiegler, after all is deeply influenced by Derrida, or even phenomenological, since the narrator is hermeneutically constituted as a being in the world through his interpretation and above all his discovery of phenomenology which is received by him as the possibility of wonder, survival and philosophical thinking. Stiegler says

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 (22).

For Stiegler the suspension of the world and the familiarity of his milieu, which was imprinted in every experience of his being-in-the-world, came naturally and forcefully because of prison. Reitering Aristotle in a rather existential tone he explains how difficult is to achieve this reflective space since:

this 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 (14).

In the non-world of prison which is still a world and part of the world Stiegler considers the “milieu while being able to extract (him) self from it, in the same way as a flying fish can leave the water: intermittently” (14). This rare freedom allowed him to realise that in the confinement of his cell he could only recollect and reminisce. This realization made the constitution of memory and time the focus of his thought. In this light, and because of his access to the prison’s library, he attempted to discover –mainly through Kant, Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida– the very conditions of recollection which resulted to his conclusion that “*hypomnesis*”, that is, technologically retained memories as in the form of a book, or the library, is what “*gives place* to anamnesis” (15). In other words, memory is sustained by external support and is affected by it.

From then on Stiegler begins to wonder about the artifactuality of our world, either as language or technology, and goes on to discuss, in a series of books with the general title *Technics and Time*, the lack of any originary, natural state of reality while asserting the technological nature of the process of becoming human. His experience in prison, and his “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*”, paved the way for such discovery (*ibid.*). From the intimacy of his cell Stiegler begins discovering his notions and forming his philosophy and thus participating in the *hypomnesic* nature of the world which through his texts is at the same time already part of our world. This paper, or this *mnemotechnic* tool,² will discuss Stiegler’s singular process of philosophizing, its taking place in prison, and the political significance of this event..

Anamnesis and Hypomnesis

As noted, the text “*How does one become a philosopher in the intimacy and secret of one’s life?*” is very personal; it is an account of someone who became a philosopher through his reminiscing of a world that was no longer available to him. However, it is also an account of the philosopher that came to be not only because of such reminiscence but because of his contemplation of this reminiscence that compensated for the lack of the world by reproducing it. Reading the text is not the reading of a convict’s experiences in jail; it is the experience of a philosopher that performatively acts through this text narrating and thus synthesizing this experience “*après-coup*”.³ This psychoanalytic term (*après-coup*) refers generally to something which the individual receives at a certain time but gives meaning to only later. It is a

foundational term for Stiegler, that bares on the thought of a series of philosophers who influenced his understanding of lived time. It suggests that there are traces in the individual that allow the formation of anticipation, the formation of the present moment and truth. His account, then, of how he became a philosopher is such an après-coup. In fact, he says that he experienced the challenge of revealing how he became a philosopher as his

duty to *say*, if not the truth, at least the *necessity* of telling the truth, and in the attempt, as far as possible, to get to the bottom of “my truth,” the truth of my journey through the question of the truth and, perhaps, as *the experience of the impossibility of telling the truth other than by default, as the fiction of an après-coup: in time and as time, as the work of time.* ⁴

Stiegler traces the trace of the present as something which is never really there, never autonomous and auto-affective. The present is rather a constant synthesis of presences and absences. In his own case, first comes the absence of the world whilst in prison which produced the suspension of the “natural attitude”. Phenomenology becomes both a necessity and a discovery. The scarcity of things gathers and intensifies his attention; it might have tempted him to go back to the things themselves but very soon he discovers that there is no going back to the thing, there is no thing-in-itself, only a thing which refers to another thing, that is, things as suspensions of things, things as traces. In this respect, Stiegler recapitulates phenomenology and structuralism and soon partakes in the deconstructive ethos. He explains

I no longer lived in the world, but rather in the absence of a world, which presented itself here not only as a default, but as that which is *always* in default, and as *a necessary default* [un défaut qu'il faut]-rather than as a lack [*manque*]. (17)

Stiegler incorporates this experience in his understanding of default. 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 by the supplement, the secondary, the subsequent. His look then is turned on “the *world, as the framework of artifacts forming relations sustaining social relations*”. He explains: “I had perhaps a 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*.” (14-15)

His phenomenological look is thus turned into a deconstructive look concentrated on the supplement that hints and sustains the world. These supplements, which are technological or linguistic or both, hold on to “*tertiary retentions*” or “hypomnesic traces”, that is, traces which are not contained in the mind. These traces participate in perception since we can access them repeatedly and differentially; they are memory externalized in space. A book is such a gathering of tertiary memories; it gives access to memory which is not mine yet inherited by me and always in the process of differentiating itself. No second reading can produce the same interpretation. The book is not identical to itself as the reader is not identical to themselves with every reading. The temporal object which can be accessed repeatedly underlines the default

of origin and the supplementarity of language and technology (18). Most of all, it underlines the role of *hypomnesis* in perception.

Traditionally western philosophy has prioritized *anamnesis* over *hypomnesis*. Both words contain the Greek etymon for remembering, namely, *mneme*. *Anamnesis*, however, refers to an immediate remembering, an authentic temporality which is accessed without the mediation of technology and resembles *aletheia*, that is, (truth as the bringing out of forgetfulness). This understanding of truth as remembering is founded by Greek philosophy. Stiegler 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 our souls used to have but forgot it. Stiegler, adds: “From then on, cognition is recognition, a remembering-an *anamnesis*” (15). *Hypomnesis*, conversely, is downgraded; it refers to a secondary kind of remembering; it is memory located externally in the technological supplement. In *Phaedrus* we witness another example of this dichotomy that solidifies western thought. In this text Plato

opposes anamnesis to hypomnesis: the latter, as a technics of memory (and he is concerned here essentially with the writing of books), with the same defects as the body, and in the same way a prison, is for Plato what renders the soul forgetful, replacing true memory with artificial memory, and accentuates the forgetting of the origin into which the soul has fallen in its descent into the body. Hypomnesis is here, very generally, the figure of artifice, of technics as the dead simulacrum of life-as-immortality'. (15)

Hypomnesis will be revisited obsessively by Stiegler. His reading of Plato's *Protagoras* and more specifically his interpretation of the myth of Prometheus will allow him to illuminate the “origin of technics” as the “origin of mortality” (16). According to the myth, the twin titans Prometheus and Epimetheus are charged with the task of giving out powers to all the animals in a way that will compensate for their weaknesses. Epimetheus performed this task but he forgot the human being which he left *a-лого* (without reason). Prometheus, attempting to compensate for his brother's forgetfulness, stole the arts and fire from Athena and Hephaestus. In this light, Stiegler comments that the human being comes to being out of a double fault; the accidental forgetting of Epimetheus and Prometheus' theft. This fault, he says “is nothing but the de-fault of origin or the origin as de-fault” .⁵ Stiegler's theory is built on these pillars, namely, on the accidental nature of the human being, the indispensability of technics for humanization and the constitution of time as reproduction because of this original de-fault. In this respect, his goal is to solidify the role of the technical realm for the givenness of time and asserts the political significance of this event. In the short section that follows this is discussed.

Conclusion

Reading Kant, Husserl and Heidegger through a deconstructive lens he detects the contributing role of representation that takes place through imagination for the presentation and continuity of time. In Husserl there is an emphasis on the way time that has elapsed is retained in order for the present moment to have meaning and for anticipation to be formed. For Stiegler this association takes place through imagination that retains and associates the past and the present moment. The fact,

however that the past is technical and accessed technologically points to imagination's dependence on the technical realm. This goes against both Heidegger and Kant, but for Stiegler technics offers access to memory which is not mine but is inherited by me. This forms my milieu, my already-there through which my anticipation is formed. In this way technics becomes the limits of thought; it is my "retentional finitude". (17)

When however technics, through its potentiality to retain the past, enters the processes that are supposedly auto-affective, namely imagination, perception and time, then the question of the type of retentions that are to form our thought becomes political.

Technics, has the nature of "pros-thesis" which means, that is, "placed before us [*la technique est ce qui nous est pro-posé*] (in an originary knowledge, a *mathésis* that "pro-poses" us things)"(235). In order to think this through, we can bring to mind how search engines are working having always already proposed the criteria for the selection and presentation of knowledge. These criteria are not chosen by me; I am not even aware of them but they still propose what is possible for me to know, they form knowledge and the limits of my world. In this respect, the one that controls our retentions controls our minds. In our current context, it is the media and culture industries that control what is to be retained or not, that schematize imagination and set the conditions for individuation. With a series of articles and books like *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Stiegler will repeatedly discuss the political aspect of technics which ultimately should become a question about the *polis* and education.⁶ His own experience in prison proved that this process of individuation should not be taken lightly. He comments: "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".⁷

He thus detects a new responsibility of care that should concern the state, education and society in general. This is a responsibility about the formation of attention, the individuation of citizens and the choice of factors that do the forming and affect individuation. Stiegler 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 ...more or less attentive and thoughtful, composing the milieu either as critical, rational consciousness (maturity) or an agglomeration of gregarious behaviors... This means that the matter of the ecology of mind is also that of the ecology of the political milieu, and the transformation of the political element –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.⁸ (85-86)

¹ Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, ed. Werner Hemacher, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross and Patrick Crogan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1.

² Mnemotechnics is a term Stiegler uses for technology. It comes from the Greek stems for memory (*mneme*) and technology (*techne*) and points to the fact that every piece of technology retains memories.

³ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 45.

⁴ Stiegler, *Acting Out*, 11.

⁵ Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 188.

⁶ Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁷ Stiegler, *Acting Out*, 22.

⁸ Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 85-86.