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Extended French Theory & the Design Field...
On Nature and Ecology:
A reader



Overall

**Techno
logy**

encourages us not to think about ecology separately from aesthetics:

To bring into being other worlds beyond those of purely abstract information, to engender Universes of reference and existential Territories where singularity and finitude are taken into consideration... to confront the vertiginous Cosmos so as to make it inhabitable; these are the tangled paths of the tri-ecological vision [of environments, social relations and subjectivities].”
(1)

Today, gaining a clearer idea of the relations between ecology and technique implies taking a look at texts written from the 1970s onwards in the context of the Cold War and the effective development of so-called “personal” computing. The philosophy of technique, or technics, which already had a rich history, had been enjoying a tremendous period of international growth for some forty years. Because it is articulated with aesthetic and ecological issues, in France this field has been echoed in some singular ways. That is what this selection of texts sets out to explore.

There is one domain, the archaeology of media, which offers a powerful counterweight to the sometimes-frightening promises of effectiveness made by these digital technologies. It does so by jolting together heterogeneous technical layers, whether of history, hardware, or software. A precursor of this field is the nomadic philosopher Vilém Flusser, whose essay *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (2) sets out a bestiary derived from squids and octopuses implicitly revealing the unthought implications of the proliferation of electronic information machines.

Taking different approaches, the philosophers of French Theory and their contemporary heirs (Bernard Stiegler, Pierre-Damien Huyghe, Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, Madeleine Akrich, etc.) have engaged acutely with the profound consequences of technological mutations. Inspired by the idea of thinking about technique beyond human actors and/or its subservience to principle of efficacy, these author—although they do not necessarily invoke this notion—interrogate an overly limited understanding of ecology. While they are not (all) contemporaries of the massification of the

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Overall Technology

Ecology and Technology In the common view of things, ecology, understood as the management of natural resources, is *de facto* opposed to technique: it is assumed that modernist logic has pushed technological progress to a crisis point where that progress would collapse under the finite nature of its growth. Technique as know-how, or the capacity to change one’s environment, is understood here, then, in its contemporary sense of “technology”: a series of technical articulations (*logos*) embodied in consumable artefacts. Now, the chapters that follow show that ecology is multiple, just as technique should be. This plurality of life environments, a concern at the heart of the fields of art and design, dovetails with some incisive texts by the philosopher Félix Guattari. His notion of “ecosophy” (global ecology) also

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use of digital technologies, the fact that these writings are still widely studied bears witness to an obvious fact: in research, there are times when notions of novelty and progress simply do not apply.

In *This Progress*, a participative performance (Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2016), (3) the German-British artist Tino Sehgal shakes up the notion of progress by activating its dimensions: personal, shared and trans-generational. One visitor's account relates this surprising experience based on the human voice, bodily movement and social interaction: "As we moved forward alone into a big empty space, a twelve year-old child came up to us and suddenly asked, 'What is progress?'"

Let us recall elements of the historical context: the emergence of mass-market computers was to a major extent based on a cognitivist understanding of the cybernetic model. (4) This paradigm of understanding, which still informs to a large extent the interfaces of the digital apparatus (*dispositifs*) (5) that we use every day, developed, economically, in a hidden way—covered by waves of objects renewed at a quick rate and installed among us without negotiation and unprepared by any civic reflection. In other words: we lack perspective for understanding what the digital media are doing to us, doing with us, or doing against us.

The artists' collective RYBN undermines the idea of progress and technological neutrality. By hybridising computer rationality with modes of thought based on mythology or belief, the esoteric forms of their work betray the "haunted" character of electronic machines. Their *Data Ghost* (6) project (Galerie Ygrec, Paris, 2014) tirelessly scans the background noises of digital data flows and detects "phantom" messages there. The internet then becomes the echo chamber of retro-inter-active spectres.

Some thirty years since the writings of Félix Guattari, these reflections on the desubjectification of individuals resonate with *dispositifs* that are invisible (because encoded) and yet infiltrate most human activities. This is what researcher Evgeny Morozov calls "algorithmic regulation," (7) that is, a pernicious form of social control effected by non-human agents. At the turn of the 2010s, there is no avoiding the realisation that information networks had not created a "global village." (8) The power of "platform capitalism" (9)—that of GAFAM and BATX—is increasingly a threat to

citizens' capacity to invent their own modes of existence. Amassing value from the sampling of "data", digital devices are also redoubtable machines for polluting the mind, the moment one starts to surf without a filter.

In this opposition between an invasive technology and the capacity of the social body to organise its conditions of existence, ecology here acquires a psychic dimension. Since technique is constitutive of humanity, however, there can be no question of going back to a golden age that never existed. In this sense, designer Ezio Manzini pleads for an "ecology of the artificial environment" (10)—a "second nature" formed by the technical fabric, which to a large extent still has to be invented. As of the early 1990s, he warned of the risk that information overload would turn into "noise": "We are living amidst a growing mass of 'semiotic waste'—in other words, messages, texts and used codes that we cannot get rid of... By their uncontrolled proliferation, the greatest variety of forms, colours and textures can result in the greyest of worlds." (11) Counter to the "attention deficit" supposedly engendered by the behavioural retroaction loops of the dominant digital "services"—that is, the economic exploitation of behaviours, affects and desires—researcher Yves Citton thus invites us to imagine the conditions of an "ecology of attention" (12) going hand in hand with a reorientation of media policies.

The philosopher of technologies Gilbert Simondon noted at the end of the 1950s, when reflecting on this loss of intelligibility, that "what is missing is the essential; the active centre of the technical operation remains veiled." (13) Technical advances have continually heightened this opacity and multiplied the "black boxes". Who today really understands, for example, how blockchain protocols work, or the self-developing codes of deep learning?

In the video *Rare Earthenware* (exhibited at ZKM in Karlsruhe as part of *Reset Modernity!*, directed by sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour in 2016), the design studio Unknown Field Divisions documented the trajectory of the rare metals needed to construct three telecommunications objects: a mobile phone, an ultra-thin laptop computer and a chip for a smart car battery. The quantity of toxic waste required to produce them was then assembled in the form of traditional Ming vases.

Inseparable from the conception of many technological objects, “civil wars” cast a veil over the environmentally and humanly damaging nature of mining operations and make the supply process invisible. At stake in an ecology of digital techniques, from a psychic point of view, would be interrogating the claim of technologies to “solve” (14) all the world’s problems. Not only do digital technologies not always save time, but they cause a proliferation of new problems. In order for the digital to benefit the masses and not just a handful of investors, we need to stand back from the idea that problems linked to technologies can simply be solved with more technology.

We are indeed confronted with two gave ecological questions: environmental and human. There is, now, a third, at the other end of the chain. It concerns the user and is—in the broad sense—a disjunction between a “technical milieu” (15) and the “actors” (16) inhabiting it. To treat persons as “users” comes down to introducing a dissymmetry between the designers of objects, of digital programmes, etc., and those who can only use them. Via ecology, then, we can prise open other dimensions than the reduction of technique to its technological and digital assignation: imagination, spirituality, memory, etc.

In the French context, for example, there is a genealogy which would be interesting to study that runs through the work of palaeontologist André Leroi-Gourhan, of the philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon, and of philosopher Bernard Stiegler on digital mutations. For Leroi-Gourhan, the notion of the tool takes an almost biological turn. The tool is that whereby a living being accedes to existence by developing gesture and speech. The relation to the milieu is always a dynamic, and never something that is acquired for good and could be stabilised: human existence is a progressive and continuous detachment from its initial conditions. Simondon approaches technical objects as “lineages” that can be compared to organic configurations and reconfigurations. His later writings on imagination and invention in techniques take an almost spiritual direction. The subject would need to be understood within a constant evolution. More precisely, the individual is conceived in relation to a “pre-individual” tending towards a “transindividual”. These reflections on “individuation” and technique have been

extensively taken up by Bernard Stiegler, who places them in the context of a period when the combination of neoliberalism and marketing (via behavioural sciences) is massively heightening the risk of the subjection of human beings. For Stiegler, ecology is to be understood as living beings’ relation to their milieu, relations that are threatened by capitalism (industrial, financial, cognitive, etc.). Thus, in addition to necessary actions and reflections on the ecology of resources (the exhaustion of capacities of subsistence), rethinking the ecology of the spirit (exhaustion of the psyche and of desire) is emerging as an increasingly urgent task.

Anthony Masure & Océane Ragoucy

- 1 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* [1989] (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 70.
- 2 Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* [1981–1987], trans. C. Lucchese (Brussels: Zones sensibles, 2015).
- 3 *This Progress* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2006) was reprised at the Palais de Tokyo, (Paris, 12 October 2016–18 December 2016): “Carte blanche à Tino Sehgal,” curated by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel.
- 4 For a broader understanding of cybernetics, see: Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Houghton Mifflin, 1950, revised edition 1954).
- 5 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is An Apparatus?* [2006], trans. D. Kishik, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 6 RYBN, *Data Ghost 1*, installation presented in the exhibition “Media Mediums” curated by Jeff Guess and Gwenola Wagon, Paris, Ygrec (4 April–31 May 2014).
- 7 Evgeny Morozov, “The Rise of Data and the Death of Politics”, *The Guardian*, 20 July 2014, online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jul/20/rise-of-data-death-of-politics-evgeny-morozov-algorithmic-regulation>
- 8 In Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Flore, *The Medium is the Massage: Inventory of the Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).
- 9 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism (Theory Redux)* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).
- 10 Ezio Manzini, *Artefacts: Vers une écologie de l’environnement artificiel* [1990], trans. Adriana Pilia, (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, CCI, 1991).
- 11 Manzini, *Artefacts*, pp. 36–37.
- 12 Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* [2014], (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).
- 13 Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* [1958], (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017).
- 14 Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism and the Urge to Fix Problems that Don’t Exist* (New York: Public Affairs/Perseus, 2013).
- 15 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Évolution et techniques. Milieu et techniques* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973).
- 16 Actor-network theory (ANT) was developed in the 1990s by the researchers Bruno Latour, Madeleine Akrich and Michel Callon.

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